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Abstract

Proposes an intriguing solution to the question of Tolkien and Lewis's estrangement in 1949: that it was Tolkien's objections to anti-Catholic sentiments expressed in Lewis's Letters to Malcolm and some beliefs deeply incompatible with Tolkien's Catholicism expressed in the depiction of Aslan in the Chronicles of Narnia that initially estranged them.

Additional Keywords

Anglicism; Catholicism; Lewis, C.S.—Religious beliefs; Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia; Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia—Attitude of J.R.R. Tolkien towards; Lewis, C.S. Letters to Malcolm; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Attitude toward the Chronicles of Narnia; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Religious beliefs; Tolkien, J.R.R. "The Ulterior Motive" (unpublished manuscript)

LETTERS TO DALCOLO
AND THE TROUBLE WITH NARNIA:
C.S. LEWIS, J.R.R. TOLKIEN, AND THEIR 1949 CRISIS

ERIC SEDDON

IN THE EARLY SPRING OF 1949, C.S. Lewis read part of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, still in manuscript, to J.R.R. Tolkien. Expecting enthusiasm from his longtime friend and colleague, he received instead what would remain Tolkien's permanent dismissal of the work. The assessment was blunt and unequivocal: Tolkien deemed the book almost worthless—a carelessly written jumble of unrelated mythologies. He simply detested it (Sayer 312, 313). Although shaken by this terse and unexpected verdict, Lewis later sought the opinion of Roger Lancelyn Green, whose encouragement led to the ultimate decision to finish the book (Green & Hooper, 241). It went on to become one of Lewis's best sellers. The first of what eventually became *The Chronicles of Narnia*, it has been continuously in print ever since. Now half a century from its first publication, the place of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* seems increasingly remarkable. Like *The Lord of the Rings* it remains embraced and even celebrated by a society steadily annexed by secular values. Its success both in book sales and, more recently, at the box office have even resulted in the somewhat bizarre spectacle of secular critics writing polemical tracts attempting to marginalize, if not deny, the Christian elements of the plot.¹ Thus *Narnia's* success has remained somewhat oddly stunning—the greatest testimony to its place in literature being this steady endurance in the public imagination, despite the societal shifts since its first publication.

It can therefore seem, at least superficially, that Tolkien's opinion was not simply wrong, but ridiculously wrong. If ever there was any problem with *Narnia*, the sales history of the work would indicate that it was entirely Tolkien's. This, in fact, has functioned as the underlying assumption of much subsequent scholarly opinion. Moreover, the crisis of 1949² has been identified as a

¹ An example of this is to be found in "The Lion King: C.S. Lewis' Narnia isn't simply a Christian allegory" by Meghan O'Rourke.

² Joe R. Christopher argues that the reading at which Tolkien rejected *Narnia* took place possibly as early as January of 1948. This speculation is based upon his reading of a letter from Tolkien to Lewis from 25 January 1948, wherein Tolkien apologizes for having hurt Lewis's feelings, as pertaining to *Narnia*. Though Christopher's argument is compelling,

contributing factor to the waning of the two men's friendship, with Tolkien considered primarily to blame. Professional jealousy, artistic narrowness, and even personal complexity as a man are supposed to have conspired against his appreciation of *Narnia*. He has been portrayed as envious of Lewis's writing speed, annoyed by his popular success, and offended by Lewis's appropriation of his own ideas and mythic histories. Finally, it has been suggested that there was a disagreement regarding the nature and rigors of mythopoeic writing between the two—that Tolkien slaved over every detail of a long gestating masterwork, while Lewis churned out commercially successful books which might have been deemed less scrupulous in craft (Carpenter, *Tolkien* 201; Sayer 313). Yet despite some compelling aspects of these theories, they seem unconvincing when considered in the broader context of their friendship and careers.

In his 1988 analysis of the Narnia crisis, Joe R. Christopher presents a closely reasoned argument against many of the assumptions surrounding Tolkien's supposed annoyance at both Lewis's writing speed and the borrowing of his own mythopoeic ideas. Christopher pays particular attention to the intellectual provenance of the theories, tracing many of them back to Humphrey Carpenter's interpretations of Tolkien's feelings. He concludes that "four or five motives which Carpenter attributes to Tolkien probably should be taken more as Carpenter's interpretations than as Tolkien's reasons [for rejecting Narnia]." (Christopher Part I 39). The present paper offers no quarrel with this conclusion, but rather adds the following argument: If Tolkien had been truly disturbed by his friend's prodigious output, a simple chronological listing of Lewis's works begs the question as to why he would draw the line in 1949. The fact is that, in the late 1930s and '40s, Lewis produced books at what can only be described as an astonishing rate, among them *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), *The Problem of Pain* (1940), *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942), *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), *Perelandra* (1943), *That Hideous Strength* (1945), *The Great Divorce* (1946), and *Miracles* (1947). After all of these, it seems unreasonable to suggest that Tolkien should have gotten upset at the speed of a relatively short children's book.

Christopher's argument also established that Tolkien's dislike of Narnia had multiple stages; that his first negative reaction was against what he perceived as Lewis's 'distorted' or 'sentimentalized' mythology in the opening

the current paper agrees with A.N. Wilson's reading of the letter in question, understanding it as referring to a reading of Lewis's *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Wilson 217). The designation of this 'crisis of 1949' is therefore a reflection of my opting for a later date for the reading to have taken place. Of course, if Christopher's theory is true, the designation could be amended to 'the crisis of 1948-49'. Other than this minor point, the difficult chronology of the event is insignificant to the general discussion of this paper. For a meticulous investigation of the difficulties of the timeline regarding this event, see Christopher's "J.R.R. Tolkien: Narnian Exile" in *Mythlore* 55 and 56 (1988).

chapters of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, while the second stage encompassed the *Narnia* series in general, on the basis of it being too allegorical (Green & Hooper 240-41, Christopher Part I 42, 45). As we shall see, this allegorical difficulty is of great importance, not only in terms of genre but in terms of the meaning of Narnia—meaning which would not likely have been lost on Tolkien. These important issues granted, the present argument diverges from Christopher’s ultimate opinion that it was an irreconcilable difference of mythopoeic theory that separated the two (Christopher Part II 22-23). For the theory that *Narnia’s* eclectic mythologies somehow irrevocably offended Tolkien fails to explain the full force and endurance of his negative reaction. Even when considering, as Christopher does, the relative difference between the two men’s handling of mythologies—Lewis’s eclectic and classical, Tolkien’s dominantly self-consistent and Nordic—the puzzle remains. For had Tolkien been so easily agitated by mythological eclecticism, Lewis’s *Space Trilogy* would undoubtedly have provoked a similar reaction. Drawing from Plato, Arthurian legend, direct parallels to Christian theology, and a multitude of stylistic and philosophical sources (including William Morris, David Lindsay, Milton, Charles Williams and even Tolkien himself), it was every bit as much a jumble as *Narnia*. But one needn’t stop there. From his very first book of fiction (*The Pilgrim’s Regress*) onward, the magpie tendency is both apparent and constant in Lewis’s development as a writer—so much so that it must be considered an essential aspect of his style. *Narnia* represents no radical departure. And, significantly, in none of Lewis’s earlier books of fiction was this eclecticism objected to by Tolkien.

Indeed, it is generally overlooked that Lewis’s method stood in such stark contrast to Tolkien’s that neither man could have missed it. For Tolkien went beyond avoiding the invocation of Christianity in his own mythologies—he even avoided parallels that might strike too closely (Tolkien, *Letters* 144; Bossert 72-73). Yet despite this radical difference of approach, Lewis’s *Perelandra*, which overtly shadows the Fall of Man from the book of Genesis, remained Tolkien’s favorite of the trilogy.³ What better proof of methodological tolerance could be hoped for?

To add another puzzling fact, Roger Lancelyn Green also felt *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to be cluttered—specifically, he disliked the insertion of Father Christmas into the plot. Yet unlike Tolkien, he was able to give his approval to the book as a whole (Green & Hooper 241). The question becomes

³ Tolkien’s opinions of the individual volumes of Lewis’s *Space Trilogy* may be gleaned from the comments made on them in his letters. In a letter to Christopher Tolkien from 31 July 1944, he clearly opts for *Perelandra* over *Out of the Silent Planet*. Likewise, in a letter drafted on December 1963 to Michael Tolkien, he states that Charles Williams’s influence upon *That Hideous Strength* spoiled the trilogy (Tolkien, *Letters* 89, 342).

why Tolkien should have had any more problem with the overall plot than Green. As *Perelandra* had shadowed the Fall and gained Tolkien's praise, couldn't *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* shadow the Redemption to the same applause? These deeper questions seem never to have been breached by Tolkien and Lewis—between them a door had been locked on the trouble with Narnia, never to be reopened. And here the story would appear to end, if not for two important factors taken together. First, the substantial theological differences between an Anglican like Lewis and a Roman Catholic like Tolkien, and second, a later book of Lewis's, mentioned in a letter of Tolkien's some fifteen years after that fateful day in 1949.



On 11 November, 1964, almost a year after C.S. Lewis's death, Tolkien composed a letter to David Kolb, a Jesuit, wherein he wrote:

It is sad that 'Narnia' and all that part of C.S.L.'s work should remain outside the range of my sympathy, as much of my work was outside his. Also, I personally found *Letters to Malcolm* a distressing and in parts horrifying work. I began a commentary on it, but if finished it would not be publishable. (Tolkien, *Letters* 352)

The abandoned commentary referred to has yet to be released publicly, but is entitled "The Ulterior Motive" and has been quoted in excerpt by Humphrey Carpenter in his Tolkien biography. It is obviously a document of great interest to any discussion of the relationship between Lewis and Tolkien, and would likely shed light onto the eventual dulling of their friendship. Yet even without direct access to the full text, the above letter provides a significant key to the door locked shut in 1949. The first sentence is of the utmost importance, for it demonstrates Tolkien's sadness at what he calls a "lack of sympathy" with *Narnia*. There is no bitterness, no chafing over his friend's speedy writing skills or commercial success (he was experiencing his own by that point), but neither is there any change of opinion. Instead, one senses a note of resignation and is left wondering what vast territory might be covered under the nebulous word "sympathy." The next sentence provides us with some important direction to solving the problem, for the context links his disapproval of *Narnia* to Lewis's last completed book, *Letters to Malcolm*. A careful reading of both texts, with the crisis of 1949 kept in mind, yields some remarkable results, for *Letters to Malcolm* demonstrates the differences between the two men in the greatest relief. As such it acts as a clarifying lens through which to view Tolkien's experience of *Narnia*. It is therefore with the later work that we begin in earnest.

Letters to Malcolm is unique in Lewis's output; so much that it may be rightly considered his last theological will and testament. It is the work of an older man—one who had chosen to shy away from the public debates of his middle age only to find that the nostalgia for battle remained. But nostalgia is selective: it seeks to relive only the more pleasant emotions associated with former trials, while avoiding the realities of actual hardship or suffering. Thus, while in *Malcolm* Lewis would reinvent a verbal battle reminiscent of his middle age, this one would be different. Being nostalgic, the constructed debate would be entirely safe. To accomplish this he would dictate the topics, inventing his own, less intelligent sparring partner, named Malcolm, as his foil. By casting him as an old friend in no danger of falling out with him (a sort of theological Watson to his own Holmes), Lewis could set the limits of the debate entirely himself. And as both the prosecution and the defense, able to fictionalize both parties' reactions to the argument posed, Lewis would have complete control. The end result is remarkable: such is the magic of fiction that this most relaxed, conversational, and open-ended book, in style and appearance, is actually Lewis's most sectarian and antagonistic in substance—a fact that would not have been lost on Tolkien or any other reflective Catholic of his generation.

In this carefully balanced literary structure, which is a monologue cast as one side of a dialogue, we find Lewis's most overtly Anglican work. It is filled with theological barbs—most of them aimed at Roman Catholicism. As such it provides us with the very clearest contrast between his and Tolkien's beliefs. Reading the book from the Roman Catholic perspective of Tolkien, it is not difficult to glean what aspects of it might have distressed and even horrified him. When investigated, they shed light on Tolkien's permanent rejection of *Narnia*, but before delving fully into these, it is important to show just how much of a break *Letters to Malcolm* was from Lewis's usual style.

As a lay theologian and writer of apologetics, Lewis's general approach was to focus only on those doctrines that most Christians of his day held in common. He referred to this as 'Mere' Christianity, which operated not on the principle that such a discussion could function, in itself, as a religion, but that it would lead a person *into* one of the various denominations. 'Mere' Christianity was therefore explained by Lewis as being a sort of hallway in God's mansion—he allegorized the various denominations as the rooms themselves, suggesting that the hallway was no place for a soul to rest, but rather a passageway toward a more substantial goal (Lewis, *Mere Christianity* 11.) The approach of discussing only what he felt common to all Christian perspectives was maintained by Lewis not only in public, but privately, with only very few exceptions. The testimony of those who knew him are firm on this point. For example, when his friend Alan Griffiths (Dom Bede Griffiths after converting to Roman Catholicism) wanted to debate the differences between the Church of England and the Roman Catholic

Church, Lewis refused to engage. Griffiths was confused, as they had always argued theological matters openly—indeed, argument had aided each others' conversions from atheism. Yet Lewis was unequivocal: he would neither debate nor speak on the subject (*Collected Letters Vol. II* 135). This is fairly typical of Lewis's treatment of the subject (though, to be honest, there are some exceptions to be found in the *Collected Letters*—usually in regards to the differences between Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism). In terms of his working theory, however, Lewis summed up his position most succinctly in "Christian Reunion: An Anglican speaks to Roman Catholics" thus:

My only function as a Christian writer is to preach 'mere Christianity' not *ad clerum* but *ad populum*. Any success that has been given me has, I believe, been due to my strict observance of those limits. By attempting to do otherwise I should only add one more recruit (and a very ill-qualified recruit) to the ranks of controversialists. After that I should be no more use to anyone (396)

Letters to Malcolm, C.S. Lewis's last completed book, stands in marked contrast to this approach—especially when attacking Roman Catholicism. As with almost everything in *Malcolm*, though, the attack is veiled with fictional protests and managed almost entirely obliquely. An excellent example is found in an early clarification about devotions to the saints, wherein he writes:

Apparently I have been myself guilty of introducing another red herring by mentioning devotions to saints. I didn't in the least want to go off into a discussion on that subject. There is clearly a theological defence for it; if you can ask the prayers of the living, why should you not ask for the prayers of the dead. There is clearly also a great danger. In some popular practice we see it leading off into an infinitely silly picture of Heaven as an earthly court where applicants will be wise to pull the right wires, discover the best "channels," and attach themselves to the most influential pressure groups. But I have nothing to do with all of this. I am not thinking of adopting the practice myself; and who am I to judge to practices of others? I only hope there'll be no scheme for canonisations in the Church of England. (*Malcolm* 15)

Had this been an actual correspondence, the first two sentences of the above paragraph might be accepted at face value. Yet the reflective reader will recognize that *Letters to Malcolm* is not a real dialogue, but a fictional construction. Thus, while Lewis *the character* is reticent about discussing the issue of devotions, it is in fact the very topic Lewis *the author* wishes to address (otherwise he simply would have constructed the fictional correspondence in a

different manner, avoiding the topic altogether). This technique of protesting the direction of the discussion just before or after offering an anti-Catholic opinion is one which Lewis maintains throughout the book.

Needless to say, the issue discussed in the above passage would have struck Tolkien immediately. As a man who prayed the Rosary, and who recited the *Confiteor*⁴ as a part of the Mass, Lewis's arrow would have hit its mark. As Tolkien was to relate in "The Ulterior Motive," Lewis held strong opinions, contrary to his own, regarding devotions to the saints:

We were coming down the steps of Magdalen Hall [...] long ago in the days of our unclouded association, before there was anything, as it seemed, that must be withheld or passed over in silence. I said that I had a special devotion to St John. Lewis stiffened, his head went back, and he said in the brusque harsh tones which I was later to hear him use again when dismissing something he disapproved of: "I can't imagine any two persons more dissimilar." We stumped along the cloisters, and I followed feeling like a shabby little Catholic caught by the eye of an "Evangelical clergyman of good family" taking holy water at the door of a church. A door had slammed. (Carpenter, *Inklings* 51-52)

Taken together, this and the quoted passage from *Letters to Malcolm* highlight an important difference between the two men—what might be generalized as Lewis's subjectivism in spiritual matters, conflicting with Tolkien's objectivism. Thus Lewis, in a perfectly typical, Anglican manner, states that devotions to the saints are optional, depending upon the opinion of the individual—the final arbiter on the matter being a Protestant, relativistic conception of the Self.⁵ Tolkien would not have shared this belief, instead understanding such devotions to be an absolute good⁶—the final arbiter on theological matters being not the Self alone, but the greater Christian community

⁴ "I confess to almighty God, and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do; and I ask blessed Mary, ever virgin, all the angels and saints, and you my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God" (*Roman Missal* 673).

⁵ Harold Bloom has on occasion referenced the work of J.H. Van den Berg, who has postulated that the concept of "self" as we know it stems from Luther—and that it is in Luther that there arises a separation between the "inner man" and the physical one (Bloom 741).

⁶ A more succinct expression of this goodness could not be found than in the words of Pope Paul VI: "We believe in the communion of all the faithful of Christ, those who are pilgrims on earth, the dead who are being purified, and the blessed in heaven, all together forming one Church; and we believe that in this communion, the merciful love of God and his saints is always [attentive] to our prayers" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 250).

of the ages working in conjunction with personal consent—a typically Catholic understanding. The implications of this difference between them was perhaps more radical than either of them realized at the time of their closest friendship.

Some fifteen pages later in *Malcolm* there is a passage that any English Catholic of Tolkien's generation would have taken personally. After obliquely and positively referencing what appears to be Dietrich Bonhoeffer's notions of a Christianity without religion (*Malcolm* 29) Lewis turns his argument against John Henry Newman, the most important convert from Anglicanism to Catholicism of the 19th century, writing:

Newman makes my blood run cold when he says in one of the *Parochial and Plain Sermons* that heaven is like a church because, in both, "one single sovereign subject—religion—is brought before us. [...] He has substituted *religion* for God [...]. [E]ven in this present life there is danger in the very concept of *religion*. (30)

Though hardly original to the 20th century, the idea of a "religionless" Christianity had gathered considerable steam by the time of Lewis's publication of *Malcolm* in the 1960s, largely due to the academic respectability it had gained through the theology of Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth. In this particular letter, Lewis flirts with the concept, at least to the degree that he is willing to set up a tentative dichotomy between "religion" and "faith." These days, the subtlety of such a distinction is less obvious: While earlier generations would generally have considered the proposition of a Christianity without religion to be ludicrous, now it is often uncritically assumed to be one among many options. Indeed, the popularity of this theology has steadily increased to the present decade, as evidenced by a rebuttal as current as that of Josef Cardinal Ratzinger, presented in 2003's *Truth and Tolerance* (Ratzinger 50). This can make it difficult to understand what the passage would have meant to a man of Tolkien's day and age. In fact, he would certainly have condemned both the idea of "religionless" Christianity and Lewis's treatment of John Henry Newman—an attack that Tolkien would probably have taken hard, for more than one reason.

First, Newman is shown solely in a deliberately negative light. Lewis could have chosen any number of passages from Newman's works to demonstrate how the Cardinal understood religion to be the most comprehensive means by which humans *encounter* God (as distinct and antithetical to the notion of religion *replacing* God), but he did not. Likewise, it is likely that Lewis could have found better examples of misguided religion than to selectively quote Newman. Why then, did he excerpt this text? The answer is most likely the same as one finds today: that many Anglicans still consider John Henry Newman a theological threat. His writings are not neutral; they tend to cut to the historical roots of the Anglican Reformation and subsequent theology.

Because of this, they have remained fresh, reading like a critique not only of the 19th century Church of England, but of 20th and 21st century Anglicanism as well.⁷ That Newman continues to generate a certain amount of Anglican rebuttal is evidenced by a recent biography of Frank M. Turner's, which was written for the purpose of discouraging the canonization of Newman.⁸ Given context, then, Lewis's attack is no unique, solitary instance, but part of a broader, more sustained tradition of Anglican antipathy towards the famous convert.

Second, while Newman's importance to English Catholicism is difficult to exaggerate, he probably meant more to J.R.R. Tolkien than to most. Having been raised by Fr. Francis Xavier Morgan, a priest of the Birmingham Oratory founded by Newman in 1849, Tolkien's link was quite personal. Fr. Morgan, who took responsibility for Tolkien after his mother's death, had even served under Newman (Carpenter, *Tolkien* 26). To Tolkien, then, this letter might have seemed more than a moment of Catholic-baiting—it could have had a distinctly personal bite to it.

From this point on, *Letters to Malcolm* continues in what must have felt like an onslaught against many of the things Tolkien held sacred. Lewis exhibits a contempt for "ready-made-prayers" as he calls them, showing deference to only the Lord's Prayer and extemporaneous verbal prayer. In letter twelve, he even speculates that those who "say their prayers" (i.e. repeating prayers learned in childhood) might be calling the *irreligious* part of their lives the *religious* part. Recitation of the Rosary, which Tolkien practiced, is thus obliquely dismissed. Adding insult to injury, though, was Lewis's labeling of such practices as childish. Tolkien might well have wondered what had happened to the Lewis he had known from previous decades, the colleague who had joined him in fighting

⁷ Some striking examples of this are easily found in his 'Note A' to the *Apologia*, wherein it is difficult to fathom that they were written so long ago, so directly do they still challenge Anglican theological premises (Newman 222-223).

⁸ The book is entitled *John Henry Newman: The Challenge to Evangelical Religion*. (Yale University Press, 2002). I attended a lecture given by Prof. Turner at John Carroll University, wherein he was very clear that this book was intended to curb the enthusiasm of those encouraging canonization of the Cardinal. Turner, an Episcopalian (and therefore a member of the American wing of Anglicanism, at least at the time of this writing), gave a lecture interesting as study in propaganda, in that he even made suggestive comments that Newman's real desire for conversion was merely an excuse for living with young celibate men. In this way, he sought to capitalize upon anti-Catholic feelings in the wake of the then-current American sex abuse scandal. Thus, the Anglican tradition of attacking Newman, begun in his own generation by many, with perhaps Charles Kingsley the best remembered, has continued through Lewis in the 20th century to Turner in our own.

the very same perceptions of mythopoeic literature—that it was a thing to be abandoned when adulthood set in.⁹

This speculation aside, Lewis goes on to disparage the legitimacy of both mysticism and mental prayer, singling out the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola as particularly unnecessary (*Malcolm* 63, 64, 84).¹⁰ While doing so, his passing comments of respect for the saint seem uncomfortably disingenuous, as his entire reason for bringing Ignatius into the conversation seems to have been for the purpose of dismissing the legitimacy of his spiritual exercises. Astonishingly, for Lewis of all people, the meditations are dismissed on the basis of the difference between Ignatius's day and age and that of the mid-20th century. This too might have legitimately struck Tolkien as somewhat duplicitous, for Lewis had made opposition to chronological snobbery¹¹ a central tenet of his apologetics. The critique of Ignatian exercises seems to skate dangerously close to this very fallacy, and gratuitously so.

Continuing through *Malcolm*, we find Lewis becoming more explicitly anti-Catholic when dismissing crucifixes and even contemplation of the crucifixion, saying that in doing so

Compunction, compassion, gratitude—all the fruitful emotions—are strangled. Sheer physical horror leaves no room for them. Nightmare. Even so, the image ought to be periodically faced. But no one could live with it. (85)

⁹ Both Lewis and Tolkien dedicated considerable energy to refuting the notion that mythopoeic literature was 'childish' or that the fact that children enjoy something is proof of its inferior or immature quality. A brief example of this from Lewis's perspective can be found in his essay "On Juvenile Tastes." It is somewhat puzzling that a man who had spent so much of his life debunking the more conceited criticisms of mythopoeic art would fall prey to the very same behavior regarding religious practices.

¹⁰ It is somewhat ironic that Lewis is so often referred to as a mystic, and that his writings are so frequently cited in this regard. For example, Anne Fremantle's *The Protestant Mystics*, includes excerpts from both *Surprised by Joy* and *The Screwtape Letters*. Yet, perhaps as an overreaction to his experimentation with the occult as a young man, Lewis was to disavow mysticism repeatedly throughout his life—sometimes mildly as in his private letters, but sometimes more strenuously, as in the cited passage from *Letters to Malcolm*. Rather than "mystical," Lewis's work is more correctly characterized as "imaginative," for this is the realm he cultivated: not the direct apprehension of the mysterious, but the exercise of intellectual faculties for the construction of fiction.

¹¹ 'Chronological snobbery' was the term Lewis coined for the belief that, among other things, one age's values replace another by simple virtue of its having come later. He gave Owen Barfield credit for alerting him to it (*Surprised by Joy* 207).

The long history of Protestant iconoclasm and rejection of the crucifix is well known and need not be retraced here—what is striking is that Lewis takes it a step further, suggesting that even meditation on Christ’s passion ought to be curtailed and, for the most part, avoided. Significantly, it is also in this letter that Lewis sets the stage for what must have truly provoked Tolkien to use the word “horrified” when describing the book; for here Lewis writes that “our whole distinction between ‘things’ and ‘qualities,’ ‘substances’ and ‘attitudes,’ has no application to Him.” Despite the seemingly random choice of terms, Lewis is driving at something specific when mentioning the word “substances”: it is a direct reference to the Eucharistic theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. Specifically, he is quarreling with Question 75, Articles 3 and 5 of the *Summa Theologica*, wherein Aquinas writes:

The *substance* of the bread or wine, after the consecration, remains neither under the sacramental species, nor elsewhere; yet it does not follow that it is annihilated; for it is changed into the body of Christ [...]. [emphasis added]. (Q75, Art 3, Reply Obj. 1)

It is evident to sense that the accidents of the bread and wine remain after the consecration. [...] There is no deception in the sacrament; for the accidents which are discerned by the senses are truly present. But the intellect, whose proper object is *substance* [...] is preserved by faith from deception [emphasis added]. (Q75, Art 5) (Aquinas 2443, 2444)

This, in turn, sets the stage for Lewis’s explicit disavowal of the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation (that at the consecration of the Mass, the accidents of the appearance of bread and wine remain, while their substance is changed to the corporeal Body and Blood of Christ):

I find “substance” (in Aristotle’s sense), when stripped of its own accidents and endowed with the accidents of some other substance, an object I cannot think. My efforts to do so produces mere nursery-thinking [...]. (Malcolm 102)

Once again the argument is made without full reference to what Lewis was opposing, which is very specifically the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist; and once again the charge of childishness is leveled, obliquely, at Catholicism. For Tolkien, the condescension would have been palpable.

In the next letter (number twenty) Lewis discusses his understanding of Purgatory, making clear that he is not talking about “Romish” doctrine, which he says the Reformers were correct to oppose (Malcolm 108). Finally, in letter number twenty-two, after what must have seemed a thorough assault on his

Catholic faith, Tolkien would read Lewis's discussion of the Resurrection of the Body. This concluding letter is of great importance. Perhaps more than any other segment of Lewis's writings, public or private, it sheds light on the incompatibility of Narnia with Roman Catholic theology, while tying together many of Lewis's less orthodox opinions. As such, it is worth quoting at length:

About the resurrection of the body. I agree with you that the old picture of the soul re-assuming the corpse—perhaps blown to bits or long since usefully dissipated through nature—is absurd. [...] We are not, in this doctrine, concerned with matter as such at all; with waves and atoms and all that. What the soul cries out for is the resurrection of the senses. Even in this life matter would be nothing to us if it were not the source of sensations. [...] At present we tend to think of the soul as somehow "inside" the body. But the glorified body of the resurrection as I conceive it—the sensuous life raised from death—will be inside the soul. [...] "But this," you protest, "is no resurrection of the *body*. You give the dead a sort of dream world and dream bodies. They are not real." Surely neither less nor more real than those you have always known? You know better than I that the "real world" of our present experience (coloured, resonant, soft or hard, cool or warm, all corseted by perspective) has no place in the world described by physics or even by physiology. Matter enters our experience only by becoming sensation (when we perceive it) or conception (when we understand it). That is, by becoming soul. That element in the soul which it becomes will, in my view, be raised and glorified; the hills and valleys of Heaven will be to those you now experience not as a copy is to an original, nor as a substitute to the genuine article, but as a flower to the root, or the diamond to the coal. It will be eternally true that they originated with matter; let us therefore bless matter. But in entering our soul as alone it can enter—that is, by being perceived and known—matter has turned into soul (like Undines who acquired a soul by marriage with a mortal). (*Malcolm* 121-123)

All of this is impossible to reconcile to Catholic theology and doctrine. Direct opposition to these opinions is to be found many places, including the entry on "General Resurrection" from Volume XII of the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1911), which Tolkien might very well have read, and which, as a devout Catholic, is most likely to have expressed his beliefs:

Resurrection is the rising again from the dead, the resumption of life. The Fourth Lateran Council teaches that all men, whether elect or reprobate, "will rise again with their own bodies which they now bear about with them." [Emphasis added] [...] [T]he heretical contention of Hymeneus and Philitus that the Scriptures denote by resurrection not the return to life of

the body, but the rising of the soul from the death of sin to the life of grace, must be excluded. [...] Among the opponents of the Resurrection we naturally find first those who denied the immortality of the soul; secondly, all those who, like Plato, regarded the body as the prison of the soul and death as an escape from the bondage of matter; thirdly the sects of the Gnostics and Manichaeans who looked upon all matter as evil; fourthly, the followers of these latter sects the Priscillianists, the Cathari, and the Albigenses; fifthly, the Rationalists, Materialists, and Pantheists of later times. (Maas)¹²

Thus Lewis's views on bodily resurrection seem to fit more comfortably with Hymeneus and Philitus, while hinting at (or hedging closer to) the Gnostic and Manichaean notion of matter as evil, than with Catholic theology. It should be noted that Lewis's position never went so far as open Gnosticism, in that he certainly never declared matter to be exactly evil. But just as importantly, Lewis's praise of matter in *Malcolm* is entirely dependant upon its ultimately becoming something else. In other words, Lewis does not present matter as being inherently good (as Catholicism maintains); rather, he considers its goodness as ultimately *contingent* upon its potential for being transformed into something *non-material*. Thus Lewis's theology is something of a semi-Gnosticism; perhaps containing some hidden reservations about the goodness of the body, or even the material universe. Tolkien would undoubtedly have recognized this as incompatible with his own understanding and that of the Catholic Church: "[Man] is obliged to regard his body as good and to hold it in honor since God created it and will raise it up on the last day" (*Catechism* 93). (Note that Catholic theology stresses the goodness of the body in relation to God's having created it—not as contingent upon what the body will become after death.)

To guard against theological challenges, however, Lewis once again employs the now familiar device of shading his opinions with a disowning comment of qualification. As he did earlier in discussion of devotions to the saints ("But I have nothing to do with all this" [15]) and Eucharistic doctrine ("All this is autobiography, not theology" [105]) so he does here by concluding with "Guesses, of course, only guesses. If they are not true, something better will be" (124). The casual atmosphere of spontaneous, private conversation is maintained throughout. It is worth reiterating, however, that these weren't spontaneous

¹² The more recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church* remains consistent with this exposition, as can be gleaned from the following:

The Church teaches that every spiritual soul is created immediately by God [...] and also that it is immortal: it does not perish when it separates from the body at death, and it will be reunited with the body at the final Resurrection [emphasis added]. (Catechism 93)

comments, nor were they private. They were well crafted and deliberately public. Significantly, the qualifications of the Lewis *character*, which add substantially to the atmosphere of humility and speculative ambiance of the book, take place most prominently after attacks on Roman Catholic theology and doctrine.

If Lewis's goal was to attack Catholicism while making counter attack seem intolerant and unreasonable, his construction of *Letters to Malcolm* was rather ingenious. For, superficially, it seems like real correspondence; undoubtedly the result of Lewis's many years as a prolific writer of letters. Control of the material is deft: it appears at times that Lewis is actually being pushed, against his will, to comment on these controversial matters. Because of this, any negative response from a Catholic (or anyone else, for that matter) would likely seem an *ad hominem* attack on Lewis *the author*, rather than as a response to Lewis *the character*. Thus, by a synthetic literary context, Lewis insured that all criticisms would appear as both intolerant and unreasonable. In any rebuttal, such as perhaps that contained in 'The Ulsterian Motive', Tolkien would have found himself in a difficult situation. Because he disagreed, and must surely have seen the bias of the book, any written response would likely have seemed both merciless and bitter. Hence at least one reason his attempted essay was "not publishable" despite the fact that, in the book, Lewis had attacked the most central aspects of his faith.

In recent years, there has been growing speculation on the part of many Roman Catholic converts as to why C.S. Lewis never converted himself. The present Church of England can seem far from the theology Lewis propagated in the 1940s—so much so that many commentators believe his apologetics, while maintaining influence in other denominations, ultimately lost the debate in his own. Joseph Pearce's relatively recent *C.S. Lewis and the Catholic Church* repeats, at times quite vehemently, the theory that Lewis all but "crossed the Tiber" theologically. With particular zeal, he develops the implications of Tolkien's 'Ulsterian' title, going so far as to say that Lewis's sole reason for remaining in the Church of England can be laid at the feet of a bigoted Ulster Protestant upbringing. After working himself into a bit of a frenzy, Pearce somewhat wildly asserts that "Lewis kowtowed before the traditions of his family and its prejudices, no longer believing what they believed, but unwilling or unable to make the break from them" (Pearce, *Lewis* 147). As we have already seen in the above analysis of *Letters to Malcolm*, such a position, besides being uncharitable, is completely erroneous. To write of a C.S. Lewis who had arrived at theological agreement with Roman Catholicism, or even something closely resembling orthodox theology, is, frankly, to write fiction. And perhaps the most contentious place to point this out is in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Because they are so popular with the general public, both Catholic and Protestant critics are often too eager to claim them as completely orthodox statements in literary form. But this is not

precisely true, and one does well to clearly separate the deliberately non-controversial C.S. Lewis of the BBC Broadcasts (whose desire was to present only those doctrines all Christians agreed upon, as best he could) with the writer of fiction, the content of which is much more revealing of his personal beliefs. As Bede Griffiths wrote: "The figure of Aslan tells us more of how Lewis understood the nature of God than anything else he wrote" (qtd. in Sayer 319). Thus, Tolkien's rejection of *Narnia* was more than a literary disagreement—it was a rejection of Lewis's deepest feelings about God. As such, Tolkien's objections beg an analysis of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in the light of Lewis's theology as stated in *Letters to Malcolm*. In doing so, we uncover both a decidedly less-than-orthodox *Narnia* and much more charitable Tolkien than most critics have previously portrayed.

It is telling that though Tolkien spent hours studying *Letters to Malcolm*, he refused to write an obituary for Lewis or to contribute to a memorial volume (Carpenter, *Tolkien* 241). That a year later he mentioned the book simultaneously with *Narnia* is instructive, for it is in the character of Aslan that Lewis's unorthodox approach to matter, the body, and the resurrection of the body, explicitly stated in *Malcolm*, are most implicitly demonstrated. As in *Letters to Malcolm*, any implication of Eucharistic theology in *Narnia* is at best unorthodox, at worst something which would have repelled Tolkien, even had he not been able to pinpoint exactly why in 1949. Thus, once the intricate theological analysis of *Malcolm* has been accomplished, the reasons for Tolkien's rejections of *Narnia* become quite easy to determine, and remarkably straightforward to discuss. In other words, though it might be time consuming to find the key to a door that has been locked for several decades, once that key is found, the door opens quickly.

It has regularly been said that the *Chronicles of Narnia* are not allegorical; that they are fairy stories, and therefore are to be read and judged as depictions of a separate world, completely consistent by their own intrinsic laws. Lewis himself described the theory behind Aslan in the following manner:

If Aslan represented the immaterial Deity in the same way in which Giant Despair [from Bunyan] represents Despair, he would be an allegorical figure. In reality however he is an invention giving an imaginary answer to the question, "What might Christ become like if there really were a world like Narnia and He chose to be incarnate and die and rise again in *that* world as He actually has done in ours?" This is not allegory at all. (*Letters of C.S. Lewis* 475)

The character of Aslan, then, is not intended allegorically.¹³ Yet from a Christian perspective, if Aslan remains non-allegorical throughout, several problems arise, one of the clearest coming in Chapter XII of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, when Peter must kill the Wolf Captain, Fenris Ulf, to save his sisters. The lines given to Aslan here are particularly embarrassing if he is considered to be a 'real,' rather than allegorical, representation of Christ. First, when Aslan raises a paw to hold the others back, so that Peter may do the deed, Aslan shouts "Back! Let the Prince earn his spurs!" Then, the bloody act accomplished, Aslan points out to Peter that he has neglected to clean his sword. After Peter completes this grim ablution, Aslan says, ceremoniously, "Rise up, Sir Peter Fenris-Bane. And whatever happens, never forget to wipe your sword" (Lewis *LW&W* 126-129).

From a Catholic perspective, this is an impossible sequence of quotations, regardless of context. To suggest that they bear any similarity to the words of Christ must strike anyone as bizarre who is familiar with the Gospels, especially if there is an open claim that Aslan is not supposed to be an allegorical representation but an 'historical' (albeit fictional) representation of Christ. Its position in the book is likewise bothersome, in that it almost parallels (though not precisely) the confrontation between St. Peter and Malchus in the garden of Gethsemene. But there, Christ tells Peter to sheath his sword, and after healing Malchus, rebukes the apostle with "Put your sword into its scabbard. Shall I not drink the cup that the Father gave me?" (John 18:10-11). Lewis's moment therefore seems all but inexplicable if Aslan is supposed to actually be Christ, rather than a mere representation of Him in psychological allegory.

One possible explanation for this moment is to suggest that here Lewis falls into a trap consciously avoided by Tolkien throughout his writings—that he makes God subject to his own imagination (Bossert 72). In the process, Christ becomes unidentifiable. Whether this was the case or not, this moment would put a writer like Tolkien, with such acute understanding of mythopoeic theory, in a difficult imaginative situation. For him to accept this moment theologically, Aslan must be read allegorically, yet to do so was antithetical to Lewis's intent and to their common mythopoeic goal. Furthermore, this necessity to read more allegorically is not an isolated occurrence in the book, nor is it confined to Aslan as a character—it is endemic to the plot itself. This is exacerbated by Lewis's

¹³ The term "allegory" in this sense seems rather restrictive, but it was the term chosen by Lewis in the quoted letter and in subsequent discussion of the *Chronicles*. A full discussion of the fascinating implications of allegory in Narnia is beyond the scope of the present article, and anyhow has been dealt with more thoroughly and admirably by scholars such as Joe R. Christopher. The terminology and its consequences here are only meant in the manner Lewis intended, in as precise a manner as possible.

treatment, or rather neglect, of Eucharist parallels in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

For a Catholic like Tolkien, any notion of a Passion narrative without the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist becomes maimed—crippled by significant theological problems. And if, as in Lewis's stated mythopoeic goal, Aslan was intended to accomplish in Narnia what he did on Earth, it would follow that the Last Supper would be as important to parallel as the Crucifixion. Yet in Narnia, while the sacrifice of Aslan is presented, there is no parallel to the Last Supper, nor anything resembling the institution of the Eucharist. Also of great significance is that although Lewis shadows the Gospel accounts of the women following Christ to Golgotha (by having the girls follow Aslan to the Stone Table) there is little during Aslan's passion to suggest a similarity to Christ. Most strikingly, there is no imploring of God the Father to forgive those who are putting Aslan to death, as Christ did when He called out from the cross "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 24:34). Instead, the evil creatures are presented as mere enemies: unredeemable, there are no prayers offered for them. Later in the book they are simply and unreflectively killed in battle before the Pevensies take their thrones in Cair Paravel. It is imperative to note that unless this battle is taken allegorically, there is simply no parallel for it in Christian theology.

The absence of Eucharistic theology is particularly evident near the very end of *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, when Aslan slips quietly away and Mr. Beaver says wistfully:

He'll be coming and going [...]. One day you'll see him and another you won't. He doesn't like being tied down—and of course he has other countries to attend to. It's quite all right. He'll often drop in. Only you mustn't press him. He's wild you know. Not like a *tame* lion. (Lewis *LW&W* 180)

Whether he would have been able to articulate why it bothered him, this moment would undoubtedly have struck Tolkien as being inaccurate as to the character of Christ and the reality he experienced as a Catholic. For him to agree with it in a mythopoeic sense, Tolkien would have had to forget Christ's telling the apostles "Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). This would have been impossible, for Tolkien would have understood this quote in reference to the Blessed Sacrament, which he cherished as the focus of his life and faith.¹⁴ As he put it in a letter to his son Michael:

¹⁴ "[The Eucharist] was appropriately instituted at the supper, when Christ conversed with His disciples for the last time. First of all, because of what is contained in the sacrament: for Christ is Himself contained in the Eucharist sacramentally. Consequently, when Christ was

I fell in love with the Blessed Sacrament from the beginning—and by the mercy of God never have fallen out again [...]. Not for me the Hound of Heaven, but the never-ceasing silent appeal of the Tabernacle, and the sense of starving hunger. (Tolkien, *Letters* 340)

The notion of a Christ who comes and goes, sometimes disappearing from life, and leaving no religion or sacraments through which to encounter Him, was therefore quite foreign and repugnant to Tolkien. By contrast, it was a growing part of Lewis's theological understanding, as evidenced above in the discussion of *Malcolm*. Lewis, simply put, did not share Tolkien's Catholic understanding of the Eucharist—his exposition of Eucharistic doctrine is tenuous in his writings, becoming specific only in *Malcolm*, where he clearly rejects Catholic Eucharistic doctrine.

As a result, Lewis's Narnia would have repelled Tolkien for both its implications about the character of Christ and its lack of what Tolkien felt to be the most important thing in life—the Blessed Sacrament. The seemingly arbitrary coming and going of Lewis's Aslan represents, in a non-allegorical sense, either a Christ not willing to do for Narnia what he did for this universe, or an implied denial of the continued presence of Christ in the Eucharist here. Admittedly, we have again the potential problem of the blurring border between *myth as sub-creation* and *allegory as psychological projection*—what Lewis might have been attempting to express in this moment is the relatively cyclical sensation of feeling God's presence. If this is so, the quotation from Mr. Beaver could be understood as an allegorized representation of the fluctuation between what is called "spiritual dryness" and an active feeling of the presence of God. As stated non-allegorically, however, the moment remains incongruent with scripture, Catholic Eucharistic doctrine and Tolkien's deeply felt personal experience. The problem is exacerbated in that Lewis seemed unaware of the potentially blurred genres. Whatever else might be true, he certainly did not delineate these things: if one seeks to make Narnia compatible with orthodox theology, one never knows what is intended to be more allegorical and what is intended to be more mythic. To harmonize the two would necessitate a shifting line throughout the book.

Deeper still are objections that a reflective, mythopoeic Catholic would feel concerning the nature of Aslan—a subject which touches directly on Lewis's unorthodox views concerning both matter and the human body. For, ultimately, the most insurmountable difficulty with Narnia from the point of view of Catholic theology is the very nature of Aslan's body. Simply put, if Aslan is supposed to be Christ Himself, operating in a parallel universe, then Lewis has

going to leave His disciples in His proper species, He left Himself with them under the sacramental species" (Q73, Art 5) (Thomas Aquinas 2431).

presented Christ with an illusory body, appearing here as human, there as lion. This is a point so obvious that it can easily be overlooked or dismissed as silly, but it is nonetheless a deeply significant theological problem for the books. Catholic theology and doctrine are clear on the subject: Christ is both fully man and fully God. His body is not arbitrary, nor illusory, but real. Thus, Lewis's portrayal of Christ is not Christian but closer to Gnosticism (the notion that Christ's body is illusory is related to Docetism, a very old Gnostic heresy [Arendzen]).

All of this seems consistent, however, with Lewis's theological background (heavily dependant as it was on the writings of George MacDonald, who likewise de-emphasized religious observance, the importance of the human body, and the sacraments), clearly expressed in the final letter to Malcolm. According to Lewis, matter was not necessarily permanent, nor was the human body essential. By extension, it is likely that Lewis saw no reason why Christ should be 'limited' to a human body, as he saw no permanent link between the physical and the spiritual. Because of this, he personally opted for a type of Gnostic understanding over orthodox theology. Likewise, the lack of Eucharistic symbolism in Narnia is best explained by the later context of *Letters to Malcolm*, wherein Lewis doesn't exactly put forward any specific view, save a denial of the corporeal presence as understood by the Catholic Church. Thus, Lewis once again postulates a disconnect between the physical, material body of Christ and the spiritual experience of Him. Such a disconnect would have been inadequate for Tolkien, so devoted as he was to the Blessed Sacrament. Even if he did not immediately discern the problem in 1949, he must have felt it: Aslan was simply not the Christ he knew.

So far, I have been careful to suggest that much of this theological tension might have been at work in Tolkien without his conscious understanding or ability to articulate it in the form of a clear objection. But there is another possibility, one which I consider the most likely solution, and which would speak volumes about Tolkien's character as a man if it was true. My belief is that Tolkien knew very well what the problem was; that upon analyzing *Letters to Malcolm* he had discovered the theological key to untangling many differences between himself and C.S. Lewis, including the problem with Narnia. This would explain the linking of the two in his letter to David Kolb in 1964. If so, he would have realized that in writing an essay response to *Malcolm*, he would have to expose the more Gnostic underpinnings of many of Lewis's beloved works. He would have to engage in what would seem a posthumous, *ad hominem* attack, which might in the end be regarded as nothing more than bitterness, contributing only to the posthumous dismantling of his friend's career in many Christians' eyes. If this was the case, and Tolkien did in fact unlock the problem

with Narnia, then his silence on the subject was the final and most noble act of charity towards the man who had been his good friend for so long.

Regardless of these speculations, I think that at the very least it ought to be acknowledged, at last, that Tolkien's response on that spring day in 1949, wherein he told Lewis that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was unsalvageable, was not likely a reaction of mere jealousy or bitterness, but in all probability the result of something more profoundly disturbing, which he later charitably described as a "lack of sympathy" on his own part. It was unsalvageable because the very premise of Christ having an illusory body, and the shock waves such a premise would send through the rest of the theology of the book, was unsalvageable. In all likelihood, what he had really experienced was the incompatibility of Lewis's subjective Anglicanism with his own objective Catholicism. Like the anti-Catholic sideswipes littered throughout *Letters to Malcolm*, the heterodoxy of Narnia was something Tolkien couldn't accept, not because it seemed too quickly written or because it drew from so many sources, but because it simply didn't ring true.

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