

# “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism” in Context

On Monday morning, May 11, 1959, C.S. Lewis delivered the essay “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism,” later retitled “Fern-seed and Elephants,” in the Common Room of Westcott House, Cambridge, England. One result of this talk was a stirring of resistance to Lewis’s theological assertions among some of Cambridge University’s esteemed theological leaders. Lewis’s present-day admirers might wonder at this response, given the writer’s popularity and profile as an astute apologist for the Christian faith, even 52 years after his death. This article therefore investigates the context of that talk and its aftermath: Why was Lewis invited, what motivated Lewis to speak, what was the physical location of the talk, who was present, what were the reactions to the talk, and why did attendees react in this way?

## *The Invitation*

The address by Lewis is mentioned in the minutes of the Council meeting of Tuesday, May 12, 1959, a meeting held just one day after the actual talk. The Principal, the Rt. Revd. Kenneth Carey, included mention of the term’s lectures in the report he gave to the Council, but the minutes were brief, stating only of the previous term, “Lectures had been given by Head Deaconess Grierson, Dr Mascall, Dr Victor Murray and Professor C.S. Lewis” (Clergy Minutes, 459).<sup>1</sup>



*Westcott House, Jesus Lane, Cambridge*

More helpful are the words of the introduction to Lewis’s talk, in which he described the circumstances under which he was invited to deliver this address, some of the surface reasons for the address (he had read one of Alec Vidler’s sermons from *Windsor Sermons*, entitled “The Sign at Cana”; Vidler was an Anglican priest and Dean of King’s College, Cambridge, at that time), and his concern for the outsider, of which he was one:

This paper arose out of a conversation I had with the Principal one night last term. A book of Alec Vidler's happened to be lying on the table and I expressed my reaction to the sort of theology it contained. My reaction was a hasty and ignorant one, produced with the freedom that comes after dinner. One thing led to another and before we were done I was saying a good deal more than I had meant about the type of thought which, so far as I could gather, is now dominant in many theological colleges. He then said, "I wish you would come and say all this to my young men." He knew of course that I was extremely ignorant of the whole thing. But I think his idea was that you ought to know how a certain sort of theology strikes the outsider. Though I may have nothing but misunderstandings to lay before you, you ought to know that such misunderstandings exist. That sort of thing is easy to overlook inside one's own circle. The minds you daily meet have been conditioned by the same studies and prevalent opinions as your own. That may mislead you. For of course as priests it is the outsiders you will have to cope with. You exist in the long run for no other purpose. The proper study of shepherds is sheep, not ... other shepherds. ... I am a sheep, telling shepherds what only a sheep can tell them. And now I start my bleating. ("Fern-seed" 104f)

Was there perhaps another reason for Carey's invitation, that is, other than Lewis's reaction to a sermon by Alec Vidler? In an email to me, retired Cambridge Professor of Modern Church History David Thompson wrote, "Ken Carey was a relatively conservative figure as Principal of Westcott ... and I do not find it difficult to imagine him warming to the idea that Lewis might share his ideas with his students" (Thompson email). Alister McGrath added in another email that Lewis's concern for the liberal positions held in Cambridge probably also motivated him to accept the invitation (McGrath email). The two Anglican seminaries in Cambridge are Westcott House and Ridley Hall. Westcott House reflects the liberal catholic position, rather than Ridley Hall's evangelical perspective. Consequently, in his 1959 essay, we find Lewis bringing an evangelical biblical perspective, but with the background of a scholar of English literature and an experienced writer.

### *The Address*

During the rest of the talk, Lewis laid out his four major bleats. Those points, briefly summarized, are as follows:

- (1) Some biblical critics lack literary judgment (they read between the lines of ancient texts, not understanding extra-biblical literary

genres, e.g., reading John’s Gospel as a romance, as James Drummond contended);

(2) Some wrongly claim that the real teaching of Christ came rapidly to be misunderstood and has only been recovered by modern scholars (Vidler is an example);

(3) Some wrongly claim that miracles don’t occur;

(4) Attempts to recover the origin of a text often err (as has happened with some of Plato’s and Shakespeare’s works).

In the first point, Lewis spoke as a scholar of English literature and showed his expertise in that field. After all, the Bible is not just theology; it is also literature. In the second point, he spoke as a student of history and a lay reader of the New Testament. In the third point, the author of the philosophical work *Miracles* offered his perspective from both a biblical and a philosophical basis. In the fourth point, he spoke from the personal experience of a writer, stating



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*The Common Room of Westcott House, where Lewis delivered “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism.”*

that modern reviewers rarely understood the origins of his own writings, even though they had many advantages over a twentieth-century critic assessing first-century writing by one of the four evangelists. Consequently, Lewis argued, one can entertain serious doubts about the conclusions of modern critics who theorize about how a biblical text originated.

### ***The Audience and Setting***

Among the forty-to-fifty students and faculty who were present when Lewis spoke were Principal Kenneth Carey (1908-1979), later Bishop of Edinburgh, who extended the invitation to Lewis; graduate student Don Cupitt, later Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, featured in the 1984 BBC television series “The Sea of Faith”; graduate student Lionel R. Wickham; student Kenneth J. Woollcombe, now deceased, later Bishop of Oxford and delegate to the World Council of Churches, who was visiting from St. John, Oxford, and is said to have led the subsequent opposition to Lewis; the Reverend Canon John Davies, Chaplain of Westcott House; and Vice-Principal Dr. John Habgood, later Archbishop of York. Nearly all of the rest in attendance

were the seminary students of Westcott House, including Trevor Shannon, Peter Nott, Hugh Magee, and Christopher Hall.

Dr. Wickham described the audience in an email: “We students were mostly in our 20s. Almost all were graduates. Some had taken first degrees in Theology; three or four like Don Cupitt and me were taking the equivalent of a Master’s Programme in Theology.” The talk was a regular part of the program for students at Westcott House, Wickham explained, not one that was extra-curricular and optional (Wickham email).

### *The Reaction and its Context*

The talk was well-received by most, especially by Principal Carey. Trevor Shannon enjoyed the talk (Shannon email), and Peter Nott stated, “The vast majority of us heard him gladly” (Nott email). Later, Walter Hooper told me in a private conversation that Austin Farrer was considered by some to be the brightest intellect in Oxford in his day and that Farrer thought this essay was right on target. Elsewhere Hooper stated that Farrer called it “the best thing Lewis ever wrote” (Preface, *Fern-seed* 9). Many would concur.

However, it was not received positively by everyone present at the talk itself. Four people in particular reacted negatively—Don Cupitt, Lionel Wickham, Hugh Magee, and Kenneth Woollcombe. An interview with Don Cupitt gave some of the reasons for the negative side of the reaction in the audience that day. At the time, Cupitt was a graduate of Trinity Hall, Cambridge. From there he came to Westcott House and, much later, became known for his unorthodox views, even to the point of questioning the existence of God, at least as most Christians understand God. Cupitt claimed that “the talk caused great indignation and ‘horrified’ the students at Westcott House” (Cupitt interview).

Cupitt commented that in *The Discarded Image*, Lewis was well aware that the views of the Middle Ages were different from ours. And yet, Cupitt claimed, in his talk at Westcott House Lewis seemed to deny that such a difference existed between the worldview of the first century and the contemporary worldview. Consequently, Cupitt suggested, Lewis also denied need for the translation of Scripture to our worldview today.<sup>2</sup> There are contradictions in the Gospels, Cupitt stated, such as Jesus’ teaching in the



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John Davies,  
Chaplain



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Trevor Shannon

Sermon on the Mount about praying, fasting, and almsgiving being done in private, and then his subsequent exhortation to "Let your light shine." So



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Don Cupitt

which is it? Should we be public or private? Likewise, Cupitt stated, Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University Leonard Hodgson (1889-1969) thought there was a need for translation. According to Cupitt, Professor Hodgson said, in effect, "If they, living in their world, put it like that, how should we, living in our world, put it?" (Cupitt interview).

In fact, Lewis was well aware of the need for translation and knew a great deal about the subject. He both advocated for translation and practiced it in his RAF lectures and his BBC broadcasts during the war. He once wrote, "We must learn the language of our audience. And let me say at the outset that it is no use at all laying down *a priori* what the 'plain man' does or does not understand. You have to find out by experience" ("Christian Apologetics" 96). He also wrote,

You must translate every bit of your Theology into the vernacular. This is very troublesome and it means you can say very little in half an hour, but it is essential. It is also of the greatest service to your own thought. I have come to the conviction that if you cannot translate your thoughts into uneducated language, then your thoughts were confused. Power to translate is the test of having really understood one's own meaning.  
("Christian Apologetics" 98)

That conviction explains his proposal that ordinands be required to translate a piece of complex theology into the language of the common person ("God in the Dock" 243). He also wrote, "[P]eople praise me as a 'translator,' but what I want is to be the founder of a school of 'translation'" (*Collected Letters* II 674). This should not surprise us. Lewis was a Professor of English literature, so he majored in words and their meanings.

While it is true that Scripture at times needs translation, or interpretation, there are many levels of translation. First of all, there is the most obvious type of translation from one language to another. Then there is the level of superficial language and terminology, such as the word "beka" (a unit of weight in Gen. 24:22 equal to 1/5 of an ounce), when we rephrase or explain ancient words to approximate their modern equivalents. Deeper than this are custom and practice, where, for example, the unfamiliar practice of an oral will in Genesis or the practice of gleaning in the book of Ruth is explained

to the modern reader. Deeper still are fundamental concepts and beliefs. To suggest that translation is needed at the deepest level can be to deny the straightforward meanings of words and to turn translation into a rationale for fundamentally changing the teaching of Scripture.

In his book, *The Intellectual World of C.S. Lewis*, Alister McGrath argues that Lewis rejected the idea that Christian ideas or values can be detached from the language that gives them their identity. While Rudolf Bultmann argued that the New Testament proclamation derived from Jewish apocalyptic and Gnostic redemption myths, Lewis wrote, "We are invited to restate our belief in a form free from metaphor and symbol. The reason why we don't is that we can't" ("Is Theology Poetry?" qtd. in McGrath *Intellectual World* 70). "To 'demythologize,'" à la Bultmann's term for the translation of Scripture, continues McGrath, "is to break the link between the Christian faith and the realizing imagination and substitute something of lesser significance" (*Intellectual World* 70).<sup>3</sup>

### ***Modernism and its Adherents***

The main immediate complaint against Lewis by those opposed to the thesis of his talk was expressed by Dr. Lionel Wickham, who thought "that he (Lewis) was not competent to criticize contemporary Biblical theology since he had had no training in Biblical studies ..." (Wickham email). Kenneth Woollcombe also was of that persuasion, as was Cupitt. Peter Nott affirmed the presence of such sympathies, stating that "there was a kind of intellectual snobbery about him, especially among 'professional' theologians, that Lewis was not a 'proper' theologian" (Nott email). Hugh Magee also wrote that "Lewis was a bit out of his depth" (Magee email). This sort of criticism is echoed in an article by W. Norman Pittenger, which described some of Lewis's statements in *Surprised by Joy* as "somewhat unfortunate theological opinions" (Pittenger 1104). However, said Nott, "others, including myself, believed [Lewis] was the best kind of theologian because he understood the language and thought forms of ordinary people, and communicated theological ideas through stories and concepts with which ordinary people would be familiar" (Nott email).



*Peter Nott*

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Although these attendees of the talk questioned Lewis's credentials, they did not offer a critique of or challenge to his four main points. In response, one might certainly ask why it was assumed by these men that Lewis was in no position to criticize contemporary biblical theology. While it is true that

Lewis was not a professional theologian, he was an intelligent, theologically informed layperson.

Further, Karl Barth once wrote, "Theology is not a private subject for theologians only" (qtd. in McGrath, *Intellectual World* 166). In that regard, McGrath argues that Athanasius and Augustine were not really "professional theologians,"



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John Habgood

but they were theologians nevertheless (169). In fact, McGrath describes Lewis as a popular theologian, a lay theologian, though not a professional theologian—who can therefore be legitimately called a theologian (168, 175).

The term "modern theology" in the title of Lewis's talk refers to modern methods of interpretation, such as source criticism, form criticism, literary criticism, tradition history, and the like, many of which asserted that there had been a long period of time during which the stories of the New Testament circulated orally. In his opening paragraph, Lewis had referred to "the type of thought which, so far as I could gather, is now dominant in many theological colleges." Since the theology taught in theological colleges in Cambridge emanates from the Divinity Faculty in Cambridge, the question may be asked, "Who were the New Testament theologians in Cambridge at that time?" What was being taught in New Testament at the time, and to what extent did the teachers adopt those modern methods that would have influenced what and how they taught the students at Westcott House?

Teaching New Testament in Cambridge at the time of Lewis's address were C.F.D. "Charlie" Moule, a Fellow of Clare College and Lady Margaret's Professor of Divinity (1908-2007); Geoffrey M. Styller, Corpus Christi College; H.W. Montefiore (1920-2005), Fellow and Dean at Gonville and Caius College (1953-1963); J.S. Bezzant, Dean of St. John's; R.P. Casey, Sidney Sussex College (1897-1959); J.N. Sanders, Peterhouse; and J.A.T. Robinson, Dean of Clare (1919-1983), all of them on the Divinity Faculty in Cambridge in the late 1950s and among those who taught New Testament to the Westcott House students to whom Lewis spoke. (See the Appendix for more details on these theologians' writings and perspectives.)

Lewis had reason to be concerned about "the type of thought which, so far as I could gather, is now dominant in many theological colleges" ("Fernseed" 104). While Moule maintained a more traditional perspective, Bezzant, Montefiore, Sanders, and especially Robinson were advocates of the modernistic approach to the New Testament that Lewis rejected. Alec Vidler held convictions similar to those of Bezzant and Robinson.

For modernists, eyewitnesses had very little influence on the development of the Gospel tradition (Bauckham 348). Cupitt especially took issue with

Lewis's use of the word "reportage" ("Fern-seed" 108), as though it were incomprehensible that Lewis could think that the Gospel of John contained accurate eyewitness accounts of events in the life of Jesus. But Lewis did think that. Lewis expressed similar thoughts in his essay, "What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?" when he wrote, "Surely the only explanation of this passage [of Scripture] is that the thing really happened?" ("What Are We to Make" 159). In "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," Lewis stated, "A theology which denies the historicity of nearly everything in the Gospels to which Christian life and affections and thought have been fastened for nearly two millennia . . . can produce only one or other of two effects. It will make him a Roman Catholic or an atheist" ("Fern-seed" 105). In fact, the modernist understanding of history was one of the major reasons for Lewis's challenge, as indicated by his use of the word "reportage" (108), his concern about "the rejection as unhistorical" (113) of all accounts of miracles, and his skepticism about skeptics who think that "something in a Gospel cannot be historical" (121). Elsewhere in this essay he wrote that liberal theology was engaged in "undermining the old orthodoxy" (106).

Since the 1950s, much work has been done on the interpretation of the Gospels. Recently, Richard Bauckham's book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, has provided



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*From inside the Westcott Quad: the main entrance (left) and the Common Room where Lewis's talk was delivered (right).*

a powerful and contemporary response to the methods and message of form criticism. Bauckham challenges some of the conclusions of form criticism, particularly the idea that the Gospel stories circulated orally for decades before being written down, stating that "the Gospel texts are

much closer to the form in which the eyewitnesses told their stories or passed on their traditions than is commonly envisaged in current scholarship" (6).

Bauckham's critique of form criticism is powerful. His arguments show the priority of eyewitness testimony for historiography in the first century A.D., the nature of memory, the accuracy of personal names in the first century, and other evidence that the four evangelists wrote from personal experience or on the basis of interviews with people who were eyewitnesses. According to Bauckham's study, Lewis's word "reportage" turns out to be quite accurate. As Dorothy L. Sayers wrote, "History was all of a piece, and . . . the Bible was part of it" (24); furthermore, "the arguments used [against the Gospel of John] are such as no critic would ever dream of applying to a modern book of memoirs written by one real person about another" (24).

*Another Perspective*

In spite of the theological perspectives of some of those in the room on May 11, Lewis's talk was well-received by many. There was some laughter in the room over his "bleats" and at other moments (Hall email). Since he had invited Lewis to give the talk, Principal Carey thanked Lewis at the conclusion. Christopher Hall wrote, "The talk was certainly enjoyed—not least for the opportunity to hear a very significant author" (Hall email). Only four people in attendance are known to have disagreed with Lewis. Wickham even stated, "I remember that I took that fourth observation to heart; it was certainly a positive benefit I derived from the paper" (Wickham email).

The main reason for any negative reaction was disagreement with the theological position of Lewis. Cupitt's amazement that Lewis would call John's Gospel reportage; the influence of Robinson, Bezzant, and others on Westcott House students; and the silence of his critics over his defense of the miraculous all suggest that the primary reason for dismissing Lewis's arguments was disagreement with his more conservative theology. The scholars that Cupitt cited favorably in conversation with me—Hodgson, Bultmann, Crossan, and Thompson—all illustrate Cupitt's disagreement with evangelical theology. Alec Vidler's close relationship with several members of the Cambridge Divinity Faculty also confirms this stance, since Montefiore, Bezzant, and Sanders each contributed to books edited or co-edited by Vidler.

Lewis wrote favorably of Vidler in certain places in *Letters to Malcolm* (30), but he also stated of Vidler in that work, "He wants ... to retain some Christian doctrines. But he is prepared to scrap a good deal. 'Traditional doctrines' are to be tested" (32). Since Vidler's theology was similar to the theology of some of the Cambridge Divinity Faculty, Lewis's talk was seen as an attack on Vidler's convictions, which many of those faculty shared. After all, it was a book by Vidler that started the process that led to Lewis's talk at Westcott House.

Dr. Wickham also expressed a legitimate point of concern when he wrote, "The tone of polemic surprised; one or two questions implying disagreement were put from the floor and, if I remember correctly, put down" (Wickham email). That Lewis often spoke combatively is well known, so Wickham no doubt remembers correctly. However, others who were present remember "that he was never confrontational—that was his gift—he took people seriously where they were, and dealt courteously and gently with their difficulties" (Nott email).

Most of those who have read Lewis know that his conversational style was sometimes dialogical, sometimes even combative, especially in his tuto-



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Kenneth Carey

rials, as John Lawlor once wrote: "One quickly felt that for him dialectic supplied the place of conversation" (3). After some time in tutorials with



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Lionel R. Wickham

Lewis, however, Lawlor came to appreciate "the weekly bout in which no quarter was asked or given" (9). Alastair Fowler agrees that Lewis "generally followed the adversarial system" (68), and many who took tutorials with Lewis would also agree. Another perspective suggests that Wickham's "tone of polemic" was simply a confidently expressed and well-argued position offered by Lewis with no intention of being discourteous.<sup>4</sup>

Another criticism of the talk was that Lewis incorrectly cited James Drummond in Walter Lock's commentary. Drummond (1835-1918) was a Unitarian minister who wrote *An Inquiry into the Character and Authorship of the Fourth Gospel* for the students of Manchester College, a Unitarian college of Oxford University. While this book by Drummond is not the book that Walter Lock cited, that was Lock's mistake rather than Lewis's. A read-through of *An Inquiry*, a 514-page book, did not turn up any of the references to John's Gospel as a "spiritual romance," or "a poem not a history," or being similar to *Pilgrim's Progress*, as Lewis stated in the talk and in the essay it became ("Fern-seed" 107), although this is the book listed in Lock's bibliography (Lock 271). However, a perspective consistent with the assertion Locke attributed to Drummond appears prominently in *An Inquiry*, so Lewis was correct in the position he attributed to Drummond (by way of Lock).

For example, Drummond stated of John, that "... he wrote in the interests of faith, and not of biographical fact" (*An Inquiry* 22), also stating that John "... set forth his ... doctrine in the form of allegory" (33). Later he wrote about John's Gospel, "[w]e seem to hear rather what Christ had spoken through history and inward experience to the hearts of his disciples than the words which he had addressed to them on earth" (38). Drummond wrote, "The writer ... is ... ascribing to him [Jesus] words which he had heard in the spirit rather than with his fleshly ears" (39). Although the reference to John's Gospel as "a poem not a history" does not appear in this work, Drummond describes John's Gospel as "admitting more or less of poetic or ideal interpretation" (115). The position cited by Lock was cited accurately. Consequently, it appears that Lewis was correct in citing Lock, and that Walter Hooper was correct in footnoting this work of Drummond, but that Lock was incorrect in his original citation.

More surprising, however, is the criticism that Lewis lacked training in theology. Lewis himself admitted that fact in his talk, and there was no

dispute on that point. Lewis was very clear about his role as a layman, something that he emphasized in his introduction. He stated that he spoke as a *layman*, not clergy; he bleated as a *sheep*, not a shepherd; he wrote as a self-proclaimed *outsider* rather than as an insider. But his training in literature was precisely the major reason for his reservations about some methods and conclusions of modernism.

Furthermore, in the opening paragraph of his talk, Lewis admitted the following: that his position was "a hasty and ignorant one," "I was extremely ignorant," "have nothing but misunderstandings to lay before you," and "I am a sheep, telling shepherds what only a sheep can tell them." Later he calls himself "not theologically educated" and an "outsider." In his conclusion, he calls his lecture the performance of "an embarrassing role." One may find it hard to reconcile these self-deprecating statements with the claim that Lewis was combative, but, in fact, he could be simultaneously humble and combative. His combativeness was in his aggressive approach; at the same time, his humility was demonstrated through his words and demeanor.

In this regard, Lewis's introduction to this talk bears some similarity to his introduction to *Reflections on the Psalms*, a book published just one year earlier and his only work published on a book of the Bible. In that work, he claimed to speak as a layman, a schoolboy, and an amateur rather than a specialist, a Hebraist, or a theologian. He opened the book with the following words:

This is not a work of scholarship. I am no Hebraist, no higher critic, no ancient historian, no archaeologist. I write for the unlearned about things in which I am unlearned myself. . . . In this book, then, I write as one amateur to another, talking about difficulties I have met, or lights I have gained, when reading the Psalms, with the hope that this might at any rate interest, and sometimes even help, other inexpert readers. I am "comparing notes," not presuming to instruct. (*Reflections on the Psalms* 1f)

The same modest approach is true of *Mere Christianity*. In words that were later excised from that volume, Lewis wrote,

*It's not because I'm anybody in particular that I've been asked to tell you what Christians believe. In fact it's just the opposite. They've asked me, first of all because I'm a layman and not a parson, and consequently it was thought I might understand the ordinary person's point of view a bit better. Secondly, I think they asked me because it was known that I'd been an atheist for many years and only became a Christian quite fairly recently. They thought that would mean I'd be able to see the difficulties—able to remember what Christianity looks like from the outside. So you see, the long*

and the short of it is that I've been selected for this job just because *I'm an amateur* not a professional, and *a beginner*, not an old hand. Of course this means that *you may well ask what right I have to talk on the subject at all.*  
(qtd. in Hooper *Companion & Guide* 306f., emphasis mine)

Likewise, in his essay "Transposition," Lewis wrote, "I . . . submit all to the verdict of real theologians" (87).

While some would, with much cogency, call this a rhetorical device, as Wickham did, I believe that Lewis was too conscious of his position simply to use rhetoric. Lewis knew his place and expressed it with humility. He was a layman rather than a biblical scholar. Not just any layman, but one with literary competence. But precisely for this reason he can offer a perspective that most biblical scholars cannot. When we see Lewis, the scholar of literature, and we think about the reaction of some who attended his talk at Westcott House, the underlying reason for disagreement was in Lewis's differing theological position. Lewis was a man of great learning, holding positions that he could defend powerfully in debate—from a theological perspective, but also from a literary perspective. His goal was merely to state his case as clearly and effectively as he could at the intersection of theology and literature, because he was both a scholar of literature and a lay theologian: in this instance, a layman speaking, a sheep bleating—not only literarily, but also theologically—an alternative and necessary perspective.

JOEL HECK

## Appendix

The following individuals were teaching New Testament at Cambridge at the time of Lewis's lecture, and their theological backgrounds and perspectives likely influenced the reaction Lewis's talk received from the audience at Westcott House.

The Revd. Prof. C.F.D. Moule was a relatively conservative New Testament scholar and Anglican priest, who was appointed to the Council (governing board) of Westcott House while serving as a Fellow of Clare College. He was a member of the Council of Westcott House during the time that Lewis served on the Council, which included the date of the talk that Lewis gave. Some of the others were not well known, publishing relatively little in comparison with other biblical scholars. That was not the case, however, with Bezzant, Montefiore, Sanders, and Robinson.

J.S. Bezzant co-edited, with Alec Vidler and two other Cambridge Deans, *Objections to Christian Belief* (1963). He also contributed a chapter to that book entitled "Intellectual Objections," the most radical of the four essays in the

book, which included his opinion that the descendants of Adam and Eve were intended to replace those angels who had rebelled against God. Bezzant's description of the early Christian message as "free imaginative composition" reflected presuppositions about the origin and development of the New Testament that are held in liberal theological camps. Bezzant cited Bultmann favorably when Bultmann considered the resurrection a matter of faith only, not a historical confirmation of the crucifixion, and he also stated that "we cannot be sure that we have the actual words of Jesus" (MacKinnon et al. *Objections* 83).

H.W. Montefiore and J.N. Sanders each contributed a chapter to *Soundings: Essays Concerning Christian Understanding* (1962), edited by Alec Vidler, as did John Habgood, Vice-Principal of Westcott House. Habgood's article, "The Uneasy Truce between Science and Theology," discussed the perception that science dealt with facts and empirical truth while theology dealt with ultimate concern and symbolic truth. While critical of Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man*, Habgood praised it as an attempt at synthesizing science and theology (Habgood 23, 30). His article stated that both science and theology had something to say to the other and that the implied criticisms of theology from science need not prevent greater harmony between the two disciplines (Habgood 41).

In his *Soundings* chapter, Montefiore affirmed Jesus as God and man "in the same Person." However, he also claimed that the author of the Fourth Gospel mingled his own experience with the words and works of Jesus "in such a way that the critic cannot distinguish the two" (150). Later he stated that Jesus "seems explicitly to have denied" his deity, with his affirmation of God as "My Father." For Montefiore, this address indicated that Jesus was something other than "of one substance with the Father" (158). According to Montefiore, Jesus made functional or relational statements about himself rather statements about his nature (159). Montefiore seemed to be trying to write about God as person without suggesting that human personhood was the model for God. However, Montefiore showed his support for the theology expressed by Robinson and Bezzant when he stated, "The old theology starts with the divinity of Christ and tries to explain how God became man. The new theology starts with the only indisputable fact—that Christ was man—and tries to show how God acted through Him uniquely" (qtd. in Wren 29). In his chapter in *Soundings*, Montefiore stated that the death of Jesus "enabled man to accept himself and thereby to enter into a right relationship with God and with his fellow men, and so to fulfill the purpose for which he was created" (167). Nor does Montefiore seem to have held to the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead. To the contrary, he wrote, "The Resurrection appearances are not dissimilar in form from other paranormal phenomena of the same general kind" (170).

Sanders's article in the *Soundings* collection was largely a historical study of nineteenth-century views of the authority of the New Testament. He

suggested that apparent discrepancies in matters of doctrine were “smothered over by nice distinctions and more or less ingenious special pleading” (125). Like Montefiore, Sanders was willing to set aside the doctrinal statements of the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) as adequate for that day but as inadequate for his own, largely for the sake of the “freeing [of] the interpretation of the New Testament from dogmatic control” (127). He rejected Bultmann (130), but he commended higher criticism (139). However, his affirmation of the miracles of Jesus and the resurrection (140f.) made him more conservative than others of the Cambridge New Testament Divinity faculty.

Robinson became the author of the best-selling book, *Honest to God*, which was considered by many to deny the existence of a personal God, a position similar to that of Cupitt. On March 17, 1963, just prior to the release of that book, Bishop Robinson, then Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, had published an article in *The Observer* entitled “Our Image of God Must Go.” The article summarized his forthcoming book and expressed the urgent need for the church to question the traditional image of God as a supernatural Person. This, he thought, would enable Christians to communicate more effectively with secular people. *The Observer’s* publicity gave great impetus to the book both nationally and internationally (Montgomery 231). The book sold almost a million copies in three years (Hastings 536).

In *Honest to God*, Robinson suggested that Christians must recast the Christian faith in modern, secular terms to avoid naïvely portraying God as otherworldly. He preferred Paul Tillich’s description of God as the “ground of our being,” as well as Bonhoeffer’s “Christianity without religion” and Bultmann’s assumption that the New Testament reflected the cosmology of a pre-scientific, and therefore naïve, age (*Honest* 34). Lewis later questioned whether laypeople in the twentieth century actually thought of God as being “up there” in the sky (*Letters to Malcolm* 74), and others would question whether Christians of the *first* century were naïve enough to think that way. Robinson also questioned the deity of Jesus and the model of substitutionary atonement, describing “the notion that the Father punishes the Son in our place” as “a perversion of what the New Testament says” (*Honest* 78). Ethical conduct, according to Robinson, is bound only by love, and moral decisions depend upon the situation. The Bultmannian reading of New Testament theology, writes Christopher Wren, had close ties with Alec Vidler, whom some scholars regard “as the ‘midwife’ of the movement” (Wren 28).

On one occasion Lewis wrote, “[me]re ‘modernism’ I reject at once” (*Collected Letters* II 646). The man who rejected chronological snobbery also rejected it when offered as a new and improved theology. Lewis spoke briefly, but disparagingly, of Robinson’s *Honest to God* in a letter to Basil Willey one month before his death (*Collected Letters* III 1468). Exactly one week after Robinson’s article was published, Lewis’s response to it was published in *The Observer* under the title, “Must Our Image of God Go?”

Lewis rejected Robinson's modernism, as well as Robinson's assumptions about what people believe, writing in this brief, three-paragraph essay,

We have long abandoned belief in a God who sits on a throne in a localized heaven. ... I have never met any adult who replaced "God up there" by "God out there" in the sense "spatially external to the universe." ... We do not understand why the Bishop is so anxious to canonize the one image and forbid the other. ... Does the Bishop mean that something which is not "a person" could yet be "personal"? Even this could be managed if "not a person" were taken to mean "a person and more"—as is provided for by the doctrine of the Trinity. ("Must Our Image of God Go?" 185)

In this, Lewis was referring to the fourth part of *Mere Christianity*, i.e. "Beyond Personality," where he argued that the Trinity was personal, but also more than a person, someone superpersonal and *not* impersonal, someone tri-dimensional, three-personal, or Trinitarian.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> At this time, Lewis was a member of the Council (governing board) of Westcott House. My article about his service on the Council, from June 1, 1955, to December 1, 1959, appeared in *The Journal of Inklings Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, April 2012, 101-107, as "C.S. Lewis and the Westcott House Governing Board." Had he not been serving on the Council, he likely would not have been invited to give this talk.

<sup>2</sup> The translation of Scripture suggested the influence of Rudolf Bultmann, who would instead use the word "demythologization." So I asked Cupitt about Bultmann, and Cupitt said that he was comfortable with Bultmann, but he also said that the historical Jesus was more interesting than Bultmann thought, so he disagreed with Bultmann on some points. Which points he disagreed with he did not say.

<sup>3</sup> In our interview, Cupitt also mentioned the Jesus Seminar, a late-twentieth-century movement to determine the historicity of the happenings of Jesus' life. The Seminar affirmed Don Cupitt's assertion that the exaltation of Jesus to heaven, according to 1 Thessalonians, was the first form of the resurrection belief that later developed into the idea that Jesus rose physically from the dead. In other words, dead people don't actually rise from the dead. Dominic Crossan, one of the founders of the Jesus Seminar, is well regarded in Cambridge, Cupitt claimed. Cupitt also mentioned favorably Thomas L. Thompson, who is associated with the Center for Inquiry, an organization dedicated to promoting a secular society and encouraging an end to the influence that religion and pseudoscience have on public policy. Thompson thought that the Old Testament recorded a history of Israel that *should* have happened rather than that which *actually* happened, another viewpoint that reflects a reading of Scripture as something other than history, even in its historical literature.

In essence, it appears that the main charge leveraged against Lewis with regards to his theology was that he presupposed the historicity and validity of Scripture in an era when this was an unpopular theological stance.

<sup>4</sup>This other perspective on Lewis can be found in John Harwood, brother to Lewis's godson Laurence Harwood: " 'He would attempt to find some merit, a glimpse of some ideas, in the pretty pedestrian essays that I read to him. With great courtesy he would suggest that I should consider this or that, extend my reading to include—whoever it might be. It was, in fact, the general character of Lewis that, even if no more gladly than anyone else, he would suffer fools with great patience' " (qtd. in Harwood 121f).

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