

**Joseph Pearce, *C.S. Lewis and the Catholic Church*,  
Review by William R. Gallagher  
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**Book Review**

William R. Gallagher

Joseph Pearce, *C.S. Lewis and the Catholic Church*, xxx + 175 pp.,  
Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2003.

This is a fine book, written by a Catholic admirer of C. S. Lewis. Its main concern is the question why Lewis never became a Roman Catholic, despite the influence of Catholic doctrines upon his thought. To this end, the book provides background information on Lewis' writings, offers insights into the development of his views, and discusses the difficulties he had with some Catholics.

Notwithstanding its rich content, my primary purpose here is to discuss the problematic aspects of Pearce's work. These arise primarily from his polemical approach, rather than from lack of understanding. As far as I can see, there is only one serious misunderstanding on Pearce's part, namely when he wrongly construes a question 'Lewis' poses to his 'teacher' George MacDonald in *The Great Divorce*:

'But there is a real choice after death? My Roman Catholic friends would be surprised, for to them souls in Purgatory are already saved. And my Protestant friends would like it no better, for they'd say that the tree lies as it falls.'

From this, Pearce attributes to Lewis the belief that people lose their free will after death, and assumes Lewis projects this view onto Roman Catholics as well (pp. 107-08). Pearce's mistakes are two: One, he shortens 'a real choice' to 'real choice', equates 'real choice' with 'free will', and concludes that Lewis does not believe in free will after death. But 'a real choice' and 'free will' are not the same thing. A choice is the exercise of one's free will within the confines of the circumstances; it is not free will itself. Two, Pearce assumes that the quote really reflects Lewis's viewpoint, when in fact Lewis is depicting himself as a naive questioner whom MacDonald has to correct and reprimand. (Lewis' prior question was, 'Then those people are right who say that Heaven and Hell are only states of mind?' to which MacDonald replies, 'Hush,...Do not blaspheme'.)

I assume Lewis' question about a real choice was prompted by what he saw: ghosts being given the choice of returning to Hell or accepting God's mercy and coming into heaven. Thus the character Lewis is asking if the heterodox idea of having a

second chance after death is right after all. To which MacDonald replies, 'Do not fash yourself with such questions. Ye cannot fully understand the relations of choice and Time till you are beyond both'.

Pearce occasionally draws conclusions from Lewis' silence, such as in a passage from *That Hideous Strength* in which Merlin asks about possible allies in their fight against a diabolical conspiracy. Merlin does not suggest calling on the Pope for help, and Pearce, following Christopher Derrick's *C.S. Lewis and the Church of Rome*, believes this is evidence of Lewis not wanting to address the issue of the papacy (pp. 97-100). Pearce and Derrick might be ascribing undue significance to this silence. Lewis may have considered such a question out of the mouth of a 5th-century character anachronistic. Pope Urban II rallied all of Europe for the First Crusade in the late 11th century, but did a 5th-century Pope have such power? I doubt it.

As one might expect, Pearce also addresses Lewis' supposed silence about our Lord's Mother. Here he gives a long, hard-hitting quote from Peter Milward, who notes that Lewis avoided the topic of Mary in both *Mere Christianity* and in his scholarly works where one could rightfully expect her to appear. Milward does not conceal his disappointment:

So again I can't help wondering at the insensitivity of this scholar, who ... claims to speak as a native of mediaeval England ... yet has no appreciation of her whom the people of the Middle Ages, including Dante and Chaucer, hailed as their queen and mother.... And in this silence I can't help feeling not so much reverence, or mere indifference, as suppression of a deep Protestant prejudice. (Quoted p. 123)

Lewis's silence on this topic is perplexing, but people usually avoid a subject not out of insensitivity, but oversensitivity. If Lewis had a 'deep Protestant prejudice', it is remarkable how well he was able to hide it. Again, one can only infer prejudice from his silence; there is almost no direct evidence for it. In the same section Pearce adds:

Failure to sympathize with, empathize with, or even mention the Mother of Christ or, for that matter, the host of...saints who have been venerated down the centuries, is not to place oneself at the centre of what 'nearly all Christians at all times' have believed, it is to place oneself in the ranks of an iconoclastic minority who have only risen to prominence in relatively recent times on the...fringes of mainstream Christian opinion. A 'mere Christianity' thus

formulated and propagated, is outside 'the great central tradition' and cannot claim to be representative of it. (p. 124)

This is doubtless one of the sections which Pearce himself admits were written in a 'somewhat rhetorical fashion', by which he means no offense and is not picking a quarrel, but which he rather intends for argument (p. xxix). I will also add that this passage does not reflect the general tone of the book. The problem is that rhetoric is often imprecise and thus unsuitable for a serious argument. In this case accusing Lewis of not even mentioning Mary is simply not true. As Pearce himself notes, Lewis mentions Mary in *Mere Christianity* and gives his reason for not discussing her. Allusions to her are in other works of his, too. In chapter five of *Perelandra*, for example, Ransom describes Tinidril, the unfallen Eve of *Perelandra*, as follows:

'Beautiful, naked, shameless, young-she was obviously a goddess: but then the face, the face so calm that it escaped insipidity by the very concentration of its mildness, the face that was like the sudden coldness and stillness of a church when we enter it from a hot street - that made her a Madonna'.

As for Protestantism, it was over 400 years old by the mid-20th century and encompassed most of the English-speaking world (Lewis' main readership). That does not sound like a fringe group to me. One could argue that Protestantism is impoverished because it rejects the veneration of the saints. But if such veneration is 'central' to Christianity, one must infer that Protestants are not real Christians. Pearce surely does not mean that. Pearce hopes that his book will be read by Protestants as well as Catholics. I heartily recommend it to any Protestant fan of Lewis, but I believe the book would have been more useful to Protestants, and to Catholics for that matter, if Pearce had explained better the Catholic position on certain issues. Purgatory is an example:

The 'Reformers' did not quibble over whether Dante's view of Purgatory was correct whereas the views of More and Fisher were wrong; they simply rejected the very existence of Purgatory itself. (p. 146)

Dante's Purgatory was a place for the soul's purification; for More and Fisher, Purgatory was apparently for 'retributive punishment'. I do not see this distinction as quibbling. If Purgatory is for retributive punishment - and in my experience this is how most Protestants understand it-questions arise as to what Christ's death on the cross achieved for us. Did not Christ take the punishment for our sins upon himself? Why do we need Purgatory after Christ's sacrifice? Considering the abuses surrounding Purgatory in the 16th century, we owe Protestants an explanation of this doctrine. We should show that it does not detract from the importance of our Lord's

crucifixion. Pearce, who apparently does not see the need for this, argues from the truth, not to the truth of his position (to borrow a phrase from Lewis). The last chapter gives an exposition of the woes of the Anglican Church since Lewis' time. Pearce's description does sound dire. The trouble is that a similar 'list of woes' could be made for the Catholic Church, especially in Central Europe, where I live. But I will not focus on that. I will only note that the Catholic Church of the 1930s-50s was probably less congenial to outsiders than it is today. Though many accusations against the Church are simplistic, distorted or outright false, there is no denying that the Catholic Church had ties to fascist movements in Lewis' time, and Lewis was sensitive to this. Much has changed since then. Pope John Paul II, for example, has apologized for the crimes committed by Catholics against others, including the persecutions of the Jews. Opinions vary on whether the Pope went too far or not far enough in his apologies, but this attempt at reconciliation with peoples whom Catholics had wronged has been long overdue. A Pope who does this is more deserving of respect, and I'm sure Lewis would have acknowledged this. As disappointing as it is for some that Lewis never became a Catholic, I believe his ministry has been richer by his remaining an Anglican. As Pearce notes, the main readers of Lewis today are Catholics and Evangelical Christians. If Lewis had become a Roman Catholic, I doubt that this Evangelical readership would have developed, so deep is the gap between us. As an Anglican, Lewis helped many on the way to becoming Roman Catholics, and he has helped others to better understand central Catholic teachings. This is more than many Catholic writers can boast.

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