

## Appendix Three

# T.S. Eliot and C.S. Lewis

Eliot and Lewis were contemporaries and leading lay apologists, within Anglicanism, for the Christian faith in the modern secular age. The warming of their relationship, which took many years, is partly explained by Lewis' journey towards Catholic faith and practice within his Anglicanism. It is likely that his growing friendship with Eliot and increasing appreciation of his work influenced this marked change of churchmanship.

Lewis' Christianity began in the Ulster Protestantism of the Church of Ireland in which he was baptised, at birth, in 1898, with its conviction that the further removed was one's faith from Roman Catholicism, the nearer one approached to God. If anything, it was even more hostile to Anglo-Catholicism as representing the enemy within. Not surprisingly, with this background, Lewis retained an antipathy to Catholicism after his mature conversion to Christianity (around 1928, the same period as Eliot's baptism and confirmation), having been indifferent to his initial Church of Ireland affiliation. His friendship with the ultra-orthodox Roman Catholic J.R.R. Tolkien – the two of them were leading members of the group of 'Inklings' in Oxford – did not quell Lewis' deep-seated anti-Romanism, Tolkien always regretting that Lewis, in returning to Christianity, joined the Church of England, not Rome. Yet, as his Anglicanism developed, Lewis definitely became more Catholic in orientation, to the point where his observances and beliefs were accurately described (as John Wain, indeed, described them after his experience of the Inklings during the Second World War<sup>1</sup>) as Anglo-Catholic in character. This protracted journey in churchmanship paralleled Lewis' relationship with Eliot.

In literary terms, Lewis began in hostile repudiation of Modernism. 'I like lines that will scan', he affirmed, and he proposed a crusade against Eliot in 1926, initiating years of 'sniping at that poet'.<sup>2</sup> The sniping included ridicule of Eliot's newfound religious beliefs. He was characterised by Lewis as a 'Neo-Angular',

trying to make of Christianity itself one more high-brow, Chelsea, bourgeois-baiting fad. T.S. Eliot is the single man who sums up the thing I'm fighting against.<sup>3</sup>

Eliot found himself being attacked not only by atheists and neo-pagans for his reactionary *volte-face*, but, in Lewis' polemic, by a fellow Christian (indeed, Anglican) convert.

Lewis even subjected the priest, William Force Stead, who had baptised Eliot, to a prank. With some collaborators, he wrote a parody of Eliot's poetry and showed it to Stead who 'expressed a serious enthusiasm for it. But this seemed to indicate not so much that the poetry was good poetry as that Stead was a hopeless judge, and shortly after this the prank petered out'.<sup>4</sup>

Lewis misconstrued Eliot's Anglicanism as 'High and Dry', 'not merely sectarian', Humphrey Carpenter writes, but 'also emotionally barren and counter-Romantic'.<sup>5</sup> Lewis had much to learn about Anglo-Catholicism and Eliot. The catalyst in this process appears to have been the poet and novelist, Charles Williams, a fellow Inkling, whom Lewis revered and who, in turn, had a high regard for Eliot who had commissioned and published several of Williams' idiosyncratic mystical and quasi-historical works. Lewis would have understood Eliot's judgement on Williams:

He seemed to me to approximate, more nearly than any man  
I have known familiarly, to the saint...<sup>6</sup>

such sanctity being demonstrated, for Eliot, by Williams' behaviour in the unlikely setting of one of Ottoline Morrell's *soirées*:

One retained the impression that he was pleased and grateful for the opportunity of meeting the company, and yet that it was he who had conferred a favour – more than a favour, a kind of benediction, by coming.<sup>7</sup>

By the time that Eliot and Lewis were introduced to each other by Williams in Oxford in the last months of the Second World War, Lewis' Anglicanism included associations with religious communities and regular attendance at the Eucharist, on saints' days as well as Sundays, in the Anglo-Catholic way. The initial meeting, however, was not a success:

Eliot's opening remark scarcely delighted Lewis: 'Mr Lewis, you are a much older man than you appear in photographs'. The tea party progressed poorly, and was enjoyed by no one except Charles Williams, who seemed to be immensely amused.

Nonetheless, Lewis' essential conservatism, socially and religiously, which had grown on him over the years, made Eliot, in spite of his Modernist poetry, an increasingly sympathetic figure. Like Eliot, he abhorred liberalism in religious thought – satirised in the form of 'Mr Broad' in his *Pilgrim's Regress* (1933) – and by the end of the 1950s, he and Eliot had established a friendly rapport:

One day in the summer of 1959 Lewis and Joy [Davidman, his wife of three years] had lunch with Eliot and his new wife Valerie. It was an event which the pre-war Lewis would have declared to be in every respect impossible.<sup>8</sup>

Earlier, however, both men would similarly have supposed that the happiness they both experienced in marriage – of being, in Lewis' phrase from Wordsworth, 'surprised by joy' – would also have been impossible. Their friendliness seemed to exemplify Eliot's theory in 'Little Gidding' about the resolution, under grace, of old antipathies.