

Book Review

C. S. Lewis. *Christian Reflections*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967. p. 176, \$3.95.

(Reviewed by Eloise Bell, who is an instructor of English at Brigham Young University. She has been interested in C. S. Lewis' work through the years and writes this review having read most of his published work.)

Christian Reflections is not the book by which one should make first acquaintance with its author, C. S. Lewis. But it *is* the most recent book of Lewis' writings, and, as such, a splendid excuse for talking about a man not well enough known in this corner of the vineyard.

The book was not really intended as an introduction. Put together by a friend, Walter Hooper, after Lewis' death, it is a collection of papers, essays, and, in at least one instance, incomplete notes. We can be quite sure that if the author himself had prepared the materials for general publication, there would have been some significant changes, for one of Lewis' greatest gifts was his ability to make every subject he undertook to treat perfectly clear and full of light. Some of the material in *Christian Reflections*, on the other hand, still lacks the final polish that makes transparency of the haze. But that problem is a most minor one for those of us to whom any appearance of new work by C. S. Lewis is cause for celebration.

Mormons generally, I believe, have one of two attitudes toward reading religious writings by non-Mormons. The first attitude is that such extracurricular wanderings are somehow slightly heretical—an idea similar to that expressed by a well-meaning missionary who took me to task once for praying in a non-Mormon chapel—or at least a waste of time—"Have you read everything by the General Authorities first?"

The second attitude toward non-LDS religious writings is that of the reader who wants to be debonair in the truest sense of the word: he wants to be familiar with the ideas and beliefs of other faiths and thus attacks their documents with lively

curiosity and great goodwill. As some men like to be considered well-traveled, this debonair reader likes to be considered well-read in the realm of the religious.

The non-Mormon writer, C. S. Lewis, deserves an approach different from either of these. We should go to him to learn how to be better Christians.

Let no one think I intend to give alarm to the conservatives or license to the the liberals. We should not go to Lewis to learn *what* to believe. Even if we did, we would be disappointed, for he steers clear of this ground with firm determination. In his preface Hooper quotes a letter by Lewis: "When all is said . . . about the divisions of Christendom, remains, by God's mercy, an anonymous common ground." Hooper continues: "From that time on Lewis thought that the best service he could do . . . was to explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times—that 'enormous common ground' which he usually referred to as 'mere' Christianity." (p. vii)

The old farmer of the anecdote, in refusing the progressive new implements of the young salesman, said, "Son, I *already* know a heap better than I do." Lewis' great contribution, to Mormons as to any others seeking to follow the Saviour, is that he can help us live better the truths we already espouse. That is the chief reason why *Christian Reflections* is not the book to choose if C. S. Lewis is unknown to you. Its attention is focused a bit less on the how than on the why. To be sure, he still deals with the *why* of the common ground. But there is perhaps a little less here than in most of his books that will enable you to do a better job of living the righteous life tomorrow morning.

And yet . . . And yet . . . ! If Lewis makes any point at all, over and over in his books, it is that righteousness is required in *all* endeavors of a man's life. And if, as it seems to me, the topics in *Christian Reflections* are more subtle and esoteric than Lewis usually treats, they are nonetheless about man's life and his righteous living of it.

Hear him on "*Christianity and Literature*," for example:

The Christian writer may be self-taught or original. He may base his work on the "transitory being" that he is, not because of the "vision" that appeared to it. But if his talents are such that he can produce good work by writing in an established form and dealing with experiences common to all

his race, he will do so just as gladly. . . . And always, of every idea and of every method, he will ask not "Is it mine?", but "Is it good?"

This seems to me the most fundamental difference between the Christian and the unbeliever in their approach to literature. But I think there is another. The Christian will take literature a little less seriously. . . . The unbeliever is always apt to make a kind of religion of his aesthetic experiences. . . . But the Christian knows from the outset that the salvation of a single soul is more important than the production or preservation of all the epics and tragedies in the world. . . . (pp. 9-10)

Lewis will not let us remain "merely intellectual" even when discussing "Church Music." Church music is not just an aesthetic question to be discussed; it is part of our worship, and hence, material for righteous living or its opposite.

In this essay, Lewis discusses the pros and cons of elevating the aesthetic quality of church music or keeping a lesser music that is more familiar and more acceptable to the unmusical congregation. He refers to the musical activity of such a congregation as "shouting" and says that there is no harm in such shouting if the intent on the part of all is the glory of God. But he adds,

The power of shouting stands very low in the hierarchy of natural gifts, and . . . it would be better to learn to sing if we could. . . . It is not the mere ignorance of the unmusical that really resists improvement. It is jealousy, arrogance, suspicion, and the wholly detestable species of conservatism which those vices engender. . . . I do not think it can be the business of the Church greatly to cooperate with the modern state in appeasing inferiority complexes and encouraging the natural man's instinctive hatred of excellence." (pp. 97-98)

(Please note that Lewis does not condemn conservatism in this quotation—only one wrong brand of it. He is himself most conservative.)

Lewis' sincere and practical approach to righteousness is most typically shown in the essay called "Petitionary Prayer: A Problem Without an Answer." Here he thinks about our seemingly paradoxical instructions about prayer, instructions he designates as Pattern A and Pattern B. In Pattern A we are told to pray "Thy will be done," and to pray ever with this qualification in our hearts. But in Pattern B, we are told to

pray with the firm belief that whatever we ask in His name, we will receive. Is it really possible to do both at once—to have a perfect assurance that we will receive whatever we ask, as we are told in John 14:13, and to maintain at the same time the reservation, “not my will, but Thine be done”? Lewis presents some interesting possibilities, but does not give any final answer. Yet, unlike so many modern writers, Lewis *is* looking for an answer. He concludes: “At present I have got no further. . . . How am I to pray this very night?” One is convinced this question is more than rhetoric.

One last example of Lewis’ dominant theme—that all subjects are spiritual subjects, and all decisions are relevant to our spirituality: in the final essay entitled “The Seeing Eye,” he treats the question of space travel and its possible consequences for our theology. For centuries untold men have gazed at the stars and wondered if other rational creatures existed somewhere. With the restoration of the gospel, Mormons received their answer to that question. It is illuminating, however, to see Lewis classify the possibilities inherent in those “worlds without number”—from the unfallen to the totally depraved and back to counterparts of our redeemed selves. As this review is being written, two great powers are planning to send men around the moon. Such a stride will have its manifold scientific, political, and sociological implications. But Lewis’ concern supersedes all these: What efforts will such exploration have upon the souls of men?

If one has not read any of C. S. Lewis, perhaps he should begin with *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, or *Four Loves*. But it does not really matter. Read any of his works thoughtfully and you will seek out the others, one by one, until you, with the rest of his readers, mourn his untimely death. At that point, you will probably be most grateful to Walter Hooper for giving us *Christian Reflections*.