

Book Reviews

VII: *Journal of the Marion E. Wade Center*, Vol. 36 (2019)

George M. Marsden, *C.S. Lewis's Mere Christianity* (Princeton University Press, 2016). \$24.95 (hardcover), i–viii + 191 pp.

In 1941, during the darkest moments of the Second World War, C.S. Lewis was invited by the BBC to present a series of radio broadcasts on some aspect of Christianity. He accepted the invitation, and the initial series of broadcasts were made during August of that year. Lewis then edited these talks (and some subsequent ones also broadcast over the BBC) and published them in three small volumes. In 1952, after minor revision, these volumes were combined and published as *Mere Christianity*. Though virtually unnoticed at the time of its appearance, *Mere Christianity* has become one of the most widely read, influential and even celebrated Christian publications in modern history – translated into at least 36 languages, in 2000, it was ranked first by Christianity Today among the “100 books that had a significant effect on Christians this century” (1). Why is this? Or, as Marsden asks, “what is it about this collection of informal radio talks that accounts for their taking on such a thriving life of their own” (2)?

Marsden has produced a highly readable and engaging “biography” of *Mere Christianity*, as part of the publisher’s Lives of Great Religious Books series. It sets out the origins, nature, and influence of *Mere Christianity*, provides extensive biographical notes on Lewis and those around him and offers a thorough account of the historical and theological context in which the volume emerged. It also builds a convincing case for the abiding influence and remarkable popularity of *Mere Christianity*. While (as we will see) the reasons for this vary and are subject to some debate among scholars, there is no doubting the remarkable impact *Mere Christianity* has had on the lives of Christians throughout the world, including a number of well-known public figures such as Chuck Colson, Francis Collins, J.I. Packer, N.T. Wright, Tim Keller and Alister McGrath. *Mere Christianity* is also (next to the Bible) the book that Chinese intellectual Christians are most likely to have read.

Marsden also presents a helpful chapter outlining the principal criticisms of *Mere Christianity*, much of which is based on Lewis’s defense of fixed (or absolute) moral standards and his employment of the famous “trilemma.” Regarding the first point, Lewis appealed (as Marsden carefully explains) never to reason alone as the basis of faith (as his critics often suggest), but to the whole person, including moral sensibilities, affections, imagination, will, and emotions, “all of which are inextricably intertwined” (144). Objections to Lewis’s use of the trilemma typically have arisen out of the rejection by

materialists of the miracles of Jesus: thus, the disciples misunderstood him, or were mistaken in their accounts or Jesus Himself suffered from a mental illness/self-delusion. Other critics (including several prominent Christians) have criticized the trilemma as a “weak argument,” or the book more generally because of Lewis’s neglect of the Jewish Old Testament context of the ministry of Jesus. (147–8) The views articulated by Lewis on women and gender have also been criticized as “dated” and out of touch with present sensibilities. (149–52) As Marsden comments, however, such views would have resonated with Lewis’s audience in the 1940s—a valid point that contemporary readers often impatiently overlook.

So, what is responsible for the abiding vitality of *Mere Christianity*? In his final chapter, Marsden offers several distinct reasons. First, Lewis emphasized ageless truths, which he regarded as more reliable than the latest fashionable views. This enabled modern readers to be exposed to the wisdom of the past (often for the first time) and to grasp its contemporary relevance. Lewis, moreover, had an uncanny ability to communicate with ordinary people. He spoke principally as an educated layman, not as an academic theologian or member of the clergy. While Lewis employed reason effectively to explain truth, its meaning was made clear through his appeal to experience, affections, and imagination. This was especially evident in his fictional writings, including *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *Till We Have Faces* and his three volumes of science fiction, but no less so in *Mere Christianity*. Another reason can be found in the skillful employment by Lewis of images, comparisons, metaphors, and analogies to illustrate complex ideas or concepts. Still another can be located in his persuasive advancement of “mere Christianity,” or “the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times” (181)—a concept that has proven highly appealing to readers, including those weary of modernist forms of reductionism and denial of the supernatural. The counter-cultural nature of *Mere Christianity* is also evident in Lewis’s refusal to compromise the personal demands of Christianity, which contributed to the freshness and authenticity of the book. Finally, and despite his own spiritual and scholarly credentials as an Oxford don, Lewis consistently points his readers toward an object beyond himself—the Gospel—and thus presents himself not as an authority on the central teachings of Christianity, but as a fellow pilgrim.

A short appendix provides a comparison of the original three volumes to the published edition of *Mere Christianity*.

Marsden’s “biography” of *Mere Christianity* is engaging, clear, thoroughly researched and easy to read. Like Lewis, he has mastered the task of explaining complex ideas in a simple and accessible manner. Two minor shortcomings are worth mentioning. First, as there was apparently insufficient material to devote the entire volume to a consideration of *Mere Christianity* itself, a portion of what appears here is of a biographical nature, or addresses other

aspects of Lewis's oeuvre. While interesting and often helpful in explaining the context or importance of *Mere Christianity*, this material has been well-covered in other accounts of Lewis. Second, readers may be surprised by the overall absence of critical engagement with *Mere Christianity*. Though Lewis's dislike of theory is well-documented, some may find the extent of this omission in the present volume regrettable.

Grayson Carter
Associate Professor of Church History
Fuller Theological Seminary, California