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Review of From the Library of C. S. Lewis: Selections from Writers Who Influenced His Spiritual Journey

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In sum, many aspects of modern American life are discussed by Anderton as he imagines how a master plan from “below” would take advantage of things today. Only a few of them are mentioned here. But the average reader will find his prose, though erudite and expressive, difficult to follow at times. Complex concepts, discussed in detail, require considerable effort. Screwtape points out the advantage of working with groups rather than spending so much time with individual bipeds, but that was the charm of Lewis’ original correspondence. Almost anyone could relate to the struggles of a young man trying to find a good church, getting a girlfriend, and going off to war. The practicality of this approach was strongly evidenced by the fact that hundreds of people wrote Lewis after reading *The Screwtape Letters* as if he were their spiritual mentor. I do not think this book will have the same effect.

Nevertheless, those who enjoy the Screwtapian format will enjoy meeting it once again. And it never hurts to see ourselves and our modern world through a perspective different than our own. This book is a good antidote for the non-Christian prejudices, assumptions, and priorities that we so easily absorb from the daily flood of media communications. Hopefully, its prophetic voice will remind Christians everywhere just how much every aspect of American society, and indeed, the world, still needs the message of redemption through Jesus Christ. And the world will not get that message until it sees it embodied in us hybrids in our homes and our varied professions.

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James Stuart Bell, *From the Library of C. S. Lewis: Selections from Writers Who Influenced His Spiritual Journey* (Colorado Springs, 2004). x + 402 pages. \$15.29. ISBN: 9780307730824.

C. S. Lewis’ library, here represented, is not his *corpus*, but the books by which he was most influenced. Some were devoured as a child, others used as a bulwark as a young apostate atheist, others absorbed in the period of intense study between his final conversion and the publication of his

first work of Christian apologetics (1931-40), yet others subtly changed his worldview – often in maturity. Therefore, *From the Library of C. S. Lewis* consists of extracts from authors who might have influenced Lewis – “might” because proving an influence – even if the person in question acknowledges it – is notoriously difficult: did the person really change his/her thinking on a profound level because of reading a particular writer? Were the true influences sublimated and overlaid with pleasant reading that the person *wished* to value over the complex psychological byzantine flux that constituted the person, bedevilled by contradictions, drawn by interests that flit from one thing to another, characterized by flaws and inconsistencies in one’s actual reading?

None of this is tackled by James Stuart Bell and Anthony P. Dawson. This is merely a compilation of selections from writers who they believe influenced Lewis, because either the books were on his shelf, or because Lewis refers to such-and-such a work as being of value to him. Perhaps the single factor that connects these works is that they are not (by today’s standards) modern or liberal – they are, as Lewis would own, the “old books” (the overwhelming majority are pre-1800). Lewis does admit to what he terms the profound spiritual influence of many of these writers on him, and that without them he would not have been the particular Christian, apologist, philosopher, and theologian that he was.

As Bell notes, Lewis was not a one-dimensional reader. We have a profound range of writings presented here: George MacDonald, G. K. Chesterton, Samuel Johnson, Edmund Spencer, and John Milton; also Aristotle and Plato; theological giants, such as Augustine and Aquinas; the less well-known, such as the Puritan divine Richard Baxter and various Reformation theologians; also, medieval mystics such as Julian of Norwich and the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing*.

The book is well structured: contents, author index, and bibliography all help what is in essence a reference work. The selections are arranged thematically (use the author index if you prefer a more systematic approach). There are eighteen sections with several extracts from over one hundred writers. The opening three sections focus on love – *agape*, that is, the transfixion of the heart, our love for God compared with the love of God, and therefore the life and sacrifice of Christ. The *agape* portion includes extracts from Julian, MacDonald, Anders Nygren, Joy Davidman (Lewis’ wife), Bunyan, Herbert, *et. al.*

The next three sections deal with God seeking us, with how we may know God, the mutuality of loving one another in Christ, and the constant dying of self. Here we find Bernard of Clairvaux, Brother Lawrence, Traherne, and, predictably, Augustine.

The next three sections center on the question of sin and temptation (Austin Farrer, Rudolf Otto, and Hilaire Beloc, amongst others we have encountered already), grace and redemption (Bunyan, MacDonald, Herbert, James Moffatt, William Morris, Richard Hooker, *et al*), and suffering (new names include C. F. D. Moule, John Donne, Thomas À Kempis, and the *Theologica Germanica*).

The selection then moves into prayer and contemplation, faith, and living a devout life. Here a breadth of material is presented from political philosophers, monks and nuns, theologians, Victorian poets, and *literati*. Enough said: the remaining sections contain a wealth and richness of material relating to obedience and will, humility, not forgetting the importance of philosophical and theological axioms – truth, apologetics, and Christianity – balanced with the insights of the imagination and creativity, concluding with a final section on heaven, death, and immortality.

It would be good for disparate groups who value Lewis' writings to read some of the material in this volume, for it presents ideas from outside the particular tradition of a group of readers. Then readers should think about how and why the ideas contained therein were valued by Lewis. For example, we have John Calvin juxtaposed here with the medieval mystics, and evangelical Puritans adjacent to Roman Catholic writers.

Bell and Dawson note that subjective judgments can often get in the way of appreciating the degree to which influences may bear on a writer; therefore, they make no attempt to quantify or rank the writers/influences presented. Is this a flaw? The assumption is that if a book was on Lewis' shelf, if he mentioned it, then it influenced his thinking. Or is it that it simply added to the color and complexity of Lewis' own thought? The compilers do stress that they have included the writers Lewis cites and names as having, in their words, a favourable impression on him.

Their list is not exhaustive or definitive; Vincentius of Lérins is missing, for example. These omissions are in part due to the fact that Lewis rarely gave reference and acknowledgement to a key theologian, but quoted and used them with only oblique, veiled, credit (as with Vincentius, for Lewis' proposition of mere Christianity).

It is, however, important to remember that many of the writers whose extracts are presented here were simply enjoyed by Lewis for his own reading pleasure. In this instance, Lewis' margin notes and annotations give a clue (but, again, not cast-iron evidence of an influence). This is a fascinating and valuable collection, and even more thought-provoking if one considers that Lewis in all probability also read each of these texts and benefited from them.

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Robert Boenig, *C. S. Lewis and the Middle Ages* (Kent, OH, 2012). 181 pages. \$55.00. ISBN: 9781606351147.

With a title like *C. S. Lewis and the Middle Ages*, a reader might expect this volume to go in any number of directions: Lewis the published medieval scholar; Lewis the champion of romance and fantasy genres, which have their foundation to a large extent in medieval literature; Lewis the explicator of the medieval world view; Lewis the defender of medieval values such as order, courtliness, allegorical thinking, pageantry, chivalry, and ritual. Some of each of these facets of Lewis' medieval knowledge and imagination are present in this book, but its author, Robert Boenig of Texas A&M University, chooses to focus his attention on Lewis the reader of mainly modern fiction that has a medieval subject, and his rewriting of these modern versions into something more historically medieval. This book then is really about Lewis and medievalism: the use of the medieval period as a model or inspiration in later creative arts, such as the Gothic Revival architecture of the Houses of Parliament, the Pre-Raphaelite painters, or movies such as *Excalibur*, *Dragonheart*, *Robin Hood*, *13th Warrior*, and *Kingdom of Heaven*. Boenig recounts how Lewis reacted against other modern writers' use of medieval stories or characters and how he, in turn, "medievalizes" these modern books by means of a more (allegedly) historical standard or spirit in his own works. Lewis' reaction is thus also properly viewed as an act of medievalism. He uses those aspects of the Middle Ages he thinks important to counter other modern writers' misuse of them.