

C. S. Lewis's Demons

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Summary. This piece is a literary and philosophical examination of C. S. Lewis's classic work of theological fiction, *The Screwtape Letters*. It summarises the theological ideas that Lewis explores through the work, before developing a kind of moral critique of the literary and rhetorical methods that Lewis uses, in the text, to put forward those ideas. That critique is then situated within a broader analysis of Lewis's life and worldview, and some suggestive commentary on the Lewis's position and influence within post-war Christian culture. The discussion is dotted with the author's first-personal account of his own feelings about the work, and the impact it has had on him.

C. S. Lewis isn't to be taken lightly. He was an eminent scholar of medieval and renaissance literature. He produced an important and wildly popular piece of fantasy with *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and influenced millions with his Christian apologetic works. He also wrote *The Screwtape Letters*: a noxious little book that should at last be recognised for what it is.

I'm probably overstating things. I have a chip on my shoulder about this. I read *Screwtape* as an impressionable adolescent, and it did a number on me. It steered me towards a superstitious, histrionic way of thinking about spiritual matters – a way of thinking that's disdained not only by religious sceptics, but also by most mature Christians. So my view of things is a little jaundiced. The book's flaws may not be as significant as they seem to me, and I expect I don't fully appreciate its redeeming qualities, such as they are. Better judges than me, including the late, lauded American writer, David Foster Wallace, saw *Screwtape* as a classic.¹ And its popular appeal is undeniable. Stage adaptations have toured internationally, a film adaptation is rumoured, and it has inspired several unofficial sequels and knock-offs.²

But I think it's rubbish, and I want to say why. Non-believers are probably more likely to appreciate where I'm coming from, but nothing I say here is premised on a rejection of Christianity. I think you should dislike *Screwtape* even if you share Lewis's religious convictions. You should view it as irresponsible, self-indulgent fan-fiction. And you should disapprove of the techniques that Lewis uses to try to sell his occult brand of Christianity. At his best Lewis was an astute thinker, and in his body of work he displays a subtle grasp of the nuances of human feeling, alongside great powers of invention and a knack for plain-spoken argument. But he misuses those talents in *Screwtape*, and you should think badly of the result, as I do.



The book's defining premise is clever: an editor has somehow acquired a compendium of letters "from a senior to a junior devil". *Screwtape* is the name of the senior devil, and the younger one is his nephew and apprentice, Wormwood. The letters are written to convey *Screwtape*'s advice about what kind of strategies of corruption Wormwood should be employing as he tries to bring about the damnation of an unnamed man, who is referred to throughout as 'the patient'. (*Spoilers ahead*: despite Wormwood's diligent efforts, the patient perseveres in his faith and ultimately falls into the clutches of 'the Enemy', i.e. God.)

The genre is hard to place. Although it is comprised of letters, and although we are told about the patient's dramatic ups and downs – he makes friends, begins a romance, stumbles in his faith, and faces the terrors of the blitz – it isn't really an epistolary novel. The narrative of the patient's life plays out entirely in the wings, and ostensibly functions as a backdrop for *Screwtape*'s lectures and homilies. He offers various lessons on the foibles of human beings and the nature of the enemy. His primary focus, though, is damnation, and how people find their way to it. *Screwtape*'s lessons are aimed at training Wormwood up in the tricks of the trade for keeping human souls out of the Enemy's hands. The letters are thus an exercise in soteriology: a treatise about the nature of salvation and damnation. But as Lewis himself noted, a theological treatise voiced by a demonic fiend is a strange instance of the type. Theories of salvation aren't normally conveyed in a sneering, hostile tone. This stylistic contrivance creates an unusual mood – John Bunyan meets Jonathan Swift – which allows Lewis to sermonise in a jazzy register, unlike the tonal monotony of much theological writing.

Screwtape's voice is haughty, cruel, and grandiloquent. He continually cracks wise, and uses devilishly funny phrases, like "lukewarm casserole of adulterers" [189].³ When his temper flares he threatens to eat Wormwood alive. During one tirade he becomes so combustibly irate that he transforms into a giant centipede, in a moment of slapstick dread that's equal parts Kafka and Lovecraft. In the

midst of this carnivalesque atmosphere, Lewis fleshes out his ideas about the road to everlasting life, and the hazards encountered upon it. Lewis gives *Screwtape* the same descriptive understanding of the human condition and the Christian journey to which he himself subscribes. But their evaluative stances towards these facts – the stance of the novel’s voice, *Screwtape*, and its author, Lewis – are photographic negatives of each other. Things that represent loss and misery, in Lewis’s eyes, are moments of victory by *Screwtape*’s reckoning. When *Screwtape* speaks of “our Father below”, we hear the echoes of John Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost*, saying “evil be thou my good”. Through this process of diabolic ventriloquism, as Lewis called it, *Screwtape*’s words can function as endorsements of Lewis’s conservative theological opinions. But they carry a transgressive frisson, more like what we would expect from a horror writer or an arch satirist. It’s an effective conceit.

Screwtape’s doctrinal content is less impressive than its style and premise. One of the main themes is that when it comes to damnation, little sins make a big difference. Wormwood is a novice tempter, and without his uncle’s guidance he would want to afflict the patient with disease, or entice him into sexual depravity. *Screwtape* knows better. Major crises give the Enemy an opportunity to draw the patient to himself. For the purposes of damnation, lulling is better than luring. The tempter should make the patient feel contented and lazy, or encourage him to stay up late, idling away time and “staring at a dead fire in a cold room” [59-60]. “You will say that these are very small sins”, *Screwtape* writes, and “like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness” [60]. But he wants Wormwood to recognise the tactical misstep in this way of going about the tempter’s business.

It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light... Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts. [60-61]

While the point is stylishly made, it isn’t quite the piercing insight that Lewis wants it to be. Warnings about ‘the thin end of the wedge’ – if you start with a small sin, you may end up losing your soul – were in Paul’s letters long before they were in *Screwtape*’s. Indeed, the whole moral logic of the slippery slope is one that inevitably appears whenever someone is preaching on behalf of the straight and narrow. We find it everywhere from *Pilgrim’s Progress*, to *Reefer Madness*, to Sunday school documentaries about the dangers of pop music.⁴ What’s more, Lewis doesn’t seem to recognise that his point about the safest road to hell sets up a slippery slope of its own. If you think that *any* misdeed can nudge you along hell’s gentle gradient, then – given how high the stakes are – you will soon be worrying that any deed *at all*, however mild it appears, could turn out to be a *mis-*

deed upon closer inspection. This type of neurosis very easily collapses into zealotry. It is the type of thinking that led Reverend Moore to ban dancing in *Foot-loose*; the kind that gave the world the Christian side-hug. And Lewis is drawn into this pattern of thinking all too easily. The things that Screwtape tells Wormwood to encourage, to keep the patient ambling down the mellow road to hell, include:

- Reading modern biographies: because they tend to favour the idea that people's lives are characterised by a succession of phases, thereby making it easier for people to retrospectively dismiss periods of Christian enthusiasm in their lives as 'merely a phase' [46];
- Making flippant jokes: because it undermines the solemnity that people need in order to be receptive to God's spiritual leading, and it doesn't come with any of the countervailing pleasures that people may find in truly wholesome sources of laughter [56]; and
- Physically exercising to the point of fatigue: because people tend to believe this is favourable to the virtues of temperance and chastity, whereas it actually weakens our resolve to resist temptation to unchaste acts, e.g. just think about how lustful sailors are. [90]

This inverted moralising reaches a nadir when Lewis has Screwtape insinuate, in passing, that beards are the Enemy's favoured form of facial hair, and that women's preference for clean-shaven men is due to a demonic campaign aimed at steering them away from "those members of the [opposite sex] with whom spiritually helpful, happy, and fertile marriages are most likely" [106]. He must be yanking our chains, you say. It's all meant to be drenched in irony, isn't it? This is part of what makes *Screwtape* intriguing. The remarks about flippancy, beards, and biographies *do* have an ironic texture to them. As you're reading you can almost picture the wry look on Lewis's face. And yet he means what he's saying. Lewis is affecting a veneer of irony, in order to convey opinions about the demands of the Christian life that would sound unnervingly extreme if they were stated candidly. He's getting away from the hectoring, juridical tone of the Pentateuch, while simultaneously laying down the law.

When addressing the spiritual implications of life's little details, then, Lewis comes across as a bit of a scold. He's like a Pharisee trying to master the art of reverse psychology. His theological insights are subtler and more interesting when he zooms out from the minutiae to consider larger themes. In Letter #19 Screwtape explains to Wormwood that when a person falls in love, this fact, by itself, is neither an advantage nor a disadvantage in attempts to lead them to damnation. "Like most of the other things which humans are excited about, such as health and sickness, age and youth, or war and peace", Screwtape says, falling in love is really just 'raw material', by which he means "an occasion which we and the Enemy are both trying to exploit" [103]. It seems like Screwtape is trying to

get Wormwood to see that if the patient buys into sweeping spiritual generalisations – like “romance is a wonderful Godly gift”, or “war is pure evil” – this is symptomatic of a faith that’s simple-minded and therefore vulnerable. In this Screwtape (read: Lewis) is expanding on a principle derived from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians: everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial.⁵ Mature Christian disciples shouldn’t be too deeply perturbed by earthly life’s fluctuating dramas. What matters to them, regardless of their earthly lot, is that they try to glorify God and put other people before themselves. The upshot of all this, according to Screwtape, is that if the patient is getting hung up trying to decipher the grander spiritual implications of events in his life, then – regardless of the actual *content* of the patient’s thinking – Wormwood should seize the opportunity to exploit the patient’s simplistic mindset and lead him astray.

These elements of Lewis’s spiritual worldview are impressively thoughtful. But then how do we square them with his pious nit-picking about kneeling to pray, modern biographies, and fussy eaters? The natural reading of Paul’s ‘everything is permissible’ line is that legalistic devotion to a laundry-list of dos and don’ts isn’t the genuine mark of a Christian life. Christ subsumed the old law under the new: love God wholeheartedly and love your neighbour as yourself. In the spiritual universe of Lewis’s imagination, by contrast, there is a litany of domestic regulations whose infringement is an important battlefield in the war for human souls. Making flippant jokes, or liking a clean-shaven chin, really *do* betoken victories for the forces of darkness. So what is the apprentice, Wormwood, supposed to conclude, about how to handle his assignment as a tempter? And what should the reader make of all this?

One thing to say in Lewis’s defence is that these problems – how one can reconcile a God that embodies transcendental truth and love, with a God who demands child-like obedience in our little lives – have tested plenty of other theologians as well. There is a perennial tension here between the mysteries of Christian grace and the small-minded certainties of Christian morality. Sympathetic readers might say that it is to Lewis’s credit that his depiction of the patient’s life bridges this gap. He gives us an everyday doctrine of salvation – a kitchen sink soteriology. But less sympathetic readers will worry that, in attempting to bridge this gap, Lewis ends up treating his personal notions of virtue and manners – the idiosyncratic mores of an oddball Oxford don – as if a whole doctrine of salvation could be built around them. It is one thing to deliver a good old telling-off to people who you think aren’t living their lives the proper way. It is another thing to try to persuade yourself and others that those shortcomings show up on the scorecard in a grand cosmic war for humanity.

In any case, the capsule summary is: I think *Screwtape*'s form is interesting and its content is fishy. But even if these judgments stand, they don't substantiate the charge that the book is contemptible rubbish. So why am I trying to make that case? My frustration isn't really about *Screwtape*'s theology as such. My problem is that it peddles its ideas using a nasty trick: it encourages the reader to radically mistrust their own thoughts. I mean to emphasise *radical* mistrust here. It's a fine thing when a book makes us grapple with the prospect that our beliefs might be wrong. Inducing this kind of doubt is one way that writing can stimulate reflection and inquiry. But *Screwtape* doesn't just challenge the reader to consider that her ideas may be false. It invites the reader to view her own thoughts as systematically deceptive lies and misapprehensions, maliciously implanted by a supernatural power. It does this by depicting a world in which every human is assigned a guardian demon: a being who has – and is always utilising, and receives *vocational training* in – the power to screw with human thought.

Here is one characteristic example. In Letter #23, *Screwtape* tells Wormwood to push the patient towards thinking about the person of Christ from an historical perspective. This perspective has a semblance of devotional seriousness, but it gradually tilts the patient away from recognising Jesus's divinity, and in so doing loosens the Enemy's hold on him. "We thus distract men's minds from who He is", *Screwtape* says, "and what He did" [125]. In this letter, then, the reader who is receptive to an historical perspective on Jesus's life is being encouraged, by Lewis, to believe that this receptivity is due to covert demonic influence. This is one example among dozens. Hardly a paragraph goes by in which *Screwtape* isn't telling Wormwood: "let the patient think this", "bring that thought to his mind", or "don't allow him to remember such and such". And at nearly every turn, Lewis portrays demonic power being used to graft in ideas of a naturalist, secularist, or liberal theological bent. If you start to see these ideas in a sympathetic light, then – so Lewis is urging you to believe – that's not you thinking those things. That's one of hell's minions mesmerising you, in an attempt to destroy your soul. Don't listen. *That's not you*. It's the devil. Your thoughts are lying to you.

This is mental poison. When a person becomes unable to trust her own thoughts she is on the verge of psychologically unravelling. This is why deliberately attempting to make someone radically mistrust their own thoughts is a form of psychological abuse. Cults do this. They encourage the believer to see outsiders as liars and enemies, so that when the believer starts to have thoughts that line up with what the outsiders are saying – thoughts like: this story about thetans sounds like a scam aimed at emptying my bank account – she finds that she's unable to heed to her own legitimate doubts. The practice of gaslighting is another example of this sort of abuse. The gaslighter tries to make his victim question her memory and sanity. For example, when she says she recalls certain events, the gaslighter insists – confidently, unswervingly – that those events never happened. If the gaslighter can get his victim to radically mistrust her own thoughts, then she is a sitting duck for him to control.

Perhaps I'm drawing a long bow? I'm going draw it longer. Here is another thing abusive cults and abusive romantic partners have in common: they both try to control people by socially isolating them, pressuring them to sever ties with friends and family members who might help to resist the abuser's influence. Anyone who has witnessed this sort of business up close will feel queasy reading Letter #10. The latest news from the patient's life is that he has made new friends: an educated, middle-class professional couple who lean progressive and prefer having a laugh over cocktails to churchgoing. Screwtape is pleased, and he spends the better part of the letter advising Wormwood how he can "delay as long as possible the moment at which [the patient] realises this new pleasure as temptation" [50]. The take-home message is ugly stuff: if you're a Christian, and you've started to click with non-believers, get out now. It may feel like you're experiencing things that are real and enriching – camaraderie, solidarity, intellectual stimulation – but those feelings, just like those thoughts you were having about the historical Jesus, are a sinister counterfeit, borne of satanic treachery. If you care about your eternal soul you have to cut those people out of your life quick smart.

People who have never had much to do with the evangelical church – the branch of latter-day Christianity that bears Lewis's imprint most strongly – may feel that this all sounds a bit overegged. All Lewis is doing, you might say, is using some literary constructions and devices to get the reader to critically reflect on their faith. He's not really trying to scare them into ditching their non-believer friends, or throwing out the items on their bookshelf that espouse a liberal theology. But this profoundly underestimates the ingenuousness of Lewis's supernatural beliefs, and the severity of his puritanical instincts. That Lewis himself was ingenuous and severe in these respects is something that he frequently insisted upon. But it's easier to take his word for it if you've known people like this: people who attribute illnesses to spiritual malaise; who throw out their children's toys because of some perceived occult-ish association; who would tell you, with a straight face, that your non-believer friends are an ungodly distraction, and that liberal-minded Christians are dangerous apostates. Lewis isn't mucking around. He wants people to radically mistrust their thoughts because he really believes demons *are* going to and fro the world, wreaking havoc on everyday people's lives.

Okay, but he isn't holding a gun to the reader's head. Lewis isn't *making* people radically mistrust their thoughts. Consider: I could go downtown and tell passers-by that their minds are being controlled by telepathic aliens. But the mere fact that I'm saying these things probably won't make anyone feel anxious about being mentally hijacked. If people hear something in my story about aliens that makes it seem credible, then some seeds of doubt could possibly be sown in their minds. But if they think I'm full of it, they will be unaffected. And the same thing goes for the viewpoint that Lewis is trying to sell in *The Screwtape Letters*, right?

Maybe. But the dynamic is more complex, in our case, because of the way in which the transaction exploits the audience's predilections and vulnerabilities. Lewis

wrote *Screwtape* for other Christians, and that remains the book's primary readership today as well.⁶ Many of the people he is addressing, then, have been primed with hellfire anxieties. This means Lewis isn't simply putting ideas on the counter that his audience can take or leave. He is playing on their prior insecurities, and lowering their defences, in order to make them receptive to his hidebound ethical and doctrinal ideas. The coercive logic of Pascal's wager underwrites the whole tactical manoeuvre. If you believe that the costs of damnation are infinite, and you think the likelihood of incurring those costs is anything more than zero – even if it's just one in a million – then cost-benefit reasoning forces you to lock onto that overriding risk in your deliberation and decision-making. Most of us aren't held in the grip of this reasoning, today, because we regard the risk of eternal suffering in hell as equivalent to zero. We see the danger as practically non-existent, much the same as we have no real fear of falling victim to the murderous phantoms that live in horror films. But for people whose visions of damnation have been tended and nurtured since birth, these sorts of infernal equations cannot be so easily brushed aside. Lewis invites you to think that your sympathy for progressive doctrinal and ethical ideas is part of a demon's long-game strategy for leading you to hell, and if you're a certain kind of reader, his invitation is one that you can't just choose to ignore.

So, while Lewis isn't making his readers radically doubt their thoughts, he's doing his best to usher them in this direction. Of course, long before Lewis ever set pen to paper on this topic Christian communities already had a rich trove of resources available to shape the believer's ideas about the afterlife, and to prime her to experience self-doubt about any views running against the grain of orthodoxy. One thematically related item in this catalogue of resources is the 1912 book *War on the Saints*, published thirty years before *Screwtape*, by the Welsh revivalist Jessie Penn-Lewis (no relation). Its central aim is to show that apostasy and false doctrine have their true origins in demonic influence, rather than human error. Penn-Lewis thus explicitly champions the type of demonological belief-system that is assumed as the illustrative backdrop for *The Screwtape Letters*. Like her namesake, she is of the view that

The church must recognize that the existence of deceiving, lying spirits, is as real today as in the time of Christ, and that the attitude of these spirits toward the human race remains unchanged. Their one ceaseless aim is to lie to and deceive every human being; they are... ceaselessly and actively pouring a stream of wickedness into the world... they are satisfied only when they succeed in their wicked plans to deceive and ruin people.⁷

With *Screwtape*, Lewis was replenishing the cultural resources available to Christians for popularising and nourishing this sort of paranoia about demonic intrusions into people's minds. Indeed, he was doing more than that. He was *vitalising* the worldview behind the paranoia. He was breathing life into it by assigning

names and personalities to the denizens of the underworld, tracing the links between their work and the events of everyday people's lives, and using his imaginative skill to imbue the whole thing with an air of psychological verisimilitude. There are many young people in evangelical and charismatic Christian communities who, when they start thinking seriously about their faith, do in fact experience grave doubts over the provenance of their thoughts. And with *Screwtape*, Lewis made an important and lasting contribution to the cultural milieu that animates and sanctions those doubts.



But wait: what if it's all true? What if Lewis's ideas about demons in fact correspond with spiritual reality? What if the secular mores and progressive theological notions that Lewis is vilifying *really are* serving Satan's purposes on earth? Those of us who don't believe in the supernatural – or who reject Lewis's specific brand of supernaturalism – may want to just assert that Lewis's views are false and leave it there. But insofar as our criticisms of *Screwtape* are grounded on such assertions, we should worry that we are simply begging the question against Lewis. If the spiritual universe that we are inhabiting is the one that he describes, then we cannot fault him for encouraging us to radically mistrust our own thoughts. If we are living in that kind of a universe then Lewis is sounding a very important warning.

As it stands, though, this reply proves too much. If we accept the logic behind it then any false religion, manipulative cult, or snake-oil salesman would be beyond criticism. Suppose there is a doomsday sect telling people that the one road to heaven is to hand over their life savings and move into the compound. Suppose they're recruiting your friend, and you're trying to break your friend away from their influence. Someone might ask you: "but what if the sect's teaching is true, and theirs *really is* the path to salvation?" The implicit premise behind the challenge is entirely correct. You don't occupy an all-knowing standpoint that allows you to assert with irrefutable certainty that the sect's teaching is garbage. But still, the challenge probably wouldn't deter you in your initial response to the situation. And nor should it. You should try to lead your friend away from the fanatics if you can. What the example suggests, then, is that none of us *really* believe that our non-omniscience disallows us from identifying certain teachings as baloney. Most of us – including most religious believers – think some teachings are sufficiently farfetched that, irrespective of our non-omniscience, we are justified in dismissing them out of hand and opposing any mischief done in their name.

There are a few hard-nosed anti-religion types who would lump all religion into that basket, but in liberal societies that is also a minority view. Most of us – in-

cluding most atheists – distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable religious views. In Column A there are views that look like sincere attempts to make sense of the world through a spiritual lens, with some degree of intellectual integrity, and with evident concern for the welfare of the view’s followers. Then in Column B, there are views that seem borne of invention, delusion, messiah complexes, or cynical ploys to abuse people or rip them off. Karl Barth and Jerry Falwell were both Christians, but we are right to regard their faiths in totally different lights.

Of course this doesn’t mean it is always easy to say which worldviews belong in which column. Today’s culture wars partly owe to many people having been convinced that Islam in its entirety belongs in Column B. Part of what makes that a benighted view, however, is the fact that all major religious traditions encompass a wide variety of beliefs and practices. For non-experts, the sensible thing to say is that some versions of Islam are probably reasonable, and others probably aren’t. The question of whether Lewis’s views belong in Column A or B turns out to be complicated in roughly the same way that it’s hard to make generalisations about the reasonableness of whole religious traditions. Across his corpus Lewis espoused a variety of ideas using a variety of methods. Some of his apologetic works are a model of Column A seriousness. But it is consistent with that to think he veered off the rails, into Column B, with his esoteric moralising in *Screwtape*. Whether that is the correct conclusion depends on several factors, but the most important one is whether Lewis offers us some half-decent reasons for accepting the picture that he presents. If he does, then those reasons deserve a proper hearing before we dismiss Lewis’s demonology as unreasonable hogwash, and before we condemn *Screwtape* over the way that it tries to inculcate radical self-doubt.

So, does Lewis offer us any reasons to buy into his beliefs about demon tempters, seeding ideas in our minds to coax us towards damnation? No. Nowhere in his corpus does he even try to argue for all this. I find it useful to contrast *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Screwtape*, with respect to this matter. Boiled down to their essence, the Narnia tales are an allegorical portrayal of Christian ideas about the creation, the fall, and the atonement. Obviously the tales themselves don’t focus on defending the reasonableness of belief in the relevant doctrines. But in Lewis’s other apologetic and lay-theological writings – in books like *The Problem of Pain*, *Miracles*, and *Mere Christianity* – he does provide a thoughtful account of what these doctrines amount to, and of why he thinks it is reasonable to believe them. We may still feel uneasy about the whole bait-and-switch of using children’s stories as a tool for religious indoctrination. When we read Lewis saying that “any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people’s mind under cover of romance without their knowing it”, we may worry that he’s playing at something underhanded.⁸ But at least in the Narnia case the ideas that he’s trying to smuggle are ones that he has gone to the trouble of defending elsewhere.

The same cannot be said about the worldview in *Screwtape*. Lewis invites us to share his beliefs about demons, and the malign work they do in our lives, despite having little or nothing to say about why we should think those beliefs are true. Again, you may think this indicates that he doesn't really believe in demons after all – that *Screwtape*'s baddies are just a creative device for dramatising Christian lessons. But as I've already explained, this explanatory gambit goes nowhere. If you've read much of Lewis's work then you know how adamantly he would baulk at it. Remarks littered across his oeuvre leave little room for doubt: he believes demons are real spiritual beings who perform the role depicted in the book, or something very much like it.⁹ To see demons as merely figurative or symbolic entities, as some Christians do, is a grave error, Lewis thinks – one that serves the interests of those same entities whose existence we are denying. He makes precisely this point in *Screwtape*'s Preface.

The plot keeps thickening, then. Lewis is clear that he himself believes in demons, but he will also sometimes acknowledge that no Christian creed commends these beliefs – that they are “his own affair”, and that “it is quite possible to be a Christian without believing in them”.¹⁰ So he knows his demonology isn't essential to Christianity. And he knows that it isn't really biblical, either. The demons we meet in scripture aren't portrayed as the personalised, strategic tempters that Lewis imagines. From a biblical angle, his account is sheer invention.¹¹ And this is at least part of the reason why such views aren't widely preached by the clergy or taken seriously by bible-reading Christians. Lewis knows enough of these people to know this – to see how he comes across, as a man shooting from the hip on weighty spiritual questions. And yet he publishes a work that reads as an exhortation to other Christians to take those ideas up, and let their faith be reoriented by them. Given his apparently modest recognition that these ideas are “his own affair”, how does Lewis summon up the temerity – the chutzpah, the sheer nerve – that is required to express these public exhortations?



Some light may be shed here by reflecting on a few details of Lewis's journey towards Christianity, and his evolving ideas about the role of imagination in the spiritual life. To say that the young Lewis had an overactive imagination doesn't quite capture things. In the account of his boyhood that we find in his memoir, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis says “my secret imaginative life began to be so important and so distinct from my outer life that I almost have to tell two stories” [89]. Over several years, aided by his older brother, he dedicated countless hours of writing and drawing to the invention of ‘Boxen’, a fantastical universe of anthropomorphic animals, furnished with a detailed history, geography, and political system. In adolescence his imagination turned in other directions. He experienced a torrent of unwanted masturbatory fantasies, often of a sadistic nature. He also

became somewhat obsessive about Norse mythology, and for a few years it served as a focal point for his intermittent feelings of sublime longing, feelings which he later understood as the inchoate awakenings of his dormant spiritual life. When Lewis writes about these episodes, he affects the unruffled, analytical air of someone who has found his feet and can view his earlier ordeals from a safe distance. But he also leaves us in no doubt about the grip that his imagination once held on him. In recounting one happy memory of reading fairy tales and becoming smitten with the dwarfs, he says “I visualised them so intensely that I came to the very frontiers of hallucination”.¹²

We know, of course, that Lewis was eventually able to harness his imagination to great effect. But we shouldn't downplay the extent to which the boy Lewis was troubled by the habits of mind that he found himself with. George Sayer was a good friend of Lewis's in later life, a fellow literary scholar, and a fellow Christian, whose deep admiration is evident throughout his memoir on Lewis, *Jack*. On Sayer's account of things – which draws on Lewis's diaries and letters, as well as Lewis's later published works – the young Lewis seems utterly consumed, and frequently *stricken*, by his imaginative compulsions. We get a portrait of a boy who simply couldn't switch it off. Whether it inspired tales of charming whimsy, or inundated him with visions of sleaze, it was always making an insistent claim upon his attention. The young Lewis didn't have many friends, his school life was miserable, he had lost his mother, and his relationship with his father was strained. He was no good at mathematics and science, and unskilled in manual tasks and sports. The arts and letters were of utmost importance for him, then – a domain in which he could explore, and play, and nurture his growing powers of mind. And yet they were equally the domains that facilitated his susceptibility to being troubled by uncontainable imaginative impulses. For the sake of his own well-being, Lewis evidently needed to find a constructive channel for his creative drives.

Eventually, by his late twenties, this need had become embroiled in Lewis's shifting attitudes towards Christianity. Lewis tends to portray his twenty-something self as a hard-bitten atheist. Whatever grain of truth is in this, it is also the case that during this time, before his 'official' conversion, many of the thinkers who most appealed to him were Christian. In his later school years Lewis was gob-smacked by the singular fantastical visions of the Scottish novelist and Minister George MacDonald. On Sayer's account, the encounter 'purified' Lewis's imagination, “making all his erotic and magical perversions of joy appear sordid and unworthy”.¹³ Lewis greatly admired G. K. Chesterton's powers of perception, argument, and critique. By the time Lewis the young don was making friends with his academic peers J. R. R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson, he was already receptive to learning from religious believers, and having his point of view altered by them. The tale of his conversion is too long to recount, but one key episode that shifted Lewis from being a plain deist to being a believer in Christ is pertinent to our purposes. Over a series of conversations Tolkien persuaded Lewis towards the

view that “it is not only man’s abstract reasoning, but also his imaginative inventions that find their origin in God”.¹⁴ Myths aren’t pure invention, then, or merely embroidered histories. Rather, they are “intimations of the truth about God and the world he has made”.¹⁵

One way that this affected Lewis was by dispelling certain misgivings he had about the genealogy of the Christian story. His worry was that the supernatural claims of Christianity – the Immaculate Conception, the resurrection, the miraculous healings, the creation stories, and other supernatural events in the Old Testament – were simply regional variations on the legends and mythologies that show up in every ancient culture. The natural world is incomprehensible to ancient peoples, and they all end up telling vaguely similar magical stories to try to make sense of it. The sceptic in Lewis believed that the Christian story was nothing more than that. Once he accepted Tolkien’s ideas about the truth-directedness of myth, however, a different understanding became available. Ancient mythologies aren’t sheer confabulation. They are fumbling attempts by God’s creatures to apprehend their creator’s workings in the world. The reason the Christian story has vague resemblances to earlier myths is that the earlier myths didn’t totally fail in their attempts at discerning the transcendent. The Christian story is where myth becomes reality – where God properly *enters* history and transforms human existence. The earlier myths describe an occluded glimpse of this divine invasion.¹⁶

The other way that this shift in perspective affected Lewis’s faith relates back to his need to find an outlet for his creative energies. It became possible for Lewis to view his imaginative flights not as a liability, or just an eccentricity, but as a truth-seeking activity. It need not be pure indulgence, he could now say, to spend one’s time bringing the submerged imaginative life to the surface and onto the page. Far beyond the edifying goals envisaged by didactic 19th Century British novelists, fiction, for Lewis, could have a truly transcendental moral purpose. This helps us make sense of the gusto that he brought to his work as a writer. In forging this path for himself, Lewis’s imaginative compulsions and aesthetic sensibilities joined forces with a missionary conviction. Authoring novels could be seen as a calling, complementary to, or at least compatible with, a serious academic day-job. This new perspective made it possible for Lewis’s love of literature and his reborn faith in Christ to merge with “a deep faith in the power of the human imagination to reveal the truth about our condition and bring us to hope”.¹⁷ Boxen could be invented all over again, this time as an act of devotion.

But we know that Lewis’s imagination had been occupied with more than just talking animals. Among his darker fantastical interests, he had a bit of a thing for the beings of the underworld. Lewis offers a few intriguing hypotheses as to where this fascination might have come from. In part, he understands it as being a kind of residue of the morbid terror he suffered under the tutelage of a psychotic headmaster at his first boarding school.¹⁸ And when he was a little older, he thinks

the magnetic pull of the occult owed something to his general attraction to intellectual forbidden fruit, as well as his acquaintance with the transgressive literary explorations of the decadent *fin de siècle* poets, like Oscar Wilde and Algernon Charles Swinburne.¹⁹ Whatever the exact cultural and autobiographical inputs were, they led the young Lewis to spend a portion of his vast energies imagining what demons might be like, if they existed. Once he came to believe that the products of the imagination have something to reveal to us about the true spiritual nature of things, it was only a matter of time before this mental file was going to be dusted off, expanded, and shared with the world.

These are the demons that we encounter in *The Screwtape Letters*. They are depicted as servants of Satan himself, but they are recognisably human in their personalities. They are not the demons we occasionally run across in scripture, who mostly spend their time possessing people à la *The Exorcist*, nor are they the demons of any mainstream church doctrine. They are not beings whose existence is suggested by philosophical or theological arguments. These are C. S. Lewis's demons – his in the sense that he brought them to life, and his in the sense that they are representations of a particular kind of menace by which he felt haunted.



It may sound like I have a sweeping, negative view about the imagination and its place in thought and inquiry about religious matters. If I was claiming that the appeal to imagination *per se* makes an author's writing on spiritual questions vicious or harmful, then Lewis would at least have excellent company in the sin bin, with Dante and Milton. But I'm not intending to make any far-reaching claim along those lines. The imaginative underpinnings of *The Screwtape Letters* become a problem because of other features of the text, and in particular, the way that it aims to elicit the kind of radical self-doubt that I described earlier. If creative work with this aim is going to express something more than artistic bad faith, it cannot play fast and loose. It needs to have some kind of epistemological foundations. Lewis writes as if he has the requisite epistemic standing to *inform* his readers that their doctrinal and ethical commitments are corrupted. But he isn't really informing his readers at all. He's using a fantastical narrative framing device to depict his opinions as if they were manifest fact, and then he's reporting that depiction as if it were simply information. In the opening words of the book, in the Preface, Lewis says "I have no intention of explaining how the correspondence which I now offer to the public fell into my hands" [ix]. It's a great line: *fell into my hands*. Lewis is toying with the boundaries of story-telling in a way that allows him to pontificate with plausible deniability. He's passing off his over-confident hunches, and the indulgence of his most judgmental instincts, behind the hazy, ambiguating smokescreen of fiction.

The element of indulgence in all this is one of the most important parts of the diagnosis and critique that I'm putting forward, but also one of the hardest to put a fine point on. I don't think there is an everyday word in English that perfectly describes the frame of mind that Lewis brought to bear in producing this work. Earlier I said that reading *Screwtape* drew me, as a reader, into a *superstitious* mindset. This word is probably the one that is nearest to the mark, but it isn't an exact fit. In ordinary discourse, to be superstitious is to be gripped by an irrational fear, or to evince an ignorance about the natural order, or to somehow meld this fear and ignorance together. It's a trait that is commonly ascribed to beliefs, to mark them out as bearing a specific type of rational defect. The mindset I'm trying to characterise is more general than this. Holding superstitious beliefs, in the everyday sense, is merely one symptom of the more broadly superstitious mode of thought that Lewis was manifesting.

So what does this mode of thought consist in, exactly? In essence, it's about semi-consciously *permitting* yourself to entertain ideas tossed up by the impulsive parts of your mind. This is something all of us can experience, not just people working in the imaginative arts. Think of what it's like when you feel that a piece of bad luck is comeuppance for a misdeed that has been nagging at your conscience. Or think of what it's like when you convince yourself that some other person is as romantically interested in you as you are in them. Or think of that moment where you feel like a chancy situation coming up in the future is destined to work out in your favor (or equally, to your disadvantage). If your mind tosses up thoughts like these for conscious reflection, you have two main approaches available to you to deal with them. You can relate these thoughts to your friends, and give them a chance to help you see why the thoughts aren't supported by good reasons. Or you can perform this role yourself, and give your measured and critical-minded self a chance to talk you into a more sober way of viewing things. Sometimes, though, for reasons that are hard to fathom from the inside, we find ourselves resisting these level-headed responses. We find that we don't *want* to have the impulsive idea dispelled, and we allow ourselves to keep entertaining it – sometimes coming to believe it, other times just ruminating on it, and letting it loiter in our mental workspace – instead of subjecting it to the kind of scrutiny that would chase it away.

When I say Lewis created *Screwtape* in a superstitious frame of mind, this is what I mean. Granted, as I explained above, Lewis has a philosophy of religion that gives him a license to exercise his fictive impulses, insofar as he understands this as being a kind of truth-seeking endeavour. But at the same time, the many personal axes that Lewis is grinding in the Letters suggest that whatever higher-minded purposes he has are muddled together with some lowlier – preachier, more judgmental – habits of the head and heart. He says he feels drained by writing *Screwtape*,²⁰ and some commentators say they are impressed by what they see as a spirit of quiet humility running through the book.²¹ But I can't shake off my contrary impression of an all too human personality having fun in a marginally

perverse fashion. Lewis *likes* scolding people (including his younger self). He likes envisioning a spiritual realm in which dissipated secularism and wishy-washy Christianity, as he sees them, are revealed to be part of a diabolical plot. He entertains these notions, and conjures up tales that make them narratively tangible, because it is a picture of life and the world that sits well with him. There is a disconcerting irony around the entire exercise, though. Some of the lessons that *Screwtape* conveys in his letters show that Lewis had an exceptionally finely-tuned understanding of the everyday ways in which humility is transmuted into pride – how an earnest recognition of one’s own shortcomings can easily lapse into vanity. And yet he seems to not perceive that this very tendency towards moral self-congratulation is being sublimated in his own attempt to compose a text that makes the tendency comprehensible to his readers.²²

When self-monitoring doesn’t do the trick, the other way to counteract one’s own superstitious tendencies – to resist indulging one’s erratic, misbegotten, and self-serving thoughts – is to get other people involved. Lewis had ample opportunity for this, as he and his band of writer-academic chums, the Inklings, met and shared their work regularly. The other celebrity Inklings, Tolkien – the man to whom *Screwtape* is gratefully dedicated – didn’t conceal his rather low opinion of the book. He believed that Lewis “had rushed his thoughts into print without allowing them to mature”.²³ This wasn’t the only time the two men disagreed about the quality of Lewis’s work, and we shouldn’t be too surprised that Lewis ultimately trusted his own instincts more than his friend’s critical sentiments. Having said that, it wasn’t enough for Lewis to simply shake off Tolkien’s criticisms. He also engineered the meta-textual presentation of the letters in a way that made his personal views in the book harder to pin down, and hence less susceptible to criticism. In the Preface, speaking in his own voice, Lewis advises the reader to “remember that the devil is a liar” [ix]. Much of what *Screwtape* says, so Lewis explains, cannot “be assumed to be true even from his own angle” [ix].

This is how superstition inoculates itself. This is the wily disclaimer of a man who wants to foist his gut feelings on other people, but doesn’t want to be answerable for them. With this device, Lewis gives himself free rein to put words in *Screwtape*’s mouth which, at face value, would validate all of his (Lewis’s) most neurotic speculations about life, death, virtue, and salvation. But then if any of his ideas ends up implying an untenable theology – if they prove to be at odds with Church doctrine, or patently unbiblical, or internally contradictory – Lewis can renounce any real responsibility, and blame the whole thing on *Screwtape*’s unreliability. What we have here is a writer who is letting his imagination run wherever it pleases, even as he pretends to be playing the part of the clear-sighted, sagacious teller of truths.

While working in this mindset Lewis produced a book that encourages people to radically mistrust their own thoughts. For all the reasons I outlined earlier, I think the book should be disdained on this account. But I admitted at the outset that I have a chip on my shoulder about this business. Part of my aim here was to see if I could bring some clarity to my feelings and thoughts around *Screwtape*. And having made a little headway on this, I think I feel less antipathy towards Lewis the man than I did initially. He wrote a bad book, but the vice that was at work in the writing of it – the kind of superstitiousness I've been characterising – isn't a gross atrocity. Most of us are susceptible to this vice in some degree. Maybe renowned authors can be held to a higher standard than others, but then Lewis was unknown when he wrote *Screwtape*. The letters originally appeared in instalments in a small Church of England newspaper, and it was only after a publisher compiled and released them that Lewis hit the spotlight.²⁴ He didn't know he would become a children's author for the ages, or that these musings written for fellow parishioners would be read by millions of young people.²⁵

I say all this because I want to work against the grain of my own lingering impulse to revile Lewis the man. I don't want to be a mirror image of the Christian writers who have an incontinent need to acclaim and beatify him. He is neither that good, nor that bad. He is a mixed bag of a person. Yes, he can sometimes be a puffed-up moraliser, and the way that this trait permeates *Screwtape* warrants critical scrutiny, from Christians as much as anyone else. But one needs to be careful not to moralise too hard against other people's moralising.

If we don't want to bang the gavel on Lewis the man, then it will be helpful, by way of conclusion, to pull back to a wider, more diagnostic perspective on *Screwtape*'s place in popular Christian thought. We can think of Lewis as one actor among thousands in a complex cultural-historical timeline of events, and we can think of *Screwtape*'s popularity more as a symptom of the state of Christianity today, rather than a cause. Lewis wasn't the only 20th Century Christian thinker whose response to the upheavals of the age took a superstitious turn. His work was just one rivulet in a stream of causal forces ushering in a Christian pop culture that indulges the superstitious in a whole host of ways. *Screwtape*'s fascination with evil incarnate is echoed in popular Christian entertainment that is Manichean to the point of self-satire – things like the *Left Behind* novels, or films by the Pure Flix production company, which substitute goodies *versus* baddies religious soap opera for theological seriousness.²⁶

This is the foreseeable nadir of a religious tradition that ends up emphasising the priesthood of all believers above all else. If each individual sees herself as accountable primarily to God – instead of things that can be cross-checked, and to which people can be *held* accountable: texts, traditions, and denominational creeds – then it is easy for people's faith to run off the rails, and become a free-wheeling, self-indulgent, metaphysical ego trip. The priesthood of all believers is a recipe for mayhem if the believers abandon any priestly discipline, and become engrossed

in their own fantasies and terrors. If Lewis has played a part in Western Christianity's migration along this trajectory in the post-war era, it isn't by leading the charge, so much as providing an alibi for a certain kind of otherwise conscientious Christian to acquiesce to it. No believer who has read Lewis's apologetic writing will doubt his scrupulosity or depth. But then it is easy to think: if it's good enough for *Lewis* to have a faith that takes its own wishes, nightmares, and flights of fancy seriously, then it's good enough for me too.

What should faith be like, then, if not like this? Well, it should be worried about different things – worried in a different way. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul said “our struggle is not against flesh and blood” but against “the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”.²⁷ Lewis and his devotees who live in the mood that suffuses *Screwtape* are anxious about being outflanked in this battle. They want to comprehend the enemy's strategy, so that they can fight back. But they are not as anxious as they could be – as they should be – about the way in which our ability to see the world justly unravels in the wake of an attempt to get inside Satan's mind. Once the occult becomes active in our perceptual consciousness we start seeing demons everywhere. We start seeing demons at work in people who disagree with our beliefs, or who don't share our moral ideals. We get the unconscionable urge to tell those people – our equals, whom we are meant to love and respect – that we know their minds better than they do, and that they have been taken over by sin and darkness. We set out to combat the spiritual forces of evil, but we carry our martial vigour over in everyday human life, and end up struggling against flesh and blood.

Notes

¹ Wallace put *Screwtape* at number one in a list of his top ten favourite novels published in J. Peder Zane (ed.), *The Top Ten: Writers Pick Their Favourite Books* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2007). Some commentators have raised questions about the possible ironic intentions of Wallace's selections in this particular list of favourites, e.g. see Forrest Wickman, “Were DFW's Favourite Books Mostly Thrillers?”, *Slate*, February 2, 2012. However, Wallace's friend and contemporary, the writer Jonathan Franzen, seems to confirm that the deep admiration of *Screwtape* professed by Wallace was quite sincere; see Jonathan Franzen, “Farther Away: ‘Robinson Crusoe’, David Foster Wallace, and the Island of Solitude”, *The New Yorker*, April 18, 2011.

² Books based on the same basic premise include Peter Kreeft, *The Snakebite Letters: Devilishly Devious Secrets for Subverting Society as Taught in Tempter's Training School* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), and Jim Forest, *The Wormwood File: E-mail from Hell* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004). (If someone writes *The Screwtape Snapchats*, now or in the future, I would like to be included in the acknowledgements.) A comic-book adaptation of *Screwtape*, which seems to be something of a collector's item on Amazon and Ebay, was published by Marvel in 1994. The rumoured Hollywood adaptation is mentioned in several relatively recent articles (e.g. Casey N. Cep, "The Devil You Know", *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2013), but it is hard to find any definitive information about it online, which suggests that it may be languishing in development hell. There have been a number of stage adaptations, the most recent and successful one being produced by The Fellowship for Performing Arts, which opened off-off Broadway in the mid-2000s, before making its way to larger stages around the US and internationally, and eventually arriving at London's Park Theatre, where I saw it performed in December 2016. In his two-star review, *The Guardian's* Michael Billington ungenerously described the production as "excessively and noisily theatrical" (December 11, 2016).

³ Throughout the text I will indicate page references for *The Screwtape Letters* as I have done here, using in-text numbers in square brackets. All page references are from the William Collins C. S. Lewis Signature paperback edition (London: William Collins, 2012), which packages *The Screwtape Letters* (originally published 1942) together with its much shorter sequel, *Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (originally published as an article in America's *Saturday Evening Post* in 1959). All of the passages that I cite are from *The Screwtape Letters*, apart from this one line about a casserole of adulterers, which is from *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*.

⁴ *Hell's Bells: The Dangers of Rock 'n' Roll* (1989) is the one that people of a certain age who were raised in the church are most likely to have seen. I'm sure I wasn't the only person who was turned onto Talking Heads and Prince thanks to watching this.

⁵ "I have the right to do anything", you say – but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything' – but not everything is constructive"; 1 Corinthians 10:23, New International Version.

⁶ As explained below, the letters originally appeared in 1941 in weekly instalments in a (long defunct) Anglican newspaper called *The Guardian*, before later being compiled and commercially published. Lewis was an obscure figure at the time, and had little reason to expect that these pieces would ever find an audience beyond *The Guardian's* narrow readership. As for today, I think it's likely that a high percentage of people still reading *Screwtape* are Christians, although I've no idea how one would find out the numbers. We get a tiny piece evidential support for this from the fact that, on Amazon UK, on the list of books also purchased by customers who bought *Screwtape*, the first 30-40 are all books written from an overtly Christian perspective.

⁷ Jessie Penn-Lewis, *War on the Saints* (New Kensington Philadelphia: Whitaker House, 1996) [originally published 1912].

⁸ See *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, Volume II: Books, Broadcasts, and the War 1931-1949*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 262.

⁹ Consider the following passages, for instance: "Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good – above all, that we are better than someone else – I think we may be sure that we are being acted on not by God, but by the devil... vices come from the devil working on us through our animal nature... It comes direct from Hell"; C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: William Collins, 2012), pp. 124-25 [originally published 1952]. In another of his famous apologetic works, one which primarily addresses the argument from of evil against theism, Lewis describes and defends the notion that the pain and suffering of animals – most of which cannot be explained as an unintended consequence of the mispent free will of humans, in the way that much human suffering can – is due to the prehistoric corrupting power of "an evil angelic being"; see C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: William Collins, 2012), pp. 137-40 [originally published 1940].

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, "Answers to Questions on Christianity" in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), p. 56.

¹¹ Granted, there's room for quibbling on this point. Obviously Lewis's work has to be viewed as a pure concoction when it comes to the names, personalities, and offices that he attributes to his demons. However real he believed demons to be, Lewis cannot but understand himself as making things up whenever he speaks in specifics about Wormwood, Screwtape, and the others who appear in the margins – Slubgob (the headmaster of the tempter's training college), Triptweeze, Glubose, Toadpipe, and Slumtripet (the demon assigned to tempt the patient's lady-friend). The question that should really interest us is whether the essential principles and *structure* of the demonic world that Lewis portrays are properly seen as an invention, or whether one could plausibly see them as being somehow implied in scripture. The essential elements of Lewis's demonological account in *Screwtape* include the following tenets. (1) In addition to the chief evil spirit, Satan, there are other evil supernatural entities that exist in some sort of spiritual realm. (2) These entities are person-like, in that they have individual identities, thoughts, and feelings, and can perform intentional actions. (3) One of the acts that these entities perform is to affect the thoughts and feelings of human beings on earth, in order to try to lead them away from God. (4) The demons work in secret. They do not reveal themselves to the human beings that they are interfering with, but instead act covertly, such that when they do affect a person's thoughts and feelings, the person typically doesn't know that this has occurred. (5) Demons doing this work are normally assigned to a particular individual, under a kind of one-tempter-for-each-temptee system. There are a number of passages in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke that imply (1) and (2). But most of these passages involve people being possessed by demons in a way that turns them into animalistic outcasts. The gospels also tell the tale of Satan tempting Jesus in the wilderness, but – apart from the fact that this is Satan and Jesus, rather than a lower-ranked demon and a regular person – the *style* of temptation depicted in that episode is quite unlike the style of (3) and (4). Satan isn't trying to surreptitiously hijack Jesus's mind. He is making grand offers and promises to Jesus, in order to try to win his allegiance, e.g. see Matthew Chapter 4. Satan intervenes in life on earth at a few other points in the bible – possessing Judas to make him betray Christ (John 13:2, Luke 22:3), sending good Christians to prison (in the apocalyptic premonitions of Revelation 2:9-11), and going to and fro in the world, ruining Job's life (in the book of Job). It's hard to see how any elements of Lewis's picture could claim support from these passages. The one biblical passage that may be cited in Lewis's favour with respect to (3) and (4) is in James's letter to the Jewish Christians. James says "if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic"; James 3:14-16, New International Version. This passage at least captures something of the flavour of Lewis's picture of how demonic infiltration works.

¹² C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (London: William Collins, 2012), p. 61 [originally published 1955].

¹³ George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton Illinois: Crossway, 1994), p. 108

¹⁴ Joseph Loconte, *A Hobbit, a Wardrobe, and a Great War: How J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis Rediscovered Faith, Friendship, and Heroism in the Cataclysm of 1914-1918* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015), p. 131; See also Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Their Friends* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), pp. 43ff.

¹⁵ Loconte, *A Hobbit, a Wardrobe, and a Great War*, p. 132.

¹⁶ See C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, chapter 11 and chapter 15.

¹⁷ Kathleen Norris, "Foreword" in *Mere Christianity*, p. xviii.

¹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, pp. 36-37.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 203ff.

²⁰ Consider the following, from Sayer, *A Life of C. S. Lewis*, pp. 274-75: "If [*The Screwtape Letters*] was praised in Jack's presence, he would often say that writing it had given him little pleasure and had, in fact, been painful. He thought it was bad for his character to imagine himself a devil, thinking about how to tempt and pervert those around him. Perhaps worries of this sort had something to do with the decision he made in October 1940 to go to the Cowley Fathers... to ask to be given a spiritual director to whom he could make auricular confession and from whom he could receive advice".

²¹ E.g. Joseph P. Cassidy, “On Discernment” in *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*, eds. Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 132-45.

²² One may worry that my criticism here turns against itself. Any discussion of the vices of moral psychology that Lewis was exploring in *Screwtape* seems likely to fall prey to this problem of recursive self-defeat. Recognising the pernicious tendency in human beings towards moral self-congratulation involves an important kind of self-conscious moral insight. Because of this, one should recognise that this first-order recognition may itself transform into a vicious form of moral self-congratulation. But then the problem repeats itself at a higher level. One also needs to recognise that this *second-order* recognition – i.e. the recognition of how the first-order recognition of our tendency towards moral self-congratulation itself involves a kind of moral self-congratulation – once again is at risk of transforming into a mode of moral self-congratulation, at another level removed. And so on.

²³ Michael White, *Tolkien: A Biography* (New York: New American Library, 2001), p. 138.

²⁴ Sayer, *A Life of C. S. Lewis*, p. 273.

²⁵ Young people who are encouraged to read *The Screwtape Letters* nowadays can get some help in trying to make sense of it from Alan Vermilye’s *The Screwtape Letters Study Guide for Teens* (Brown Chair Books, 2016). Here is a sample study question from the book. Which action of Screwtape below do you think would be most effective in keeping teens from knowing Christ today? Why? (a) Convincing teens that “real life” is just like their favorite reality show. (b) Convincing teens that they are immortal and will never die. (c) Replacing “right” or “wrong” with “what’s trending”. (d) Acting without considering any consequences. (e) Distracting teens with media and other forms of technology”; see screwtapelettersstudy-guide.com/teens/.

²⁶ Some of Pure Flix’s more profitable titles include *God’s Not Dead* (2014, box office: \$60.8 million), *Do You Believe?* (2015, box office: \$13.0 million), *Woodlawn* (2015, box office: \$14.4 million), and *God’s Not Dead 2* (2016, box office: \$20.8 million) (all box office figures via boxofficemojo.com, accessed February 16, 2018).

²⁷ Ephesians 6:12, New International Version.