EDITORIAL

This year marks the seventieth anniversary of the publication of C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*. Written in the aftermath of the Second World War, the bleak townscape in which the book begins readily evokes what I imagine to be the drab and grimy contours of post-war London.

The narrator of this fictional tour of the 'Valley of the Shadow of Life' (or is it 'Death'?) is Lewis himself, writing himself into the story. A bus ride out of the dismal town brings him to an expansive glade, filled with possibilities and impossibilities. There he witnesses a variety of conversations between his fellow passengers and those who have come to meet them. About halfway through the book, he acquires a 'guide'—for someone has come to meet him, too, none other than George MacDonald (1824–1905), the Scottish author and Congregational minister. In the story, they move off together, observing the choices made that take individuals either to 'heaven' or 'hell'. As the book finishes, Lewis follows MacDonald's instruction: 'Ye are only dreaming. And if ye come to tell of what ye have seen, make it plain that it was a dream. See ye make it very plain.'[1] (Worth noting in passing that the narrative ploy of employing a dream is one that Lewis shares with Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as well as Dante's *Divine Comedy*—of which, more below).

I'm quite sure the time span from the publication of *The Great Divorce* to my first reading it was significantly smaller than the period from that reading to today. However many times I've re-read it over those years, I find there is always more to appreciate. I remember being puzzled by the title itself, although Lewis did supply the clues fairly liberally. In the first place, there is the epigraph provided on the title page ascribed to George MacDonald, which runs in part: 'There is no heaven with a little of hell in it...'.[2] The quote comes from MacDonald's reflection on Matthew 5:26 which, in the Authorized Version, runs: 'Verily I say unto thee, thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.' It was a favourite of MacDonald's, capturing something of the severe mercies which God uses to drive the penitent to himself. There is no compatibility of light with darkness. While illuminating the title—and certainly signalling the main line of the narrative that follows—it stops short of explaining it.

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1 C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (Glasgow: Collins, 1972; first published by Geoffrey Bles, 1946), pp. 116-17.

2 George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons, Second Series* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1885), p. 124.

Lewis provides that explanation in the Preface: 'Blake wrote the Marriage of Heaven and Hell. If I have written of their Divorce, [this is because] … the attempt to make that marriage is perennial.' William Blake (1757–1827) produced his influential but obscure vision around the years 1790–1793, with the significance of its historical context in the upheavals of the Age of Revolution widely noted. Whatever Blake's obscurities, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* asserts that 'Without contraries there is no progression'. Truth and wisdom are found in hell, while angels and devils seem indistinguishable. Against this, Lewis pushes back.

There is yet another influence shaping *The Great Divorce*. It is signalled at various points, none so obvious as an epigraph or preface acknowledgement, but clear all the same. At the meeting of the narrator with his guide, there is a moment of 'autobiography'. As Lewis-the-narrator explains to MacDonald the deep significance his writings had in bringing Lewis to faith, he likens MacDonald's *Phantastes* to 'what the first sight of Beatrice had been to Dante: *Here begins the New Life*.' (p. 60) While referencing *La Vita Nuova*, the association also signals the relationship of *The Great Divorce* with the *Divine Comedy*, completed only towards the end of Dante's life (1265–1321). And one notices that the second conversation that Lewis overhears after disembarking from the bus, well before he meets MacDonald, involves a cleric and a bishop, which concludes with the latter returning to the bus—and to hell. Not unlike Dante's *Hell*, then, populated with its share of clerics, bishops, and even popes.

These echoes are not mere flourishes. Writing to William Kinter, an American professor of English Literature, in 1953, Lewis points out that

> the bus driver in the Divorce is certainly, and consciously, modelled on the angel at the gates of Dis [in Dante's *Inferno*], just as the meeting of the 'Tragedian' with his wife is consciously modelled on that of Dante & Beatrice at the end of the *Purgatorio*: i.e. it is the same predicament, only going wrong. I intended readers to spot these resemblances: so you may go to the top of the class![3]

I'm afraid my naïve reading falls far short of Kinter's perceptiveness, and a score in relation to Lewis's intention would leave me near the bottom of the class.

My marking this anniversary in this way isn't because *The Great Divorce* registers especially as a landmark in Christian literature. Rather, it is because it retains a strong relevance for the Western church and its embeddedness in the remnants of a cultural Christianity—a 'perennial'

[3] C.S. Lewis, *Collected Letters, Volume III: Narnia, Cambridge and Joy 1950–1963*, ed. by Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 313-14.

problem, as Lewis himself observes. In *The Great Divorce*, Lewis repeatedly reinforces the notion that Christian faith is deeply inimical to large swathes of modern popular culture. That conversation with the bishop mentioned earlier is telling: the 'free play of inquiry' has become an end in itself, in which speculation has replaced the gospel. Lewis sketches an impressive portrait of a form of godliness that denies its power. In different forms, this displacement of the Creator with creaturely fancies marks each of the scenarios along the way. Much as the characters in Lewis's 'dream' attempt to bring their favourite bit of hell into heaven, so too many of the world's fashions are welcomed into the life of the church, with their resultant distortions and perversions.

There is an added complexity here, one often raised when these themes are discussed. Christians are to be 'in' the world, but not 'of' the world (cf. John 17). The challenge in maintaining proximity without likeness is evident in the fervour of Jesus' prayer. One might see an irony (indeed, this is part of the aim) in outlining the (select!) range of influences and allusions touched on above. Obviously Lewis is deeply embedded in a literary world that informs the shape of, and lends force and depth to, his own writing. However, it's worth noting here that, almost without exception, the precursors Lewis is drawing on each had a 'moral', as is the case with *The Great Divorce* itself; they intended to serve a higher purpose of bringing gospel truth the strengthen those on the path of faith, and to warn those wandering away from it. In much of the Western church's aping of cultural expressions today, I doubt this is the case.

As Dorothy Sayers puts it in relation to Dante, this writing 'comes home poignantly to us who have so recently rediscovered the problem of evil, the problem of power, and the ease with which our most God-like imaginings are "betrayed by what is false within".[4] As the cultural pressures on the church to capitulate to social norms mounts, we do well with Lewis to remember MacDonald's words, that in heaven there 'is no plan to retain this or that of the devil in our hearts or our pockets. Out Satan must go, every hair and feather.'

[4] *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine. Cantica I: Hell*, trans. by Dorothy L. Sayers (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949), p. 10.

CONTRIBUTORS IN THIS NUMBER

Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali is President of the Oxford Centre for Training, Research, Advocacy and Dialogue (OXTRAD)

Dr Michael Harbin is Professor of Biblical Studies at Taylor University, Upland, Indiana

Dr Donald John MacLean is a Research Supervisor at Union School of Theology, and an elder at Cambridge Presbyterian Church

Dr Bill Mitchell was before his retirement the Head of the UBS Americas Translation Department

Dr Liam Jerrold Fraser recently completed his PhD in Edinburgh, and is probationer minister at Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh