

Stella Aldwinckle, Atheists, and Agnostics

Stella Aldwinckle invited “atheists, agnostics, and those who are disillusioned about religion or think they are” to discuss the positions they had adopted against Christianity. Unafraid to hear arguments from the other side, Aldwinckle modeled the openness for which C. S. Lewis was well-known. She had confidence in her faith and the biblical foundation on which it was based, and the Oxford University Socratic Club provided the venue for those face-to-face discussions.

Best known as the founder of the Oxford University Socratic Club, Aldwinckle served as the Club’s Chairman during the twelve years that C. S. Lewis was President. The two worked side by side, planning and conducting one of the most popular undergraduate societies at the university. The Socratic’s many guest speakers over the years showcased a star-studded lineup of English intellectuals whose reputations often spanned the globe—people like atheists Antony Flew and J. B. S. Haldane, philosophers Isaiah Berlin and Gilbert Ryle and Michael Dummett, writer Dorothy L. Sayers, and philosophers C. E. M. Joad and Gabriel Marcel¹—many of them supporters of the Christian faith but many of them opponents. Aldwinckle and Lewis planned to bring the best people they could find to present a view that challenged the Christian faith to see if Christianity could stand its ground. This essay deals with the organizer of those Socratic Club meetings rather than the challenges between two opposing points of view, although it is to her lasting credit that she was able to recruit such an impressive list of speakers.

“All Atheists and Agnostics”

After five years of teaching theology in other parts of England, Elia Estelle “Stella” Aldwinckle returned to Oxford in 1941, late in the Michaelmas Term.² The idea for the Socratic Club surfaced at a “fresher’s tea,”³ which Aldwinckle hosted in the rectory of St. Aldate’s Church to discuss ministry hopes for the term. There undergraduate Monica Shorten⁴ complained that there was no forum to discuss important matters about the Christian faith. She stated, “The sermons and the religious clubs just take the real difficulties as solved—things like the existence of God, the divinity of Christ, and so on.”⁵ They determined that they needed a place to discuss “the intellectual difficulties connected with religion and with Christianity in particular.” Soon thereafter,



Monica Shorten
Used with the permission of
Principal and Fellows of
Somerville College, Oxford

¹ Jim Stockton, “Chaplain Stella Aldwinckle: A Biographical Sketch of the Spiritual Foundation of the Oxford University Socratic Club,” *Inklings Forever* 8 (2012), 2.

² Stella Aldwinckle, “Socrates Was a Realist,” *Socratic Digest* No. 1, 1942-43, 10.

³ That is, tea and cakes for incoming university freshmen.

⁴ It is my guess that this ‘fresher’s tea’ is the time and place where Monica Shorten voiced this opinion. Monica Shorten attended Somerville College, 1941-1943, in a Shortened Honours program due to the war, studied Zoology, earning a B.A. degree in Natural Science in 1944 and the M.A. in 1948. She worked as a Research Assistant at the Bureau of Animal Population in Oxford from 1943 to 1948; as a Scientific Officer with Infestation Control, which was part of the Ministry of Agriculture; and then Senior Scientific Officer until 1958. She wrote for *Nature*, *New Naturalist*, *Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London*, and other publications. Email from Kate O’Donnell, Assistant Archivist, December 3, 2019.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Aldwinckle posted an invitation for “all atheists, agnostics, and those who are disillusioned about religion or think they are” to meet in the Junior Common Room of Somerville College. Two informal meetings were held during the Michaelmas Term, the first with female students at Somerville College only and the second with these students and their boyfriends to standing room only in the Junior Common Room of the college.⁶ These two meetings paved the way for the start of the Socratic Club.

Since the club was required to have a senior member of the University as its President, they invited Lewis. Lewis had recently completed his second series of talks over the BBC, his Screwtape letters were being serialized in *The Guardian*, and his three Ballard Mathews lectures on *Paradise Lost* were about to be delivered at University College of North Wales, Bangor. Furthermore, his best-known sermon, “The Weight of Glory,” had been delivered to a packed house at the University church a few months earlier and was on its way to publication.⁷ Lewis was a rising star on the Oxonian landscape, clearly the best choice for President.

Although it is unclear when they met, Lewis and Aldwinckle probably met soon after that “fresher’s tea.” When Aldwinckle invited Lewis to be president of the Socratic Club, the club was well under way, having already held two unofficial meetings during Michaelmas Term in 1941.⁸ Soon after Christmas, the Oxford University Socratic Club was fully established with Aldwinckle as Chairman and Lewis as President.⁹ For the next twelve years, Aldwinckle worked closely with Lewis to set the schedule of speakers, book meeting space, publicize the meetings, and conduct the meetings of the Club.

The Socratic Club Begins

The first official meeting of the Socratic Club took place on Monday evening, January 26, 1942, at Somerville College.¹⁰ Guest speaker Robert Emlyn Havard, the Lewis family physician and an Inkling, spoke on the topic, “Won’t Mankind Outgrow Christianity in the Face of the Advance of Science and of Modern Ideologies?” Havard, a devout Catholic, undoubtedly answered the question with a resounding “No!”¹¹

The first issue of the *Socratic Digest* explains the origin of the Socratic Club in an essay entitled “Socrates Was a Realist.” In that essay, Aldwinckle contends that realists, not escapists, are welcome because Socrates was a realist. The Club is for those who ask ultimate questions, and who desire to live an unselfish life. Two main questions were to be entertained at the Socratic:



Socratic Club, Somerville College (left window at corner, first floor, author’s photo)

⁶ Stella Aldwinckle, “Oral History Interview with Lyle W. Dorsett,” July 26, 1985, 5. Call no.: OH / SR-1, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by permission. The size of these rooms meant that they might have up to seventy-five students in attendance.

⁷ June 8, 1941, St. Mary the Virgin Church, Oxford.

⁸ Jim Stockton, unpublished essay, *The Oxford University Socratic Club 1942—1972: A Life*.

⁹ Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: Companion & Guide*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996, 617f.

¹⁰ The location of the meeting is shown in the photograph, taken by the author in the Somerville quad. It was determined when the author visited Somerville College while on sabbatical in 2004 and inquired about that meeting at the Porter’s Lodge.

¹¹ Meetings normally started at 8:15 p.m. and usually lasted until 10:30 p.m. Green and Hooper, 215.

“First, is existence significant at all?” Secondly, is there any way out of the bondage to self-centeredness?¹²

In the second issue of the *Socratic Digest*, Aldwinckle’s editorial explains that this issue of the *Digest* was concerned with truth, how we know that something is true, what we mean by words such as *knowledge* and *truth*, and to what extent our convictions are based on rational grounds. Often a person’s attitude is neither rational nor scientific. She writes, “With such considerations at the back of our minds, Reason is here discussed, and also Faith, as *practical* issues.”¹³

In a later issue of the *Socratic Digest*,¹⁴ Aldwinckle argues that philosophy in Oxford is too often used to confuse rather than to clarify, and Austin Farrer’s essay “On Credulity”¹⁵ provides an antidote. Farrer invites us to ask important questions, such as those about the existence of God, rather than trivial ones. Not only do such questions “keep philosophical fashion in perspective ...,” they help us find “a bridge between scientific and personal knowledge, between ‘reason’ and ‘faith.’” Furthermore, such questions ...

... may be fundamentally of a piece with the childlikeness which Christ teaches us can open the Kingdom of God to a man, and it is also possible that the fragmentary and more than untidy intellectual answers to our untidy questions may remove misunderstanding and ignorance and so prepare the way ... to another kind of answer—that spiritual discovery which sets the questions in a new frame of reference, and so gives them an intelligibility in which scientific and personal knowledge both find their due place.¹⁶

For Aldwinckle, faith and reason work together.

In the second meeting, speakers Dr. William Stevenson¹⁷ and C. S. Lewis addressed a Freudian claim, “Is God a Wish Fulfillment?” Freud had claimed that belief in God arose out of a wish for an omnipotent Father: “When a human being has himself grown up...he is in possession of greater strength, but his insight into the perils of life has also grown greater...he still remains just as helpless and unprotected as he was in his childhood....Even now, therefore, he cannot do without the protection which he enjoyed as a child.”¹⁸ Religious ideas, Freud stated, owe their origin neither to reason nor experience but to a need to overcome fear: “[they] are not precipitates of experience or end results of thinking: they are illusions, fulfilments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes.”¹⁹

¹² *Socratic Digest*, No. 1, 10f.

¹³ Editorial, *Socratic Digest*, No. 2, June 1944.

¹⁴ Issue No. 4, 1947-48.

¹⁵ Austin Farrer, “On Credulity,” *Illuminatio* 1 (1947):3-9. See also the Preface of Stella Aldwinckle in *Socratic Digest*, Number 4, page 5.

¹⁶ Stella Aldwinckle, Preface, *Socratic Digest*, No. 4, 102.

¹⁷ Stevenson was Assistant Director of the Institute of Experimental Psychology and, presumably, represented the Freudian point of view. See the *Socratic Digest*, No. 1, 1942-43, reprint edition, Joel D. Heck, editor, 3.

¹⁸ Freud, “The Question of a Weltanschauung,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXII, James Strachey, editor, London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1974, 163.

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1961, 30.

Aldwinckle spoke at the third meeting of the Socratic Club. The remaining speakers during this first term included W. B. Merchant, Lord Elton,²⁰ Charles Williams, and L. W. Grensted, Oriel Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion. That Lewis spoke at the second meeting surprises no one. Aldwinckle once wrote, “C. S. Lewis himself always came. He came to every meeting, eight meetings a term, unless he was actually ill or had to attend something in London. His support was simply wonderful.”²¹

Subsequent terms at Oxford University featured an impressive array of speakers, and Lewis himself often provided the first response to a speaker who was challenging Christianity. Aldwinckle states about Lewis, “In meetings, he was never ever dogmatic or domineering. He would listen sympathetically to the other person’s point of view and would comment helpfully, not antagonistically. Because, you see, we weren’t debating. In a debating society you are out to score points and to win the votes. But we were Socratic, that is, we wanted to get to the truth of things, and to follow the argument in good faith and good temper wherever it went.”²²

The typical Socratic Club meeting featured a major paper, sometimes a formal response by another speaker and then questions from the audience. Aldwinckle would sit in the chair, the speakers would join her on the stage, and students would sit on the floor.²³ So valuable were the various meetings of the Socratic, Aldwinckle notes, that students frequently “used to go on talking under the streetlamps until two or three in the morning.”²⁴ The first term of meetings took place in Somerville College, but subsequent meetings met in other colleges of the University, such as the Junior Common Room of St. Hilda’s College or St. John’s College or Oriel College. Attendance varied from a high of 250 on January 24, 1944—when C. E. M. Joad spoke to a standing room only crowd about his controversial views on atheism and theism—to a couple of dozen.²⁵ Throughout the years of the Socratic Club’s existence, Stella Aldwinckle guided the club through 414 meetings with 306 scholars and guest speakers, many of them the most famous names of their day in England.

Socratic Teas, Weekends, and a Socratic Farm

To advance the mission of the Socratic Club, Aldwinckle held regular Socratic teas and experimented with Socratic Weekends. Three of the Socratic teas took place in the Michaelmas Term of 1949. Presumably, there were many others in every year, especially during the Michaelmas Term—the first term of the new school year. In 1949, as the Michaelmas term was beginning, Stella Aldwinckle held a Socratic Tea with several students to discuss Socratic Club policy.²⁶ One week later, she held another afternoon Socratic Tea, where they discussed the type

²⁰ Possibly Godfrey Elton, British historian, 1st Baron Elton (1892-1973), Fellow of Queen’s College, Oxford, 1919-1939, and secretary of the Rhodes Trust, 1939-1959. He would have been living in Oxford at the time.

²¹ Stella Aldwinckle, “Memories of the Socratic Club,” *C. S. Lewis and His Circle: Essays and Memoirs from the Oxford C. S. Lewis Society*, Roger White, Judith Wolfe, and Brendan Wolfe, eds., 193.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Stella Aldwinckle, “Memories of the Socratic Club,” *C. S. Lewis and His Circle: Essays and Memoirs from the Oxford C. S. Lewis Society*, Roger White, Judith Wolfe, and Brendan Wolfe, eds., 192.

²⁴ Stella Aldwinckle, “Memories of the Socratic Club,” *C. S. Lewis and His Circle: Essays and Memoirs from the Oxford C. S. Lewis Society*, Roger White, Judith Wolfe, and Brendan Wolfe, eds., 192.

²⁵ During its heyday in 1944, the Socratic Club had 164 student members.

²⁶ Notebook of Stella Aldwinckle, The Stella Aldwinckle Papers, Box 8, Folder 386. The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by Permission. Notebook. Paul Piehler of Magdalen, P. B. Topham of Somerville, I. L. Lee of Magdalen, and six others were in attendance. The date is October 13.

of paper that should be read at the Socratic Club.²⁷ Then, in November, she held a high tea Socratic Meeting, discussing topics, getting college representatives, and gathering volunteers to sell the *Socratic Digest* between academic terms. Since students served the Socratic Club as secretaries and treasurers, they undoubtedly attended such meetings, serving as an executive committee to advance the aims of the Socratic Club and promote the Christian faith.

In the early years of the Socratic, weekend retreats offered teaching on important biblical concepts, but no retreats were held after 1945. Apparently, a good idea was tried and found to be unable to fit into the schedules of busy university students. Unfortunately, the 1945 conference was held during the last week of term, a time when students were preoccupied with completing assignments and preparing for exams, so this may have been the death knell of the Socratic weekends.

In 1943,²⁸ a weekend Socratics' Conference on "Christian Faith" was held at the Old Jordans Hostel, Beaconsfield, about halfway between Oxford and London. A second Socratics' Conference was held with the same theme in Cambridge in 1945.²⁹ The broad theme of the conferences allowed for a wide range of topics in the lectures. The speakers at these two conferences included Lewis, Dr. L. W. Grensted, Dr. R. W. Kosterlitz of New College,³⁰ Rev. F. C. Bryan, and Rev. Eric Fenn.³¹ Stella Aldwinckle was the driving force behind this conference, as she was for most Socratic activities. In attendance were many students from the colleges of Oxford University. At these conferences, Grensted spoke on "Prayer—Before or After Faith?", "The Nature of Faith," and "The Consequences of Faith.," and Lewis spoke on "Presuppositions of Faith" and "The Church."³²

The topics of the weekend conferences indicate Aldwinckle's interest in providing basic instruction in the Christian faith and helping students to understand how to defend their faith during the impressionable college years. Difficult topics—eschatology, sacramental theology, denominational differences, and the like—were not on the docket; rather, the weekends aimed at what Lewis later called mere Christianity. His four series of BBC talks on the Christian faith may actually have led Aldwinckle to select topics that reflected what he had taught over the radio. These weekend conferences were no longer held after 1945, perhaps because the war had ended, the soldiers had returned, and everyone's schedules became much busier.

²⁷ The Stella Aldwinckle Papers, Box 8, Folder 386. The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by Permission. Notebook. Those in attendance including Hare, Aldwinckle, Alvarez of Christ Church, and E. Thompson of Balliol.

²⁸ On March 13-16.

²⁹ On March 17-20, 1945 at Ridley Hall, Cambridge.

³⁰ Kosterlitz spoke at the Socratic Club on five different occasions—June 2, 1942, June 26, 1942, March 11, 1946, October 25, 1948, and January 28, 1952.

³¹ Eric Fenn, a Presbyterian minister, worked for the BBC as assistant head of religious broadcasting. He replaced Grensted at the 1945 conference, speaking on "Faith in Christ" and "Prayer – before or after faith?"

³² Weekend Conference Programme. 1943 Conference on Christian Faith. Stella Aldwinckle Papers. Box 8, Folder 367. The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. It was apparently Stella Aldwinckle (possibly someone else) who took handwritten notes (still extant at the Wade Center) on the talks by the various speakers, including those by C. S. Lewis. Her prayer, written on the bottom of a follow-up letter after the 1943 conference, shows something about her faith: "O God, the God of all goodness and of all grace, who art worthy of a greater love than we can either give or understand, pour into our hearts, we beseech Thee, such love toward Thee, that nothing may seem too hard for us to do or to suffer in obedience to Thy will; and grant that, thus loving Thee, we may become daily more like unto Thee, through Jesus Christ our Lord." Stella Aldwinckle letter, March 30, 1943. Ibid. See the chapter on F. C. Bryan for more information about the weekend conference. The conference began on Saturday evening and continued all day on Sunday and Monday.

The Socratic Farm never got off the ground. In the Editor's Notes to the second issue of the *Socratic Digest*, Aldwinckle writes,

We have in mind the possibility of beginning a 'Socratic Farm' after the war, immediately outside Oxford, combining a 'Socratic' Library and Guest House for extra-Oxford and gone-down Socratics on holidays, with a Club House for undergraduate Socratics during term. Here Socratic conferences could be held in vacation. We would welcome the considered views of readers and their friends on whether such facilities would be welcomed (also any donations towards the Library, now in embryo!), and the names of any who would like to combine a country holiday with a Socratic Conference in the summer of 1945.³³

The funds apparently never materialized, and the Socratic Farm never saw the light of day.

The London Socratic Club

Early in 1943, buoyed by the success of the Oxford Socratic, Stella Aldwinckle met with Mr. M. Kinchin-Smith³⁴ about establishing a Socratic Club in London. The Oxford Socratic Club was enjoying the popularity of its early years and the influence of Lewis, so its leaders wanted to extend the Socratic to other locations. They asked Dorothy L. Sayers to serve as Chairman (they had originally wanted her to lead the Oxford Socratic Club),³⁵ and Kinchin-Smith would serve as deputy chairman. The London Socratic Club would have two secretaries and a student's committee to represent various London colleges, among them King's, Bedford, University College, London School of Economics, and Westfield. The geographical distribution of students probably made a student committee much less efficient than in Oxford and may have contributed to the failure of the London Socratic Club to get off the ground.

The following year, Aldwinckle met with Dorothy L. Sayers and Rev. Gilbert Shaw once again to discuss the Socratic Club of London.³⁶ Some months later, Aldwinckle wrote to Sayers about the fall program for the London Socratic Club being cancelled and inviting her to come to address the Oxford Socratic Club.³⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers was certainly as capable as C. S. Lewis to serve as a leader and advisor of a Socratic Club. One can surmise that her heart really was not in this proposal and that her reticence to take up this task was the major reason why a London Socratic Club never got off the ground.

Although the London Socratic Club did not materialize, one did start at Cambridge University, probably beginning with the 1945 weekend conference in Cambridge mentioned earlier. Little is known about it, but in the summer of 1951, D. M. Walsh, Secretary of the Cambridge University Socratic Club, wrote to Aldwinckle about the possibility of the two Socratic Clubs meeting for a weekend party.³⁸

Heart and Soul

³³ Future Developments, *Socratic Digest*, No. 2, June 1944, 30.

³⁴ Probably David Michael Alexander Kinchin-Smith, the author of *Forward from Victory*, Faber, London, 1943, a book dealing with the problems of post-war reconstruction from a conservative point of view. The exact date of the meeting was February 1.

³⁵ Aldwinckle, "Interview," 8, cited in Jim Stockton's unpublished essay, *The Oxford University Socratic Club 1942—1972: A Life*.

³⁶ The Stella Aldwinckle Papers, 8-373. The date was March 13, 1944.

³⁷ The Stella Aldwinckle Papers, 8-374. The date of the letter was August 14, 1944.

³⁸ The Stella Aldwinckle Papers, 8-376. The letter was dated August 14.

Stella Aldwinckle founded, organized, and served as the driving force for the Socratic Club. She planned the schedule of speakers,³⁹ determined who would introduce each speaker,⁴⁰ and did the publicity. While Lewis was the prominent name behind the Socratic Club, Aldwinckle was its heart and soul. She attended nearly every meeting, took notes, participated in the discussion,⁴¹ and edited those notes and the presenters' papers for publication in the *Socratic Digest*. She oversaw the editing and proofreading of the *Socratic Digest* for publication, worked with a local printer, publicized the *Digest*, and filled orders, although she undoubtedly had help from students. She also tended to the needs of the speakers as they traveled, were housed and fed, and presented their papers.

Aldwinckle also spoke at the Socratic Club. On February 9, 1942, the third meeting in the Socratic's history, when the Socratic Club was so new that speakers were not easily lined up, Aldwinckle spoke on the topic "Was Christ Really Any More Than a Great Teacher and Prophet?" She spoke on a similar topic two years later,⁴² probably a paper developed from her initial presentation in 1942, given the similarity of the two titles. That second paper was published in the second issue of the *Socratic Digest* under the title "Concerning the Question: 'Jesus, Prophet or Son of God?'"

In her published essay, she writes about how we can have certainty of what we know, and why different people arrive at different conclusions.⁴³ To what extent, she asks, can unbiased reason come to reasonable conclusions, particularly regarding the deity of Christ, "The judgment concerning the 'metahistorical' fact of Christ's deity ... uniquely invites the danger of a vicious subjectivity, since if it be fact it must drive a man ... from the last strongholds of his

³⁹ We only get a glimpse of the work behind the scenes when we read that on October 18, 1943, Cyril E. M. Joad wrote to Stella Aldwinckle, agreeing to speak on January 24, 1944, provided that they provide a room for him, pay his fare, provide dinner, and accept his title. In other words, Stella handled the day-to-day arrangements for recruiting speakers and handling arrangements associated with them coming to speak to the Socratic Club. Letter from C. E. M. Joad to Stella Aldwinckle, October 18, 1943. The Stella Aldwinckle Papers, Box 8, Folder 372. The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Then on November 18, 1943, Lewis received a letter from writer and critic Joyce Pyddoke of London, about the possibility of speaking at the Socratic Club, and he passed it on to Stella Aldwinckle. Letter from Joyce Pyddoke to C. S. Lewis, November 18, 1943. The Stella Aldwinckle Papers, Box 8, Folder 369, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by permission. On September 25, 1945, Lewis forwarded a letter from Shaw Desmond, who had offered to speak at the Socratic Club, to Stella Aldwinckle. Letter from Shaw Desmond, September 25, 1945. The Stella Aldwinckle Papers, Box 8, Folder 369, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by permission. On June 12, 1950, Lewis wrote to Stella Aldwinckle about the next term's program for the Socratic Club, especially encouraging an invitation to G. E. M. Anscombe to speak on the topic "Why I believe in God."

⁴⁰ On October 14, 1944, Lewis wrote to Stella Aldwinckle about his introduction on October 22.

⁴¹ For example, on March 5, 1945, the Socratic Club heard Rev. Douglas Reginald Vicary, Chaplain of Hereford College and Tutor and Chaplain of Wycliffe Hall, speak on the topic "It and Thou (Scientific Knowledge and Personal Knowledge)." During the discussion period, Stella Aldwinckle spoke about three other options: "It-it" (scientific knowledge relating to scientific knowledge) being present in all intelligent perception, "I-it" (first person personal knowledge relating to scientific knowledge) and "I-thou" (first person personal knowledge relating to second person personal knowledge) knowledge. Notes by Stella Aldwinckle, March 5, 1945, The Stella Aldwinckle Papers, Box 8, Folder 384. The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. There are also numerous other records of her participation in the discussion.

⁴² On May 22, 1944.

⁴³ All of the issues of the *Socratic Digest* have been reprinted, with permission, in one volume by the author and are available online at www.Lulu.com.

egocentricity—his right to himself and his self-esteem.”⁴⁴ A couple of years earlier, Lewis had stated on BBC radio, “You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”⁴⁵ Aldwinckle and Lewis were of the same mind.

In that same paper, Aldwinckle also presents the basic facts which affirm Christ’s deity:

- (1) the changed lives of the apostles,
- (2) belief in Christ’s deity among monotheistic Jews (a belief which the Jews would ordinarily have resisted),
- (3) the persistence of the Church through the ages,
- (4) the impact of a living faith in Christ, and
- (5) the character and claims of Christ Himself.

Then she asks what role faith plays in perceiving these facts about Christ correctly. She answers that faith “involves both intellectual assent and a continued act of trust by unconditional surrender of the will to God,” but it also includes an awareness of sin and an admission of guilt. She concludes, “Faith gives the kind of *certain* knowledge beside which all other certainty seems empty and insecure, and all other knowledge mere tentative description. It is by such spiritual cognition that we come to *know* that our existence has meaning and purpose.”⁴⁶

The central activity of the Socratic Club, of course, was the meetings themselves. The most well-known meeting is the Anscombe-Lewis debate in 1948 that dealt with a chapter in Lewis’s book *Miracles*. The most well attended meeting in the history of the Socratic Club, however, took place in the third year of the Socratic. On January 24, 1944, the Socratic Club met in the dining hall at St. Hilda’s College to a standing-room only crowd of 250 people, which Aldwinckle called “the most amusing, and the most moving” meeting of the Socratic Club.⁴⁷ John Wain, former student of Lewis, later described the atmosphere as “positively gladiatorial.”⁴⁸ At a time when he was seriously considering a return to the Christian faith, popular philosopher and radio personality C. E. M. Joad spoke on the topic “On Being Reviewed by Christians.” He gave a defense of his book, *God and Evil*, which had been released fourteen months earlier. In this meeting, Aldwinckle invited Lewis to remove his jacket because of the heat (even though it was January), after Joad had removed his. Lewis declined because his shirt was patched!⁴⁹ Joad later rejoined the Church of England and wrote about his spiritual journey

⁴⁴ Stella Aldwinckle, “Concerning the Question: ‘Jesus, Prophet or Son of God?’” *Socratic Digest*, No. 2 (June 1954):54.

⁴⁵ *Mere Christianity*, New York: HarperCollinsPublishers. Copyright 1980, 52. The date of the BBC broadcast was February 1, 1942.

⁴⁶ *Socratic Digest*, No. 2, June 1944, 31ff.

⁴⁷ Stella Aldwinckle, “Oral History Interview with Lyle W. Dorsett,” July 26, 1985, 5. Call no.: OH / SR-1, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by permission. Page 29.

⁴⁸ Walter Hooper, “Oxford’s Bonny Fighter,” in *C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table*, 145.

⁴⁹ Oral history interview excerpt with Stella Aldwinckle, January 24, 1984. The Stella Aldwinckle Papers, CSL-Y, SR-276, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by permission. See also Stella Aldwinckle, “Memories of the Socratic Club,” *C. S. Lewis and His Circle: Essays and Memoirs from the Oxford C. S. Lewis Society*, Roger White, Judith Wolfe, and Brendan Wolfe, eds., 192.

back to the Christian faith in his last book, *The Recovery of Belief*, published in 1951 shortly before his death in 1953.⁵⁰ He gave some credit to the influence of C. S. Lewis.⁵¹

Stella Aldwinckle

Stella Aldwinckle was born on Dec. 16, 1907, in Johannesburg, South Africa. Her family moved to South America in 1911⁵² and to England in 1915. Because World War I was underway, her father wanted to contribute to the war effort, so the family returned to England. The return trip faced danger when their ship was chased by a German submarine for nine days.⁵³ In England, Stella attended Westcliff School in Weston-super-Mare, near Bristol. Stella's aunt operated this private school, located in southwestern England with a view of the Bristol Channel.⁵⁴ The family returned to Brits, South Africa, in 1925, where Stella engaged in tobacco farming with her younger brother.⁵⁵ While in South Africa, a country and continent she grew to love, Stella decided to devote her life to pointing people to the Christian faith. That goal later fit well with her leadership of the Socratic Club. Aldwinckle was raised in a "conventional Anglican middle-class family—church was regularly attended, the Lord's Prayer formed a focal point and was frequently recited, and her father's advice to the family was that the greatest book ever written was St. John's Gospel."⁵⁶ The influence of the Gospel on Stella was clearly felt during her formative years.

In 1928, Aldwinckle returned to England, where she worked as a nursemaid for a Baptist in North London.⁵⁷ Before enrolling in the university, she taught herself Greek by correspondence to improve her chances of acceptance into Oxford University.⁵⁸ In 1932, Stella attended St. Anne's College in Oxford to study Theology. Austin Farrer, who became a lifelong friend, was one of her tutors.⁵⁹ She earned a B.A. in 1936 and the M.A. in 1941.

⁵⁰ *The Recovery of Belief: A Restatement of Christian Philosophy*, London: Faber & Faber, 1951. For a more complete description of this evening and Joad's spiritual journey, see Joel D. Heck, "From Vocal Agnostic to Reluctant Convert: The Influence of C.S. Lewis on the Conversion C.E.M. Joad," *Sehnsucht* Vol. 3 (2009).

⁵¹ See Joad's *God and Evil*, 298.

⁵² They moved to South America because her father hoped he could find work there in his capacity as an architect. Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: Companion & Guide*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1996, 617.

⁵³ Stella Aldwinckle, "Oral History Interview with Lyle W. Dorsett," July 26, 1985, 5. Call no.: OH / SR-1, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by permission.

⁵⁴ Stella Aldwinckle, "Oral History Interview with Lyle W. Dorsett," July 26, 1985, 5. Call no.: OH / SR-1, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by permission.

⁵⁵ Stella Aldwinckle, "Oral History Interview with Lyle W. Dorsett," July 26, 1985, 5. Call no.: OH / SR-1, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by permission.

⁵⁶ Richard Leachman, "Biographical Postscript." *Christ's Shadow in Plato's Cave: A Meditation on the Substance of Love*. By Stella Aldwinckle. Oxford: Amate, 1990. Cited in Jim Stockton, "Chaplain Stella Aldwinckle: A Biographical Sketch of the Spiritual Foundation of the Oxford University Socratic Club," *Inklings Forever* 8 (2012), 3.

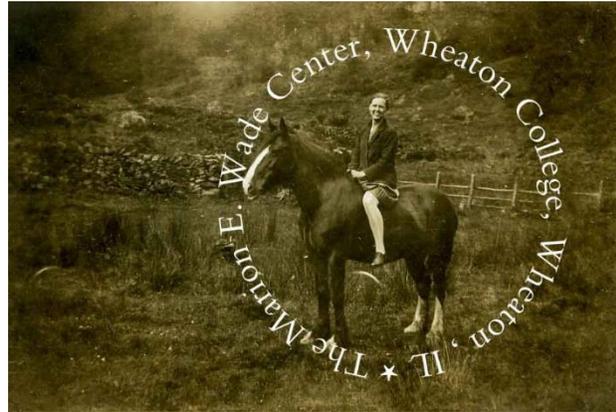
⁵⁷ Jim Stockton, "Chaplain Stella Aldwinckle: A Biographical Sketch of the Spiritual Foundation of the Oxford University Socratic Club," *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016*: Vol. 8, Article 26.

⁵⁸ Stella Aldwinckle, "Oral History Interview with Lyle W. Dorsett," July 26, 1985, 5. Call no.: OH / SR-1, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by permission.

⁵⁹ Stella Aldwinckle, "Oral History Interview with Lyle W. Dorsett," July 26, 1985, 5. Call no.: OH / SR-1, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by permission.

After completing her studies at Oxford, she taught Divinity in Yorkshire for three years, where she also pursued her love of horseback riding, and then she served as Tutor of Old and New Testament at St. Christopher's College in Blackheath, a London suburb near Greenwich.⁶⁰

In 1941, Aldwinckle joined the Oxford Pastorate, a team of workers attached to St. Aldate's Church, serving the undergraduates of Oxford University.⁶¹ She held the position of Chaplain to Women Students from 1941 until her retirement in 1966, working primarily among "the members of the four women's colleges—Somerville, Lady Margaret Hall, St. Hugh's and St. Hilda's—as well as amongst the large number of Home Students."⁶² During her time in Oxford, her two most important ministries were working as an advisor to the students at Somerville College and her work with the Socratic Club. In 1958, she founded the Oxford University Horsemanship Club, served with the ecumenical Christian community at Lee Abbey in Devon, and founded SCARS, an interdenominational prayer and fellowship group.⁶³



Aldwinckle on Horseback
(Used with the permission of the Wade Center)

After retiring, Aldwinckle worked on a philosophical treatise that had interested her for a long time with some help from her former tutor, Austin Farrer.⁶⁴ This treatise eventually developed into the poem *Christ's Shadow in Plato's Cave: A Meditation on the Substance of Love*,⁶⁵ for which Iris Murdoch wrote the Foreword. Jean Iris Murdoch, a Fellow of St. Anne's College, was one of Aldwinckle's close friends "who would eventually become recognized as one of the twentieth century's leading intellectuals and novelists."⁶⁶ In fact, Plato was one of three authors Aldwinckle was reading when, in 1985, Lyle and Mary Dorsett visited her for an in-person interview. The other two authors were Percy Bysshe Shelley and C. S. Lewis.⁶⁷ In retirement, Aldwinckle continued to attend meetings of the Socratic Club. She died on Dec. 28, 1989, and the poem was published in 1990.

After retiring, Aldwinckle worked on a philosophical treatise that had interested her for a long time with some help from her former tutor, Austin Farrer.⁶⁴ This treatise eventually developed into the poem *Christ's Shadow in Plato's Cave: A Meditation on the Substance of Love*,⁶⁵ for which Iris Murdoch wrote the Foreword. Jean Iris Murdoch, a Fellow of St. Anne's College, was one of Aldwinckle's close friends "who would eventually become recognized as one of the twentieth century's leading intellectuals and novelists."⁶⁶ In fact, Plato was one of three authors Aldwinckle was reading when, in 1985, Lyle and Mary Dorsett visited her for an in-person interview. The other two authors were Percy Bysshe Shelley and C. S. Lewis.⁶⁷ In retirement, Aldwinckle continued to attend meetings of the Socratic Club. She died on Dec. 28, 1989, and the poem was published in 1990.

⁶⁰ Jim Stockton, unpublished essay, *The Oxford University Socratic Club 1942—1972: A Life*, drawing on Stella Aldwinckle, "Oral History Interview with Lyle W. Dorsett," July 26, 1985, 5. Call no.: OH / SR-1, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by permission):7.

⁶¹ Leachman, *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶² Vicar G. Foster-Carter, "A Pastor for Women Students," *The Oxford Pastorate Forty-fifth Report: July 1940—June 1941* (Oxford: Oxford Pastorate, 1941), 10, cited in Jim Stockton, unpublished essay, *The Oxford University Socratic Club 1942—1972: A Life*.

⁶³ <https://archon.wheaton.edu/index.php?p=creators/creator&id=241> The first two letters, SC, undoubtedly stand for Socratic Club. She also grew to love lions, decorating her home with drawings and pictures of lions. See Stella Aldwinckle, "Oral History Interview with Lyle W. Dorsett," July 26, 1985, 5. Call no.: OH / SR-1, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by permission.

⁶⁴ Stella Aldwinckle, "Oral History Interview with Lyle W. Dorsett," July 26, 1985, 5. Call no.: OH / SR-1, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by permission.

⁶⁵ Hooper, *Companion & Guide*, 618.

⁶⁶ Jim Stockton, "Chaplain Stella Aldwinckle: A Biographical Sketch of the Spiritual Foundation of the Oxford University Socratic Club," *Inklings Forever* 8 (2012), 4.

⁶⁷ Stella Aldwinckle, "Oral History Interview with Lyle W. Dorsett," July 26, 1985, 5. Call no.: OH / SR-1, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by permission.

Conclusion

Outside of the Inklings and his Oxford colleagues, Lewis worked more closely with Stella Aldwinckle than with anyone else. His reliance upon her leadership in the Socratic Club demonstrates his trust in her. The success of the Socratic Club had as much to do with the untiring work of Stella Aldwinckle as it did with the reputation and the brilliant repartee of Lewis.

One major reason for this close cooperation was their similar theological views. This similarity may have led to their cooperation in the Socratic Club, but some examples further affirm them as kindred spirits. One can hear Screwtape in the background railing against the Socratic Club's approach, "By the very act of arguing, you awake the patient's reason; and once it is awake, who can foresee the result?"⁶⁸ Echoing Aldwinckle's emphasis on reason, we hear Lewis telling his BBC listeners that God "lends us a little of His reasoning powers and that is how we think: He puts a little of His love into us and that is how we love one another. When you teach a child writing, you hold its hand while it forms the letters: that is, it forms the letters because you are forming them. We love and reason because God loves and reasons and holds our hand while we do it."⁶⁹ He also writes, "It is not reason that is taking away my faith: on the contrary, my faith is based on reason."⁷⁰

In his last letter to Aldwinckle, Lewis gives his opinion of her. Nearly a dozen other letters merely address the lineup of speakers, his ability or inability to attend the Socratic Club, or possible speakers and their arrangements,⁷¹ but Lewis's letter of resignation in early 1954 marks the shift from a Lewis presidency of the Socratic Club to another president, Keble College philosopher Basil Mitchell. Lewis had heard of the establishment of a Professorship of Medieval and Renaissance English at Cambridge University, which would begin later that year, and he probably knew he was the most likely candidate. His complimentary words serve as a fitting conclusion to this chapter:

The moment seems a good one for saying how very much I have admired the great work you have been doing in Oxford all these years; a work which, I expect, no one else could have done, and v. few others *would* have done. I have worked with some who had your energy and with some who had your good temper, but I am not sure that I have worked with any who had both. It has been a great privilege and I have at all times appreciated it more than (I fear) my behavior showed. May you long continue the work. *Oremus pro invicem.*⁷²

⁶⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, New York: HarperCollins, 1996, 2.

⁶⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, New York: HarperCollinsPublishers. Copyright 1980, 57.

⁷⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 139.

⁷¹ Because they met frequently before, during, and after the meetings of the Socratic Club, Aldwinckle and Lewis could make many necessary decisions at those times.

⁷² *Collected Letters*, III, 400f. The date of the letter is January 1, 1954. The Latin means, "Let us pray for one another."