



Summer 2019

Dear listener,

At the end of November in 1954, C. S. Lewis gave his inaugural address on the occasion of his installation as the Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English Literature at Cambridge. In this lecture Lewis summarized his views concerning where (and why) the epoch-defining boundaries of Western history are most accurately placed.

He had long believed that the barrier between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance “has been greatly exaggerated.” But, he asked: “If we do not put the Great Divide between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, where should we put it?” Lewis went on to suggest several possible places to draw that line.

One possible boundary he considered but rejected was the event often labeled as the Scientific Revolution. Although Lewis was unsparing in his criticism of the disordering effects of modern science (especially in *The Abolition of Man*), he rejected the birth of modern science as a pivotal historical point because, even through the eighteenth century, the sciences did not affect “the tone of the common mind.” Lewis went on to explain the popular insignificance of science:

Science was not the business of Man because Man had not yet become the business of science. It dealt chiefly with the inanimate; and it threw off few technological by-products. When Watt makes his engine, when Darwin starts monkeying with the ancestry of Man, and Freud with his soul, and the economists with all that is his, then indeed the lion will have got out of its cage. Its liberated presence in our midst will become one of the most important factors in everyone’s daily life.

It was thus James Watt, a mechanical engineer, rather than a great theorist such as Copernicus or Newton, who emerged in Lewis’s judgment as the harbinger of the Second Great Chapter of the West. Not the dawn of Western science in the seventeenth century nor the coming of Enlightenment Reason and Freedom in the eighteenth, but the technological breakthroughs of the nineteenth century and the novel mentality that accompanied them formed the cultural threshold into an emphatically different era.

Between Jane Austen and us, but not between her and Shakespeare, Chaucer, Alfred, Virgil, Homer, or the Pharaohs, comes the birth of the machines. This . . . is parallel to the great changes by which we divide epochs of pre-history. This is on a level with the change from stone to bronze, or from a pastoral to an agricultural economy. It alters Man’s place in nature.

Lewis observed that the increasing *ubiquity* of technological devices that shape everyday life affected the modern *imagination*. “The birth of the machines” imparted a prejudice in favor of the new and reinforced modern assumptions about *progress* as the growth of *control* over nature and human nature. As this technological mentality ripened, it eliminated the long-standing assumption that nature and human nature have intelligible meaning. We are now the makers — not the recipients — of meaning.

Lewis sagely concluded that the advent of the modern technological mentality was “the greatest change in the history of Western Man.”

We are still living through the consequences of that change. While many pundits and commentators recognize that “the meaning of the human” is a central and critical question for cultural life, it is not as widely appreciated that the logic of the modern project *prevents* an adequate answer to this question. French philosopher Rémi Brague has recently argued that in modern times, “the knowledge of man freed itself from nature and from the divine.” Modern societies assume that humanity is self-defining, that no context of being or understanding is required for us to know what we are (and thus how we should live well). But, as Brague warns (with echoes of *The Abolition of Man*), “To deprive the human of any context leads to its destruction.”

In his inaugural lecture Lewis described the post-Christian West as living through an “un-christening.” I find that a much more sobering description than the more clinical “secularization.” It suggests that the West, which as “Christendom” once accepted the name of Christ, is now turning its back on the truest source of the meaning of the human. The project dubbed “Christendom” was (in Lesslie Newbigin’s summary) “a sustained attempt to realize the reign of Christ in the actual life of the world.” Oliver O’Donovan has described Christendom as “an era in which the truth of Christianity was taken to be a truth of secular politics.” If that sounds like a contradiction, it is only because on this side of the un-christening we assume that “secular” means “religion-free.” What it once meant was *temporal*, confined to the present age, as opposed to *eternal*. Christendom meant, says O’Donovan, that “The rulers of the world have bowed before Christ’s throne.” The un-christening does not mean (as the modern myth of the secular state alleges) that the rulers of the world are somehow now *neutral*. As Bob Dylan once opined, “you’re gonna have to serve *somebody*.”

Since 1993, the interviews on MARS HILL AUDIO have explored how Christians might best think about *the meaning of the human under the reign of Christ*, and thus about how we might strive to live well, *privately and publicly*. By way of contrast, our guests also describe how the institutions of modern culture — by ignoring or denying the supernatural context of our existence — typically misrepresent the kinds of creatures we are (often by denying our *creatureliness*). However discouraging and surreal the current cultural landscape, I find a great source of hope in reading the words and hearing the voices of the many faithful and thoughtful men and women who grace our *Journal*.

The importance of asking these questions, answering them well, and conveying the answers to our neighbors is higher now than it was when we launched our *Journal*. And the trend lines are not encouraging. Many Christians in the West are intellectually unprepared to stand firm under the pressure of the un-christening, often unaware of the resources available to help them better understand the spirit of the age. If you share our sense of the urgency of disseminating intellectually compelling and theologically discerning reflection on the challenges presented by contemporary culture, please consider supporting our work with a generous gift.

Gratefully,



Ken Myers

Host and Producer