

Permanent Things

BY J. DARYL CHARLES

The Inklings, because they were profoundly out of step with their times, could offer a penetrating critique of contemporary culture and a lucid defense of Christian basics. The wisdom of their vantage point is what T. S. Eliot calls “the permanent things”—those features of the moral order to the cosmos that in turn hold all cultures and eras accountable.

Some of the most fertile Christian thinkers in the twentieth century were profoundly out of step with their times. Indeed, their tendency to buck “conventional wisdom” causes writers such as the Inklings, but also Dorothy Sayers, G. K. Chesterton, T. S. Eliot, and Evelyn Waugh, to retain immense popularity among North American Christians. These literary prophets offered a penetrating critique of contemporary culture and a lucid defense of Christian basics couched in imaginative and morally rich language.

They had a knack for stressing “the permanent things.” While many of their contemporaries, in ways familiar to us, measured intellectual sophistication by *how much moral reality they could deny*, these poetic apologists were devoted to seeing *how much they might recover*. While their contemporaries were obsessed with the politics of power, they upheld principle and were supremely sensitive to the need to align themselves with the eternal and the unchanging. C. S. Lewis distinguished between the older approach and the contemporary fashion: “For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men.”¹ Wisdom,

then, stands on a platform of transcendent thinking that is not held captive to the spirit of the age.

By these literary prophets, modernity's vagabond and shallow spirit is found wanting. Its desecration of all things sacred and its material predisposition calls for their robust response that counters the truncated ideology of the here and now. And doubtless, were they to appear in our day, these prophetic voices would expose the paucity of postmodern nihilism.

What are the roots of their critique?

ANCHORED IN THE UNCHANGING

The wisdom of their vantage point is what T. S. Eliot refers to as "the permanent things"—those features of the moral order to the cosmos that in turn hold all cultures and eras accountable. This perspective is capable of addressing both the ills of modernity and the metaphysical murk spawned by modernity's child, postmodernity.

As individuals held captive by "the permanent," the Inklings rejected out of hand the quest for novelty that plagued so many of their, and our, contemporaries. They realized that a culture that refuses to acknowledge what is permanent is consigned to moral lobotomy and spiritual destitution. When moral assumptions about human nature are abandoned, decadence sets in, and with it, nihilism—i.e., the demise of all standards, authority, ideals, and metaphysical commitments. In short, culture collapses. What is left, quite simply, is pornography, idiocy, and broad-based spiritual famine. The Inklings certainly would have much to say in our day.

Among these voices, C. S. Lewis retains especially abiding appeal. Why is this? Clearly, we are moved by his moral imagination—an imagination that understands that pens are sharper than swords. But this is not the sole reason. Perhaps more than any of his guild, Lewis is indebted to and informed by "the permanent things," and these elements imbue virtually all of his literary works, from fantasy to philosophical reflection.

In his writings, this indebtedness takes on numerous forms. Lewis, the storyteller, often depicts moments of pure and spontaneous pleasure, which are "shafts" of divine glory that are a part of everyday life. Though he recognized such moments of Joy in his pre-conversion days (and later understood them as signposts pointing to a heavenly city), as a Christian writer Lewis is particularly cognizant of these innumerable "patches of Godlight" that penetrate our daily life and experience.²

"Permanence" also pervades Lewis' work in the fundamental conviction of human beings' depravity as well as their immortality. He is extremely adept at exposing what Gilbert Meilaender calls "the sweet poison of the false infinite."³ That is, whether we are encountering the misplaced longing for the "ocean-going yachts" in *Out of the Silent Planet* or "Turkish Delight" in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lewis uncovers the inordinate love of possessions that, because of human fallenness, masquerade as

satisfaction in the present life. To be guided by what is permanent, for Lewis, is to be freed from the tyranny of human passions in the present; it is to set our sights on that which alone can satisfy the deepest human longings.

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topics as diverse as capital punishment, humanitarian approaches to criminal justice, socialism, welfare and economics, fascism, the totalitarian tendency, and more. We should take our political cues, he says, not from culture but from the eternal truths of creedal Christianity. Principle, which is rooted in the permanent, is far more important than matters of policy, since the former ultimately guides the latter.⁴

Yet another defining feature of Lewis’ recognition of the unchanging is the emphasis in his writings on a transcendent moral order that is intuited *at the most basic level* by all human beings. He calls this the *Tao*, the “law of nature,” or the “law of oughtness” in his philosophical treatises, while in his fantasies this order is mirrored in the less-than-bestial behavior among animals. In Lewis, the deepest intuitions of both children and beasts point in the direction of normative morality. As one writer aptly notes, the conviction of a transcendent moral order is “no late addition to Lewis’s thought.”⁵ Rather, it is central.

TOWARD THE ABOLITION OF MAN

If there is nothing universal in the moral nature of humankind, then what constraints are there, beyond our political decisions, on how we will treat one another and organize our communities? Politics truly becomes “war by other means,” culture wars are no mere metaphor, and we are confronted with the problem posed so strikingly by Lewis in the final section of *The Abolition of Man*: controllers (“conditioners”) lord it over the controlled (the “conditioned”) and employ new technologies, which were developed for “conquest over nature,” for inhumanity in the guise of “innovation.”⁶ Only when we acknowledge the permanent—“the law written on the heart,” the *Tao*—can we escape enslavement to lower animal in-

instincts for power and personal aggrandizement.

About the time that Peter Singer, the noted animal-rights activist who is an open advocate of infanticide and euthanasia, was being installed in an endowed chair in ethics at Princeton University, President Harold Shapiro delivered a lecture on the university's role in moral education. Shapiro underscored three goals of liberal education, to "provide an understanding of the great traditions of thoughts," "free our minds from unexamined commitments and unquestioned allegiances," and "prepare us for an independent and responsible life of choice." He qualified the last point with the remarkable statement that education is "especially important in a world where we increasingly depend on individual responsibility and internal control to replace—or at least to supplement—the *rigid kinship rules, strict religious precepts, and other aspects of totalitarian rule* that have traditionally imposed order on societies" (emphasis mine).⁷

Did Shapiro's comments cause any stir in his audience? The characterizations of "kinship rules" as "rigid" and of "religious precepts" as belonging to the category of "totalitarian rule" should strike us as rather frightening and certainly give us pause. But this is the very thing Lewis predicted: when humankind is free-floating in a universe of "choice," divorced from the transcendent and unfettered by moral standards, we descend into self-annihilation. Shapiro's commentary well illustrates the present moral state of affairs within our culture and helps explain why a prestigious university can endow a chair, with relatively little protest, for an animal rights activist who denies those same rights to the handicapped neonate and the elderly persons in our midst. In truth, there is no consensus in the present cultural climate as to fundamentals of right and wrong behavior.⁸ *We do not hold these (or any) truths*, and to contend for such is deemed rigid, totalitarian, and unsophisticated.

But contend we must, which is why the insight of Lewis strikes us as all the more prescient: without the *Tao*, without an acknowledgement of a universal moral law, we are inevitably and irrevocably consigned to the abolition of man. "Ethical, intellectual, or aesthetic democracy is death," Lewis once wisely quipped.⁹ Indeed, apart from natural law, what argument and protection do we have against evil when it manifests itself? If there is no universal moral law, the Nuremberg Trials were arbitrary and wrong-headed, and the Nazis, to their great misfortune, merely ended up on the wrong side of a post-war power-grab.

CONCLUSION

Natural law, as Lewis rightly understood, serves as a bridge between Christian and non-Christian morality. In civil society, religious and non-religious people conform to the same ethical standard in order to be governable. A revival in natural-law thinking, therefore, must be a highest priority for the Christian community as we contend in, rather than abdi-

cate, the public square. Indeed, if there is no natural law, if there are no “permanent things” to which we are subordinate, the alternative is moral, social, and political anarchy, leading to nihilism or political totalitarianism.

In the end, we invite what Lewis, with prophetic insight, sought to forestall.

NOTES

1 By “applied science” Lewis means the use of technology to accomplish the “disgusting and impious,” and hence, humankind’s self-annihilation. *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 88.

2 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harvest Books, 1996), 238. In *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harvest Books, 2002), Lewis writes: “We—or at least I—shall not be able to adore God on the highest occasions if we have learned no habit of doing so on the lowest. At best, our faith and reason will tell us that He is adorable, but we shall not have found Him so, not have ‘tasted and seen.’ Any patch of sunlight in a wood will show you something about the sun which you could never get from reading books on astronomy. These pure and spontaneous pleasures are ‘patches of Godlight’ in the woods of experience” (91).

3 See Gilbert Meilaender’s *The Taste for the Other: The Social and Ethical Thought of C. S. Lewis*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), chapter one.

4 For more on this theme, see John G. West, Jr., “Politics from the Shadowlands: C. S. Lewis on Earthly Government,” *Policy Review* 68 (Spring 1994): 68-70.

5 Meilaender, *The Taste for the Other*, 183. He refers to this strand in Lewis’ thinking as “primeval moral platitudes.”

6 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 53-82.

7 Harold T. Shapiro, “Liberal Education, Moral Education,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly* (January 27, 1999); accessed online at www.princeton.edu/~paw/archive_old/PAW98-99/08-0127/0127feat.html.

8 For similar reasons, T. S. Elliot could write in *After Strange Gods* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), “The number of people in possession of any criteria for discriminating between good and evil is very small; the number of the half-alive hungry for any form of spiritual experience, or what offers itself as spiritual experience, high or low, good or bad, is considerable. My own generation has not served them very well. Never has the printing press been so busy, and never have such varieties of buncombe and false doctrine come from it” (61).

9 *Present Concerns: Essays by C. S. Lewis*, edited by Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1986), 34.



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