How ‘The Abolition of Man’ Destroys the Idols of the Postmodern Age

No one could rightly accuse C.S. Lewis, who was raised as a Northern Protestant Irishman, of betraying his adopted home of England. During the Great War, Lewis had—though exempt from any draft—volunteered to serve as an officer in the British Army. When he arrived in the trenches of that horrendous war, now a century gone by, he declared himself a champion of Western civilization, fully and finally understanding the fortitude of Odysseus. He even suffered severe injuries to his internal organs, and he adopted the family of his closest friend in the war, after his friend failed to survive. To his dying day, Lewis cared for the members of that adopted family.

When the Second World War began, though, Lewis had strong reservations about the waging of the war itself. While he certainly believed the war against the Nazis noble, he feared the alliance—however informal and unsteady—with the Soviet Union. He also believed, critically, that the British were certain about what they were fighting against, but less certain about what they were fighting for. This latter point, he worried, would prove exceptionally dangerous to a free people, willing to become the enemy, or, at the very least, willing to use the tools of the enemy to defeat the enemy. Like Socrates long before him, Lewis feared that any use of evil, whatever the excuse, would ultimately taint the good. What if, after all, in the fight against National Socialism, the British themselves succumbed to socialism? Not merely as a necessary temporary matter, but as a prolonged and habitual one.

Already immensely popular in the United Kingdom, especially after the publication of several theological and

theologically-oriented books in the 1930s, Lewis decided to employ his considerable reputation in examining the most important, but also some of the least popular, questions of his day. Through his popular non-fiction books, his fiction, and his innumerable lectures and radio addresses, Lewis explored the question of "just war," relativism, subjectivism, and ethical and moral purpose. Of these books, *The Screwtape Letters* probably sold the best, but the one that has lasted to this day—especially in terms of reputation and stature—is his short but vigorous *Abolition of Man*. As with *Mere Christianity*, published in 1952 but based on several of Lewis's World War II addresses, *The Abolition of Man* began as a series of lectures, ostensibly to consider the state of the English language and the teaching of it. Owen Barfield, one of Lewis' closest friends and a deeply important scholar in his own right, pronounced *The Abolition of Man* not only Lewis's best non-fiction work, but also the best example of one of Lewis's two best traits: his "atomic rationality." (The other trait was his romantic mythmaking.) Since its initial publication seventy-five years ago, *The Abolition of Man* has served as one of the finest non-reactionary bulwarks against the faddish ideologies and various subjectivisms and other nihilistic nonsense of the political and cultural Left. No student can read it without calling into question the whole of his education. And, no certainly, no reader or supporter of *The Imaginative Conservative* should be without a copy of the book on his shelf. (On a personal note, I try to read it every other year or so as a reminder of how to approach various difficult questions with logic, rather than emotion. In this, it serves with only four or five other non-biblical books I try to read on a regular basis: *The Lord of the Rings* to remind me of beauty; *The Aeneid* to remind me of fortitude; *The City of God* to remind me of truth; the collected poems of T.S. Eliot to remind me of sacramentality; and Strunk and White to remind me never to take my own writing too seriously.)

From the opening sentence to its fascinating appendix on the

deep cultural understating of the natural law, *The Abolition of Man* destroys the idols of the modern and post-modern age. Lewis particularly notes that if we do not understand the meanings of meanings, grammar, and style, we lose our ability to think clearly. One cannot separate the word from, in Stoic terms, the Word. To demean one is to demean the Other. (Russell Kirk would make a similar argument, twelve years later in his nearly forgotten masterpiece, *Academic Freedom*.) Lewis begins *The Abolition of Man* with a chapter entitled "Men Without Chests." Analyzing a then-newly published work geared toward teaching English to secondary-school students, Lewis laments that the two authors are far more interested in teaching their own poor and poorly-formed ethics than they are in teaching English, their own subject. The student who studies this textbook carefully will learn nothing of grammar, style, or definition but will learn a great deal about the personal social views of the two authors. Rather than educating, the two authors—wittingly or not—are conditioning.

> *A boy who thinks he is 'doing' his 'English prep' and has no notion that ethics, theology, and politics are all at stake. It is not a theory they put into his mind, but an assumption, which ten years hence, its origin forgotten and its presence unconscious, will condition him to take one side in a controversy which he has never recognized as a controversy at all. The authors themselves, I suspect, hardly know what they are doing to the boy, and he cannot know what is being done to him.*

Intentional or not, the result is the same: a willful misuse of educational authority. None of this however, Lewis notes, is terribly new, as authors have been doing the same for almost half a century. As a result, he realizes, the English-speaking world has produced several generations of "trousered apes" and "irredeemable urban blockheads."

The true teacher or professor seeks to impart knowledge and

wisdom, to teach truth and to leaven the human being, not to conform him to the standards of the ephemeral, the fleeting, and the passing.

> *For every one pupil who needs to be guarded from a weak excess of sensibility there are three who need to be awakened from the slumber of cold vulgarity. The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts. The right defence against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments. By starving the sensibility of our pupils we only make them easier prey to the propagandist when he comes. For famished nature will be avenged and a hard heart is no infallible protection against a soft head.*

Following in the line of not only Plato and St. Augustine, but also of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, teachers and professors must align themselves and their students with the eternal verities and the natural laws (what Lewis chooses to label "the Tao"), recognizing that we do know real things, true things, and false things.

Redefining the Platonic and Aristotelian understandings of the three faculties, Lewis concludes this first chapter by arguing that one can know what is true, good, and beautiful through the intellect (the head), the imagination (the chest or soul), and the passions (the heart and the stomach). Of these, Lewis argues in traditional Western fashion, the most important is the chest or the soul, the aristocratic part of the person, the part that serves as a bridge between the analytical and the passionate, between the machine-like aspect and the animal-like aspect of man. Strangely and paradoxically, it is the soul as mirror—that is, that faculty which reflects the divine—that makes man most man, even though it is the least human aspect about him.

In the modern world, though, we have trained the head and encouraged the heart, while neglecting the soul. Or, as Lewis

so scathingly put it, we are producing men without chests. “In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”

We have brought such horrors upon ourselves.

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