

C.S. Lewis and the NXIVM Cult

My wife and I recently watched [The Vow](#) on HBO Max. It's a nine-part documentary about [NXIVM](#) (pronounced "NEX-ee-um"), an organization that claimed to provide personal and professional development training programs.

Think Scientology in its early days, when it was [an unorthodox therapy program](#) without all the sci-fi religious mythology.

Like Scientology, its true nature was much more sinister. NXIVM quickly grew into an abusive cult. Female members were referred to as "slaves" and were pressured to brand themselves, hand over nude photos as blackmail material, lose unhealthy amounts of weight, and have sex with NXIVM founder (or "Vanguard") Keith Raniere.

The power and ease with which Raniere ensnared so many smart, successful people struck me as nothing short of demonic, but it's nothing new. C.S. Lewis warned against following such men and their bankrupt philosophies almost 80 years ago in his book [The Abolition of Man](#).

Two moments from the show struck me as particularly revealing.

The first is an exchange from the first meeting of Raniere and *Smallville* actress [Allison Mack](#), who later became Raniere's top recruiter of female "slaves." If you have HBO, you can find it in the fourth episode around the 30-minute mark.

RANIERE: Is art important to you?

MACK: Yes.

RANIERE: Why?

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MACK: When I go to see a film or a piece of artwork... something happens to me that is so exciting and wonderful. Blissful. Joyful.

RANIERE: You know you can practice generating an extreme feeling of joy over anything... What if artistic endeavors were really bogus? What if art was just an excuse for those who couldn't do?... The most excitement that you've ever felt is yours to have all the time, independent of art. The bad news is you sort of have to divorce yourself from the thought that it comes from the art. If you feel that art is necessary for that, that's almost a self-condemnation.

*MACK: *Begins to cry**

The second comes from the final episode (around 44:30). Ranieri is speaking to NXIVM board member Mark Vicente, who later left the cult and worked tirelessly to convince others to leave.

RANIERE: There is no injustice. There is no "unfair." There's just cause and effect. There's a part of you that is facing [the question], "What if morality doesn't mean anything?" ... When you abandon all good, truly, you will come to a point where you must construct it. You understand that it is the basis of our whole curriculum. Everything that we do is about that. We are constructing a definition of good.

Listening to this conversation years later, Vicente wept, realizing Ranieri's true malevolence, as well as the pleasure he took in harming so many people.

The Abolition of Man begins with Lewis' analysis of a high-school composition textbook, in which Lewis points out that the authors argue that when "we 'appear to be saying something very important' when in reality we are 'only saying something about our own feelings.'"

Lewis finds this very modern idea terrifying. According to the textbook's authors' philosophy, nothing is objectively good or bad, and people should feel free to reprogram themselves—or, more likely, be reprogrammed—to feel any response to any stimulus.

“Until quite modern times,” Lewis explains, “all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it – believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could *merit*, our approval or disapproval, our reverence or our contempt.” This is no less true in ethics than in aesthetics.

Raniere effectively told Mack that this age-old belief that Lewis holds is nonsense. Her feelings of bliss when seeing beautiful art are, Raniere insists, entirely arbitrary, and his methods—he calls them “technologies”—can help her adjust them. She may as well react with disgust, fear, apathy, or any other emotion. No response is any more valid than another.

But this idea cuts both ways. If wonder is not an appropriate response to beautiful art, then horror is not an appropriate response to physical disfigurement or forced starvation. If the victim feels horrified, those feelings are nothing more than a mental block she needs to overcome. Any difficulty she has in overcoming them would only serve as proof to Raniere of how badly the victim needs the NXIVM program.

As Lewis [also states in *The Abolition of Man*](#):

We shall in fact be the slaves and puppets of that to which we have given our souls. It is in Man's power to treat himself as a mere 'natural object' and his own judgements of value as raw material for scientific manipulation to alter at will. The objection to his doing so does not lie in the fact that this point of view (like one's first day in a dissecting room) is painful and shocking till we grow used to it. The

pain and the shock are at most a warning and a symptom. The real objection is that if man chooses to treat himself as raw material, raw material he will be: not raw material to be manipulated, as he fondly imagined, by himself, but by mere appetite, that is, mere Nature, in the person of his de-humanized Conditioners.

Only after wasting 12 years of his life as Raniere's disciple did Vicente reach the same conclusion as Lewis: that the denial of objective values leads inevitably to brainwashing and abuse.

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