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# The Church Should Give Us a Lead: C. S. Lewis on Modern Social Thought

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While it would be inaccurate to claim that C. S. Lewis wrote as a public policy wonk or addressed "the social problem" at length, he did care about social issues like poverty, inequality, and class conflict. His writings on these issues focus more on achieving clarity with regard to how Christians should, and should not, engage matters of justice. While the institutional church has a part to play, it is a secondary role as compared to what Christians might accomplish by employing their vocational gifts and exercising the duties and privileges of citizenship.

## Introduction

Thirty miles north of Dublin in Lewis's native Ireland there is a town of around forty thousand-plus called Drogheda (Clare 2010). It was a town that was well known to the Lewis brothers, both to Warnie Lewis and his rather better-known brother Jack, or C.S., as he's known to us.

To state the matter matter-of-factly, Warnie struggled with alcoholism, and if he got past his brother's watchful eye and crossed the Irish Sea, he would frequently go on benders, to the extent that he would often spend several weeks to several months at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda, a hospital founded by the Medical Missionaries of Mary; Lewis referred to the sisters as "charming nuns" who had taken such good care of his brother (Lewis 2004, 790). It was during one of these extended stays that C. S. Lewis was asked to write a short note about the mission of the sisters while staying at the White Horse Inn, a hotel founded in 1755. That short note was first published in a book about the Medical Missionaries of Mary, an order that still serves the vulnerable today throughout the world. It was later published with the rather pedestrian title "Some Thoughts" in the collection of Lewis essays *God in the Dock* (Lewis 1970, 147–50).

Lewis begins with the observation that there's nothing more obvious to us than a Christian hospital, with the possible exception of a Christian church. In addition to blessing marriage and fostering arts and philosophy, Christianity has "always been healing the sick and caring for the poor." It "is always either doing, or

at least repenting with shame for not having done, all the things which secular humanitarianism enjoins." Looking at Christianity through this lens, we see that Christianity preserved civilization after the fall of Rome, protected and furthered the rule of law, preserved advances in agriculture and architecture, and so forth. This lens leads us to think, Lewis suggests, that Christianity belongs among the great world-affirming religions.

But through another lens we might say just the opposite. The central image of Christian faith is a "man slowly dying by torture," and the instrument of that torture has become a worldwide symbol of that faith; martyrdom is celebrated among Christians, and while there are feast days, there are also fast days; we put our treasure not on this earth but in another world; we put dust on our foreheads and acknowledge that to dust we shall return. Christianity through this lens belongs to the great world-denying religions like Buddhism.

Non-Christians, Lewis thinks, must be bewildered by this juxtaposition, but Christians from the inside see that these two aspects of the faith, while paradoxical, are reconcilable, because ours is an ordered and "hierarchical universe." Without mentioning Augustine by name, Lewis echoes his emphasis on ordered loves and an ordered reality: "The Supernatural is higher than the natural, but each has its place; just as a man is higher than a dog, but a dog has its place."

We should not be surprised then that healing the sick and providing for the poor might give way, sometimes, to the salvation of souls. Yet the created nature, the natural, still has its place, and because God created it out of his love and artistry, it deserves a measure of our reverence.

It is only after this rather meaty meditation that Lewis turns to what these nurses are actually doing: fighting against death, earnestly, calmly, skillfully. But why do this if death itself is ultimately going to die anyway? Why worry about the sick bay on the Titanic? Why worry about death, and sickness, and poverty, Lewis asks, if such things are, in the eternal scope of things, so very temporary?

One might ask why Jesus wept at the death of Lazurus even knowing that he would raise him moments later. Lewis suggests Jesus wept because death disturbs him, as the author of life and mere nature, even more than it does us. And while the war against death was won at Calvary, so long as mere nature remains infected by sin and death there are many battles yet to be waged against it: "Because we know that the natural level also is God's creation we cannot cease

to fight against the death that mars it, against pain and poverty, barbarism and ignorance. Because we love something else more than the world we love even the world better than those who know no other" (Lewis 1970, 150).

The problem with talks or papers about Lewis is that one often drifts into just quoting him over and over. And this is a perennial temptation, given that one of Lewis's great gifts is his keen ability to help us see things from just a slightly different angle, such that we might say, "Of course that's how it is, how did I not see it before?" He reminds us of things we felt like we've known under the surface; at other times he takes us to a new vista of belief or insight that we would never have come to on our own.

And so it is when it comes to the matter of social morality, or the social question, or the problem of poverty, or inequality, or however one wants to describe the unease we feel when thinking about the pervasive and stubborn reality of poverty, particularly when we consider just how much wealthier the world is on the whole than it was just a few hundred years ago. The poor have been and always will be with us, and we know we are called to care about the poor. The parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25 frames this calling as accompanied by rather high stakes. There's much more to be said about Lewis's thoughts about politics and social challenges; one could even write a book about the matter and not exhaust it (Meilaender 1978; Dyer and Watson 2016).

But for this short essay I want to focus on three questions: First, and briefly, did Lewis care about or address the social question? Second, what did Lewis mean when he wrote in *Mere Christianity* that the church ought to give us a lead? Third, and finally, what hope might we draw from Lewis for our current moment amidst what seems to be a deep-seated and worsening malaise?

## Lewis and the Social Question

Did Lewis care about the social question, or perhaps better put, did he care about class issues? The answer is clearly yes. Did Lewis address class or the social problem in any sustained or focused way? Did he write a treatment of class conflict or a treatise on public policy or the best means to alleviate poverty? Here the answer is no. Hence we have to temper our expectations for what Lewis offers when it comes to the sort of guidance or hints we might find in his writings. It's entirely possible for any figure to (1) think an issue is important, and yet (2) not treat that issue in any sustained way. Thus in the chapter in *Mere Christianity* on social morality Lewis notes the wisdom of the ancient Greeks, Old Testament

Jews, and great Christian teachers of the Middle Ages that lending money at interest is a really bad idea, and how at odds this wisdom is with the practice of interest which he describes as "the basis of our whole system" (Lewis [1952] 2009, 82–87). It could be, Lewis notes, that the ancients were mistaken and could not have known about the joint stock company, but he is not an economist and so he merely raises the question and says we need the Christian economist to help us out. One should be careful speculating about what a historical figure "might" do or think today, but I will venture it is likely that Lewis would heartily approve of the Acton Institute's role in responding to this question.

Once we are looking for it, we find Lewis addressing class and poverty throughout his works and in his life. While comfortably middle class, Lewis was not sequestered from the challenges of the working class and the working poor. His father was a solicitor in Belfast, a lawyer who worked with the police and brought his work home with him. Even though Oxford-bound, Lewis served in World War I alongside soldiers of all backgrounds. As a don at Oxford, he taught political philosophy, including thinkers who wrote on the matter, such as Rousseau, Marx, and Lenin. He wrote an early essay on Bolshevism and, while it's safe to say he was not a fan, one can acknowledge the genuine socioeconomic challenges that contributed to the rise of Bolshevism without endorsing Bolshevism as a solution (Barkman 2009, 158). During World War II he gave several talks to the Royal Air Force (RAF). He answered letters from hundreds and hundreds of people from all walks of life, some of whom encountered great financial and medical difficulties. He also gave away a great deal of his own money, so much so that he lost track and got in some trouble with the British equivalent of the IRS, as at the time they did not account for charitable giving and his tax bill was quite high (Hooper 1996, 32–33). His friendship and then marriage to Joy Davidman Gresham helped him see how difficult life could be for a divorcee abused by an ex-husband with two young boys to raise. He did live a sort of remarkably rich life amid the gleaming spires of Oxford, but he was not cloistered there.

We see this also in his writings. In the very first book he wrote after becoming a Christian, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, the main character, John, meets the character of Mother Kirk, Lewis's stand-in for the Christian church, and describes how business is done between the classes when it comes to property: "The little people do not know the big people to whom they belong. The big people do not intend

that they should. No important transference of property could be carried out at all if the small people at the bottom knew what was really happening" (Lewis 2014, 75).[1]

Later, John meets History, a venerable character who relates to him the scope and sweep of human history. According to History, the Enlightenment began to go downhill once Mr. Mammon "was taking it over, and building new towns and turning the people out of the fields and into the factories." The factories gave us machines, about which another character says, "Their labour-saving devices multiply drudgery; their aphrodisiacs make them impotent: their amusements bore them: their rapid production of food leaves half of them starving, and their devices for saving time have banished leisure from the country" (Lewis 2014, 192).With the exception of the quip about food and starvation, that is a fairly accurate prophecy from 1933 about some aspects of modern life today.

We find other examples throughout Lewis's fiction and his essays. *That Hideous Strength* has a remarkable portrayal of a hierarchical society in St. Anne's that is nevertheless completely egalitarian when it comes to class: One of the main characters, Jane Studdock, is flummoxed by the full inclusion of a working-class woman, Mrs. Maggs, who is treated as her equal, even though her husband is a convicted criminal (Lewis [1945] 2003). And speaking of criminals, perhaps Lewis's only foray into the weeds of public policy is found in his "The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment" (Lewis 1970, 287–300; Babbage 1972). Here Lewis defends the rights of criminals to be treated as real men and women and not "things" or "patients" to be manipulated by the authority of the state for its, rather than their, purposes. In one of the most moving visions in his book *The Great Divorce*, Lewis introduces us to a woman whose appearance is so splendid and her entourage so overwhelmingly transcendent that the narrator wonders if she is the mother of our Lord.[2] She is not, the narrator's guide tells Lewis; her name is Sarah Smith, and while she was not great as greatness is understood on earth, heaven's economy is rather different, and her true greatness was found in her charity and kindness that had nothing to do with her class status and would likely have been hampered by it (Lewis [1946] 1973, 118–20).

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1 David Downing's commentary and edits for this edition are invaluable for understanding the work.

2 I'm grateful to President Robin Baker of George Fox University for this insight.

As evidenced by the essay about the Irish hospital with which I began, bolstered by these other references, it is clear Lewis cared about poverty, and class, and even politics as an attempt to grapple with those things. What did he think about the church's role in doing so?

## Lewis and the Church

Here we need another reminder from Lewis about the angle we're seeing things from. We can be tempted when we hear "the church" to think of the human, all-too-human, manifestation of the church: the abuses, the scandals, the times it has let us down, the human and fallen institutions that are made up of sinful human beings. And if we are wise, we know that we too contribute to that angle with our own frailty and fallenness and the crooked timber of our humanity.

But this warped and crooked vision we see here isn't *really* the church. As Screwtape reminds Wormwood in the second of his letters of that name, the church is "spread out throughout all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners," "a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. Fortunately, it is quite invisible to these humans" (Lewis [1942] 1996, 5).

Screwtape may be right that we can't see the Bride of Christ in all her actual glory, but Christians do well to remember that as we grapple with the lived reality of the earthly church as it is in this temporal, and temporary, moment. And this is particularly important to remember when we think about the church's role with respect to politics and poverty. Lewis addresses the role of the church most directly in his chapter on social morality in *Mere Christianity* (Marsden 2016).[3] In this chapter, originally spoken over the air as a BBC radio address during World War II, Lewis notes two important points before discussing the church. First, Jesus did not come to preach a new morality. The Golden Rule is, Lewis believed, known by everyone whether they get it from divine scripture or the natural law written on their hearts. The second thing is that Christianity tells us about ends, but not always about means: "When it tells you to feed the hungry it does not give you lessons in cookery. When it tells you to read the Scriptures it does not give you lessons in Hebrew or Greek, or even in English grammar. It was never intended to replace or supersede the ordinary human arts and sciences; it is rather

3 See Marsden's "book biography" for helpful context and commentary.

a director which will set them all in the right jobs, and a source of energy which will give them all new life, if only they will put themselves at its disposal" (Lewis [1952] 2009, 79).

Lewis is noting what many people were saying then, and anticipating what many people are saying now: "The church should give us a lead." Here again it depends on what angle we're looking from. If by "the church" one means that the institutional church, and in particular the clergy, should give us a lead, then Lewis thinks this is a very bad idea indeed. The clergy have been "specially trained to look after what concerns us as creatures who are going to live forever," *not* to determine what it looks like to put the Golden Rule into action such that the church (the clergy) can fight the battles against death and poverty and injustice on the earthly plane even after the cosmic war has been won by Christ on the cross.

If, however, what people mean by "the church" is "the whole body of practicing Christians," then Lewis thinks this is much more promising. If Christians who are also economists, and political scientists, and public policy wonks, and think tank enthusiasts who promote a free and virtuous society—if *those* Christians put their effort into putting the Golden Rule into action, then we will make some progress toward Christian solutions to our social problems.

But, we want to ask, does Lewis give us anything more specific that we can go do? Well, yes, he's already addressed that to some extent, and we already know part of the answer: Our role as practicing Christians and members of the Church universal is to be good nurses, economists, accountants, firefighters, and just about any job, formal or not, that contributes to the natural world that God created and called us to cultivate and the human world he has tasked us with bringing into being and preserving. But Lewis does describe an idea that is, to my mind, rather intriguing if at the same time daunting.

Then, and now, Christians can be tempted not only by the "solution" of the institutional church taking the lead, but by the church actually taking control. In the dark early years of the Second World War, Catholic thinker Jacques Maritain and Lewis both considered, and rejected, Christian political parties as a viable

solution to the ills of modernity.[4] Lewis wrote a brief essay titled "Meditation on the Third Commandment" just a couple years before *Mere Christianity*, and in it he borrows explicitly from Maritain's rather meaty book *Scholasticism and Politics* (Lewis 1970, 196–99). In a chapter called "Catholic Action and Political Action," Maritain distinguishes three layers of Catholic activity: The first concerns the ongoing and strictly spiritual ministries of the Catholic Church as the Catholic Church (the spiritual); the second is the actions of Catholic citizens in the earthly realm regarding mundane matters affecting everyone in society (the temporal); and the third layer consists of those issues in which the formal Church is somehow engaged with a temporal matter insofar as Catholic teaching directly speaks to it (Maritain 1940).

The second layer is what Maritain refers to as the political, and that is what Lewis means when he refers to the church as comprised of all practicing Christians. For reasons that Lewis shared, Maritain was wary of a Catholic party operating in the name of the Church in partisan politics. Yet Maritain did offer a suggestion as to what Catholics might do as a voting bloc that would avoid the dangers of a Christian party while still practicing faithful Christian citizenship. "M. Maritain has hinted," Lewis writes in his essay, "at the only way in which Christianity (as opposed to schismatics blasphemously claiming to represent it) can influence politics" (Lewis 1970, 199). What was Maritain's hint? Faithful Catholic citizenship can be practiced, Maritain writes,

> not by taking sides for a certain political idea of the political common good, judged more favourable to religion, nor by making Catholics, as such, enter upon the service of historical forces and temporal interests linked to this idea. . . ; it is rather by laying every political camp whatsoever under the necessity of respecting these rights and values, if it does not wish to be fought by the Catholic masses. Such procedure raises above the diversity of political ideas concerning the political common good,—political ideas to which a Christian may legitimately adhere,—the idea of religious and spiritual values to be

4 Some of what follows is taken from an earlier essay in which I draw from Lewis and Maritain to make a case against Christian parties: Micah Watson, "Another Meditation on the Third Commandment," *Perspectives in Political Science* 46, no. 1 (2017): 43–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2016.1252612.

> served, and thus maintains under the only ascendant of the things of God, even in political matters, the efforts of Catholics in so far as they are Catholics (Maritain 1940, 211–212).

Maritain's chapter is one heavily conceptual offering in a book that contains several vigorously argued and in-depth chapters, and so Lewis is right to refer to Maritain's Christian veto option as a "hint," as Maritain does not expound on it at any length. Nevertheless, Lewis endorsed and briefly expanded on this hint in his "Third Commandment" essay. The brevity of Lewis's treatment should not diminish the strength of the endorsement. Lewis, as a "mere" Christian, broadens Maritain's idea to include not just Roman Catholics but Christians generally, an "interdenominational Christian Voters' Society" that "might draw up a list of assurances about ends and means which every member was expected to exact from any political party as the price of his support." Drawing up this list of assurances would have been quite the ecumenical challenge in Lewis's day, to put it mildly, and surely the challenge would be even greater in ours. Nevertheless, Lewis did describe this possibility as the "only way" Christians as Christians might engage politically in a healthy way. Lewis went so far as to write in a weekly Anglican newspaper that he was "prepared in principle, for membership and obedience to be obligatory on Christians."

I'm not persuaded that this notion is the "only way" for Christians to engage politics well, nor am I persuaded that membership should be a strict religious duty. Yet the proposal does offer one way for Christians to influence society for the good without attaching the name and reputation of Jesus Christ and the church to the tumult of mundane political wrangling. This is what Lewis meant by invoking the third commandment: Attaching Jesus's name to partisan politics takes that name in vain.

Such a proposal would invert the political dynamics that threaten the integrity of the church while protecting the democratic emphasis on the consent of the governed. Instead of candidates from a Christian party seeking to persuade the electorate to buy into their religiously grounded values and policy prescriptions, potential power brokers seeking political office would need to persuade members of a Christian Voters Society that they would respect their convictions, and they could be held accountable electorally if they did not. The failures of politics would not be directly tied to any particular denomination or group of Christians, even as Christian interest groups and Christian citizens could still freely influence the political process and run for office.

I want to conclude with one last angle from which to consider these matters, and that's the angle Lewis borrowed from a friend and involves the metaphor of the book-lined study and the smoke-filled room.

Now we know that Lewis's hostility toward politicians is well-grounded (Dyer and Watson 2016, 5), and we see evidence of this throughout his fiction, with my favorite example being the lunatic headmaster in Eustace and Jill's school in *The Silver Chair* being cashiered after failing miserably as a headmaster, then being fired after failing miserably as a school inspector and being sent off to Parliament, "where she lived happily ever after" (Lewis 1953, 171). Given Lewis's own experience with horrid schoolmasters, this is not a ringing endorsement for members of Parliament.

And six days before he died in November of 1963, Lewis responded to a Mrs. Frank Jones, noting that "Our papers at the moment are filled with nothing but politics, a subject in which I cannot take any interest." Immediately after declaring his indifference to politics, Lewis went on to lament the inevitability of a forthcoming and likely long-serving Labour government, though the "regimentation, austerity, and meddling which they so enjoy" would be mitigated by the death of Sir Stafford Cripps, the "late nursery governess of England" (Lewis 2007, 1481). In these snippets and anecdotes, Lewis proclaims both ignorance of, and hostility toward, politics, though it was a paradoxically well-informed ignorance and a moth-drawn-to-the-flame hostility.[5]

Despite all this, even Lewis recognized that his antipathy to politicians might have been overwrought. Sixteen years after his 1940 letter to Warnie and three years after *The Silver Chair* was published, Lewis offered high praise to Chad Walsh's *Behold the Glory*, noting in a letter to Walsh that the bit he needed most was the book's qualified defense of politicians (Walsh 1965). Walsh had likened politicians to physicians, most of whom do the best they can given the materials they have. Some are stupid, others wicked, but this does not distinguish them as a class from any other class of human beings, and many do attempt to do some good in a limited, earthly way (Lewis 2007, 713).

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5 For a fuller picture of this political paradox, see the first chapter in Justin Dyer and Micah Watson, *C. S. Lewis on Politics and Natural Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

The politician, like the physician, must be able to move smoothly between the God-given design of a healthy body, or a healthy body politic, and the reality that both bodies are diseased. A doctor ignorant of what health looks like would not be of much help to the sick. And a doctor who recoiled from the horrors of cancer or gangrene would not be well-suited to help them either. In the same way, the good politician must understand what the healthy body politic looks like, and Walsh here cites the City of God as the ideal. But the good politician must also be willing to squarely face the dirty realities of politics as it exists in a fallen world. He must be well-acquainted with the ideal, which is learned in the book-lined study, but he must not be reluctant to dive into the smoke-filled room, where the good politician cannot help but be struck by how far the earthly political reality is from the ideal of the City of God, yet nevertheless rolls up his sleeves and gets to work.

Lewis did not write very much about Walsh's chapter, and I don't mean to extract a great deal from his passing note that he very much needed its message. But I do want to suggest that this dynamic between the ideal of the book-lined study and the sordid goings-on of the smoke-filled room helps us understand Lewis's purported disdain for politics and his lifelong interest in and engagement with political themes. There are biological diseases, wounds, viruses, and other ailments that mar our physical health, and to address those things doctors and nurses like those at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital practice the healing arts. Similarly, there is violence, injustice, wrongful inequality, poverty, and a host of other social ills that afflict the body politic, and to address those things Lewis calls on ordinary Christians practicing the "ordinary human arts and sciences" to put "do as you'd be done by" into action.

For all the many gifts Lewis had and all the genres his work fits into, he did not undertake the role of politician, or economist, or public policy wonk. Nevertheless, his most valuable work for those Christians concerned with the social question was in laying out the framework, helping us connect Christian faith and doctrine with the categories of thinking necessary to engage the modern world. It is up to us to glean what we can from his ideas and example and put them to work in our own context and season.

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