

# Editorial: Special Issue on Mere Christian Social Thought

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C. S. Lewis is known for many accomplishments. To the public, his name is tied to one of the most famous children's fantasy series of all time: the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Friends and enemies of the Christian faith recognize Lewis as one of Christianity's leading apologists, notably in his *Mere Christianity*, which defended the orthodox Christian faith, and *The Abolition of Man*, which defended objective morality. For others, their introduction to Lewis was reading *The Screwtape Letters*, where Lewis made fun of Satan—but took the devil seriously. A smaller number are aware of Lewis's scholarly contributions to Renaissance literature and literary theory, as in his *The Discarded Image* and *An Experiment in Criticism*, respectively.

Notwithstanding the depth of Lewis's literary accomplishments and the breadth of his readership, few have connected the thought of C. S. Lewis to social philosophy or social theology. But the connection is worth making. As revealed in this C. S. Lewis-inspired issue of the *Journal of Markets & Morality*, the thought of Lewis contains the rudiments of a uniquely ecumenical Christian approach to social doctrine and practice.

Lewis was a Christian humanist whose anthropology had room for both "the Fall of Man" (Lewis 1943) and the future glorification of Christian believers. As he puts it in his sermon *The Weight of Glory*, "You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, and civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is

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to ours as the life of a gnat” (Lewis 1949). From this starting point, Lewis draws conclusions about how we ought to treat and think about one another. His focus is on our everyday personal interactions.

By Lewisian logic, because we have “never talked to a mere mortal,” we have also never sold to, bought from, paid, employed, contracted with, voted for, subjugated, deposed, taxed, subsidized, fought with, litigated, killed, defrauded, cooperated with, declared war on, deceived, partnered with, married, divorced, parented, reneged on, or betrayed any “mere mortals” either.

Indeed, these examples suggest that social life is fraught with “sharp edges” that threaten to mortally wound us as we interact with one another. In this vale of tears, perfectly smooth social interactions are infeasible, but bumps and bruises beat fatal lacerations. They’re also morally superior. If we interact with divine image-bearers who are equal in moral worth and possess inherent dignity, then we must think hard about what social constraints befit such creatures (Otteson 2019). To undertake that project is to step onto the terrain of “mere Christian social thought,” inspired by Lewis’s notion of mere Christianity.

Central to such a project is a search for the institutions—the “rules of the game” (North 1991)—that facilitate human flourishing, fulfillment of the Creation Mandate (Genesis 1:28), and mitigation of violent conflict (North et al. 2009). There are many ways that image-bearing persons can interact. The claim of economists, for over two centuries now, sounds exclusivist to ears which have become accustomed to pluralist themes. It’s this: There are only a few ways of living together which generate “mass flourishing” (Phelps 2013).

While there are variations on the theme, ways of interaction that generate flourishing feature strong private property rights, security of transference (contracts), and voluntary exchange. When such institutions are present in a society, markets are widespread and it makes sense for people to engage in specialization and exchange to get what they want. Under specialization and exchange, our innate human differences become a blessing, rather than a curse (Sacks 2003, 22). The stage is set for the move from subsistence living to production for the market, terminating in widespread prosperity.

Strong private property rights, enforceable contracts, and voluntary exchange form the core of Adam Smith’s “obvious and simple system of natural liberty” (Smith [1776] 1910, bk. 4, chap. 9, 180). Such a system features the right to use private property as one sees fit, so long as it does not physically infringe on

others' rights to do the same. Live and let live. Persuasion and rhetorical force are available options to convince others of their mistakes, but attempts to justify physical coercion must surmount a high argumentative bar.

Other benefits often flow from Smith's "obvious and simple system of natural liberty" too, as the *doux commerce* thesis maintains. This idea suggests that commerce smooths many of our rough edges. A market system tends to punish improvidence, sloth, arrogance, and rudeness, while rewarding foresight, diligence, honesty, prudence, mutual respect, and the like.

We think C. S. Lewis would have, by and large, signed up for the Smithian "obvious and simple system of natural liberty" (Elzinga 2023). Lewis did "not wish to contradict" Aristotle's observation that "some people were only fit to be slaves," but he rejected totalitarian regimes because he "saw no men fit to be masters" (Lewis 1943).

That "no men are fit to be masters" is both distinctively Smithian and historically anomalous. Thomas Sowell reminds us that slavery is among the world's most ubiquitous social institutions (2009). In fact, economics got the name "dismal science" due to thinkers like Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill linking arms with the abolitionists of their day (Levy 2001). Whatever these economists' motives—and they did vary—we think Christian social theorists, who possess an elevated anthropology, would agree that the society for which they strove is befitting of creatures whose every interaction either pushes men heavenward or toward hell (Lewis 1945). Of course, the devil is in the institutional details. Simply pointing to Smith's "system" does not begin to exhaust all there is to say about our interactions with one another. It must be unpacked, studied, analyzed, and possibly critiqued.

The articles in this issue span disciplinary perspectives and methods as they take steps toward developing "mere Christian" social doctrine. For instance, in his case study on ServiceMaster, Christopher Armstrong argues that Lewis-inspired Christian humanism played an important role in shaping corporate culture and executive decision-making at ServiceMaster. His essay also serves as an introduction to the core principles of Christian humanism. Russell Galloway contends that existing Protestant thinking on contraception is thin, but that the Protestant tradition contains the necessary resources to develop a robust perspective on this issue. The article that develops mere Christian social thought most explicitly is Andrew Yuengert's contribution, which wrestles with the

connection between Christian revelation about the human person and social science. In “The Church Should Give Us a Lead,” Micah Watson teases out elements of Lewis’s implied social philosophy: namely, that the Church should avoid partisan politics, but ought to help its members “as practicing Christians . . . to be good nurses, economists, accountants, fire fighters, and just about any job . . . that contributes to the natural world that God created and called us to cultivate.” Paul Radich offers a retrieval of Cicero’s social philosophy, which he argues undergirds much of what’s best in Christian social thought and may also provide a basis for conciliation among Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant approaches, while forming a bridge to certain secular social philosophies. Finally, John Robinson draws on C. S. Lewis’s anthropology to argue that scarcity can draw us into proper dependence on God and others.

While from various disciplines, these articles resonate with different aspects of Lewis’s thought to generate insights about “mere Christian social thought” and in the process take Lewisian scholarship in new directions. Treat this themed issue of the *Journal of Markets & Morality* not as the final word but as an invitation to further inquiry. These articles, taken together, demonstrate that Christian doctrine offers untapped resources for thinking more clearly about markets, politics, society, the nature of persons, and—critically for social thinkers of all stripes—the nature of those persons’ interactions. *Tolle lege*.

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