

The Abolition of Man, One More Time

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Not so many years ago I went with a good friend to see an Australian film, *Bliss*. Overall not the greatest film ever made, but it has its points.

The opening scenes are set in a home, with a family at table together. The father walks out into the backyard, and with terror in his eyes clutches his chest. A *heart attack*. And the camera slowly begins to take us up into the sky, looking down upon the body. As the seconds pass, the images of earth are less and less clear, until finally we begin to see something else.

Wonderful and beautiful and good, and then awful and ugly and evil—in stark contrast.

But then those images also become less clear, and through the murk we begin to see earth again. No longer a lone body, but now an ambulance with lights flashing, and family and caregivers are surrounding the stricken man. And with a shock—a literal shock to his system—the man comes back to life.

Rushed to the hospital, he has an operation to address his wounded heart. The next minutes in the film are the strongest in the story, as the man knows that he has come close to death and wants to know what the images he saw mean—for his life.

An Anglican clergyman comes to visit him in the hospital, offering pastoral care. But it is the man with the mended heart who asks the most important questions. He wonders what he has seen, the images of good and evil so plain before him as he wandered up and out of his body. And so he asks the clergyman about something he has read in the Thirty-nine Articles—the historic doctrines of the Anglican Church—in particular about its statements on the reality of hell. He is certain that he was very close to its gates.

The clergyman takes the book from the man, reads the words himself, and says, “1571.... It’s a bit out-of-date, don’t you think?”

Over the last months I have thought of this film and its conversation many times, as I have listened to the debates in the press, on-line, and among friends about the present and future of the Anglican Communion. At heart, of course, it is historical hubris and theological naïveté of a malicious sort that makes it possible to say with seeming seriousness, “It’s a bit out-of-date,

don’t you think?”

And yet to read the reports from the less-than-orthodox bishops in the Episcopal Church USA, in no uncertain terms that is what they are saying to themselves and the watching world. The deposit of faith prized over time is “a bit out-of-date.” What true Christians in the third century and the thirteenth century believed about God, human nature, and history, about heaven, hell, and salvation, is no longer acceptable in our so-sophisticated post-Enlightenment world. In words very much like that, the American bishops overwhelmingly thumbed their noses at history and the Anglican Communion worldwide—with special scorn for the theological and moral out-of-dateness in the two-thirds world churches—in their decisions this summer to rewrite the creed and confession of the Church with regard to human sexuality. All in the name of making it more “up-to-date,” I am sure they would say.

This all came home to me with painful poignancy this fall when one afternoon I stopped at the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, VA, a seminary of the Episcopal Church USA. Some say it is the best-endowed seminary in America; its beautiful campus reflects the history and wealth of that possibility. The seminary’s library is a great resource to many from across the city, and they generously allow people in to read and study. On many days over many years I have been graced by that kindness.

After I found what I was looking for, and was making my way out, I saw a row of used books for sale, a temptation I rarely resist. On the bottom shelf, there it was: a real find. When I opened it up, I saw that in fact it really was a first edition of C.S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man*.

With a hidden smile, I paid my quarter, and walked out, thinking with some sadness that that book’s wisdom—written 60 years ago—was at the heart of the crisis in the Anglican world today. And the VTS library was letting the book go for a quarter, apparently not having any idea what they were losing—which was a mooring in meaning and reality and truth. Lewis called it the abolition of man.

[I assume no malice on the part of the librarians, for a moment. The library may have all it needs of Lewis's work, even first editions. And so their decision could have been simple generosity.]

Lewis wrote the book as a public square argument, an apologetic for the wider world. In it he takes up a text in use in British schools in the 1940s; he calls it *The Green Book*, written by authors he names Gaius and Titius. His unwillingness to name names gives us an important window into Lewis; he was not out to pick a fight with particular people so much as he wanted to raise the flag of concern about the spirit of the age, and its meaning for human life under the sun.

The heart of his critique is that the book in question is emblematic of a worldview being argued across British society, and in fact the Enlightenment-shaped world beyond Britain. Because there is nothing new under the sun — philosophically, politically, psychologically — the debates and positions sound so fresh, so cutting-edge, and yet they are the perennial conversations that sons of Adam and daughters of Eve have generation by generation. And that is true here as well. Mind vs. heart, thinking vs. feeling, rationalism vs. romanticism, the cerebral vs. the visceral; in every age they come to us with new faces and new force, and must be answered once again.

In our day we hear the argument run this way: it is facts not values that run the world. Facts, not values. The bifurcation itself is troubling, as it reflects a fragmented universe of learning and life that is foreign to the coherence of the Christian worldview, of the world that really is there. But it is the way we talk if we have been educated in the right places, if we have learned the rules of the game as it is played in polite society. That split has shaped the public square as we know it — in politics, economics, the media, and education.

Two generations later, as I have listened to students making their way through Washington, it is that issue that is the line in the sand, that is at the core of sustainable Christian faith in a secularizing, pluralizing world. Do we have trustworthy access to truth and meaning, or not? Or are we stuck, floundering in the facts/values morass, with a fragmented, incoherent, and compartmentalized faith as the only possibility? If students are not able to work their way through that conundrum, with its philosophical and sociological complexities, my judgment — sorrowful as it is — is that they will not make it into the maturity of faith, with belief and behavior twined together over a lifetime. The stakes are that high.

Not surprisingly, Lewis understood this. In the first chapter he sets forth his famous “Men Without Chests” argument: if contemporary learning addresses only the head — the seat of reason, the source of

“facts” — and in so doing creates educational expectations about what really matters that in due course then shape society, we will find ourselves in cultural crisis because we will have lost crucial dimensions of what it means to be human, of what moral meaning can and must mean.

I had sooner play cards against a man who was quite skeptical about ethics, but bred to believe that ‘a gentleman does not cheat,’ than against an irreproachable moral philosopher who has been brought up among sharpers. In battle it is not syllogisms that will keep the reluctant nerves and muscles to their post in the third hour of the bombardment. The crudest sentimentalism (such as Gaius and Titius would wince at) about a flag or a country or a regiment will be of more use....The head rules the belly through the chest — the seat, as Alanus tells us, of Magnanimity, of emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments. The Chest — Magnanimity — Sentiment — these are the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man. It may even be said that it is by this middle element that man is man: for by his intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal.

It may even be said that it is by this middle element that man is man. The stakes are that high.

Lewis was wise enough to know that the weight of the world is never one-dimensional. His critique is more nuanced, as he is as concerned about “feelings” becoming dominant, as he is about “thinking” holding sway. And in the realm of ethics, even as the Church debates moral questions such as the meaning of sexuality, that lens shapes so much of what is heard, in conversations among friends, in the press, and even in the highest of ecclesiastical courts, viz. my “feelings” tell me, I “feel” that this is right. In Lewis's terms, the visceral or the “guts” can be just as overwhelming as the “brain,” and so the need for a chest — character rightly formed — to mediate.

Creatively engaging his time, Lewis knew that the more didactic argument would only go so far, and so he wrote a more imaginative account of the same dilemma, calling it *That Hideous Strength*. (He actually saw these as companion volumes, to be read together.) The third in his “space trilogy,” the story is set in the world of the university, full of itself and its ideas, spiritual temptations each one.

At the center of his story is an effort to control the world by “enlightened” people. The sort that are so sure of their brilliance, so certain of their schools and traditions and beliefs — unmediated as they are by Chests — that they are able to decide for the rest of us the nature of the good life, the path to human enlightenment.

Deliciously, Lewis calls them N.I.C.E.— the National Institute for Coordinated Experiments. In the perversity of the human heart, they in fact believe they are, nice, that is. They are the best and the brightest of their day, and it is that that is the temptation to Lewis's character, Professor Mark Studdock. Simply, sadly, he wants in, he wants to be part of "the inner ring" of the most highly educated and influential thinkers in society. After all, their plans will make a better world for everyone—if only those not-so-bright and not-so-highly-educated ones will just cooperate.

As he tells his tale, Lewis connects ideas with life, showing that ideas do in fact have legs. The intellectual arrogance of the N.I.C.E. crowd is its undoing, eventually, after much sadness and horror. Their beliefs about reality, meaning, and truth have consequences, for themselves and for others. And the consequences are for curse, and not for blessing.

Lewis calls it "a fairy tale for grown-ups." If it only were. But, I suppose that is the best of a fairy tale, in every century and every culture. If we have ears to hear, we can hear the truth about ourselves and about the universe in which we live. Shakespeare was right, as usual: "The play's the thing to catch the conscience of the king" — as well as ordinary people like you and me, folk who are all too prone to think more highly of ourselves than we ought.

How can we eschew the pride of the *Bliss* clergyman, sure as he is that the core convictions of Christian faith and the moral life that flows out of it, are "a bit out-of-date" — without falling into the hole of our own hubris?

I think it is all in the Chest, so to speak. The "chest" was Lewis's metaphor for an understanding of character that is formed by what is real and true and right; and that assumes we have access to what is real and true and right, that we are not forlorn in the universe wondering who we are and how we are to live.

In *The Abolition of Man* he calls it the "tao," a universal vision of human flourishing, with real rights and real wrongs as the center of the good life for everyone everywhere. And it is that possibility which is obliterated in *That Hideous Strength*. N.I.C.E. is not "nice," in any morally meaningful sense of the word. With horror in his heart, Studdock begins to understand.

He saw clearly that the motives on which most men act, and which they dignify by the names of patriotism or duty to humanity, were mere products of the animal organism, varying according to the behavior pattern of different communities. But he did not yet see what was to be substituted for these irrational motives. On what ground henceforward were actions to be justified or condemned?

His question echoes across time and through every human heart. Without "chests" we lose our humanity, in Lewis's words, what makes man man.

Without a mooring in "mere Christianity" — the mainstream of historic orthodoxy, with settled convictions about moral meaning shaped by Scripture and affirmed and interpreted in the creeds and confessions of the Church over time—we find ourselves asking Mark Studdock's question, "On what ground henceforward were actions to be justified or condemned?" In the end are there other options than group-think or personal preference? the position that has the most votes wins or I-do-what-I-want-to-do-when-I-want-to-do-it?

Milan Kundera writes about this tension so tellingly in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, lamenting our century's "profound moral perversity...everything is pardoned in advance, and so everything is cynically permitted." If God has not spoken in a way that can be trusted, if the Bible is not true to the way the world really is, then we are left with the need for an updated faith, a brave new faith for a brave new world. And Bishop Spong was right, after all, in his audacious title, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*.

But he wasn't, and Lewis was. Writing fifty years before the notorious bishop, Lewis was amazingly prescient, able to see what ideas would mean for the generations that followed. Is the crisis in the Church today reflective of an abolition of man, and woman? Is mere Christianity and the vision of moral meaning which it both reflects and promotes "a bit out-of-date"? Are the beliefs and behaviors shaped by centuries of Christian commitment in need of review?

Years ago I dropped by to talk to the head of a school under the oversight of the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia. Our soon-to-be-freshman daughter was either going there or to our local public high school. With a long history and vaunted traditions, its size was a major draw to us. Rather than thousands in the classrooms and hallways, there would be a few hundred. But I wanted to talk to someone in charge, to take the pulse of its nature and direction, beyond what the brochures promised and the admissions officers promoted.

I had my conversation, and was satisfied that I knew what we were getting into — if we went forward and enrolled our daughter. All the way home I kept thinking to myself, "Yes, there is a cross on the building, yes there is required chapel... but at its heart the school is at best sympathetic to transcendence — but it does not believe in truth."

Then it seemed a fair reading on both the school and the Diocese of Virginia. Three children and years later, I am sad but sure that I had it right.

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In this very fallen world, we live our lives in the now-but-the-not-yet of the kingdom, and so there is always something provisional and proximate about the choices we make. We use the word “trade-offs.” The hard questions for me as a father were: given the trade-offs, will it be worth it? can I live with the trade-offs, and still love God and my daughter with integrity – knowing that she will be exposed to a hollowed-out faith? Or is there something so damnable about the ethos of a school “sympathetic to transcendence – but that does not believe in truth” that should make me turn tail and run, taking my children with me? All of us make choices like that all the time, individually and corporately, in the church and in every other dimension of life.

And yet, and yet.

Whatever did happen to the man in *Bliss*? The one whose question about heaven and hell stumped his rector? When he heard that the Church believed it was all bunk anyway, that the beliefs embraced and embodied over time were “a bit out-of-date,” and not to be believed by serious people in serious trouble, he walked away.

With no mooring in mere Christianity, with no tethering to truths tested over time, all that is left is to step into the darkness – for the leaders of the wandering Episcopal Church and for any of us – hoping against hope that we will find our bliss.

Lewis called it the abolition of man.



Steven Garber

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