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Public Life in the Shadowlands: What C. S. Lewis Can Teach Us About Politics

by John G. West

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Even before the film *Shadowlands*, C. S. Lewis was probably the most widely recognized Christian thinker of the twentieth century. By the end of the 1980s, his books already had sold more than seventy million copies, an achievement that surely places Lewis among the best-selling authors of all time.

Lewis is most appreciated today for his superlative imagination and his lucid defense of Christian orthodoxy. But he also was a keen observer of social and political affairs. As Americans struggle to define the proper relationship between religious faith, moral principle, and political action, there is much that they might learn from this inimitable British academic.

Turning to Lewis for advice about politics is undeniably a bit paradoxical. According to stepson David Gresham, Lewis was skeptical of politicians and not really interested in current events.[1] He even observed that he had no use for the "great issues" of his day. "Lord! how I loathe great issues," he wrote in 1940. "Could one start a Stagnation Party—which at General Elections would boast that during its term of office no event of the least importance had taken place?"[2] Lewis likewise avoided making partisan commitments. During the 1930s,

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[1] Gresham's views as recounted by Chad Walsh in *The Literary Legacy of C.S.Lewis* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. 15.

[2] C. S. Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. with a memoir by W. H. Lewis (New York: Harcourt, Brace

he told a student that he refrained from donating money "to anything that had a directly political implication"[3]; and in 1951, he declined a title offered him by Prime Minister Winston Churchill (whom he greatly admired), because he feared that critics would seize upon the honor as evidence that his "religious writings are all covert anti-Leftist propaganda…."[4]

Despite this seeming indifference to political life, Lewis wrote about a variety of political topics, including crime, war, censorship, capital punishment, conscription, socialism, vivisection, the welfare state and the atomic bomb.[5] When he discussed these matters, however, his primary concern was not public policy. Political problems of the day interested him only insofar as they involved matters that endured. Looked at in this light, Lewis's habit of writing about politics and his simultaneous detachment from the political arena are perfectly understandable. Uninterested in the partisan passions of the moment, he always tried to find the permanent in the political. As a result, much of what he has to say about public life remains acutely relevant. Indeed, it is the very timelessness of Lewis's writings that makes them so timely.

Public Morality Based on Public Principles

Of all the political lessons that can be learned from Lewis, perhaps the most important is that public morality should be founded squarely upon public principles. Unlike some Christian conservatives, Lewis did not believe that civic morality ultimately had to be

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and World, 1966), p. 179.

[3] Lewis, quoted in William Griffin, *Clives Staples Lewis: A Dramatic Life* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 137.

[4] C. S. Lewis, *Letters*, p. 235.

[5] See, for example, "The Pains of Animals," "Dangers of National Repentance," "Vivisection," "The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment," "Delinquents in the Snow," "Is Progress Possible? Willing Slaves of the Welfare State," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics,* ed. by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 161-171, 189-192, 287-300, 306-310, 311-316; "Why I am Not a Pacifist," "The Inner Ring," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses,* rev. edition, ed. by Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), pp. 33-53, 93-105; "A Reply to Professor Haldane," in *C.S. Lewis on Stories and Other Essays on Literature,* ed. by Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), p. 69-79; all the essays in *Present Concerns,* edited by Walter Hooper (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1986).

grounded in the Bible to be legitimate. Nor did he believe that arguments about social morality were fundamentally arguments about religion.

Instead, Lewis championed the time-honored idea of natural law—the belief that the fundamental maxims of civic morality are "written on the hearts" (Romans 2:14) of all human beings by God through reason and conscience. This natural moral code cannot be escaped, said Lewis; it is the source from which all moral judgments spring. Its cardinal virtues—justice, honesty, good faith, magnanimity, beneficence, mercy—are known to be true independently of experience. According to Lewis, these basic precepts form a moral common ground that undergirds all civilized societies, a point he illustrated in his book *The Abolition of Man* by cataloguing similar ethical injunctions from some of the world's major civilizations.

Lewis was aware that some Christians objected to natural law because they thought it detracted from the dignity of revealed religion. But he could not accept their view. Far from contradicting Christianity, he argued, natural law is actually presupposed by it. Lewis agreed that Christianity deepened one's ethical understanding. But he was insistent that "Christian ethics" not be regarded as "a radically new thing." Pointing out that a convert to Christianity "accept[s] the forgiveness of sins," he asked:

> But of sins against what Law? Some new law promulgated by the Christians? But that is nonsensical. It would be the mockery of a tyrant to forgive a man for doing what had never been forbidden until the very moment at which the forgiveness was announced. The idea…that Christianity brought a new ethical code into the world is a grave error. If it had done so, then we should have to conclude that all who first preached it wholly misunderstood their own message: for all of them, its Founder, His precursor, His apostles, came demanding repentance and offering forgiveness, a demand and an offer both meaningless except on the assumption of a moral law already known and already broken.[6]

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[6] C.S. Lewis, "On Ethics," in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), p. 46.

The practical political consequences of Lewis's understanding of morality are considerable. The present controversy over religion in politics largely hinges on the assumption that the morality espoused by conservative Christians cannot be justified apart from the Bible, and hence it is illegitimate as a guide to secular policy. But according to Lewis, this is a red herring. One does not need to accept the authority of the Bible to know that theft and slander are wrong, or that honoring one's commitment to a spouse or child is a good thing. Traditional morality of the type we find in the Bible is also reasonable morality, the morality of common sense. Thus, as Christians, we should not be afraid to apply our moral principles to politics. Instead, we should be willing and able to defend our principles as supported by reason as well as revelation. Civic morality is not the peculiar domain of religion, and Christians who wish to be politically effective (as well as theologically sound) should drive this point home. It is one of the best ways for them to disarm their critics.

The Importance of Being Prudent

Natural law provides a moral common ground for all citizens to enter politics as equals, but it does not provide simple-minded solutions to specific political problems. Nor did Lewis claim that it would. Lewis understood that being morally right is not the same thing as being politically bright. Translating moral principles into public policy requires something more than merely the right moral principles. It requires the virtue of prudence, which Lewis aptly defined as "practical common sense, taking the trouble to think out what you are doing and what is likely to come of it."[7][8] The importance of prudence is a second lesson about politics that might be gleaned from Lewis.

Lewis lamented that "nowadays most people hardly think of Prudence as one of the 'virtues,'" and he chided fellow Christians for being especially guilty of this offence. "Because Christ said we could only get into His world by being like children, many

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7 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 74.
8 Ibid.

Christians have the idea that, provided you are 'good,' it does not matter being a fool. But that is a misunderstanding." In Lewis's view, consequences matter, and one of the problems with idealists in politics is that they often don't comprehend this fact. They crusade for perfect health, universal employment, or everlasting peace, but they don't bother to pay any attention to the disastrous effects their policies, if enacted, would likely bring about.

Fundamental to Lewis's conception of prudence was an unflinching realism about the human condition. Human beings are both limited and sinful according to Lewis. They are limited in their knowledge about the world around them. They are limited in their ability to do anything about the knowledge they have. And in those cases where they should know what to do (and be able to do it), their judgment is often derailed by their selfishness. As a result, earthly perfection is unobtainable. Political utopians who think otherwise deceive themselves. Their kind of thinking, said Lewis,

> assum[es] that the great permanent miseries in human life must be curable if only we can find the right cure; and it then proceeds by elimination and concludes that whatever is left, however unlikely to prove a cure, must nevertheless do so… But I have received no assurance that anything we can do will eradicate suffering. I think the best results are obtained by people who work quietly away at limited objectives, such as the abolition of the slave trade, or prison reform, or factory acts, or tuberculosis, not by those who think they can achieve universal justice, or health, or peace. I think the art of life consists in tackling each immediate evil as well as we can.[9]

Lewis thought that Christians in politics needed to heed the hard lessons of human imperfection just as much as the secularists. This is true of the Christians on both the left and the right. Today Christians of a liberal persuasion are at the forefront of urging universal health care, strengthened environmental protection, and increased spending on poverty programs. The problem is that many of the proposals they embrace have unintended consequences that may defeat the very purposes they are trying to achieve. By failing to pay

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[9] C.S. Lewis, "Why I am Not a Pacifist," in *The Weight of Glory*, pp. 44-45.

attention to the potential consequences of their policies, they are opening the door to disaster. We have seen this in the past, perhaps most wrenchingly in the 1920s and 30s, when Christian pacifists helped weaken Europe's resolve against Hitler.

But Christian liberals aren't the only ones who need to beware of the pitfall of utopianism in politics. This temptation can be just as attractive to Christian conservatives, some of whom still yearn for the days of teacher-led prayers and Bible reading in the state schools. They presumably think that these practices will help instill reverence for both God and morality in students. But will they? Lewis had his doubts about using the government to promote religion. Writing about efforts to teach Christianity in government-run schools in Britain, Lewis pointed out that if non-Christian teachers were charged with inculcating Christianity in their pupils, unbelief would be the most likely result. "As the teachers are," he observed, "so they will teach. Your 'reform' may incommode and overwork them, but it will not radically alter the total effect of their teaching… if we were permitted to force a Christian curriculum on the existing schools with the existing teachers we should only be making masters hypocrites and hardening thereby the pupil's hearts."[10] Lewis's point here is worth serious reflection. There are limits to what we can achieve through government, regardless of whether we are conservative or liberal.

Paying attention to consequences, of course, has its limits in politics. We are not God. We can't perfectly predict what will happen when we propose a certain action. So we need to be wary of justifying our policies solely in terms of their results, because this can lead us to use the end result to justify almost any means.

In other words, we must be prudent about our use of prudence. Lewis himself recognized this fact, as can be seen in his novel *That Hideous Strength,* where a sinister government agency conspires to take over Great Britain. A small intrepid group gathers to

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[10] C.S. Lewis, "On the Transmission of Christianity," in *God in the Dock,* pp. 117-118.

oppose the conspiracy, but its members spend most of their time praying and waiting rather than starting a rebellion.

"I am not allowed to be *too* prudent," says Ransom, the de facto director of the group. "I am not allowed to use desperate remedies until desperate diseases are really apparent. Otherwise we become just like our enemies—breaking all the rules whenever we imagine that it might possibly do some vague good to humanity in the remote future."[11]

Lewis never says that there aren't dire circumstances where ordinary rules have to be broken in pursuit of the higher good. But he does emphasize that we need to be extremely careful before we break ordinary rules in the name of the end result. Despite this caveat about the abuse of prudence, however, Lewis's main point remains: In the real world, consequences matter; and in politics good intentions are not good enough.

Another facet of Lewis's prudent realism was his emphasis on political humility. Echoing Aristotle in the *Ethics*, Lewis more than once explained that specific applications of moral principles "do not admit of mathematical certainty."[12] The more specific the application of a moral principle, the greater the possibility of error—especially when fallible humans are involved. Hence, political partisans should be wary of being too dogmatic. Those who proclaim their political program with absolute certainty are flirting with despotism. If ever they begin to take their exalted rhetoric seriously, they will be tempted to stop at nothing—even tyranny—to push their agenda forward.

This was one reason Lewis opposed the creation of an explicitly Christian political party. Such a group, he feared, would raise the political stakes too high. "The danger of mistaking our merely natural, though perhaps legitimate, enthusiasms for holy zeal, is always great," he said, but a Christian party would make the temptation well nigh irresistible. "The

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[11] C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1965)., p. 155.

[12] C. S. Lewis, "Why I am Not a Pacifist," in *The Weight of Glory,* p. 53. The passage in Aristotle which Lewis is recalling can be found in the *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1094b. Lewis explicitly refers to this passage in "A Reply to Professor Haldane," in *C.S. Lewis on Stories,* p. 76.

demon inherent in every party is at all times ready enough to disguise himself as the Holy Ghost; the formation of a Christian Party means handing over to him the most efficient make-up we can find."[13]

Lewis added that attaching divine certitude to a party platform is a theological blunder as well as a political one. It takes the Lord's name in vain by "pretending that God has spoken when He has not spoken. He will not settle the two brothers' inheritance: 'Who made Me a judge or a divider over you?' [Luke 12:14] By the natural light He has shown us what means are lawful: to find out which one is efficacious He has given us brains. The rest He has left to us."[14]

Freedom, Virtue, and the Limits of Government

A final political lesson to be learned from Lewis is the moral necessity of limited government. An unrepentant critic of what he termed the "omnicompetent" state, Lewis believed that government's chief task was not to fill our every want or grant our every wish, but to defend individual liberties so that citizens could live their lives in their own way.

Lewis knew that this limited view of government was not exactly popular in the modern age. We have grown accustomed to unlimited government. No matter what our problem, we think government can—and should—supply the solution.

Having lived through Europe's flirtations with both Communism and Fascism, Lewis well understood the lure of the omnicompetent state. Confronted by the sheer volume of human misery—war in Bosnia, famine in Africa, homelessness and gang violence here in America—we almost naturally look for an earthly savior; and sometimes we don't much care what we have to give up to get one. Whatever this desire for earthly salvation is, it is not new.

"In the ancient world," observed Lewis, "individuals… sold themselves as slaves, in

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[13] C.S. Lewis, "Meditation on the Third Commandment," in *God in the Dock*, p. 198.
[14] Ibid., pp. 198-199.

order to eat. So in society. Here is a witch-doctor who can save us from the sorcerers—a war-lord who can save us from the barbarians—a Church that can save us from Hell. Give them what they ask, give ourselves to them bound and blindfold, if only they will! Perhaps the terrible bargain will be made again. We cannot blame men for making it. We can hardly wish them not to. Yet we can hardly bear that they should."[15]

The problem with making unlimited government our savior, according to Lewis, is that it undermines human dignity, and it ignores human depravity. It undermines human dignity because it doesn't take seriously the connection between freedom and human excellence. Government can make people behave, but ultimately it cannot make them good. That is because virtue presupposes free choice. The society where all good acts are compelled is a society where no act can be virtuous. It is a society without Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, or George Washington. It is a society where individual initiative and individual heroism are superfluous. In the final analysis, it is a society that is not, strictly speaking, human at all—it is a society of robots.

Lewis granted that the freedom required for virtue to flourish also "makes evil possible." But this is the price that must be paid, he said, for "any love or goodness or joy worth having."[16]

If unlimited government undermines the dignity of human nature, it likewise fails to come to grips with human depravity. To be blunt, it doesn't recognize that a government of unlimited scope invites a government of unlimited oppression. In the words of Lewis: "Mankind is so fallen, that no man can be trusted with unchecked power over his fellows. Aristotle said that some people were only fit to be slaves. I do not contradict him. But I reject slavery because I see no men fit to be masters."[17]

So how is all of this relevant to those of us in America? Our government is limited,

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15 C.S. Lewis, "Is Progress Possible? Willing Slaves of the Welfare State," in *God in the Dock*, p. 316.
16 *Mere Christianity*, p. 52.
17 C.S. Lewis, "Equality," in *Present Concerns*, p. 17.

isn't it? Or is it? Lewis believed that the modern welfare state of the kind found in western democracies skirted dangerously close to unlimited government.

In an essay for *The Observer* in 1958, Lewis wrote: "The modern State exists not to protect our rights, but to do us good or make us good—anyway, to do something to us or to make us something. Hence the new name 'leaders' for those who were once 'rulers.' We are less their subjects than their wards, pupils, or domestic animals. There is nothing left of which we can say to them, 'Mind your own business.' Our whole lives *are* their business."[18]

Worse was yet to come, predicted Lewis. He thought that the welfare state was apt to become even more intrusive as government planners allied themselves with the tools of modern social science. What Lewis feared above all was that the welfare state would evolve into a kind of technocracy—that is, government by those who claim they know what's best for society because of their technical or scientific expertise.

In the modern age, said Lewis, those in charge "must more and more base [their] claim to plan us on [their] claim to knowledge." As a result, politicians will "increasingly rely on the advice of scientists, till in the end the politicians proper become merely the scientists' puppets."[19]

Lewis's painted a grim portrait of this kind of despotism in *That Hideous Strength.* There the spirit of modern social science becomes incarnate in something called the National Institute for Coordinated Experiments—NICE, for short. Of course, there is nothing nice about NICE; its social scientists are exactly the type of technocrats that Lewis feared. In the name of science and humanity, they claimed the right to remake society without bothering to obtain society's consent—let alone the consent of the individuals involved.

While we may be a long way off from the nightmare vision depicted by Lewis in *That Hideous Strength,* we certainly should be able to understand his point. For public policy decisions in our country are increasingly made by precisely the type of unelected experts that

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[18] "Willing Slaves of the Welfare State," p. 314.
[19] Ibid.

Lewis talked about. During the past three decades our legislators have transferred much of their authority to a vast array of independent regulatory agencies staffed by unelected experts who are largely unaccountable to average citizens. Environmental policy is a good example. Decisions about how—and whether—to save certain endangered species are made not by elected officials, but by government biologists and bureaucrats. Decisions about whether we can have fires in our fireplaces are made not by elected officials but by professional bureaucrats specializing in air quality. Now some of these decisions we may well applaud; some we may not. But the fact remains that we the citizens—and those we elect—have very little to say in the matter.

But, you may ask, what's wrong with that? Surely it's better for experts to make decisions about these things than the average voter or politician. After all, don't today's increasingly complicated problems demand that we hand over the reins of power to the experts?

Lewis didn't think so. He didn't dispute that technocrats have plenty of knowledge; this knowledge may even be necessary for good public policy. But it is not sufficient. Political problems are preeminently moral problems, according to Lewis, and technocrats are not equipped to function as moralists. "I dread specialists in power," he said, "because they are specialists speaking outside their special subjects. Let scientists tell us about sciences. But government involves questions about the good for man, and justice, and what things are worth having at what price; and on these a scientific training gives a man's opinion no added value."[20]

As Americans again hear the siren song of a federal government that offers to fulfill all their hopes and solve all their problems, these words are worth pondering. So are Lewis's other observations about government and politics.

Though he lived in an era different from our own, Lewis offered insights into public

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[20] Ibid., p. 315.

life that remain acutely pertinent. His defense of natural law speaks to a generation yearning for a stable basis for public morality. His advocacy of prudence is a warning to ideologues from both the right and the left to lower their extravagent political claims. And his critique of the welfare state supplies a context for the renewed debate in America and elsewhere over the nature and extent of government.

By focusing on the permanent in the political, Lewis's writings on politics continue to resonate with prophetic power for our own generation.