

ARTICLES

The Christian Humanism of C. S. Lewis's *Abolition of Man*

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This article uses a particular cultural-historical lens—Christian humanism—for reading C. S. Lewis's three-part work *The Abolition of Man*. The argument (1) traces Christian humanism from its patristic roots to its modern resurgence; (2) outlines key themes of Christian humanism, acknowledging the breadth of manifestations and contested elements hidden in that term; (3) outlines Lewis's Christian humanism; and (4) suggests elements of *The Abolition of Man* that indicate Lewis's Christian humanism.

Prelude

As Alan Jacobs argues in *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis*, C. S. Lewis was part of a movement of postwar European public intellectuals—including W. H. Auden, T. S. Eliot, Jacques Maritain, Simone Weil, Mortimer Adler, and others—who were trying to work out how to reweave the moral fabric of wartime and postwar Europe. As these thinkers faced the *antihumanist* roots and fruits of their age's catastrophic ideologies, they turned to the traditional Christian humanism of the West to recover a true understanding of human nature and flourishing. Though we will further define that humanism in what follows, its core characteristic is an anthropology forged on the anvil of the *imago Dei* with the hammer of the incarnation.

As scholar of Christian humanism Jens Zimmermann has pointed out, the Christian humanist impulse has always had a strong tendency to reemerge during times of wrenching cultural change; emblematic of this is the crisis in religious authority of the Renaissance era—the period first labeled as “humanist”—that led eventually to the Protestant Reformation. In Lewis's time, the title of Maritain's *Twilight of Civilization* (1943) speaks to this sense of cultural crisis.

Given this association we may wish to ask, as we explore Lewis as a humanist with special reference to his 1943 book *The Abolition of Man*, “Are we again today in such a crisis time, which once more makes urgent the reconsideration of Christian humanism's claims?” Certainly many would say that we *are* in such a time. And ideas and language from Christian humanism *are* demonstrably resurging in the cultural conversation.¹

¹ You can see this resurgence in Google's Ngram Viewer's graph of English-language usage of the phrase *Christian humanism* from 1800 through 2019. The viewer allows researchers to track the rise and fall of terms and phrases year by year through data derived from Google's vast collection of scanned English-language texts: <https://bit.ly/3T9Zult>. Note the peak in the turbulent early 1960s and the slow rise since the late 1970s.

It is worth adding (and we will look at this more closely later) that *Abolition's* central concern about *education* has also been characteristic of the long tradition of Christian humanism, which in its earliest years absorbed the Roman emphasis on education as character formation for citizenship. After medieval scholasticism's centuries of pansophic aspiration, Renaissance humanism would revive this characteristic focus of the Christianized Roman tradition. And we can see in *The Abolition of Man* this humanist theme of *paideia* arising once again. In *Abolition*, Lewis argues for character formation—construed as the training of the affections to the *Tao* (Lewis's term for the moral law universally understood by humans, what has often been called the natural law)—as a primary function of education. And he portrays an eclipse of that educational function as the chief cause of postwar Europe's deepening cultural crisis. In today's America, many share this analysis of eclipse, as the school choice and homeschool booms attest.

The long tradition of Christian humanism is also now proving timely once again for the healthy, noncombative style of political engagement engendered by its robust anthropology and commitment to education for citizenship. Working from these foundations, Christian humanists have historically eschewed idolatrous attachment either to the purely naturalistic, utopian solutions of partisan politics or to theocratic rule, rather hewing to a middle way between them. In short, Christian humanism provides “important religious roots for education, tolerance, fair economic practices, philanthropy, and humane politics” (Zimmermann 2017, 12, citing Oser 2007)²—civic qualities whose exercise is today, in the words of Shakespeare's Hamlet, “devoutly to be wished”!

Related to this civic equanimity and fruitfulness is the fact that given the tradition's long engagement with truth wherever it may be found—Greek philosophy, Roman civic forms, the many religious and secular permutations of the virtues or “the *Tao*” per Lewis—Christian humanism has always, while remaining anchored in that faith's characteristic doctrines, been willing to make common cause with the wisdom resident in non-Christian cultures and thinkers. I will argue that the nontheistic framing of *Abolition*, accessible to all readers, is thus one marker of that text's Christian humanism. First, then, I will give a definition of Christian humanism in dialogue with both Alan Jacobs and Jens Zimmermann. Second, I will sketch some further reasons why we can class Lewis as a Christian humanist. And third and finally, I will examine some parts of Lewis's 1943 short book *The Abolition of Man* to see how Lewis is operating in it as a humanist.

2 One political theologian who is currently exploring these facets of Christian humanism is Luke Bretherton at Duke University; see, for example, Brooks and Bretherton (2022).

Lewis's Humanism: Older and Deeper

The terms *humanist* and *Christian humanist* are contested. The first term, *humanist*, has been coopted (at least in America) by secularists fighting against religion in general and Christianity in particular, and then, around the 1980s, by neofundamentalist culture warriors to damn those same secularists.

Though the phrase *Christian humanism* emerges into English writing on both sides of the Atlantic during the twentieth century and continues to cement itself in English usage into the twenty-first, I will argue, following Zimmermann, that the tradition of Christian humanism draws from much older roots, not only the Renaissance-era *studia humanitatis ac litteratum*, “humane and literary studies,” but also the much earlier patristic period, with its Christianization of classical learning (Jacobs 2018, 37).

Jacobs's definition of Christian humanism, while insightful and accurate as far as it goes, dwells largely on its literary nature and method (its *habitus* of “seeking wisdom in stories”).³ This is not surprising, for two reasons: First, Jacobs is a scholar of literature who has previously written of C. S. Lewis as *The Narnian* (Jacobs 2005). And second, following Jacques Maritain and the neo-Thomists, Jacobs takes the Renaissance phase of Christian humanism as its determinative origin, at least as far as his wartime figures are concerned—and many of the Renaissance authors famously looked to literature, especially ancient literature, as a primary aid in their moral crusade. Writes Jacobs, “Each of the figures we study here works within a nexus of ideas first generated in the early modern period, and then reconfigured in the nineteenth century” (2018, 37). It would be surprising, however, if this genealogy were true of Lewis's Christian humanism, because it is not true of Lewis generally (except for his fascination with certain Romantic authors of the nineteenth century). His intellectual formation came largely, instead, from his prolific reading in the “long middle ages”—from its classical and patristic roots to the still largely Christian literary world of sixteenth-century English-language authors. He was no Renaissance humanist (for Jacobs makes it clear that's what he means by “first generated in the early modern period”), nor did he owe much to them.

In particular, we can hardly say that Lewis's deep commitment to formative storytelling makes him a humanist in the Renaissance sense (though again, perhaps at least partially in a derivative Victorian Romantic sense), which is Jacobs's argument about the group of authors he treats in his book. For one thing, the Renaissance authors were notoriously antischolastic. But when we find Lewis talking about actual Renaissance humanists in his weightiest tome about literature, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* in the Oxford History of English Literature (Lewis 1954), it is not to laud

³ “The *umanistas* [of the Renaissance] were doing something unprecedented in keying the search for wisdom—including specifically Christian wisdom—to the study of literature. This was, to put the point mildly, not in keeping with the dialectical approach of the medieval scholastic tradition, which they scorned” (Jacobs 2018, 37).

their loyalty to stories old and new (which loyalty they certainly did have, to a fault!) but rather to mock them for their failure to engage the precise and powerful theological ideas of the medieval schoolmen they so disdained—such that, in Lewis's rather heated opinion, what they ended up teaching was less a “new learning” than a “new ignorance.” The heart of Lewis's critique of the Renaissance humanists was that in putting forward their own “modern” moral and literary agendas, the humanists caricatured medieval scholastics as hairsplitters who used atrocious Latin to argue obscure and irrelevant theological minutiae.

Were these fair characterizations of the scholastics and their philosophical arguments? Anything but. As Lewis says, “These are not the terms in which a new philosophy attacks an old one: they are, unmistakably, the terms in which at all times the merely literary man . . . attacks philosophy itself. No humanist is now remembered as a philosopher. They jeer and do not refute [a familiar syndrome today!]. The schoolman [that is, the medieval scholastic] advanced, and supported, propositions about things: the humanist replied that his words were inelegant.” In conclusion, Lewis argues, “The war between the humanists and the schoolmen was not a war between ideas: it was, on the humanists' side, a war against ideas. It is a manifestation of the humanistic tendency to make eloquence the sole test of learning” (Lewis 1954, 29–31; see also Armstrong 2016, 75). So we need a broader and temporally deeper description of a Christian humanist if we are to class Lewis as such.

And I am not cherry-picking here. Lewis's defense of the scholastics against the humanists in the literature volume just cited was echoed, too, in his other treatments of medieval culture more generally. For example, in his *Discarded Image*, Lewis argued that the most characteristic genre that medieval people loved to write and read was not, against some unschooled modern opinion, the fictional “romance”—as in the Arthurian tales. Rather, it was the systematic treatment of this or that area of human knowledge—so that even in the epic poem of Dante, we find that scholastic fascination with system and knowledge again and again cropping up even in the midst of the didactic tale-telling (Lewis 1964).

Or take his address upon being installed in the Chair of Medieval Literature at Cambridge in 1954, which he titled *De Descriptione Temporum*. There Lewis, by way of defending medieval people from the now tired and debunked charges of mass ignorance, general cruelty, and the like, told a brief and illuminating story on a former pupil who had described a sixteenth-century author as being among the first to clamber out of the great dark sea of medieval romance and confusion. This just goes to show you, Lewis concluded, the invincibility of these stereotypes, since “nearly all the medieval texts which the syllabus had required [that pupil] to study had in reality led him into formal gardens where

every passion was subdued to a ceremonial and every problem of conduct was dovetailed into a complex and rigid moral theology”—a *scholastic* moral theology, he could have added (Lewis 1969, 2).

Again, if we cast Lewis and the rest of the wartime humanists as modern renaissance men and women, then we miss the at times systematic and scholastic nature of his, and quite likely also their, humanism rather badly. I am not saying, by the way, that Jacobs does this entirely. He recognizes in Maritain the stern philosophical backbone evident (for example) in that neo-Thomist author's typical characterization of Aquinas as *the* unsurpassable thinker for that dark modern time. Among the Christian humanists of scholastic bent who were soon to follow we could number, too, Joseph Ratzinger—Pope Benedict XVI of blessed memory—widely recognized as one of the leading Christian humanist thinkers of our time, whom no one would accuse of a Renaissance-like antiphilosophical romanticism. Again, we need a broader and older understanding of Christian humanism to see the genius (which I mean in the older sense of “guiding spirit”) of that tradition and of those in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries who have espoused it. Hence my affinity for Jens Zimmermann's broader and older definition of Christian humanism.⁴

I am now going to offer that deeper definition. In contrast to Jacobs, I am a church historian, and I see both Christian humanism and Lewis through that lens (though I do not pretend to be in Jacobs's league as a Lewis scholar). And on the matter of this tradition's origins, I go instead with Zimmermann, first, in seeing Christian humanism's clear groundings in a much older tradition—both patristic and in fact also classical—long before the term *humanist* gained currency, though Zimmermann and I both see ample support for using the term to describe those earlier phases.

Second, I go with Zimmermann in recognizing, among those earlier phases, a *medieval scholastic* form of Christian humanism, with which the Renaissance form quarreled on many levels. And third, I join Zimmermann in taking this whole long tradition's most determinative qualities to be formed not primarily by academic approaches to literature (for example), but rather, by *theological* ideas—in particular by the central doctrines of human creation in the *imago Dei* and divine visitation in the incarnation, as not only a theophany but also what we might call an “anthropophany”—an event and a person that show us true humanity.

My argument will be that Lewis was even more a humanist in this fuller sense of the term than in Jacobs's narrower sense—in fact, that he is almost the epitome of a modern humanist in the older tradition—and that while we can

⁴ Zimmermann works out that definition and that history most systematically in his *Incarnational Humanism* (2012a) as well as *Humanism and Religion* (2012b). He also summarized the story in his edited volume *Re-Envisioning Christian Humanism* (2017).

see this in many of his writings, *Abolition* puts Lewis's Christian humanism on display in a particularly striking way. This may be considered ironic, as the essay does not make its argument in explicitly Christian or even theistic terms.

Periods of Christian Humanism

So, briefly, and drawing from Zimmermann (2012a, 2017), though not doing him justice, here are the key periods of Christian humanism and a highly compressed suggestion of what each contributed to this tradition.

First, we have the undeniable *classical* origins, in a concern for human *telos*, human flourishing, and human virtues. The focus in this pagan tradition was on character and education for citizenship. Its characteristic questions were, What is human excellence? and What is the good life and how do we achieve it? In describing this phase, Zimmermann starts with Plato and Aristotle, then spends a lot of time with Cicero.

Second, there is the determinative *patristic* phase, which worked out a theological anthropology, in a move Robert Louis Wilken calls “the Christianization of Hellenism rather than the Hellenization of Christianity” (Wilken 2003, xvi–xvii), answering the great human questions of the classical tradition from the pages of Scripture and the categories of incarnation and soteriology: How does God prepare us for flourishing? Irenaeus and Athanasius are central here, as is *theosis*, the notion that we are enabled through Christ both to see true humanity in the image of God, and to—with increasing degrees of perfection—recover that image in ourselves.

Third, the *medieval* phase comprises two very different versions of humanism: the scholastic, which celebrated reason and orderliness in God, in humanity, and in the world; and the Renaissance, which threw out the scholastic project nearly wholesale and sought wisdom for living in literature and the great classical texts, reviving as it did so the classical emphasis on education as moral formation.

This two-part medieval phase hybridized the patristic theological anthropology with a newly acute understanding of the world as rich with resources that we are to improve with creativity and rationality in order to foster human flourishing. The resulting leaps forward in many sectors of human culture-creating activity—higher education, scientific exploration, the arts, and healthcare being just four—are too often forgotten today.⁵

⁵ Though Rodney Stark (2006) remembered them in his *Victory of Reason*. And historians of science, following in the wake of Edward Grant (1996, 2010), David C. Lindberg (1992), and others, now generally also recognize (if sometimes grudgingly) the medieval origins of modern science.

To sum up this key middle phase of Christian humanism, well-described in certain works by the late scholar of the medieval period Sir Richard William Southern (1995, 1970), the medieval thinkers asked, How can we use human reason, tradition, and also—in a Renaissance development—story to help us foster flourishing in response to God?

Fourth, the *early modern* phase represented a continuation of characteristic Renaissance concerns, while—among the Protestant Reformers at least—applying the Renaissance cry “*ad fontes*” (to the sources!) more to the scriptural and patristic humanist taproots than to classical thought, and expanding concern for the good life in a social and political direction.

In the period of the Reformations and after, questions around the common good received special attention—vocation, the family, the *polis*, the markets. This phase’s characteristic question was, In light of a biblical understanding of our humanity, what values will guide our life together? So emerged Luther’s doctrine of vocation, Calvin’s Geneva, and eventually the grand—and doomed—Puritan socio-religio-political experiment at Massachusetts Bay.

Then, fifth came the *antihumanisms* of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the fruits of the Enlightenment’s case against tradition and of streams of secularizing thought. In the wake of Marx, Darwin, and Nietzsche, modern Western thinkers found themselves asking, What are humans without God? This theme later intensified in *postmodern* versions of antihumanism, which denied any story of humanity that would provide us with a *telos*—and indeed denied all possible metanarratives.

I take Eliot, Maritain, and the other *dramatis personae* of Jacobs’s tale, including Lewis, to have been writing in a *sixth phase*—the first in which the phrase *Christian humanism* became widespread—the period of the two world wars and the years immediately after. (And we may ask, Are we perhaps now in a *seventh phase* of Christian humanism?)

Core Elements of the Tradition

Before turning to Lewis, let’s quickly identify the central elements of this tradition. I will start with two introductory arguments, then unpack them.

First, the term *Christian humanism* captures the greater Christian tradition’s view of God’s saving relation to humanity as established in the incarnation. *God became human so that humanity will be restored to its glorious destiny of Godlikeness through union with Christ.* From the early church onward, Christian humanists have promoted an integral view of the human being based on the incarnation: the highest spiritual aspiration of communion with God in loving freedom is never separated from careful attention to our embodied, enculturated existence and our responsibility for creation as those reflecting Christ’s image.

Second, based on this interpretation of the gospel, Christian humanism built an important foundation of virtues and values still affirmed in the secular West—and I use the term *secular* here in Charles Taylor's meaning: to describe a social situation in which belief in God, or a higher order, is not simply absent or rejected, but is also not taken-for-granted (Taylor 2007). That is, a transcendent frame exists as one out of a number of possible ways to understand the world and our place within it. Therefore, Christian humanism still offers both a preparation for shalom-promoting action within all spheres of work and public engagement and a potential pathway to self-understanding for people living in modern societies.

More specifically, Christian humanism provides a direct, biblical, and orthodox affirmation of cultural activity; that is, it grounds its understandings of the full range of human culture-creating activity in Scripture and tradition. It does this, first, through a broad and high view of humans, and second, through a broad and high understanding of the created (and social) order.

Christian Humanism's View of Humanity

These claims warrant a few points of elaboration. First, Christian humanism affirms human beings as socially embedded spirit-body beings who are God-loved, eternal bearers of the image of the creator God and are therefore, first, creative workers at our core; second, of very high dignity and even “glory” (see Lewis 2001b); and third, provided with the necessities for *full, spiritual-material-social* flourishing (John 10:10's resonant phrase “abundant life”⁶) by God himself—a flourishing traditionally understood as not inconsistent with elements of want and suffering (as, for example, Paul's words in Philippians 4:11–12 about learning to be “content in all things”).

Christian humanism therefore pushes back against the super-spiritualizing currents in modern American evangelical Christianity that by their nature diminish the value of all activities in the world that are not explicitly “spiritual.” Put positively, it has seen the incarnation of Christ as a man in a specific community and cultural setting, and his healing, feeding, and teaching activities, as indications of the dignity of our embodied lives and thus our cultural lives, too, in which we meet each other's (and our own) vital, sensory, aesthetic, and social needs through a wide spectrum of vocational, culture-creating activity.

⁶ For fuller arguments to this effect from New Testament scholars, see Pennington (2018) and Jipp (2023). From theologians, see Volf and Croasmun (2019). Ongoing conversations in this vein may be found in the pages of the new journal *Faith & Flourishing* (<https://karamfellowship.org/faith-flourishing-journal/>). See, e.g., Waters (2022).

By the same token, Christian humanism pushes back against a gospel that is narrowly spiritual, replacing the old language of “souls to be saved” with a more faithful and world-engaging language of *Christ coming to inaugurate a new humanity and to show what it means to be human in all dimensions of our being*.

Also, by the same token, Christian humanism pushes back against versions of Christian eschatology that diminish or ignore the importance of the new creation, the resurrection of the body (which, Lewis once told a correspondent, is a doctrine woefully “soft pedalled” in the modern era),⁷ the book of Revelation’s images of the city, and the mysterious continuity between our current culture-creating activity and the shape of that new creation.

But finally, Christian humanism does not purvey a prosperity-gospel type of overrealized eschatology; it recognizes the continued reality of human fallenness and the futility—and indeed idolatry—of all human utopian schemes (or, the provisional and contingent nature of human cultural action). This Lewis certainly did as well.

Christian Humanism’s View of the Created Order

Christian humanism also joins to that high view of humanity an understanding of the created order as *by definition* intelligible, stable, and full of resources that support human flourishing—given its origin in a rational, constant, and loving God.⁸ Christian humanists have understood this God-created orderliness of the world as a *moral* as well as a rational order. The Christian humanist view of creation thus rejects a merely distant, deistic relationship between God and the created order; Christian humanism’s participatory ontology sees God as sacramentally present throughout the world; there is in other words no sacred-secular divide.

As I have suggested, Christian humanism therefore has also always, following the *Logos* Christology of Justin Martyr and the apologists who followed him, valued all truths and resources that support human flourishing as God-given and good, which provides a basis for a high valuation (by Christians working in the world) of *non-Christian knowledge sources*. We can see Lewis operating in that Christian humanist mode in the appendix of *The Abolition of Man*: “Illustrations of the *Tao*.”

We have seen that Christian humanism has fostered a kind of classically sourced education (*paideia*) aimed at inculcating personal and civic moral virtues that are grounded both in Christian Scripture and tradition and in the best wisdom of the world. To be more specific about the Christian content of that civic

⁷ See Lewis (1967, 110): “But these particular guesses arise in me, I trust, from taking seriously the resurrection of the body: a doctrine which now-a-days is v. soft pedalled by nearly all the faithful—to our great impoverishment.”

⁸ See, e.g., Grant (1996, 2010) and Harrison (2001) on the Christian impetus of science.

emphasis, Christian humanism sets aside “mere inner piety or adherence to a belief system,” affirming instead “the transformation of body and soul into true humanity” as “the ultimate [goal] of the Christian life and thus also of Christian civic responsibility as reflected in all public life” (Zimmermann 2017, 12).

Most importantly, Christian humanists have insisted on the irreducible value of each human being as the basis for civic life. Whether against totalitarian regimes, consumerist individualism, or other dehumanizing constructs, Christian humanists have promoted a biblical human dignity and equality as the only proper basis for a just and unified society.

Christian humanist ideas that humankind shares the image of God, and that this image includes God’s creative agency and his powerful pro-flourishing work in the creation and sustaining of the world, have led Christians throughout history to do creative, pro-flourishing work in all culture-making arenas, including as founders or refounders of major modern sectors of work, especially in the West: health care, the university, science and technology, law, the arts, commerce; in each of these, marks of those Christian humanist origins still linger.

Finally, fundamental Christian humanist commitments are still affirmed in secularized cultural sectors and work settings, even though these are now often called “Enlightenment values” and assumed to have secular roots. These values include ideals of “a common humanity, universal reason, freedom, personhood, human rights, human emancipation and progress” (Zimmermann 2017, 6). Today, in secularized form, such ideals support human agency, freedom, and equality of opportunity within marketplace and other cultural settings—and, owing to these values’ Christian origin, they can be strongly affirmed and perhaps even more deeply understood by Christians than by secularists.

Lewis as a Christian Humanist

Now, in light of this brief history and account of the essential marks of Christian humanism, let’s turn to Lewis and his relationship to this tradition.

Classicism

Lewis was a classicist before he became a Christian,⁹ and like the Christian humanists of every age, he never stopped pursuing “philosophy as a way of life,”¹⁰ informed first by Scripture and tradition, but second by truth wherever he found it—and he continued to find it in Plato, Aristotle, and their heirs.

⁹ This owed much to Lewis’s early training under an Irish tutor, William Kirkpatrick. See, e.g., Lewis (1955, ch. 9, “The Great Knock”).

¹⁰ See Barkman (2009) for an exhaustive account of Lewis’s philosophical journey.

Centrality of the Incarnation

Lewis was a medievalist, and like the medieval Christian humanists, he followed the church fathers in making the incarnation central to his understanding of humanity and human culture. Just two illustrations of this: First, while writing an introduction to his friend Sister Penelope Lawson's English translation of Athanasius's *On the Incarnation* (Lewis [1944] 1993), Lewis completely absorbed a Greek copy of that work, annotating every page.¹¹ Second, in the radio talks that became *Mere Christianity*, he shows his debt to patristic humanism in its portrayal of the incarnation, of Christ as true humanity, and of our salvation in the mold of the patristic teaching of *theosis*, as I will argue.

High View of Humanity

Following on the previous point, Lewis, like his medieval and patristic sources, understood that by taking on human nature, God raised the dignity of what it means to be human. He thus believed with all Christian humanists that to be a Christian is to live a more fully human life and indeed to become more fully ourselves in our individual, *particular* humanity.

We see his high regard for all human beings throughout his life and writings. This manifested particularly in his habit of giving away money to all who asked, and to many whose need came to his attention. Owen Barfield, who was Lewis's trustee as well as his friend, observed how Lewis followed this principle in his own life: "He gave two-thirds of his income away altogether and would have bound himself to give the whole of it away if I had let him. . . . There were substantial donations to charitable institutions, but what he really liked was to find someone through a personal connection or hearsay whose wants might be alleviated. He was always grateful to me for suggesting any lame dog whom my profession [as a lawyer] had brought to my notice" (Barfield 2011, 14). It is easy to see behind this practice the Christian humanist anthropology of his "Weight of Glory" sermon, with its insistence, "you have never met a mere mortal" (Lewis 2001b, 46). He thus argued, "Giving to the poor is an essential part of Christian morality. I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I'm afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, and amusement, is up to the standard common of those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little" (Lewis 2001a, 86). With the fundamental dignity and equality of all people as created in the *imago Dei* seemingly in mind, Lewis did not worry about wasting his money on "undeserving types." Instead, he reflects, "It will not bother me in the hour of death to reflect that I have been 'had for a sucker' by any number of impostors; but it would be a torment to know that one had refused even one person in need. After all, the parable of the sheep and goats makes our duty perfectly plain, doesn't it?" (Lewis 1967, 114).

11 This copy is in the archives of the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill.

As with all Christian humanists, Lewis's high anthropology is anchored in Scripture's portrayal of God's *own* high view of humanity—as he gave us his image, shared our nature in the incarnation, and redeems and resurrects us. In other words, Lewis held, as Zimmermann puts it, a “theo-anthropocentric” view (Zimmermann 2017, 5–6).

Theosis

We should also see how this incarnational understanding of humanity colored Lewis's understanding of Christian salvation and the gospel (as it had for the old incarnational humanists). In short, Lewis understood and taught the patristic reading of salvation as *theosis*, which was the Christian humanist soteriology par excellence—that is, the view of salvation as the graced recovery by humans of our image-bearing nature, coming closer and closer to the likeness of Christ, who is the epitome of that nature. In *Mere Christianity*, he said we become “little Christs” who are like tin soldiers brought to life (Lewis 2001a, pt. 4, ch. 5), and throughout his writings he illustrated this understanding with a variety of analogies: God as deep-sea diver plunging down to bring us up,¹² dancers in a divine dance led by the Incarnate One,¹³ and statues crafted by a sculptor and then brought to life by him.¹⁴ Each of these images evoke the old idea—rooted in Athanasius's thought and dominant in the East but shared as well by Augustine and the Western tradition—of salvation as *theosis*, usually translated in English as “deification” or “divinization.”

Ethical Eudaemonism

Now we come to the question of how these precious humans are to flourish. And on this question, like the classical thinkers and the older Christian humanists—from Boethius to Erasmus—Lewis was an *ethical eudaemonist*. That is, first, when asking about the *telos* and fulfillment of human life, he started where those earlier thinkers always started: with questions about the sources of human happiness (*eudaemonia*). Think of the title of his short religious memoir, *Surprised by Joy*, or his insistence in the “Weight of Glory” sermon that, given the scriptural language of reward and enjoyment, God is less likely to accuse us of desiring too much, and more of desiring too little. But second, also, Lewis's eudaemonism, like the classical and old Christian

¹² Like the diver working on a salvage project, Christ goes down into his own creation “in order to bring the whole ruined world up with him to new life.” See Fiddes (2010, 98; citing Lewis 1960, 115).

¹³ “The partner who bows to Man in one movement of the dance receives Man's reverences in another. To be high or central means to abdicate continually: to be low means to be raised: all good masters are servants: God washes the feet of Men.” See Fiddes (2010, 94; citing Lewis 1960, 128). Fiddes comments, “Lewis's fundamental insight is that, by entering the dance or drama of the Trinity, we truly become sons and daughters of God; *we truly become persons*” (2010, 94, emphasis added).

¹⁴ What happens to us in that process is akin to what happens to the creatures who were turned to stone in the White Witch's courtyard: though we now may be only static pictures of God, made in his “sculptor's shop,” “some of us . . . some day [are] going to come to life” under the vivifying power of the breath of the dying-and-rising Aslan. See Armstrong (2016, 198; from Fiddes 2010, 94; citing Lewis 2001a, 136).

versions, was always also *ethical*—it turned quickly, in an Aristotelian mode, to the virtues (both graced and practiced) as central to the happiness we may hope to experience in our lives with God and neighbor.

Virtue and Culture

The process of becoming more and more like the full humanity epitomized by Christ was essential for Christian humanism as it was for Lewis. Both saw our arts, sciences, cultural activities, and personal virtues and vices contributing to heaven or hell on earth, as well as to our progress in the Christian life. In his essay “Christianity and Culture,” Lewis reflects, “Culture is a storehouse of the best (sub-Christian) values. These values are in themselves of the soul, not the spirit. But God created the soul. Its values may be expected, therefore, to contain some reflection or antepast [i.e., foretaste] of the spiritual values” (Lewis 1940, 177). In this light, he came cautiously to the conclusion that the whole cornucopia of human culture-making and its related virtues is a divine directive—though of course in its various forms, and to various people, a particular cultural practice or product could be either helpful or harmful.

The Abolition of Man as Christian Humanist Text

How is this assessment of Lewis supported by a close reading of *The Abolition of Man*?

I find Lewis in *Abolition* to be writing well within his central vocational identity, as a conservator of past wisdom and tradition, a thinker who taps centuries of philosophy (his first love) and literature (his formal vocation) for that wisdom, explicitly seeking to recover the humanism of the “long Middle Ages”—from Plato to Jane Austen¹⁵—which, although it was for him grounded in Christian tradition, as it had long been for Europe, could also be expressed nontheistically.

In *Abolition* we see Lewis raising the specter of the complete loss of our common humanity (which in the West was overwhelmingly defined by the tradition of *Christian* humanism), and he suggests that if we are to regain that humanity, then we must do as the ancients did and train the imaginations and affections of our young people through education and culture in general.

First, I argue that *Abolition* is at its heart a Boethian work. In response to a question about which books “did most to shape [his] vocational attitude and [his] philosophy of life,” Lewis named (along with nine other books) Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*—easily a Christian humanist classic, and one of the most formative texts of the medieval era.¹⁶ How does the *Consolation* channel Christian humanism?

¹⁵ He identified “after Jane Austen” as the break with Old Western Christian humanist culture in his *De Descriptione Temporum* (Lewis 1969).

¹⁶ Lewis (1962, 719). For an analysis of the whole list of ten, see Werther and Werther (2015). On Lewis and *The Consolation*, see Armstrong (2015).

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (ca. AD 480–524) was (many scholars now agree) a Christian, but his allegory does not argue from Christian Scripture or doctrine, or even from a theistic position. Yet the *Consolation* clearly emerged from attention to the big themes of Christian humanism: What is humanity? What is our purpose? How are we to flourish (be truly happy)? How are we to live together? How can we become excellent people? Importantly, in treating these themes Boethius was content to draw from classical (pagan) philosophical sources rather than Christian sources. But he draws from those pagan sources at points where they most distinctively resonate with Christian understandings, indicating that he is working from the Christian-classical synthesis described by Zimmermann and Wilken (among others).

Second, of the key themes described in the secondary literature on Christian humanism,¹⁷ Lewis's thought and work in general, and *Abolition* in particular, is certainly marked at least by the following: (1) a concern for understanding human beings' *telos*, fundamental dignity, and equality (at the root, for example, of rule of law); (2) a concern for virtue and human excellence, adapted from the classical tradition, which includes within it a concern for the beauty-truth relationship in both seeing and attaining virtue (excellence, in Aristotle's formulation) and attention to the affective dimensions of virtue formation (again, *per* Aristotle); (3) a general concern for understanding and fostering the common good (through, for example, vocation, the family and its *oikonomia*, the *polis*, and the markets), which includes attention to our mutual social responsibility, to practical wisdom within all sectors of culture-making work, and to the programs of the politically powerful and their impact on ordinary people's flourishing; and (4) an aversion to utopianism.

So, Lewis shows his humanism in *Abolition* by his choice of subject matter. What are human beings? What kind of reality do we inhabit? And how are we to flourish in that reality? These are the humanist questions *par excellence*, and they animate this work.

For example, in the first section of the first chapter, "Men without Chests," Lewis says, "Gaius and Titius [the author of the elementary school textbook he attacks in that first section], while teaching him nothing about letters, have cut out of his soul, long before he is old enough to choose, the possibility of having certain experiences which thinkers of more authority than they have held to be generous, fruitful, and humane" (Lewis 1947, 9). This shows us not only Lewis's thematic humanist commitment, but also the fervency of his Christian humanist belief in the formative power of education. The passage is almost painful in its clarity about the *mal*forming power of a certain kind of education. It is as if we are reading the great humanist Thomas More bewailing

¹⁷ E.g., Zimmermann (2012a, 2012b, 2017), Jacobs (2018), Rowland (2021), Oser (2007), Franklin and Shaw (1991), and Shaw et al. ([1982] 2009).

the effects of a particularly bad schoolteacher on his beloved (and eventually very learned) daughters. And note his last qualifier of the “certain experiences” that the textbook writers have “cut out of [the schoolboy’s] soul”—he uses the term *humane*.

This short passage also shows us, because it is about education in “letters,” the powerful relationship in Lewis between literature and human formation in virtues (or vices!). In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that this relationship lay close to the center of Lewis’s vocational identity. I venture to say that in every book he wrote, fictional and nonfictional, including to some degree even his literary criticism, Lewis wrote *moral philosophy* with the intention to form his reader. In the opinion of some, including famously his friend J. R. R. Tolkien, this tendency hampered his storytelling *as* storytelling (Downing 2012).¹⁸ But in any case, Lewis’s belief that we may often best find and teach wisdom for living through stories certainly resonates with Jacobs’s historical portrayal of humanism.

In fact, the very first sentence of *Abolition* manifests Lewis’s characteristically Christian humanist concern for education as *paideia*—its deep and important work of shaping (as we now say) “the hearts and minds” of students. Lewis started his argument with these words: “I doubt whether we are sufficiently attentive to the importance of elementary text books” (Lewis 1947, 1).

This characteristic concern Lewis shared with others in his circle—none more strongly than his friend, fellow medievalist Dorothy L. Sayers, who once was known most widely as the author of a certain mystery series, but today has found a new and apparently lasting legacy as the author of the modern Christian classical educator’s bible, the programmatic essay “The Lost Tools of Learning” (Sayers 1948). Not coincidentally, this imaginative writer, theologian, and translator of medieval verse was also asked to write a book on postwar cultural reconstruction, which she did, titled *Begin Here* (Sayers 1942). In short, theirs was a time marked, in contrast to our own, by the cultural power the English world was still willing to give to its Christian humanist thinkers. And that willingness was itself a manifestation of a lingering Christian humanism that strongly marked the mission and self-understanding of the great English universities of medieval foundation—Oxford and Cambridge—the first of which trained Sayers, and in both of which, of course, Lewis served.¹⁹

18 “Tolkien . . . said that the Narnia stories simply ‘wouldn’t do,’ that they fell outside the range of his sympathies. He didn’t like Lewis’s pastiche of so many different traditions—Christian, classical, European fairy tales—and he found the stories too hastily-composed and too didactic” (Downing 2012).

19 Zimmermann (2021) writes powerfully of that originating humanist vision of the university. An excellent study of that lingering cultural power of Christianity in England, with specific reference to Lewis as a public intellectual, is Joeckel (2013).

One more illustration of Lewis's Christian humanism as manifested in *Abolition* is worth considering. He says, "In the *Tao* [natural law] itself, as long as we remain within it, we find the concrete reality in which to participate is to be truly human: the real common will and common reason of humanity, alive, and growing like a tree, and branching out, as the situation varies, into ever new beauties and dignities of application" (Lewis 1947, 74–75). In other words, when we live within the *Tao*, we are truly human. Outside of the *Tao*, we lose our humanity. The *Tao* is therefore necessary for any true humanism, and as a matter of historical fact, in the Christian tradition of humanism, the values of the moral law *as they describe humans individually and in our common humanity* have flowed historically and theologically (as I have claimed, following Zimmermann) from the fountainheads of the *imago Dei* and the incarnation.

A subtler manifestation of both Lewis's Christian humanism and his Christianity in general is the participatory ontology that dwells just below the surface in *Abolition*. We are not expressive individualists whose entire being is self-defined. We participate in a larger reality that of course (though he does not say it in *Abolition*) Lewis believed is created by and reflects the glory of God,²⁰ but which in any case is not created by us in the space between our ears. The objective moral law is part of that reality, and thus "fits" our being and promotes our flourishing, as one more facet of the world participating in God—the good, stable, rational, ordered world that God created for that very purpose, as Christian humanists had always argued.

Thus, Lewis's argument against the reduction and ultimately abolition of this larger humanity, objectively linked to creation and to God, with the moral law as one important facet of that linkage, is a defense of a capacious and (we might say as Christians) *sacramental* Christian humanist understanding of human nature. Lewis is in *Abolition* simply defending that anthropology with arguments from reason, very much as Anselm in his *Cur Deus Homo* defended and understood the atonement story without resorting to theological rationales, and as Boethius in his *Consolation of Philosophy* defended an ethical eudaemonism that is thoroughly consistent with Scripture in a dialectical way, without reference to Scripture. Thus have Christian humanists always been willing to do, from Boethius to Erasmus and beyond.

Again, Lewis is not making explicitly Christian arguments here. He is pointing to the water of the *Tao*, and not He who is the Spring from which the eternal, living water flows to us, making us ever more human. But one does not have to look hard to see that divine waterfall behind the sublime waterfall of *Abolition*'s famous opening illustration. The story Lewis is telling about humanity in his *Abolition* is fully a Christian humanist story, supported in the first place by the

20 On the long theological pedigree, forms, and entailments of participatory ontology, see Davison (2020) and Boersma (2011).

Genesis story of humanity's creation, placed in a garden of shalom-promoting resources and made in the creative, rational image of the creator God, and in the second place by the story of that same God taking on flesh and dwelling among us, working with his hands, feeding, counseling, healing, praying for, and teaching us as one of us.

Christian humanism had always read the story of the incarnation as Christ showing us once again the image of *true* humanity, even as he offers us through his death and resurrection the way to retrieve that image with increasing perfection in ourselves. That Lewis's soteriology owed much to the ancient Christian humanist framing of salvation as *theosis* is evident everywhere in his writings—nowhere more than in his *Mere Christianity*, with its imagery already noted.

As Athanasius had said—and again, Lewis knew Athanasius's thought well—"He became man so that we might become god," that is, that we might retrieve the image of God in us, which has been damaged in the fall. In *Abolition* he is fighting the mirror-image of *theosis*: a modern antihumanist story that turns this *theologoumenon* on its head, removes us from our participation in God (by denying that participation), casts us back to expressive individualist self-creation, and thereby removes us from our true selves—"abolishing us" as the kinds of being that God has made us. While in this work he defends not God but objective reality, that reality has always been understood by Christian humanists as participating in the ontologically prior reality of God.

In order to see Lewis explicitly engaging the concepts of Christ as the true human and our being remade into the *imago Dei*, we must turn to the *theosis* passages in *Mere Christianity* and his other works. But as we began by saying, the Christian humanist has always been willing to talk with non-Christian people on a shared playing field about the truths that grip them both. And the *Tao* is the biggest of those truths, since it defines us as human beings, whether we name the name of Christ or not.

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