

## **Redemption of Reason**

### Talking Points for the Second Lecture

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#### Lecture II. The Way Back: Thinking about a Possible Christian Response to the Plight of Reason today.

When I speak of “Christian” or “Christian tradition or knowledge” in what follows, I shall be referring to what C. S. Lewis calls “Mere Christianity,” the core beliefs of the main tradition of the Christian people throughout the ages. It is sufficient just to think of the cognitive content of the “Apostles’ Creed.” Failure to distinguish this central core from the many historical and accidental accretions to that tradition led the Christian institutions (Churches, but also of their colleges) of the late 1800’s and early 1900’s to irrational defenses of doctrines and practices that could not be rationally defended, leading to identification of religion with irrationality and to the deadly and false opposition of “faith” to reason. Religion became synonymous in many minds with blind dogmatism and blind adherence to authorities. “Faith,” it is jokingly said, “is what you believe even though you know it ain’t so.” Thus you will hear people say today that you can’t be a scientist and believe in God. When you supply the historical background you see why they might say that, though it remains a thoroughly ignorant statement.

Now, one standing outside the peculiar history referred to sees things very differently. Thus Charles Malik: “If the university today dominates the world, if Jesus Christ is who the church and the Bible proclaim him to be, and if we happen to believe that what the church and the Bible claim about Jesus Christ is the truth, then how can we fail, not only to raise the question of what Jesus Christ thinks of the university, but to face the equally urgent demand: What can be done?” (*A Christian Critique of the University*, p. 21)

I want us now to put ourselves as best we can in Malik’s position, outside the box and posture of current American religion and intellectual prejudices, and think that, as followers of Jesus Christ, we have something vital to say and to be in the University setting with reference to intellect. Try to imagine, for a moment, that all we say about Jesus is true and that we know it. Think the thought that he brings ultimate knowledge of truth and goodness, and that we see the University as a human system struggling to provide the knowledge necessary to life having set aside what he brought and brings. If we were to do that, what are some of the things we might do as honest and open researchers into the subject matters of our fields and across disciplinary lines?

One of the things we must do is develop our own understanding what truth is and how it relates to life. Truth itself—what truth is—is a simple thing, which small children easily understand. A statement or belief is true if what it is about is as that statement or belief says it is. “Snow is white” is true if and only if snow is white. And so on. Truth is completely unyielding to opinion or desire. “True for me” never makes any belief true.

It's just another way of saying you believe something, or say something. But then of course many beliefs are false. Again, "absolute" truth is not a kind of truth, but a way of talking about how someone believes or holds to something. All truth is absolute in the sense that it does not depend upon anyone's acceptance. Truth is not a social construction, though views often are: false views as well as true ones. You are not a dogmatist or a Nazi if you understand truth in this way. The recovery of truth in this clear and traditional sense is indispensable for the redemption of reason. Only so can one find a point of reference outside the "social ferment," as Horkheimer describes "Critical Theory," to serve as a guiding star for thought in its appointed function, which is, precisely, discovery of truth. The curious feature of so much "research" is that it goes hand in hand with the assumption that there is no truth to discover. What, then? Foucault rightly says, in that case, that "force" rules the intellect. No redemption possible.

Of course the particular truths which Jesus Christ brings into the world then have, at last, a field of play in open and fair competition with alternative claims to truth. But we must distinguish truth itself from truths of whatever kind, which, unlike truth itself, often are very complicated and recondite.

Having done this we clarify in our minds and for others what knowledge is. I suggest: We know any given thing if we are able to represent it as it is on an appropriate basis of thought and experience—not to exclude authority. Authority is indispensable, and it is good so long as it is utterly open and fearless in the face of any question, fair or unfair. All that religion requires of philosophy, L. T. Hobhouse once said, is "a fair field and no quarter given." Yes, especially for follows of Christ.

Knowledge, of course, requires truth. You cannot know what is not true. And you cannot know that for which you have no "basis." You should also note that to know you do not have to know that you know. (An old Sophistry.) The description of knowledge stated above is one that fits the cases we commonly distinguish in ordinary life, between those who do know something and those who don't. What counts as an "appropriate basis" will vary from subject matter to subject matter, and there is no general formula for such a basis. Experienced people in any field have a good sense of when such a basis is there and when it is not. Of course we need to know and use general logic in our inquiries of all sorts, but that gives us, in some cases, only a necessary condition, never a sufficient condition of "appropriate basis."

You will notice that truth and knowledge and logic as here described do not automatically rule any areas of thought or practice out of the domain of knowledge. That contrasts with the many understandings of knowledge in the Western tradition that do automatically rule some areas out. Whether there is knowledge in a given area or case is a matter of the details. One of the good things Postmodernism (to speak loosely) does is to reject the idea that there is **just one** "story" about knowledge, and, in particular, to reject the hegemony of natural science—mainly, Physics—over the whole domain of knowledge and reality. Every field has its standards derived from experience of its subject matter.

The greatest mistake among Christian thinkers and institutions over recent centuries was to **allow the secular mind** to define what counts as knowledge. Think of how this went from, say, Descartes, through Empiricism, up to Positivism and Scientism. That is what opened the way to the required assumption of atheism—practically at least,

God making no difference—in all areas of knowledge and practice. The opposite of that assumption is not theism, but openness to facts and inquiry without adherence to some narrow and prejudiced understanding of what counts as knowledge.

Having secured the stand of the Christian intellectual in this understanding of truth, knowledge and reality—and of course one must work through the foundations of this understanding—one can now go on to consider the central truth-claims of Mere Christianity. One can explore the implications of those central claims, about God, the universe, and human life, for particular fields of intellectual work.

It may be of use here to think of three respects in which one could evaluate adequacy of treatment or of course content in a given field of research. Is the treatment, the understanding, adequate to:

The judgments of fellow professionals?

The human needs for understanding and practice?

The subject matter itself?

You can see, I think, that these are rather different standards. And whether the traditional “body of Christian knowledge”—concerning practice as well as theory—is relevant to adequacy of treatment in a given field will depend on which of these serve as the standard of adequacy.

A good way to proceed might be to scrutinize the unanswered questions in the given field—your field, of course. Through force of habit, these might not be obvious. We may then need to go back to what is “obvious” in our field. “Genius,” it has been said, “is the ability to scrutinize the obvious.” Doing this may yield results that will make you look like a genius. Indeed, it is a good rule in intellectual work to mistrust the obvious. What would happen if one did such scrutinization on the hypothetical assumption that the central claims of Mere Christianity are true? Would anything appear intellectually interesting about, for example, why the physical universe has the laws it does, why mathematics works, the possible forms of energy, the function of the art object in aesthetic creation and appreciation? Or why the life of Napoleon or Teresa of Calcutta turned out as it did? What language is? The nature of the human being? Spiritual reality in the human? The mind and the brain? And so on.

Let us say without qualification: If research in our fields is adequate in every respect without “integration,” without any reference to the central truths of Mere Christianity, that’s fine. So be it. If there is a God, he is in charge of that too. But one shouldn’t assume that such adequacy is present without careful examination. In some cases we might find mere consistency between the research results in the field and Mere Christianity. Perhaps in other cases there might be stronger or weaker evidence for its central truths, or from those truths to the given field. For example, the truth of the existence of an all-powerful, benevolent creator God. It has been said that except upon the assumption of such a being, science as we know it would have never arisen. If so, that is intriguing to say the least. But we need to recognize that false assumptions can be useful, and to dig deeply to see if there is more to the cause and effect than just a fortunate assumption of what is false. These are just some suggestions as to what might be done. You would know better than I in the areas where you specialize. But the general point is that the current assumption that no field of knowledge or practice requires reference to God and his kingdom and his redemptive presence in history needs to be challenged and made to support itself on the highest intellectual plane. What might be established in one field could be influential on other fields. Sometimes a current controversy may be broadly illuminating. The

current discussion of evolution and intelligent design as factually carried on on the campuses and in the culture is a painful illustration of how irrational presumably rational people can be, and has much to teach us about the current state of the intellect.

Now, once again: The last thing we are talking about is taking a dogmatic stand about anything. We are talking about engaging our work and our fields with openness, humility, dogged intelligence, the highest quality of scholarship, love for those we work with, and confidence that God is with us. But we are not to thoughtlessly accept the secular definitions of our work.

Also, we are not talking about something that identifies itself as “Christian” research. We are talking about good research done outside of the blinders of dogmatic secularism.

This, I believe, gives some practicable idea of how reason can be redeemed from its dogmatic, secular captivity as seen in current University and intellectual environments.

Beyond all this, but not in separation from it, we must show by our character and practice the reality of life in the kingdom of God with a living Christ. The intellectual vacuum in the moral life of our culture is appalling. It is not for us just to talk about it, though we should, but we must live out the “truth and reality” we talk about, make present the non-secular presence which Mere Christianity advocates. We cannot do this just by maintaining purity of doctrine and being nice. What we say we believe must be the things we actually believe, the things we act upon. To believe something is to be set to act as if it were true. One main reason why we must be intellectually serious is because the views and theories of secularism deeply impact what we actually do believe, and not just what we profess to believe. Much of the weakness of Christian practice comes from the thought that what we say is true about God and the universe is not knowledge, and that the other side represents “real knowledge.” Integration of faith and learning is whole life. And the kind of intellectual/practical schizophrenia we see so much of today is not sustainable in a healthy existence. The redemption of reason, the restoration of it as traditionally recognized in our better human moments, is vital to human beings, Christian or not.

Now deeper critical issues concerning the failure of self-understanding of reason or “research” in its modern modes is something that I cannot pursue here. This failure deeply effects the Universities and our general culture. But I would just say that it is a hugely important matter for humanity, and that it is widely recognized as such by leading philosophers. I refer you only to Edmund Husserl’s works and especially his *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. A much simpler treatment is to be found in H. W. B. Joseph’s *Some Problems of Ethics*, especially Chapter I. You can find further discussions of this matter on the “Philosophical” side of my web-page: [www.dwillard.org](http://www.dwillard.org).