

Faithful Stewards or Terrestrial Gods? Christianity and the Chief End of Science

a lecture by Ken Myers

In the reading I have done over the past two decades on the broader cultural issues at stake in the various bioethical debates of our time, there is one book that I have seen cited more frequently than any other. There are two facts that make this book's reputation really remarkable. The first is that it was a book about education, not technology or ethics. Its subtitle is *Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools*. The second surprising aspect is that the book was written in 1947.

The book is C. S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*, a book, as I've said, about education. The reason the book is so helpful for bioethics is that Lewis's view of education was an ancient one, which assumed that educators were not simply imparting information to minds, but were involved in shaping virtue, in encouraging what Augustine described as the proper ordering of loves. In this older view, there was no impermeable barrier between fact and value.

Lewis recognized that the new models of education were rooted in a denial of value, in materialistic modes of conditioning rather than the reasonable informing of virtue. And Lewis saw that there were assumptions about human nature and purpose at work in these theories of education that had a long history. Aspects of that history have relevance for bioethics, and my talk today will unpack some of Lewis's observations.

Before I get into the main substance of my talk, I need to clarify a terminological matter. I am going to be talking about aspects of modern culture or modernity. But many people seem convinced that the West has turned a corner into the neighborhood of postmodernity, and so any talk of the problems of the *modern* world or of *modernity* is passé.

While there is some usefulness to the category of postmodernity, I think it is important to recognize that it is not as universally "post-" as some might think. Sociologist Craig Gay, a perceptive Christian scholar at Regent College in Vancouver, has observed that "the essential features of 'postmodernism'—however this term is defined—are demonstrably modern in origin."¹ To demonstrate the genealogy between the modern and the postmodern, let's look for a minute at an essay by Daniel Bell, the sociologist who brilliantly analyzed the rise of post-industrial culture. Bell defined the modern in terms of "a sense of openness to change, of detachment from place and time, of social and geographical mobility, and a readiness, if not eagerness, to welcome the new, even at the expense of tradition and the past. It is the proposition that there are no ends or purposes given in nature; that the individual, and his or her self-realization, is the new standard of

¹ Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 18.

judgement; and that one can remake one's self and remake society in an effort to achieve those goals.”²

Now all of these perspectives sound very harmonious with the sensibility that has been described as postmodern; in fact, it would be hard to find a defender of the postmodern mentality who would reject the posture Bell here describes.

There is, Bell goes on to argue, a single theme that focuses all of the distinctively modern movements in culture: “The rejection of a revealed order or natural order, and the substitution of the individual—the ego, the self—as the lodestar of consciousness. What we have here is the social reversal of the Copernican revolution: if our planet is no longer the center of the physical universe and our earthly habitat is diminished in the horizons of nature, the ego/self takes the throne as the center of the moral universe, making itself the arbiter of all decisions. There are no doubts about the moral authority of the self; that is simply taken as a given. The only question is what constitutes fulfillment of the self.”³

That too sounds very postmodern to me, and, I suppose, to Craig Gay, which is why he argues “that ‘postmodernity’ represents only a kind of extension of modernity, a kind of ‘hyper-modernity.’ As British sociologist Anthony Giddens suggested recently: ‘Rather than entering a period of post-modernity, we are moving into one in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalised and universalised than before.’”⁴

So even if our way of looking at the world and human experience is in some sense postmodern, it’s not because we are decisively rejecting all of modernity; rather we are intensifying the effects of many of modernity’s fundamental commitments and assumptions.

Later in his provocative book, which incidentally is called *The Way of the (Modern) World: or, Why It’s Tempting to Live as If God Doesn’t Exist*, Craig Gay observes that the two great commitments that characterize the modern notion of progress are scientific advancement and “the liberation of individuals from the repressive constraints of religion and tradition,” both of which would result in the mastery, the rational control of the whole world.

As modernity made the self the center of the moral universe, rather than natural law, cosmic order, or divine purpose, it also effected a change in understanding about the nature of the cosmos. The radical anthropocentrism of modernity is linked to the assumption that the universe is made up of inherently impersonal, meaningless stuff, raw material for projects of human devising, mathematically decipherable but morally and spiritually mute. The more rationalizable the world becomes in our understanding, the more disenchanting it is. Or, as physicist Steven Weinberg observes in his book, *The First*

² Daniel Bell, “Resolving the Contradictions of Modernity and Modernism” (*Society*: March/April 1990, pp. 43-50).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 18.

Three Minutes, “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.”⁵

C. S. Lewis commented on this regression in an essay called “The Empty Universe”:

At the outset the universe appears packed with will, intelligence, life and positive qualities. . . . [Yet] [t]he advance of knowledge gradually empties this rich and genial universe: first of its gods, then of its colours, smells, sounds and tastes, finally of solidity itself as solidity was imagined. . . . The same method which has emptied the world now proceeds to empty ourselves. The masters of the method soon announce that we were just as mistaken (and mistaken in much the same way) when we attributed “souls,” or “selves” or “minds” to human organisms, as when we attributed Dryads to the trees. . . .⁶

Lewis’s reference to the loss of colors, smells, sounds, and tastes, is a reference to the effects of the so-called two-substance theory, the dualistic framework pioneered by Galileo and developed by Descartes, which became the orthodoxy of science. As cultural historian Franklin Baumer summarizes it, the two-substance theory “divided the world into two great realms of mind and matter, or of thought and extension. Mind—as signified by final causes—was ejected from nature. So also were all the qualities that had formerly kept nature close to man: the fragrance of flowers, the songs of birds, the color in everything, including light itself. Mind, soul, purpose, belonged to man’s world, no longer to nature’s. Nature, it now appeared, was like a great machine or clock, made of dead matter, possessing fundamentally mathematical characteristics, functioning mechanistically rather than teleologically, obedient to invariable natural laws. This dualism, a triumph of simplification, allowed scientists to pursue their inquiries without paying more than passing attention to theology and metaphysics. Though it created some formidable philosophical and epistemological problems, dualism provided the conceptual framework for a spectacular advance in the sciences.”⁷

Baumer concludes: “With the elimination of the secondary qualities, nature inevitably began to seem less like the setting for man’s spiritual pilgrimage and more like a field for the exercise of human power. But where this was understood, it prompted, on the whole, more optimism than pessimism.”

Premodern men and women lived in a world that was often threatening and baffling, but full of purpose and meaning, however obscure and mysterious. Modern men and women live in a world that is meaningless, but more and more manageable, more and more subjected to our wills through science and applied science (or technology). Modernity

⁵ *The First Three Minutes* (London: Flamingo, 2nd edition, 1983), p. 149.

⁶ The essay is contained in *Present Concerns* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

⁷ Franklin L. Baumer, *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600-1950* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1977), p. 51.

bargains away meaning for power. There is still the possibility of meaning for modern people, but it is private rather than public, and interior rather than emanating from the cosmos.

Now of course many scientists pursue their research for the sheer joy of thinking God's thoughts after him (whether or not they believe in God). But our *social* commitment to science is exceedingly practical. Pure research is funded in the hopes that some profitable application will be found. Ever since Francis Bacon asserted that "Knowledge is Power," ever since he defended the pursuit of scientific knowledge by appealing to the practical and benevolent goal of "the relief of man's estate," the Western project of science has been directed toward *applied* science. If the goal of the pursuit of knowledge is power, then one will tend to prefer the forms of knowledge, the ways of knowing that confer most power. And asking *how* something works, rather than *why* it exists or *to what ends* it might legitimately be engaged, is the sure route to knowledge as power.

Scientific knowledge for practical ends is the only form of knowledge that is now regarded as properly public in the modern West. But there is a suicidal irony in this. Leon Kass has warned that "Liberal democracy, founded on a doctrine of human freedom and dignity, has as its most respected body of thought a teaching that has no room for freedom and dignity. Liberal democracy has reached a point—thanks in no small part to the success of the arts and sciences to which it is wedded—where it can no longer defend intellectually its founding principles. Likewise also the Enlightenment: It has brought forth a science that can initiate human life in the laboratory but is without embarrassment incompetent to say what it means either by life or by the distinctively human, and, therefore, whose teachings about man cannot even begin to support its own premise that enlightenment enriches life."⁸

Science by itself cannot ask or answer the question, "Is there some knowledge and some power that we should *not* have?" That was a question raised very provocatively in a 1996 book by literary critic Roger Shattuck called *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography*. In the first part of the book, Shattuck looked at numerous stories and myths in the Western tradition that warn about the dangers of curiosity, and hence the necessity of limiting it. The story of Prometheus, of Pandora, of Eve and the Serpent, of the Tower of Babel, the fatal glance of Lot's wife: all of these stories and many more including Faust and Frankenstein, are reminders of boundaries in human doing and knowing. And yet it is the essence of the modern Western mentality to resent and reject such warnings, to regard all taboos that are unverified by something like an environmental impact statement as superstitions in need of debunking.

Of course, those earlier cautionary tales all assumed, as C. S. Lewis observed somewhere, that you can't go against the grain of the universe without getting splinters. And the modern disenchantment of the world denies any such thing as a grain in the universe. Splinters are caused by a lack of knowledge, not the possession of forbidden knowledge.

⁸ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science: Biology and Human Affairs* (New York: Free Press, 1985), p. 7.

Again, in *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis observes “For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men.” Applied science is the engine that drives modern civilization. But why does Lewis associate it with *magic*? That association is the tip of an iceberg of insight into the spirit of modernity that merits greater attention

At the dawn of modernity, the power to control nature so as to fulfill human desires was sought through the disciplines of magic, specifically astrology, numerology, and alchemy. We forget that Johannes Kepler was not only a brilliant mathematician and astronomer but also a court astrologer who believed that the movements of the planets had profound effects on human life. (We still have about 800 horoscopes that Kepler drew up for his patrons.) Isaac Newton had as much in common with Albus Dumbledore as with Stephen Hawking, being deeply committed to the pursuit of various alchemical and occultic research. So, Lewis can write that “the real story of the birth of Science is misunderstood. You will even find people who write about the sixteenth century as if Magic were a medieval survival and Science the new thing that came in to sweep it away. Those who have studied the period know better. There was very little magic in the Middle Ages: the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are the high noon of magic. The serious magical endeavour and the serious scientific endeavour are twins: one was sickly and died, the other strong and thrived. But they were twins. They were born of the same impulse. I allow that some (certainly not all) of the early scientists were actuated by a pure love of knowledge. But if we consider the temper of that age as a whole we can discern the impulse of which I speak. There is something which unites magic and applied science while separating both from the ‘wisdom’ of earlier ages. For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men. . . .”

In modern societies, the social goal of the pursuit of the total conquest of nature eclipsed the more venerable goal of conforming the soul to reality. We no longer have socially central institutions that are dedicated to the conforming of souls to reality, through knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue.

Lewis knew the history of the dawn of the Modern inside out; he had insight into the Modern mentality in part because his own consciousness was so thoroughly shaped by premodern assumptions. We don’t know that history or have that insight, which is one reason why I think we have a hard time understanding why so many people assume that there is an inevitable war between science and Christianity.

To the extent that science is not just a set of procedures and experimental disciplines, but a cultural project dedicated to the goal of extending human power without limits, it must be regarded with suspicion by Christians. I think that Christians who desire to pursue the great gifts of scientific knowledge in a way that is commensurate with a Christian understanding of creation would be well advised to understand that Western science is not historically simply the product of Christian assumptions about the knowability of God’s creation because of the rationality of God. Those assumptions were present. But so were

much more dubious assumptions from other sources about human nature and human purpose in God's creation.

Looking back at that period, Lewis observes: "No doubt those who really founded modern science were usually those whose love of truth exceeded their love of power; in every mixed movement the efficacy comes from the good elements not from the bad. *But the presence of the bad elements is not irrelevant to the direction the efficacy takes.* It might be going too far to say that the modern scientific movement was tainted from its birth: but I think it would be true to say that it was born in an unhealthy neighbourhood and at an inauspicious hour. Its triumphs may have been too rapid and purchased at too high a price: reconsideration, and something like repentance, may be required."

All of the books that are written by well-intentioned Christians arguing that theology and science are mutually encouraging disciplines have some very helpful points to make. But they fail to explain how and why science so soon became divorced from a Christian framework, and how and why science has been and is so easily seen as the essential discipline in liberating humanity by combatting Christianity's influence in Western culture. It's not enough to say that some scientists covertly and illegitimately import their philosophical naturalism into what is otherwise and rightly a Christian discipline. There is, Lewis suggests, more to it than that. "[I]n every mixed movement the efficacy comes from the good elements not from the bad. *But the presence of the bad elements is not irrelevant to the direction the efficacy takes.* . . . [The] triumphs [of science] may have been too rapid and purchased at too high a price: reconsideration, and something like repentance, may be required."

It would be very helpful if books that proclaim the essential compatibility between science and Christianity, an argument that can be and usually is made apart from any historical analysis, must also honestly and humbly recognize the bad neighborhood, the inauspicious hour, the mixed parentage of science as we actually know it, and offer some counsel about what a chastened, repentant science might look like. I think that Alister McGrath's recent book, *The Reenchantment of Nature*, performs some of that service, as have other Christian books that deal specifically with environmental issues. Leon Kass, writing from a Jewish perspective and influenced by classical and Christian sources, has suggested a way of pursuing such projects in his book *Toward a More Natural Science*. Steve Talbott, Craig Holdridge, and some of the other people affiliated with The Nature Institute, while not offering analysis that is explicitly Christian, have repudiated the hubris and reductionism that has tainted modern science as they have tried to formulate a framework for scientific work that takes the qualitative nature of creation as seriously as its quantitative nature. The work of philosopher Mary Midgley and of philosopher of science Michael Polanyi have offered insights into the faulty epistemological assumptions of many unnuanced defenders of science. Theologian Colin Gunton has helped to recover a more Trinitarian understanding of Creation that could guide the spirit of a repentant science. Albert Borgmann, in his reflections on how technology shapes our engagement with Creation, has provided some tools to challenge the ideal of total control of Nature. Theologians Hans urs von Balthasar, David Bentley Hart, and others, by insisting of the character of creation as divine Gift, and by recalling us to a posture of admiration and

wonder before the Beauty in the givenness and goodness of Creation, have paved the way for fruitful meditation, reflection, and (one hopes) preaching to properly re-orient our souls. And Wendell Berry, in stories, poetry, and essays, has called attention to the shape of life in community, within boundaries, honoring the grain of the universe.

None of these people are anti-science, though they are often dismissed as such, because they refuse to embrace the Promethean agenda that many people assume is the birthright of science. When Leon Kass began his work as chairman of the President's Council on Bioethics, he gave members of the Council some homework to do before one of their first meetings. The membership included ethicists, philosophers, scientists, and entrepreneurs in the biotech world. Kass asked them all to read Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, "The Birthmark," a story about the pursuit of perfection, of total control, a pursuit with fatal consequences. Kass believed that reflective discussion on such a rich narrative would help the members of the Council think more wisely about the choices they needed to make. But many of the more technically minded members of the council were outraged that they had to read a story. The pursuit of wisdom through the exercise of the moral imagination in the hopes of conforming the soul to reality was not on their agenda. It was not the sort of thing modern, scientifically minded people did. It did not seem properly progressive.

All of the quotes I've cited from *The Abolition of Man* come from a single paragraph, a paragraph which begins with this observation: "Nothing I can say will prevent some people from describing this lecture as an attack on science. I deny the charge, of course. . . . But I can go further than that. I even suggest that from Science herself the cure might come."

The disease for which a cure was necessary was the chronic behavioral disorder that defines the West's commitment to *conquering Nature*. In a subtle and powerful argument, Lewis suggests that Nature cannot be conquered. All that can happen is that we can make certain trade-offs to improve our lives in certain ways, while we surrender other opportunities and blessings, and surrender power to the mediators of our technology. And Lewis warns that the goal of the total conquest of Nature will finally take aim at the conquering of human nature itself, with the ironic and tragic result of the Abolition of Man: Man sets out to conquer nature for the relief of man's estate, but Man must conquer human nature to complete the project. It is reminiscent of the contemporary project of eliminating certain diseases by eliminating fetuses who are the carriers of the disease.

Lewis called Francis Bacon the chief trumpeter of the new era, in recognition of the role that Bacon had in laying the foundations for a theory of science, an apologetics for science. Certainly Bacon never intended the Abolition of Man. Far from it. In his classic, pithy statement about the redemptive possibilities of science, Bacon wrote: "For man by the fall fell at the same time from his state of innocency and from his dominion over creation. Both of these losses however can even in this life be in some part repaired; the former by religion and faith, the latter by arts and sciences." [And here, "arts" refers to the mechanical and practical arts, what we would today call technology.] And later Bacon established some boundaries: "Only let the human race recover that right over nature which belongs to it by divine bequest, and let power be given it; the exercise thereof will be governed by sound reason and true religion."

This sounds like a plausible and noble theological basis for science. And yet there are some problems with the way Bacon formulated this. The main problem is the dichotomy that Bacon introduces between the spiritual effects of the Fall, that is the loss of innocence and the corrupting of the relationship with God, and the material, physical effects of the Fall, the loss of dominion and the new experience of the pain and struggle of natural disorder.

Religion will remedy one of these losses, and technical skill will remedy the other. But one has to ask if the mastery over nature granted to Adam was simply a technical mastery, or if it was an enactment of and a blessing for his loving and obedient posture toward God. William Leiss, in his book *The Domination of Nature*, asks just this question: “. . . Bacon, together with virtually all of his readers—failed to notice the necessity of demonstrating one crucial aspect of his argument, namely, that it is through the progress of the arts and sciences that ‘mastery of nature’ is achieved. . . . Why is the recovery of the divine bequest not the result of moral progress rather than scientific progress?” Leiss points out that earlier Christians believed that “it was their exemplary moral life, not their superior scientific knowledge, which was believed to be the basis of their restoration of that dominion over the animals possessed by Adam.”

On the older view, Adam’s dominion was not something separable from his walking with God; it was both a blessing and an expression of that faithfulness. In Genesis 1:28, dominion is bestowed in the form of a *blessing*. By defining mastery over nature as something achievable apart from that faithfulness, Bacon, in the judgment of William Leiss, “unwittingly charted a course for later generations which led to the gradual secularization of this idea. His contention that science shared with religion the burden of restoring man’s lost excellence helped create the climate in which earthly hopes flourished at the expense of heavenly ones.”⁹

Leiss credits Bacon with “forming the modern consciousness of the idea of mastery over nature,” and he claims that Bacon wasn’t just adapting this old theme to a new social context, “but rather was attempting to transmute it into a wholly different form, a form appropriate for the age of secular science and technology that was dawning.” Is it fair to accuse Bacon of so radically altering the understanding of dominion as set forth in Genesis 1:28?

The research of Jewish historian Jeremy Cohen on the premodern interpretation of the dominion text by Jews and Christians seems to suggest that Bacon was doing something new. Cohen writes that “Ancient and medieval readers of the Bible did not discount the conferral of dominion in the second half of the primordial blessing, and they often posed numerous questions to define its limits and implications. Yet with a handful of rare and sometimes questionable exceptions, they never construed the divine call to master the earth and rule over its animal population as permission to interfere with the workings of nature—selfishly to exploit the environment or to undermine its pristine integrity.” One might say, in Christian terms, that the bestowal of rule was an invitation to mirror the rule of God in

⁹ William Leiss, *The Domination of Nature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1972), p. 53

Christ, our great King. Human rule of the earth was mediatorial rule, and our kingship should mirror Christ's kingship who rules as a suffering servant and sacrificial shepherd, not as a self-interested dictator. This was rule as stewardship, not tyranny.

We see such a view in Calvin's commentary on Genesis 2:15, in which we are told that the Lord God put Adam in the Garden to tend and to keep it.

Moses now adds, that the earth was given to man, with this condition, that he should occupy himself in its cultivation. Whence it follows, that men were created to employ themselves in some work, and not to lie down in inactivity and idleness. This labour, truly, was pleasant, and full of delight, entirely exempt from all trouble and weariness; since, however, God ordained that man should be exercised in the culture of the ground, he condemned, in his person, all indolent repose. Wherefore, nothing is more contrary to the order of nature, than to consume life in eating, drinking, and sleeping, while in the meantime we propose nothing to ourselves to do. Moses adds, that the custody of the garden was given in charge to Adam, to show that we possess the things which God has committed to our hand, on the condition, that being content with a frugal and moderate use of them, we should take care of what shall remain. Let him who possesses a field, so partake of its yearly fruits, that he may not suffer the ground to be injured by his negligence; but let him endeavour to hand it down to posterity as he received it, or even better cultivated. Let him so feed on its fruits, that he neither dissipates it by luxury, nor permits it to be marred or ruined by neglect. Moreover, that this economy, and this diligence, with respect to those good things which God has given us to enjoy, may flourish among us; let every one regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses. Then he will neither conduct himself dissolutely, nor corrupt by abuse those things which God requires to be preserved.

It is notable that even in his application of this pre-Fall text to a post-Fall world, Calvin's principal concern is with stewardship, not with the necessity of conquering nature.

Where does this more radical view of dominion over nature come from in the Western tradition? Without going into a lot of detail, I think it was the conflation of two strands that combined during the Renaissance. The first was the late medieval philosophical school of nominalism, which called into question the idea of metaphysical order established in Creation by God, thereby regarding Creation as a more pliable and malleable thing. Nominalism also exalted the human will as the ultimate human attribute.

As a result, in the thinking of some of the leading 15th century humanists, human dignity was predicated on the grounds of an *absolute* human freedom. Rather than seeing human worth and honor rooted in a human nature of metaphysical necessity or divine blessing, these seminal thinkers asserted that humanity's brightness was a function of a

dynamic human *will* restricted by no nature at all. Take, for example, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's landmark *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, presented in 1487. In the *Oration*, Pico offers an account of Creation, in which God informs the newly made Adam that he has a unique place in the cosmos: "We have given you, Oh Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor any endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgment and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer."

Pico later makes it clear, in good neo-Platonic fashion, that this freedom to define oneself is best exerted by the contemplative, who disdains all bodily existence, seeking godlike knowledge and power through the exercise of magic.

Similarly, Marsilio Ficino's *Platonic Theology*, printed first in 1482, presents an argument that man is a terrestrial god. "The entire striving of our soul is that it become God. Such striving is no less natural to men than the effort to flight is to birds."¹⁰ And later, after describing the godlike power over creation which is possible for man, he makes another exceptional claim: "[T]he immense magnificence of our soul may manifestly be seen from this, that he will not be satisfied with the empire of this world, if, having conquered this one, he learns that there remains another world which he has not yet subjugated. . . . Thus man wishes no superior and no equal and will not permit anything to be left out and excluded from his rule. This status belongs to God alone. Therefore he seeks a divine condition." Ficino later asserts that Man has the power to acquire knowledge to change fate, to shape his own destiny.

While Ficino and Pico were both writing from an ostensibly Christian position, it is clear that, in addition to the influence of nominalism, they were also influenced by other neo-Platonic sources, especially a body of writings that was translated by Ficino in 1463, writings which were believed to date to the time of Moses, and which offered a radically different account of creation. There is actually a fascinating story behind this, that we don't have time for today, but if you care to look into it yourself, the writings were attributed to a figure named Hermes Trismegistus, who was believed to be the source of Greek philosophy, ancient Hebrew theology, and thus the author of all ancient wisdom. The documents were actually written by Christian heretics sometime in the 3rd century A.D., but in the 15th century, and beyond, they exercised amazing influence. More than any other factor, they stimulated the rise of interest in natural magic in the Renaissance period, and inspired confidence in the possibility of human progress.

¹⁰ Cited in Stephen A. McKnight, *Sacralizing the Secular: The Renaissance Origins of Modernity* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), p. 55.

When Lewis says that science was “born in an unhealthy neighbourhood and at an inauspicious hour,” I think that this may be part of what he has in mind. But perhaps we are living in an auspicious hour for the reconsecration of the great gift of science. The challenges presented by environmental problems, by biotechnology, and by the sexual revolution of the late 20th century have brought forth in the Church a new level of thoughtfulness about the meaning of the human and the relationship of the human to the rest of Creation. There is a possibility for a reorientation of science, of the orderly knowing of the cosmos, that, as Alister McGrath’s book title suggests, leaves room for the reenchantment of the world. Perhaps then we would be postmodern in a real and very constructive way.

If we regard Creation as just something to be mastered or manipulated to fulfill human desires, we lose sight of the way in which human well-being can be ordered by thoughtful engagement with Creation. When science become secularized, separated from faithfulness to God in Creation, then our life of fellowship with God become too spiritualized.

We were not created to relate to God in a vacuum, but through the web of lived life in the world God has made. Adam and Eve loved God and lived for and with Him as they tended the Garden. Each of us is called to a specific vocation as the site of our living sacrifice, but we are also involved in the general and common reality of living in space and time, in specific places, with particular kinds of bodies, within the pattern of the order of Creation. Creation is the medium through which we know, love, and serve God.

This is really hard for modern people to achieve, because of modernity’s denial of what classical and Christian culture had previously assumed: that the order of creation established the order that human culture should take. The reductionistic view of modern science assumes that the universe is awaiting our ordering of it, rather than discovering order within it.

In his book *Enlightenment and Alienation*, Colin Gunton observes that “[I]n our desire to impose form on the world and our lives we have lost the capacity to see the form that is there; and in that lies not liberation but alienation, the cutting off from things as they really are.”¹¹

In I Kings 4, we read a fascinating summary of the wisdom of Solomon. “And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt.” And having been reminded that Solomon spoke 3,000 proverbs and composed 1,005 songs, we are given a glimpse at the content of Solomon’s wisdom, a summary of the sorts of things on which his wise proverbs and songs reflected. It is not the list we might expect. “He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish.”

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but it would seem that the trajectory of wisdom takes us through a contemplative and morally fruitful engagement with the stuff

¹¹ Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation: An Essay towards a Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), [p. 6f.]

of Creation. Because God's world is a coherent Creation, because the moral is not separable from that which is empirically known, our relationship with God is not, contra Bacon, detached from our faithful and attentive rule of creation.

Of course the reconfiguration of the relationship between man and nature requires a reconfiguration of the relationship between man and God. If we see ourselves as masters of the world rather than stewards, the real master gets lost. God is still in the picture, but he is a deist God who doesn't really care very much about creation. The idea of providence become much less plausible, as does the idea of general revelation, the notion that certain things about God can be known from the things he has made, as Paul writes in Romans.

I believe that if we are eager to establish a repentant science, we are going to have to pay more attention than Christians generally do to reordering our consciousness concerning Creation. We are going to have to fight the alienation from Creation promoted by modern culture, by our economic and political institutions and by our ways of living on the earth, and recover an intuitive sense not just of stewardship of Creation, but of membership in creation.

The Christian account of human life teaches that we are *particular* kinds of creatures, living in a *particular* kind of world. Oliver O'Donovan observes that "the resurrection of Christ directs our attention back to the creation which it vindicates. But we must understand 'creation' not merely as the raw material out of which the world as we know it was composed, but as the order and coherence *in* which it is composed." And that order is not simply mathematical, but it is moral. Which is why we need poets and painters and composers to help us perceive it.

In Isaiah 45, we read a great affirmation of that order and coherence, an affirmation which I will use to conclude this reflection:

For thus says Yahweh, the Creator of the heavens—
he is God, who shaped the earth and made it,
who set it firm:
he did not create it to be chaos,
he formed it to be lived in:
I am Yahweh, and there is no other,
I have not spoken in secret,
in some dark corner of the underworld.
I did not say, 'Offspring of Jacob,
search for me in chaos!'
I am Yahweh: I proclaim saving justice,
I say what is true. [Isaiah 45:18f.]