
NECESSARY TEACHING

No, the conscience not properly informed will be taught by some power exterior to itself. This is why hate groups can exist. This is how children are taught in “schools” to hate Jews, and to aspire to become suicide bombers. This is how sailors in the slave trade could throw people overboard to lighten the ships. This is what drove the zeal of the Nazi S.S. officers. This is why people march in favor of abortion. The human conscience can be, and often is, perverted.

In the Bible, parents are enjoined to teach their children the commandments of God, in both Testaments. When Jesus gave his Great Commission to “make disciples of all nations,” that included “teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:18–20). That teaching is

absolutely necessary, or the conscience itself can be malformed.

With that teaching, we dare to hope for something deeper to take root in the hearts of all Christians: that the Holy Spirit will write God’s laws there for all of us. When the conscience is so formed and empowered by grace, there can be no choice between religious belief and moral conviction, for both are rooted together, intertwined and inseparable.

I could not answer that question in the quiz, and I am grateful that I could not. ♦

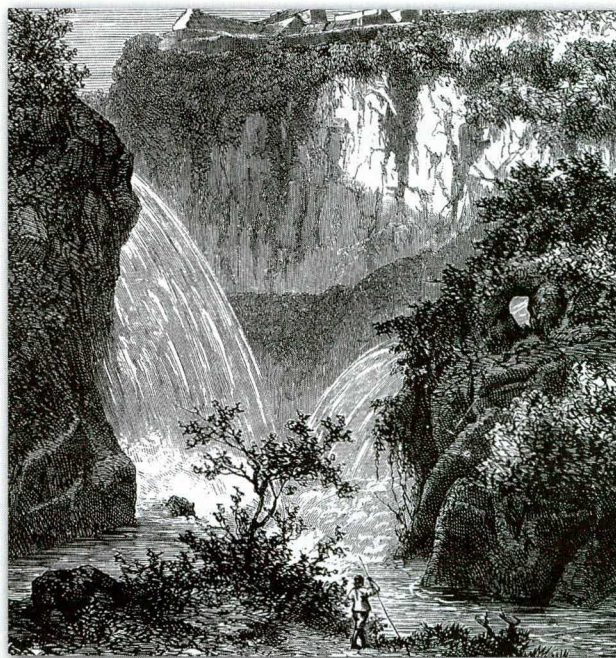
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Spirited Hearts

STEPHEN MUSE *on Why Men Without
Chests Are Not Free & Do Not Love*

WILLIAM BLAKE once asked a companion what he saw when he looked at the sun. His friend replied, “I see a yellow orb, approximately such-and-such a shape and distance from the earth.” Blake responded something like, “I see the Hosts of Heaven coming on chariots of fire proclaiming ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, Art Thou O Lord!’” Did the two men see the same sun? Or were they just talking about it differently? And what does it really matter?

C. S. Lewis, in *The Abolition of Man*, describes a textbook used to teach the ways of the King’s English to British youth. He points out a subtle philosophical sleight-of-hand that the author hid behind the guise of teaching boys rhetoric. An example was given of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who was visiting a waterfall with two tourists. One called the waterfall “sublime” while the other said it was “pretty.” Coleridge endorsed the first judgment and rejected the second with disgust. The textbook author used this incident to teach that when the one man said, “This is sublime,” he only *appeared* to be making a remark about the waterfall. Actually, his remark was not about the waterfall at all, but only about his own emotions in response to it.



With this teaching, the author was inculcating in students an uncritical acceptance of a philosophical position regarding their capacity to discover what is true about themselves and the world. They were learning that one’s own subjective experience is all one can know about reality. This utterly self-centered perspective is now a familiar, often unquestioned stance, that finds its way into catchy slogans that effectively end any depth of discussion by appealing to the politically correct psychobabble implicit in the social norms governing public discourse in America: *Whatever I like and works for me is true and good for me, and whatever you like and works for you is true and*

good for you. (The corollary to this seems to be: *Whatever I like and however I want to say it is true and good for me, and if you don't like it, so what!*)

Do these kinds of kindergarten rules of engagement permit us to encounter one another co-creatively with any degree of passion and intelligence to discover a truth greater than our own personalities? Do they permit us to fully explore the depth and height and breadth of the blazing mystery that lies around and within us and includes all of us, and that set the poet William Blake's heart on fire?

FALSE FREEDOM

There is a saying from the Talmud that declares, "We don't see the world as it is but as we are." Though that may sound a lot like the position of the author cited in Lewis's book, it is actually a much more subtle and useful observation. It suggests by implication that if we want to see the world as it is, we had better refine our own vision first; or, as Jesus said, "Take the log out of your own eye" and "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." That's pretty good vision.

If human subjectivity is indeed the "highest value" and "measure of all things," it had better be illumined by God, who alone is able to actually know life as it is. Whatever our religious persuasion, we all suffer from a kind of monomeism instead of monotheism. This is the sickness of every addict, which must be cured by the first three of the "twelve steps" before any healing and transformation can begin: One—recognizing that putting all my hope in myself is hopeless. Two—recognizing that there is a God whose power and truth are greater than my own subjective self, and who can help me. Three—

entering into relationship with that Other in order to become free of slavery to my addiction, which is rooted in placing my own desires and self-centered actions above the objective reality and truth of God and all other persons.

Unwillingness to move beyond one's own unredeemed subjectivity in order to encounter the other and the world on their own terms inevitably produces what Lewis calls "a man without a chest," that is, someone who is content to allow basic fallen instincts and imagination to overpower and co-opt reason because he has no discerning heart able to integrate instinct and rationality in the service of goodness, truth, and love. A "man without a chest" is someone who does not distinguish his desires from their effects on others, someone whose heart remains untrained, undisciplined, blind, weak, and ineffectual. In effect, he is a man who is not free and does not love.

What comes to fruition in the life of a man without a chest is not the humanity of God we see in Jesus Christ, but the inhumanity that Mark Twain remarked was more cruel than the fang and claw of any beast, which arises in every person who presumes to be the sole determiner of right and wrong, "knowing good and evil" on his own, apart from God and the community. This is Lucifer, the king of men without chests. And from Lucifer all manner of demons arise to captivate and further enslave.

Once a person confuses freedom with the tyranny of his untransfigured instincts and subjective emotions, he becomes like Gulliver venturing onto the island of the Lilliputians, who are able to tie him down and immobilize him with a thousand weightless strands. What seems like the ultimate "freedom to be myself" is an illusion that can only be maintained by disregarding the power

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and threat contained in each of those tiny strands of “I want.” In reality, it is precisely the opposite of freedom. In his play *Man and Superman*, George Bernard Shaw offers a definition of hell as “*having to do what you want.*” This leads to total depravity, and it happens a little bit at a time. Every instance in which conscience is ignored makes the spiritual heartbeat grow a little fainter.

TRUE FREEDOM

By contrast, true freedom is gained by coming to love Christ more than we love our own pleasures, likes, and dislikes—by encountering God, and by coming to love the world more than we desire to possess and use it and others for our own ends. By praying “Thy will be done on earth” instead of our own, we begin to be instilled with a willingness to offer ourselves for the life of the world. We discover that we no longer *have* to do what we want; we are free and willing to do whatever God, our ontological Father, wills. Having been “born from above,” from beyond the created world, we now find our life *in* the world, but no longer entirely *of* it.

This royal road of the priesthood of all believers involves awakening and training the heart to discern Truth, and purifying one’s feelings of the self-centered emotionality of egotism. This is in line with the ancient Christian witnesses of the desert: the Ammas and Abbas and hesychasts who counseled the importance of struggling to collect the attention of the body and the mind together in the heart. Gradually a new state arises, in which “the heart governs and reigns over the whole bodily organism, and when grace possesses the ranges of the heart, it reigns over all its members and its thoughts. For there, in the heart, is the mind and all the faculties of the soul” (Pseudo Makarios, *Spiritual Homilies* 15:20). This, finally, is a man *with* a chest.

As Lewis notes, apart from this kind of transformation, the intellect remains powerless against the animal organism because it lacks collectedness and refinement from the energies of grace. These qualities cannot be acquired solely by the human effort of rational philosophical inquiry or by attempts to govern one’s instincts through sheer will or emotional identification. All human powers are ultimately powerless against egotism. For us men without chests, help must come from beyond us. A Holy Spirit-led encounter with the uncreated energies of God the Father in and through Christ the Son is needed. He who is “the way, the truth, and life” itself reveals to us the face of God, who *is* love and virtue, and who thereby illumines and transforms the heart, engendering what Lewis in *The Abolition of Man* calls “the spirited element” that is able to tame and integrate body and soul:

In battle it is not syllogisms that will keep the reluctant nerves and muscles to their post in the third hour of the bombardment. . . . Reason must rule the mere appetite by means of the “spirited element.” The head rules the belly through the chest—the seat as Alanus tells us, of “Magnanimity,” of emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments. The Chest—Magnanimity—Sentiment—these are the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man.”

What seems like the ultimate “freedom to be myself” is an illusion that can only be maintained by disregarding the power and threat contained in each of those tiny strands of “I want.”

The military metaphor Lewis uses is an apt one, for it is a well-known fact that those who show courage in the field are not those who are without fear or who possess superhuman powers, but rather those who, by the grace of God, take no thought for themselves because they are wholly concerned with protecting others. They are the ones whose greatness of soul is demonstrated by conscience uniting presence of mind with action in the willingness to lay down their lives for others in moments when men without chests have already fled.

As Lewis notes, such love is not learned in one fell swoop, but over a lifetime of obedience to God, through the continual making of small sacrifices that gradually train and condition the heart in the magnanimity of him who said, “They love me who obey my commandments” (John 14:21). True freedom is not having to do what you want, but being willing with all your heart to offer yourself as bread for the life of the world. According to Jesus, the way to life is narrow. Few find it, and fewer still enter in (Matt. 7:14). Those who do, discover the great secret: we are given life in order that we may give it away for those we love. ♦

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