

7. Cultural Education

Understanding the Foundations

[T]his change surpasses that which Europe underwent at its conversion.

C.S. Lewis, 'De Descriptione Temporum'
(‘A Description of the Times’)¹

Liberal Society in a Post-Christian Culture

C.S. Lewis gave his inaugural Professorial lecture at Cambridge University in 1954, published as ‘They Asked For a Paper’ but originally entitled ‘De Descriptione Temporum’, or a ‘description of the times’.² In this he clearly identified three phases in the history of the West: the pre-Christian, the Christian and the post-Christian. Lewis saw the momentous cultural changes that such transition has brought about and identified some of their results. It should be noted that Lewis distinguished between the personally or spiritually Christian (which he described as ‘penitent and regenerate’) and ‘Christian Civilization’.³ He compared and contrasted his own time in England with that of Jane Austen (1775-1817) and explained:

In her days some kind and degree of religious belief and practice were the norm: now, though I would gladly believe that both kind and degree have improved, they are the exception.⁴

Lewis considered that ‘this change surpasses that which Europe underwent at its conversion’⁵ and was concerned with its political, social and religious effect. Peter Kreeft points out that ‘Dechristianization is happening faster than Christianization did’ and shows not only that the ‘last two hundred years have seen a greater change than the previous two thousand’,⁶ but also how this continued ‘progress’ might affect society in the twenty-first century. Lewis depicted the ‘un-christening’ and was alarmed at the prospect of being ‘the spokesman of Old Western Culture’.⁷

Addressing his audience in 1950s England, he argued that 'the vast change which separates you from Old Western' is a 'chasm'. One can imagine Lewis looking directly at his audience and explaining 'those who are native to different sides of it can still meet; are meeting in this room', telling them 'I myself belong far more to that Old Western order than to yours'.⁸ The implications of the 'chasm' that he describes are immense. Donald Williams agrees that 'two rival conceptions of humanity stare at each other across a great chasm' and argues that what is at stake is 'the possibility of a civilization in which man can be whole'.⁹ This is directly relevant to education and schooling because educational theories that influence the methods in classrooms and the goals of schools are 'a product of a commitment to a certain philosophical paradigm'.¹⁰ According to Spears and Loomis, 'Education is no longer understood in terms of training that enables us to pursue a true conception of reality. Formerly, education was conceived as a tool by which we came to properly understand our humanity, ourselves and our right role within society'.¹¹ In other words, education in the post-Christian phase of our culture has ceased to have the aim of 'pursuing and understanding objective value'.¹² While it has been suggested that 'the liberal educator has to promote the values that are necessary to living in a liberal society' we need to be aware that educators in the post-Christian phase of our culture often do not 'stop short of promoting a liberal set of moral beliefs or lifestyle'.¹³ One can be a *political* liberal and believe in personal freedom while not being a *comprehensive* liberal. Differentiating between the two is critical.

Beliefs about the respective place of rights, reason, liberty, equality, inclusion and freedom of expression are all informed by the doctrines, beliefs and practices of the religion that has had a pervasive influence on the liberalism of England, Holland and the rest of the West. We should not forget that 'Liberalism was an offshoot of Jewish and Christian belief'¹⁴ and need to be aware of the importance of foundations. As we are living in this post-Christian phase, understanding the roots and origins of our culture is essential. The Bible, Christianity and the English language (as we saw in the previous chapter) are central to Western culture and many of the freedoms we currently experience are the result of a historic legacy; they have profoundly influenced the sort of society in which we live in the West. Nations such as the U.K., U.S.A., Canada, Australia, France, Germany, Israel and The Netherlands are all liberal democracies. They also share a Judeo-Christian heritage. In a liberal society the sanctity and dignity of human life is respected, one can generally trust the Police and there is respect for the Rule of Law. The Magna Carta in England established

the principle that we should be free from arbitrary arrest and we go to considerable lengths to ensure that the law is not partial and does not defer to power or wealth. What this culminates in is *an ethos of personal freedom and liberty* (to recall the classical meaning of 'liberal' as discussed in Chapter 4).

The emphasis in Western society is on the freedom of the individual, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom to protest and freedom of assembly rather than subservience to the dictates of rulers. Yet freedom will only be exercised well if the people who have it also have the right values to guide them as they express themselves. Although most of us would not swap living in a liberal democracy for life in a nation run as a personal dictatorship or one-party state, liberal societies are far from perfect. In fact, we might well conclude they are only as good as the values of the majority of the people in them.

The assertion that 'ordinary people matter' is derived from a radical theological teaching that is distinctively Christian. What is also decidedly Christian is the emphasis upon freewill and individual decision-making (as we saw in Chapter 2). In the Gospels, Jesus is critical of those who followed the 'tradition of men' rather than making their own decisions about whether or not to follow him. The influence of Christianity on liberalism and the freedoms we enjoy is well documented if not frequently acknowledged. Although social justice is emphasized in many religions, 'of all faiths primitive Christianity was the most radical, egalitarian and inclusive, smashing down all barriers between people, and even the barrier between individuals and God' and it is 'no accident that the West was the only civilization to abolish the slave trade and slavery voluntarily'.¹⁵ Yet the 'unalienable rights' (*sic*) asserted in the *Declaration of Independence* may be called into question when these are seen only as a matter of opinion rather than being derived from objective truths and a Creator. In the rest of this chapter we examine the three core values of the West (liberty, equality and rationality), which are developed further in the following chapter. It is helpful to understand Lewis's perspective, which was derived from objective truth, to counter the secular twenty-first-century assumptions about these values and underpin much modern thinking about schooling.

Liberty

To be 'liberal' is often equated with being 'free', but in pluralistic societies these words do not mean the same thing to everyone; for secular citizens individual liberty often entails the freedom to

pursue one's own interests and desires when for Christians, such as Lewis, this is not considered to be freedom at all in spiritual and moral matters. In fact, in these areas, the pursuit of one's own desires can be regarded as evidence of a lack of freedom *from* such desires; indeed, 'wishes and desires' can 'carry out a sort of blitz' upon a person's faith.¹⁶ Yet the freewill to mount a defensive action against this 'blitz' is integral to Christian conceptions of our humanity.

We must, however, discriminate between political freedom and spiritual freedom. Professor Andrew Stables emphasizes that 'freedom is not co-terminous with democracy', acknowledging that the rule of the majority can 'restrict or remove the freedoms of minorities'.¹⁷ Equally, increasing regulation or 'paternalism' through rights legislation can reduce the freedom people experience in a democracy. Being looked after by the state has disadvantages if individual choice and freedom are not protected. Lewis firmly believed officers of the state could *advise* but should not *decide* on many matters:

Let the doctor tell me I shall die unless I do so-and-so; but whether life is worth having on those terms is no more a question for him than for any other man.¹⁸

In the third section of *The Abolition of Man* Lewis wrote of the 'Controllers' or 'Conditioners' (an Elite or Establishment). This reminds us of 'the power of majorities over minorities' and of 'a government over the people'.¹⁹ He foresaw the 'rule of the Conditioners over the conditioned human material, the world of post-humanity'.²⁰ In *Willing Slaves of the Welfare State* (1958) Lewis puts it starkly that 'rulers have become owners'²¹ under the guise of protecting our 'rights' and 'equality'. This is a controversial notion but is timely fifty years after the death of Lewis. The assessment that the 'precariousness of our economic life' has even 'forced Government to take over many spheres of activity' is strangely prophetic. The claim that security threats have reduced our liberty will also sound strangely familiar to twenty-first-century ears:

Two wars necessitated vast curtailments of liberty, and we have grown, though grumblingly, accustomed to our chains.²²

These twin threats still exist: intrusion and increased surveillance and concerns about economic recession or depression. For Lewis (who lectured in Political Philosophy as well as English), ensuring that people have certain minimum 'entitlements' met, means submitting to 'paternalism' but this cannot be achieved without

losing 'personal privacy and independence'.²³ With reference to agents of the State, Lewis concludes that the 'more completely we are planned the more powerful they will be'.²⁴ If education is to prepare students for life in a free society, it must help to protect fundamental freedoms.

Equality

The influence of the Judeo-Christian belief in the political equality of all people is foundational in our society. It has been suggested that the emphasis on the individual self originated in the Christian belief in a unique and immortal soul²⁵ and that the commitment to respecting every individual is rooted in the Christian teaching that each person is made 'in the image of God'.²⁶ We take it for granted that the Professor of Politics does not cast ten votes in an election while the cleaner of her office casts only one but such political equality owes a considerable debt to Christianity:

The early Christians came up with the most subversive political idea yet to hit the world – that of the equality in Christ of all nations and races, of slaves and masters, and of men and women. The idea that ordinary people mattered and the individual soul had infinite value was peculiarly European; this emphasis was absent in other great religions and cultures, in Islam, in Confucian China, and in Hindu India.²⁷

The belief in the 'priesthood of all believers', asserted during the Reformation emphasized that ordinary people matter. This is not to suggest that Luther and Calvin were early 'liberals' but the emphasis on the individual being able to read the Bible and decide on matters of faith rather than being dictated to by religious authority, was central to the Reformation. During his earthly ministry Christ worked tirelessly as an advocate of those belonging to marginalized ethnic groups; he associated with ostracized women such as prostitutes and stood up for their rights in a patriarchal society. The emphasis on human dignity and equality was not only limited to the earthly ministry of Christ. According to the Apostle Paul: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus',²⁸ which was 'the first statement of humankind's equality and fraternity ever recorded'.²⁹ This was groundbreaking in terms of the inclusion and equality it proclaimed. The emphasis on social justice and liberty in education should not be divorced from its intellectual, historical, moral and theological roots.

Rationality

The ability to act autonomously or to make up one's own mind and come to one's own decisions by making rational choices in life is one of the main aims of a liberal education, but we do need to be discriminating when we think about rational thinking. We should consider the basis on which choices and decisions are made and we must not fall into the trap of assuming religious positions to be irrational. The apostle Paul gave a rational explanation of his faith in Athens³⁰ and a 'reasonable' defence before Festus, the Roman governor.³¹ Indeed, the Christian Scriptures have an emphasis on serving God with one's heart, soul and *mind*,³² which Lewis clearly took seriously. In a sense, when we consider if certain behaviour is appropriate in the classroom, in school or in society, we are often asking the question of whether it is *reasonable* or not. Certainly, when liberty and equality (the first two liberal values) clash in liberal societies, rationality (the third liberal value) mediates. There are, however, issues with rationality from a Christian perspective as the core liberal value that mediates between equality and liberty.

If a person 'ought to act autonomously when it is *reasonable* to act autonomously' then it is clear that 'what *reason* demands on any given occasion will vary between persons depending on their circumstances, spheres of expertise and organizational roles'.³³ For many educators the aim should be to try to teach children in such a way that they are 'averse neither to authority nor to independence of mind' and to choose between them wisely; we should aim at 'producing *rational*, well-balanced people willing and able to exercise independent judgement, rely on expert advice or submit to legitimate authority *as the occasion demands*'.³⁴ Although we tend to think decisions are generally made on the basis of rational justification, we should be sufficiently attuned to debates concerning diversity to appreciate that not all citizens will read and respond 'reason' or to 'autonomy' in the same way. Believers such as Lewis will not endorse the view that important choices are always to be based on logically consistent rational justification. Many will certainly be sceptical about rational choice theory, as a world-view in the social sciences, which 'trivializes all statements of value'.³⁵ In *That Hideous Strength*, the social scientist Mark Studdock, is 'unable to detect the falsity at Belbury'³⁶ by reason alone and needs to pay heed to the emotional, spiritual and moral aspects of the institution to break free.

Making rational decisions underpinned by an interpretation of a sacred text is just one instance of how reasons are always based on

beliefs and truth claims, the 'texts' one believes to be authoritative for living. That liberalism itself is founded upon certain preconceptions or ways of seeing the world is evidence that any reasoning is always 'faith-based'. In an increasingly 'post-Christian' society, as Lewis termed it, students are much more likely to consider the influence of liberalism than that of Christianity upon the freedoms they enjoy but if they are to accurately reflect the history of ideas and beliefs they need to consider these together. Before the Second World War a 'consideration of social and moral responsibilities and community involvement would have been inconceivable without reference to Christian beliefs and ethics'.³⁷ Yet it is all too easy for the story of citizenship (even in the U.S.A.) to become inaccurately secular. Arguably, 'classical political theory' with its 'Christian and juristic key conceptions (natural law, the value of the individual, the rights of man) has died'.³⁸ The cultural analysis that Lewis provides in 'A Description of the Times' is invaluable to education today where an education in many schools in the West appears to be characterized by the cultural disinheritance of the Christian faith.

Chapter 7 Study Guide
Tasks and Questions for Discussion

1. What are the key features of a liberal society?
2. How has Christianity contributed to Western society?
3. Describe the three core liberal values.
4. How can the three core liberal values be interpreted differently by secular and religious citizens?
5. Is religion rational?
6. What are the limits of reason?
7. How has Christianity had a profound influence upon our ideas of equality?
8. Do we live in a 'free' society in the West?
9. How is choice important in both democracy and the Christian faith?
10. What is a 'comprehensive' liberal?
11. What is a 'political' liberal?
12. Are you a 'political' liberal or a 'comprehensive' liberal or neither?