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## *A More Medieval Vision of God*

LOUIS MARKOS

Chris R. Armstrong, *Medieval Wisdom for Modern Christians: Finding Authentic Faith in a Forgotten Age with C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos, 2016). 272 pages. \$19.99. ISBN 9781587433788.

I have had the privilege over the last six or seven years to speak widely for classical Christian schools across the country. Though nearly all of these schools are Protestant—with a large majority of them being Reformed Calvinist—their teaching methods and pedagogical vision are medieval in content, purpose, and worldview.

Aside from the obvious medieval borrowings—the trivium and quadrivium, the teaching of Latin, the instilling of virtue—classical Christian schools share the medieval Catholic love for a number of things that have been lost in most modern schools, whether they be secular or Christian, Protestant or Catholic: a passion to find connections in every area of knowledge, from literature and history, to science and math, to art and

*Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006); Francisco J. Ayala, *Darwin's Gift to Science and Religion* (Washington, D.C.: Joseph Henry Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Michael L. Peterson, "C. S. Lewis on Evolution and Intelligent Design," in *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 62 (2010): 253-66.

music; a fervent love of books and a willingness, if not a burning desire, to be changed by those books; a hunger to find goodness, truth, and beauty in every place and subject and a refusal to tear them apart; a belief that nature and the cosmos are meaningful and bear the imprint of the Creator; a central understanding that we were made in God's image but fallen and thus possess both an innate dignity and a deep depravity.

Though Chris Armstrong does not reference such schools in his new book, *Medieval Wisdom for Modern Christians: Finding Authentic Faith in a Forgotten Age with C. S. Lewis*, he attempts to do for the church what the classical Christian movement has done for education: namely, infuse and invigorate it with a more medieval vision of God, man, and the universe. In 2009, Armstrong, senior editor of *Christian History* and founding director of Wheaton College's *Opus: The Art of Work*, helped turn evangelical eyes backward in his *Patron Saints for Postmoderns: Ten from the Past Who Speak to Our Future*. Of these, the first four were medieval—Antony of Egypt, the founder of monasticism, Pope Gregory the Great, Dante, and the British mystic Margery Kempe—and the tenth, Dorothy Sayers, was an apologist for the medieval synthesis of Dante (Sayers wrote *The Lost Tools of Learning*, one of the books on which the classical Christian movement was founded).

At the heart of *Medieval Wisdom for Modern Christians* lies Armstrong's impassioned plea that evangelicals not simply dismiss the Middle Ages as medieval, but that they be willing, like C. S. Lewis, to learn from and be challenged by it. By so doing, American Protestants can find an antidote to "immediatism," which Armstrong defines in three ways: as our "obsession with novelty"; as our "pressurized pragmatism" that seeks to find a "silver bullet solution to all social problems"; and as our often intransigent belief that we can "bypass all mediating traditions and interpretations and go directly to the supposedly commonsense meaning of Scripture" (7-8).

Against the dangers of evangelical "immediatism," Armstrong holds up spiritual disciplines that were practiced most fully in the monasteries but that also shaped the lives of common people during the Middle Ages. While praising the work of such spiritual formation gurus as Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Eugene Peterson, and Jim Houston, and while identifying in their popularity a consciousness among American Christians for ascetic discipline, Armstrong laments that interest in such things has

proven to be mostly a fad and has failed to take root in Protestant churches or seminaries. Part of the reason for this is the fear, particularly among evangelicals (the target audience for Armstrong's book), that a heavy focus on spiritual disciplines will lead to works-righteousness and downplay the centrality of grace. Another part is our modern over-eagerness to accept without question Enlightenment propaganda that branded the Middle Ages as ignorant, backward, cruel, and dark.

Armstrong spends some time exploring these fears and misunderstandings; however, he wisely intuits that they are only symptoms of a deeper problem which is too often left unchallenged in evangelical circles: the spiritual status of our bodies and of the material world. What ultimately prevents us from accessing the full riches of the thousand-year Christian era that stretches from Augustine to Luther is our gnosticism, which sees our bad body as something that must be overcome by our good soul, and our "equally destructive and ironically opposite-but-the-same attitude toward creation" (140) that Armstrong identifies with materialism. On the surface, these two "isms"—the one treating the body and matter as negative impediments to holiness; the other measuring its success and happiness by how much "stuff" it can accumulate—should be contradictory. In fact, both spring from a devaluing disenchantment of physical creation which not only "fails to see the divinity in the material world," but separates the good things of that material world from their "source and meaning, which is God" (141).

Methods for navigating between the Scylla and Charybdis of gnosticism and materialism abound in the Middle Ages. First, there is the joy that St. Francis of Assisi took, and the kinship he found, in nature. Second, there is the allegorical vision of such poets as Dante who uncovered traces of God's grace in the most ordinary of things. Third, there are the many spiritual manuals that called on Medievals to imitate Christ, not by turning against the body but by leading it upward toward God through discipline, contemplation, and passion: Armstrong highlights Richard Rolle's *Fire of Love*, Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* and *Theologia Germanica*, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, but, oddly, leaves unmentioned the most important of these medieval guides, Thomas á Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*. Fourth, scholastics like Thomas Aquinas offered a grand

theological synthesis that bridged the gap between “faith and reason, love and logic, religion and science, and Word and world” (71). Fifth, medieval worship united head and heart, offering and participating in “a living experience of devotion to God that elicited an affective (emotional) as well as a cognitive (rational) response” (166).

Still, Armstrong argues, these methods alone would have been powerless unless they had been wedded to a full and robust understanding of, and appreciation for, the Incarnation. More than a dry, dusty doctrine, the Incarnation means “the Creator God entering his creation, not only entering creation but entering *the part of creation that is us*. In the incarnation, God experiences us from the inside” (207). This great theological truth—or, better, historical reality—was the motivating force behind three aspects of medieval (and modern) Catholicism that tend to trouble evangelicals: the central role played by the seven sacraments (all of which show forth the two-into-one mystery of the Incarnation), devotion to Mary (who was God’s chosen vessel for bringing the Incarnate Christ into the world), and the ubiquitous presence of the crucifix (reminding us of the full bodily humanity of the Incarnate *and* Resurrected Christ).

Throughout his book, Armstrong appeals to the life and work of C. S. Lewis to aid him in his mission of rehabilitating a vigorous incarnational-sacramental vision for the church. He is wise to do so, for Lewis—as academic, apologist, ethicist, and fantasist—fiercely defended and unashamedly embodied medieval values that his society, like our own, had cast aside, always making sure to nudge the Incarnation back to the center of the faith. Indeed, in *Miracles*, Lewis refers to the Incarnation as the “grand miracle,” the one that makes sense of everything else and that offers a glimpse into the true nature of reality. It was precisely because of his focus on the Incarnation that Lewis was able to unite reason and imagination, the universal and the particular, the ordinary and the supernatural, thus producing a body of work that not only teaches us about the Middle Ages, but allows us to reimagine the world through medieval eyes.

From Lewis’s fiction and nonfiction alike, we learn (and *experience*) “the undeniable reality that we finally have no other conduit to the divine besides our bodies and our senses. Simply put, we are sensuous creatures, and that’s okay; we know it’s okay because in the incarnation God shared that embodied sensuous reality with us” (203). “When we really ‘get’ the

incarnation,” adds Armstrong in his own voice, though still faithfully channeling the medieval vision of Lewis, “it releases us to live *all* of life in light of Jesus Christ and to affirm our own humanness—our own materiality, our own affectivity, our own rationality, our own cultural creativity” (207). That release was achieved by the creator of Narnia and *felt* by fans of the Chronicles, even if most of those fans are unconscious of what and why they are feeling it.

If we, as modern evangelicals, don’t get the full implications of the incarnation, if we fail to grasp that everything changed when God took on our flesh and became man, then we will not understand how ascetic discipline can go hand in hand with riotous merriment, or how an academic bookworm trained in the pedantic minutiae of the Middle Ages could create a fantasy land filled with beauty and fear, wonder and terror, holiness and joy. If we don’t get it, we will continue to separate the physical-material from the spiritual, thus impoverishing both our sacred and secular lives.

This separation and impoverishment, Armstrong demonstrates, can perhaps best be seen in the linguistic evolution of the word charity (Latin: *caritas*; Greek: *agape*). Contrary to its use in the Middle Ages, the word today has been so narrowed in meaning that the essential unity between religious motivation and practical action has been lost:

The unfortunate history of the word “charity” actually illustrates the breaking of this unity that joined acts of mercy (social ethics) and Christian love (personal ethics, character). Charity started as a theological virtue with social implications. It has become now a purely social activity that anyone can achieve or practice no matter their relationship or lack thereof with the Creator and Redeemer God. In our post-Christian society we still speak freely of “charity,” but we measure it in dollars and donations. (134)

Such was not the case for monasteries. Indeed, it was the early and medieval church that *invented* the hospital. Roman society, which at its best, I would argue, embodied the highest pagan ethics, did not minister to the poor and sick. Rome offered no social safety net, preferring to let the weak die out—an ethos that *should* control western secular humanists who believe that man evolved solely through Darwinian evolution (natural selection) but that thankfully does not, for most continue to live *as if* the Christian teaching that we were made in the image of God were true.

Still, despite the mixed motives of modern philanthropists, the fact remains that the hospital marked a natural outgrowth of a fervent belief in the Incarnation—the almighty God not only became a man but a poor one in a rural village—and a literal, bodily reading of Jesus’s Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-26), in which Christ identifies himself fully with the poor, naked, sick, hungry, and imprisoned. Without falling into the false utopian belief that we can create a perfect world, the medieval architects of the hospital were moved by Jesus’s suffering on our behalf to foster within themselves “a pious empathy with the sufferings of others” (132) out of which flowed their charitable work.

For thousands of medieval Christians, that work often involved tremendous risk, as when they attended to those suffering from the plague, but the danger did not dissuade them from extending the compassion of Christ. That is in great part because they did not perform their charitable tasks out of a cold, rational stoic-Kantian sense of duty, but out of a passionate desire to identify fully with Christ. Here, once again, Lewis proves the ideal aid for Armstrong, for Lewis was perhaps most medieval in his belief that what ultimately drives us to God is not fear of hell but the proper following of the yearning and longing that God placed in us for Himself. Nearly everything Lewis wrote—from his allegorical autobiography *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, to his apologetics, to his science fiction and fantasy novels, to *Letters to Malcolm*—is touched by that Dantean desire that drives us to find our proper place around the Creator. Yes, we are ever in danger of being sidetracked by false lures, but if we persist in our search we will find a deep satisfaction in Christ. Lewis knew (and lived) this as did the Medievals; Armstrong would have his fellow evangelicals know it as well.

Armstrong does an admirable job bringing to life the medieval dimensions of Lewis’s work that so many readers find appealing but which so few correctly identify with the worldview of the Middle Ages. Thus, it is curious that Armstrong avoids an obvious feature of medieval thinking which is both present in the Lewis corpus and anathema to the postmodern mindset: innate differences between men and women. Most schools and universities, together with a disturbing number of Christian colleges and seminaries, teach that gender is nothing more than a social construct. Aquinas, Francis, Dante, and Julian knew better. Like the Medievals, Lewis celebrated masculinity and femininity though with

nuance and unanticipated insights: “It is arrogance in us,” wrote Lewis, “to call frankness, fairness, and chivalry ‘masculine’ when we see them in a woman; it is arrogance in them to describe a man’s sensitiveness or tact or tenderness as ‘feminine.’”<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, Armstrong offers no guidance for sorting through such a nuanced approach either in Lewis’s writing or within a postmodern context.

In other respects, *Medieval Wisdom for Modern Christians* is a clarion call of return to the old way: the way of virtue. May it help young Christians, and those who instruct them, chart a sure course through our strange new world.

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 62.