

## **Christian Character, Christian Education**

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Institutions of Christian Higher Education (ICHEs) have forfeited their proper *telos* as institutions dedicated to the service of God and have instead cast themselves as servants of nation and the economy. Employing John Henry Newman’s description of university education, the arguments of C. S. Lewis and Stanley Hauerwas for the usefulness of literature for moral formation, and descriptions of how artistic skills are developed (via Erich Fromm and Makoto Fujimura), this article attempts to point toward the development of “Christian character” as the primary goal of the ICHE.

Keywords: Christian education, capitalism, character, moral formation, liberal arts

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*It’s the economy, stupid!*

—Bill Clinton

### **Introduction: *Who Do You Think You Are?***

In almost thirty years of teaching in institutions of Christian higher education,<sup>1</sup> the nearly annual lament has concerned the difficulties of meeting budgets, raising additional funds, and recruiting students. Faculty and staff are continually and consistently asked to “do more with less,” to take on additional duties, to be satisfied with less compensation, to forego even cost-of-living raises and faculty development conferences, to print on both sides of every sheet of copier paper (and sometimes to stop printing altogether), and so on. For the most part, we are willing to do this: we are committed to the cause; we believe that “Christian education” is worthy, that it provides something to our students that cannot be had elsewhere. And so we soldier on, and typically, we do so quite happily. But we also see “the handwriting on the wall” that has pointed toward the closing of many similar ICHEs, and we fear that this time the handwriting describes our own future. We see a trend, we wonder if it can be reversed, and if so, we wonder how.

Administrators point toward national trends for small ICHEs as they defend their own efforts; as the price of a college education rises and potential students (and their parents) seek to avoid massive debt, the pool of potential students for ICHEs continues

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, ICHE (or plural ICHEs) refers to both colleges and universities that call themselves or think of themselves as “Christian.” Whether or not the modifier “Christian” can apply to an institution is not a question I will consider here.

to shrink, while overhead expenses for maintaining such an institution continue to rise. The problem for ICHEs is, in essence: Why should a budding young adult attend an expensive private school when a cheaper public alternative will do just as well or better? When this question is asked, the ICHE is perceived as offering nothing other than what a non-Christian or secular institution can offer, but at a much higher price. Worse yet, we frequently see and portray ourselves this way. To adapt C. S. Lewis's phrase, we are "schools without chests":<sup>2</sup> we have sacrificed our heart on the altar of secularity. We are lost and wandering, having forgotten our true purpose: the service of God. Instead, we have often offered our service to the economy and nation as our self-justification; we provide excellent workers, and we provide those workers with training to be affluent and solid citizens.

These attempts at self-justification are often found in the formulae we use to recruit students: our faculty and staff are "nicer" than those at secular institutions; our professors are more interested in their students, and so on—none of which can be verified and are oftentimes simply untrue. At best, we can claim that we are smaller and do not typically have graduate students teaching lower-level general education courses. These patches have not sealed the leakage because they do not address the real problem—our self-identity. In this essay, I will attempt to articulate a *raison d'être* for the ICHE. Specifically, I suggest that we provide to our students an environment that encourages them to develop a truly Christian character. This development takes place both within the curriculum and in extra-curricular activities, through a variety of venues—all or most of which are available at secular institutions—but are directed explicitly toward the larger goal or *telos* of the ICHE: service to God.

### **Liberal Arts and Christian Education: John Henry Newman**

The *telos* of the ICHE is not the same as the secular university. We aim, instead, to produce a particular kind of person, one that is notoriously difficult to define; and in a consumer society, having a clear product definition is vital. It is difficult to sell something if no one knows just what it is. In his classic essay, *The Idea of a University*, nineteenth-century scholar and theologian John Henry Newman described the purpose of university education as the creation of "gentlemen," what contemporary Americans would rather understand as the creation of people of "noble character." "Nobility" sounds like a great idea (even if "gentlemen" is culturally suspect to Americans), but just what "noble character" consists of was difficult even for Newman to determine. He distinguished between "instruction" and "education": one can be "instructed" in various skills, such as "manual exercises . . . which have little or no effect on the mind itself" since they consist in "rules committed to memory." "Education," in contrast, "is a higher word; it implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of a character; it is something

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<sup>2</sup> See below, p. 3.

individual and permanent, and is commonly spoken of in connexion with religion and virtue.”<sup>3</sup> On this level, “knowledge” is

something intellectual, something which grasps what it perceives through the senses; something which takes a view of things; which sees more than the senses convey; which reasons upon what it sees, and while it sees; which invests it with an idea. It expresses itself, not in a mere enunciation, but by an enthymeme: it is of the nature of science from the first, and in this consists its dignity. . . . Such knowledge . . . is an acquired illumination, it is a habit, a personal possession, and an inward endowment.<sup>4</sup>

The person being thus educated

apprehends the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its light and its shades, its great points and its little, as he otherwise cannot apprehend them. Hence it is that his education is called “Liberal.” A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom; or what . . . I have ventured to call a philosophical habit.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, for Newman, university education is decidedly *not* what we would call “vocational.” *Knowledge is its own end*, and if it were to serve some purpose outside of itself, it would become *servile*, and thus not “liberal.” It would not create people of noble character, but only servile souls who could not truly be happy or contribute to the betterment of their society. In Newman’s view, theological studies must be part of a liberal education because (1) an institution could not truly call itself a “university” if it rejected any legitimate field of study, and (2) the “character” that university studies should imbue into the student is closely connected to “religion and virtue.” Newman gives us, therefore, an argument not only for the existence of such a thing as a “university,” but also an argument in favor of the liberal arts, and additionally an argument for including the study of religion in the liberal arts curriculum.

### **C. S. Lewis: Literature and Formation**

In his short book *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis battled against the view of the logical positivists that all moral claims or claims of “value” were reflective only of the

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<sup>3</sup> John Henry Newman, *The Idea of the University*, “Knowledge as its own end,” §6, quoted from *A Newman Treasury: Selections from the Prose Works of John Henry Cardinal Newman*. ed. Charles Frederick Harrold (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1975), 69–70. Newman wrote and presented this series of lectures in 1850, thus his language is dominated by masculine pronouns, which I have not changed.

<sup>4</sup> Newman., §6, 69–70.

<sup>5</sup> Newman., §1, 61.

emotional attachment of the speaker. Thus, to claim that some particular act “is good” means only that the speaker has “warm feelings” about the object; the claim is not about any reality outside the speaker, but only a revealing of the emotions *within* the speaker.<sup>6</sup> This reduction of moral thinking to emotional states, says Lewis, is the recipe for the demise of humanity and of all that is truly human because the ability to make such moral claims constitutes what it means to be human. If moral claims are only about the emotions of the speaker, we have been reduced to something less than truly human; we become, in his words, “men without chests”; that is, we have abandoned the essence of what it means to be human.<sup>7</sup>

Lewis’ primary proposal is to anchor morality in what he calls “*the Tao*” or “natural law,”<sup>8</sup> but he is clear that there is no theory that infallibly produces a moral person.<sup>9</sup> Morality must be *cultivated*, and this requires a certain kind of training. And so, his second proposal—though he does not offer it explicitly as an antidote to the logical positivists—is that teaching students to be good readers of great literature will lead them to a better moral sense. One cultivates the requisite skills not by giving students exposure to literary theories but rather to literature. Becoming a “good reader” requires that one become a particular kind of person—a person who has inculcated into herself certain qualities such as “the wisdom of being prudent, temperate, just, and considerate. Those virtues further qualify us in subtle ways so that we begin to see, in turn, that faith, love, and hope also make sense.”<sup>10</sup>

In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis does not offer any theoretical explanation of this claim. In fact, according to theologian Paul Holmer, nowhere does he do this, because doing so would reduce morality to “getting the right theory” rather than the ability to be a moral person:

Literature is not dependent . . . upon theories. More properly, literature does not teach theories in the guise of fantasy and fiction. Neither is it, therefore, only an emotional expression of the life of the age or the idiosyncrasies of the individual author. Literature is produced in a myriad of circumstances and for an indefinitely large number of purposes. An unsuspected consequence of the reading of literature is that it enlarges that everyday capacity for explanation that we already command. By thinking and feeling with persons in literary contexts, not so much the authors themselves, but with the fictional characters and by the help of the individual poetic lines, we extend pathos, passion, desire, wishes, and we become, ideally, more competent ourselves. Literature adds to reality, it does not

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<sup>6</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 14–16.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, *Abolition*, 34.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, *Abolition*, 56. While I do not think that “natural law” arguments are ultimately successful, I will not argue the point here.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, *Abolition*, 24, 34, 43–44.

<sup>10</sup> Paul L. Holmer, *C. S. Lewis: The Shape of His Faith and Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 9.

simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become.<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, like Newman, Lewis's concept of a good person is firmly rooted in English gentility, and his attempt to ground it more deeply in natural law mistakes the English concept of nobility for such "universal reason." At the same time, this mistake affirms Alasdair MacIntyre's assertion that much of what we call "good" in Western society is the vestige of pre-modern Christianity.<sup>12</sup> In other words, what grounds both Newman's and Lewis's notions of "good character" is a particular moral tradition, and here this analysis begins more clearly to intersect with the *telos* of the ICHE.

### **Stanley Hauerwas and Trollope's "Gentleman": Narrative and Virtue**

The difficulty of defining a "gentleman" is delineated also by Stanley Hauerwas in his consideration of the novels of Anthony Trollope.<sup>13</sup> With reference to Alasdair MacIntyre's similar difficulty in *After Virtue*<sup>14</sup> of providing a definition of "constancy," Hauerwas employs Trollope's work to demonstrate that certain virtues cannot be succinctly defined but only described by means of extended narratives due to their "teleological and temporal character."<sup>15</sup> Both constancy and forgiveness, says Hauerwas, are resistant to succinct definition because they are always contextual. Constancy, for instance, may in one situation demand that the person be unflinchingly committed to a particular principle, but may in another situation demand that the person change in order to be true to herself. Such change may appear to be the very opposite of constancy to those who do not know the person well, but close investigation reveals the higher principle to which the agent adheres and which gives her story coherence. A "constancy" that excludes the possibility of change would reduce itself to mere rigidity, inflexibility, stubbornness, and a general inability to navigate life, especially with anything approaching Christian love: "Constancy is a correlative of a character that allows our lives to be narrated in an ever-changing but still steady manner."<sup>16</sup> Whether a person is displaying constancy or mere rigidity can only be shown by narrating an entire life.

While "constancy" may not immediately be recognized as a "Christian virtue"—though it is probably included in the more frequently used New Testament term

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<sup>11</sup> Holmer, 28. Lewis notes that in his experience as an educator, the task had been "to irrigate deserts. The right defence against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments" (*Abolition*, 24).

<sup>12</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 1–2, 6–7, 36, 51.

<sup>13</sup> See his chapter "Constancy and Forgiveness: The Novel as a School for Virtue" in Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 31–57.

<sup>14</sup> MacIntyre, 189.

<sup>15</sup> Hauerwas, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Hauerwas, 35.

“faithfulness”—both “repentance” and “forgiveness” exhibit the necessity of story to give them meaning, and the literary form of the novel provides one of the best mechanisms to perform the task:

Like constancy, forgiveness requires display through the temporal narration of lives. Insofar as novels provide such display, they help us imaginatively to capture the complex character of forgiveness. Such complexity, as MacIntyre suggests, results from a kind of self-knowledge that comes from those who have learned the skills of repentance. Those skills are honed by the kinds of experience that it is the peculiar virtue of the novel to display. Repentance is not so much a matter of awareness, though it may involve that, as it is a set of skills formed by a life open to others. Such life is the novel’s natural subject and form.<sup>17</sup>

Literary narratives—the art of telling and reading a story—are primary tools in Christian moral formation. Clearly, we are in the realm of art, both in the form of expression and in regard to the virtues themselves that are being expressed. For moral formation, the liberal arts are vital.

### The Art of Love

In his now classic book *The Art of Loving*, psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm described the traits requisite for an art or a skill to be acquired: discipline, concentration, and patience; additionally, the art must be of “ultimate concern” to the practitioner, so that “discipline in one’s whole life” allows concentration on practicing (“Can anything be learned about the practice of an art, except by practicing it?”), which leads to patience as skills are developed. None of this occurs if the acquisition of the art is not central to the identity of the person.<sup>18</sup>

Love is an art, argues Fromm, that “depends on the character development of the person,” his *maturation* from which are developed elements basic to all forms of love, namely “*care, responsibility, respect and knowledge.*” These are

a syndrome of attitudes which are to be found in the mature person; that is, in the person who develops his own powers productively, who only wants to have that which he has worked for, who has given up narcissistic dreams of omniscience and omnipotence, who has acquired humility based on the inner strength which only genuine productive activity can give.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hauerwas, 52–53.

<sup>18</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 107–10. The phrase “ultimate concern” is used on p. 5 of Fromm’s book, and of course is borrowed from theologian Paul Tillich. Later in Fromm’s book he uses “supreme concern.” For consistency, I am using Tillich’s phrase.

<sup>19</sup> Fromm, *Art*, 26, 32–33.

“The practice of the art of loving requires the practice of faith,” Fromm adds, and in tune with Paul Tillich, faith is “a character trait pervading the whole personality, rather than a specific belief.”<sup>20</sup>

The art of loving is, then, akin to the art of faith, not simply as a list of skills to be acquired (like drawing a straight line or learning piano scales), but what might be called *habits of life*, or *virtues*. What stands in the way of developing such virtues in Western society is often the commodification of nearly (if not) all parts of our existence, including the human self,<sup>21</sup> resulting in the commodification of both faith and God: God becomes simply a potential benefactor to either appease or bribe, and faith is the mechanism or bribe itself rather than an art that encompasses all of one’s life and identity. This tendency toward commodification is also noted by artist Makoto Fujimura in his book *Art and Faith*: “Often, the complaint against the arts is that art is not directly useful to the creation of wealth and does not serve society in a tangible way,”<sup>22</sup> and thus the arts—not to mention the humanities in general—are often devalued in both public schools and universities as well as in ICHEs. Thus again, the antidote to the poison of commodification will be the development of the person of character, and key to that development is the study of the humanities, both literature and the other “fine arts.”

It is also true that the center of such character development must be the study of religion, and in most ICHEs the department of religion takes a central role. There are, however, various factors that mitigate the influence of these faculties, the foremost of which is, indeed, the commodification of religion itself. God and church are thereby reduced to “factors” in the economy, which is then considered to be all-encompassing.

### **The Death of a Salesman?**

If it is true that ICHEs have been thoroughly shaped by our surrounding culture, so that we have learned to define ourselves by its terms, and to promote our “value” in the terms that the culture values—that is, by the criteria of contemporary American capitalism—then this is shown in the ways we promote ourselves as producers of “economy” rather than *oikonomia*;<sup>23</sup> we are entrepreneurs, not creators; we have “jobs” rather than callings; we are consumers rather than producers; we are shaped by our culture rather than being its shapers. While we do occasionally dip our toes into the pool of moral or spiritual formation, these are often seen as accessories to rather than as integral to the academic work of the university. Thus, if parents or students do happen to see that such formation is central to what they are “purchasing” from an ICHE, the

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), 1, and Fromm, *Art*, 121.

<sup>21</sup> Fromm, *Art*, 105.

<sup>22</sup> Makoto Fujimura, *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 107.

<sup>23</sup> Dotan Leshem, “Retrospectives: What Did the Ancient Greeks Mean by Oikonomia?” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 30, no. 1 (2016): 225–38.

academic work is then seen as peripheral—as an obstacle to be endured rather than essential. All in all, the university experience is understood as a consumer product, and therefore ICHE administrators become both salespeople and sales managers and attempt to tailor the “product” to fit the “perceived needs” of the “customers.” This “mission drift” is disastrous to the ICHE and ends by putting these institutions in grave danger—and in capitalistic terms, we cannot compete with secular universities on this, their own playground.

The defects of Arthur Miller’s character Willy Loman<sup>24</sup> are apparent: for him, image is everything. In a sense, for ICHEs, image is everything, but the “image” to which we should refer is Jesus Christ. If we rely on non-Christian imaging, we will die, and we should. If we begin to learn what it is we truly have to offer, then we have a “product” that Christians will value, and perhaps we will survive.

Dr. Lynn McMillon epitomized the ICHE vision. In his long career, he has inspired generations of students to be better, to be persons of faith, to be shaped by the image of Jesus Christ. To him this article is dedicated.

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<sup>24</sup> See Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (New York: Viking Press, 1949).

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