

# *The* TELLER REVIEW *of* BOOKS

*A Journal of Faith, Law & Public Policy*

Nadine L. Jackson, Editor-in-Chief

VOL. I CHRISTIANITY, CULTURE & *the* STATE JUNE 2014

|                                              |                               |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| MERE CHRISTIANITY                            | C. S. Lewis                   |
| A PRACTICAL VIEW OF CHRISTIANITY             | William Wilberforce           |
| SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE               | Philip Hamburger              |
| ON TWO WINGS                                 | Michael Novak                 |
| NOTES TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF CULTURE        | T.S. Eliot                    |
| CHILDREN OF LIGHT & THE CHILDREN OF DARKNESS | Reinhold Niebuhr              |
| LECTURES ON CALVINISM                        | Abraham Kuyper                |
| ABRAHAM KUYPER: A CENTENNIAL READER          | James D. Bratt (Ed.)          |
| CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT                      | David O'Brien, Thomas Shannon |
| COVENANT & POLITY IN BIBLICAL ISRAEL         | Daniel J. Elazar              |
| THE NAKED PUBLIC SQUARE                      | Richard John Neuhaus          |
| A WORLD WITHOUT TYRANNY                      | Dean C. Curry                 |
| CREATION REGAINED                            | Albert M. Wolters             |
| IN THE BEGINNING                             | Herman Bavinck                |
| THE LAST THINGS                              | Herman Bavinck                |

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THE TELLER REVIEW OF BOOKS  
Vol. I Christianity, Culture & the State



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ISBN (13) (paperback): 978-1-68109-062-7  
ISBN (10) (paperback): 1-68109-062-7  
ISBN (13) (ePub): 978-1-68109-063-4  
ISBN (10) (ePub): 1-68109-063-5



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## **THE TELLER REVIEW OF BOOKS™**

Nadine L. Jackson, Editor-in-Chief

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## Table of Contents

|                                                                                    |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| TABLE OF CONTENTS .....                                                            | 7  |
| I. MERE CHRISTIANITY (C. S. LEWIS) .....                                           | 9  |
| A. The Case for Absolute Values .....                                              | 9  |
| B. The Case for Christ .....                                                       | 9  |
| C. On Christian Living .....                                                       | 10 |
| II. A PRACTICAL VIEW OF CHRISTIANITY (WILLIAM WILBERFORCE) .....                   | 13 |
| A. Introduction .....                                                              | 13 |
| B. Review .....                                                                    | 13 |
| C. Critique .....                                                                  | 15 |
| III. SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE (PHILIP HAMBURGER).....                        | 17 |
| IV. ON TWO WINGS (MICHAEL NOVAK) .....                                             | 19 |
| V. NOTES TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF CULTURE (T.S. ELIOT) .....                        | 21 |
| VI. THE CHILDREN OF LIGHT AND THE CHILDREN OF DARKNESS (REINHOLD<br>NIEBUHR) ..... | 23 |
| VII. LECTURES ON CALVINISM (ABRAHAM KUYPER).....                                   | 25 |
| VIII. ABRAHAM KUYPER: A CENTENNIAL READER (JAMES D. BRATT, ED.).....               | 29 |
| A. Abraham Kuyper: His World and Work .....                                        | 29 |
| B. Common Grace (1902-4) .....                                                     | 29 |
| C. Maranatha (1891).....                                                           | 30 |
| D. Sphere Sovereignty (1880).....                                                  | 30 |
| IX. CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT (DAVID J. O'BRIEN AND THOMAS A.<br>SHANNON).....       | 31 |
| A. Rerum Novarum: The Condition of Labor (Leo XIII, 1891).....                     | 31 |
| B. Quadragesimo Anno: After Forty Years (Pius XI, 1931) .....                      | 32 |
| C. Centesimus Annus: On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum<br>Novarum (1991).....  | 33 |
| X. COVENANT & POLITY IN BIBLICAL ISRAEL (DANIEL J. ELAZAR).....                    | 35 |
| A. The Covenant Idea in the Bible and Politics .....                               | 35 |
| B. The Torah as Ancient Israel's Constitution .....                                | 36 |
| C. A Biblical Republic?.....                                                       | 37 |
| D. A Biblical Constitutional Monarchy? .....                                       | 38 |
| E. Conclusion .....                                                                | 39 |
| XI. THE NAKED PUBLIC SQUARE (RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS).....                            | 41 |
| XII. A WORLD WITHOUT TYRANNY (DEAN C. CURRY) .....                                 | 43 |

|       |                                                                              |    |
|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| A.    | Overview .....                                                               | 43 |
| B.    | Flaws .....                                                                  | 43 |
| XIII. | CREATION REGAINED (ALBERT M. WOLTERS).....                                   | 49 |
| A.    | Introduction to the Christian Worldview .....                                | 49 |
| B.    | Creation, Fall, Redemption .....                                             | 49 |
| C.    | Structure and Direction .....                                                | 50 |
| XIV.  | IN THE BEGINNING: FOUNDATIONS OF CREATION THEOLOGY (HERMAN<br>BAVINCK) ..... | 51 |
| A.    | Creation: God as Maker of Heaven and Earth .....                             | 51 |
| B.    | Man's Origins .....                                                          | 52 |
| C.    | Human Nature .....                                                           | 52 |
| D.    | Man's Destiny .....                                                          | 52 |
| E.    | Providence: God's Preservation of the Earth .....                            | 53 |
| F.    | Conclusion .....                                                             | 54 |
| XV.   | THE LAST THINGS (HERMAN BAVINCK).....                                        | 55 |
| A.    | Review .....                                                                 | 55 |
| B.    | Critique .....                                                               | 56 |

## **I. Mere Christianity (C. S. Lewis)**

2001 Harper San Francisco edition co-published by Zondervan, with a foreword by Kathleen Norris

“Clear, lucid, persuasive”

In this volume, C.S. Lewis, one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century, successfully lays out those basic tenets that nearly all Christians have held together at all times. He employs convincing arguments in plain language to point to a system of absolute truth and he then comes full circle by arguing that this system is fully realized in a Christian worldview.

### **A. The Case for Absolute Values**

He opens the book by arguing that people hold to common perceptions of right and wrong, as can be evidenced in everyday, mundane situations. The statements that are exchanged in arguments, such as “That’s my seat, I was there first” or “Come on, you promised,” demonstrate this tendency (p. 3). People quarreling typically do not discard the standard against which their conduct is being measured; rather, they try to justify themselves according to the standard. This, says Lewis, points to a system of absolute values that people hold in common.

### **B. The Case for Christ**

Lewis then challenges the reader to concede that he (the reader) has at some time or another violated the very standards of behavior that “we expect from other people” (p. 7). Thus, although people believe in transcendent standards, they have throughout history and throughout cultures typically not acted in accordance with these standards. This is the gateway through which Lewis sets up the argument that he will employ throughout the rest of the book: people need to be justified, and Christianity offers the answers in Christ.

The reader is challenged to examine the claims of Christ and to determine for himself whether or not Christ was God, as he claimed to be. If he was not, then he “would either be a lunatic--on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg--or else he would be the Devil of Hell” (p. 52). Lewis leaves no room for the view that Jesus was no more than a “great moral teacher”, since no great moral teacher would claim to be God if he was merely man.

### C. On Christian Living

After setting out the case for Christianity, Lewis discusses various aspects of Christian doctrine and behavior. The purpose and end of Christians is to become like “little Christs” while working out their salvation. Lewis discusses a series of relevant questions, including social morality, sexual morality, charity, hope, faith, and the difficulty of Christian living.

Of the latter sections of the book, one of Lewis’s strongest is chapter 6 of book 3, where he discusses the idea of Christian marriage. He makes the case for the leadership of the man in Christian marriage in a way that is strikingly relevant. He begins from the premise that there needs to be a leader in the relationship and, based on the natural differences between men and women, as well as some anecdotes and arguments based on intuition and some common sense, Lewis states why the leadership of the man, as taught in the Scriptures, is in keeping with human nature. My only criticism to this chapter is that Lewis starts on the premise that disagreement will naturally arise, and because there can be no democracy in a relationship of two, either the man or the wife needs to take the lead. The problem with this is that it ignores the place of leadership even in the absence of disagreement. For example, Adam was Eve’s head in prelapsarian Eden, where there was neither sin nor conflict.

Lewis also discusses the two aspects of love that married couples will experience, the first being the “falling in love” and the second being the “staying in love” that should last for the rest of their lives. He writes that “What we call ‘being in love’ is a glorious state, and, in several ways, good for us. It helps to make us generous and courageous, it opens our eyes not only to the beauty of the beloved but to all beauty, and it subordinates (especially at first) our merely animal sexuality; in that sense, love is the great conqueror of lust. No one in his senses would deny that being in love is far better than either common sensuality or cold self-centeredness. But, as I said before, ‘the most dangerous thing you can do is to take any one impulse of our own nature and set it up as the thing you ought to follow at all costs’. Being in love is a good thing, but it is not the best thing. There are many things below it, but there are also things above it. You cannot make it the basis of a whole life. It is a noble feeling, but it is still a felling. Now no feeling can be relied on to last in its full intensity, or even to last at all. Knowledge can last, principles can last, habits can last; but feelings come and go. And in fact, whatever people say, the state called ‘being in love’ usually does not last. If the old fairy-tale ending

‘They lived happily ever after’ is taken to mean ‘They felt for the next fifty years exactly as they felt the day before they were married’, then it says what probably never was nor ever would be true, and would be highly undesirable if it were. Who could bear to live in that excitement for even five years? What would become of your work, your appetite, your sleep, your friendships? But, of course, ceasing to be ‘in love’ need not mean ceasing to love. Love in this second sense--love as distinct from ‘being in love’--is not merely a feeling. It is a deep unity, maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habit; reinforced by (in Christian marriages) the grace which both partners ask, and receive, from God. They can have this love for each other even at those moments when they do not like each other; as you love yourself even when you do not like yourself. They can retain this love even when each would easily, if they allowed themselves, be ‘in love’ with someone else. ‘Being in love’ first moved them to promise fidelity: this quieter love enables them to keep the promise. It is on this love that the engine of marriage is run: being in love was the explosion that started it” (p. 108-109). Lewis speaks with remarkable clarity and wisdom for a man who, at the time he wrote the passage, was unmarried.