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Review of Rhys Laverty et al., *Life on the Silent Planet: Essays on Christian Living from C. S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy*

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Rhys Laverty, ed. *Life on the Silent Planet: Essays on Christian Living from C. S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy*. Landrum, SC: Davenant Press, 2024. 356 pages. Softcover, $44.95.

C. S. Lewis, one of the most influential Christian thinkers and literary critics of the twentieth century, authored the *Ransom Trilogy*—a sequence of science fiction novels united by their central figure, Elwin Ransom, a philologist and professor whose kidnapping forces him to undertake interplanetary journeys packed with spiritual and moral challenges. The set, also referred to as the *Space Trilogy*, comprised of *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), *Perelandra* (1943), and *That Hideous Strength* (1945), stands as Lewis's creative response to the prevailing worldview of modernism. For Lewis, modernism—with its reliance on materialism, scientism, and individual autonomy—represented a cultural drift away from the metaphysical and moral order that once undergirded Western thought. The essay collection *Life on the Silent Planet* gathers twelve Christian scholars, all deeply engaged with Lewis's work and worldview, to examine how Lewis's cosmic vision speaks to believers navigating an age unmoored from its metaphysical roots. The contributors seek to interpret the trilogy not solely as imaginative fiction but as a theological and moral commentary on modern civilization.

All in eyeshot of these words are native moderns in their patterns of thought, according to this collection and to Lewis himself (iv). To understand what being a modern thinker means, consider the geocentric model of the universe popular in the Middle Ages. It is often assumed today that placing the Earth at the center of the universe reflected human egotism, but this projection arises from a modern assumption that the center is a place of privilege. In medieval cosmology, however, height—rather than centrality—signified holiness. Glory belonged to the "highest," not the center—the ancient hymn "Gloria in Excelsis Deo [Glory to God in the highest]," derived from Luke 2:14, was a popular hymn of the Middle Ages (imagine a

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congregation singing this hymn in Salisbury Cathedral, dazzled by the height and symmetry of the columns and awed by the saturation of multi-colored light beaming through the stained glass—it is upwards and outwards in a kind of cosmic cathedral that the worshipper focuses).[1] For medieval society, the cosmos was hierarchical: the pure rose; the impure sank.[2] The center was not exalted; it was the lowest point. Lewis described the medieval view of Earth in *The Discarded Image* as "in fact the 'offscourings of creation,' the cosmic dust-bin."[3] Dante's Lucifer dwells at the center of the Earth, the nadir of creation.

Tellingly, the term egocentric did not arise until around the year 1900, and "self" words like "self-centered" arose after the Middle Ages.[4] Modern people tend to impose their assumptions onto the past—what Lewis called "chronological snobbery," characterized by "the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate of our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that count discredited."[5] Lewis understood that modern cosmology had superseded the medieval model in terms of scientific accuracy, but he insisted that how a culture imagines the universe reveals its moral framework (15). To modern secular people, the cosmos is a mechanical system devoid of intrinsic meaning. The medieval vision, by contrast, conveyed

[1] For an excellent introduction to Lewis' arguments about the contrasts between medieval and modern worldviews and imaginations, including his thoughts on the practical implications of cosmological models, see Jason M. Baxter's *The Medieval Mind of C. S. Lewis: How Great Books Shaped a Great Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022).

[2] C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 62.

[3] Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 63.

[4] Oxford English Dictionary, "egocentric (adj. & n.)," December 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1208286259.

[5] C. S. Lewis, *The Beloved Works of C. S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy* (Edison, NJ: International Press, 2004), 114.

moral order and purpose: a "Great Chain of Being that stretches from God to the lowest form of inorganic life" (7).

The *Ransom Trilogy*, published at the height of wartime instability and fear of a dystopian future between 1938 and 1945, pulled Lewis's interest in cosmological models and worldviews together. These novels are lesser known to the average Christian, offering less "sound bite" or sermon-illustration kind of material than *The Screwtape Letters* or *Mere Christianity*. Heavy with references to Arthurian legend, philosophy ranging from Plato to Nietzsche, and other science fiction such as that written by H.G. Wells and Olaf Stapledon, the barrier to entry feels higher than Lewis's other fiction. Such a statement is ironic, points out Rhys Laverty, the editor of this volume of essays about the trilogy. The novels highlight the ills of modernity with unparalleled prescience; yet, Laverty argues, the barrier to entry is not intellectual difficulty but the modern reader's estrangement from the classical and theological scaffolding that once made such works approachable (xi). Reflecting on lacking the context that earlier readers may have taken for granted, Laverty observes, "The series may still have been relatively accessible in its day, but ironically it has become less so in ours precisely due to the modern ills about which it warns us. It is not so much that the barrier to entry has become higher over time; rather we, having received educations that were neither scientific nor classical . . . have sunk lower and lower" (xi). The volume's essays aim to restore that lost context.

The authors—academics, pastors, and cultural commentators—take up Lewis's challenge to confront the modern worldview with theological imagination. Each essay connects aspects of the trilogy to concrete realities of Christian life today. Joe Rigney, author of *Live Like a Narnian: Christian Discipleship in Lewis's Chronicles*, explains how *Out of the Silent Planet* critiques a "despairing and terrifying nightmare engendered by scientistic mythology and carried forward by

greed, lust for power, and technological mastery of man's environment and eventually man himself" (31). When the transcendent order is lost, what remains is nihilism, totalitarianism, and moral relativism. Lewis somehow saw that doing away with transcendence—and the requisite sources of traditional authority and morality—would result in "progress" characterized by a class of scientistic technocrats attempting to replace the Creator and become gods themselves.

Lewis saw what was coming for traditional concepts of gender, too. Colin Smothers, executive director of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, writing on masculinity in *Out of the Silent Planet*, argues that Elwin Ransom's transformation under the influence of Mars (named after the Roman god of war) from a man characterized by passivity to a man of action reflects not brute aggression but courageous, virtuous knighthood. Ransom's willingness to embrace danger and obey God in the face of the terror of his own potential annihilation reframes masculinity as fortitude. Smothers notes, "'Martianity,' mature masculinity, is the disciplined warrior enlisted in the cause of righteousness, who is fearless and courageous, even to the point of death on behalf of his beloved" (66–71).

The authors also take up one of modernity's central casualties: the natural body in its natural world. From transgenderism and transhumanism to virtual reality and AI, Laverty and others argue that the body is being reduced to an inconvenience or a raw material to be manipulated.[6] In his chapter on *Perelandra*, Laverty highlights how the temptations of the Green

[6] Keith Lowery gives an apt example of our modern push toward disembodiment when discussing "reality privilege." He writes about an interview with technologist Marc Andreessen in which "Andreessen was asked if he thought that technology perhaps made us too connected and virtualized in ways that were unhelpful to human psychology. He responded by suggesting that such a notion might itself be an artifact of 'reality privilege': 'Your question is a great example of what I call Reality Privilege. . . . A small percent of people live in a real-world environment that is rich, even overflowing, with glorious substance, beautiful settings, plentiful stimulation, and many fascinating people to talk to, and to work with, and to date. These are also all of the people who get to ask probing questions like yours. Everyone else, the vast majority of humanity, lacks Reality Privilege – their online world is, or will be, immeasurably richer and more fulfilling than most of the physical and social environment around them in the quote-unquote real world. . . . We should build – and we are building – online worlds that make

Lady on the unfallen Venus-like planet of Perelandra mirror the modern discontent with natural things. The Un-Man, a scientist so driven by megalomaniac visions of technological progress that he has lost his humanity, attempts to convince the Green Lady not to accept the good things God has given her in every moment but to always think of what else there might be. Rather than accepting the goodness of her embodied moment, she is urged to yearn for "other fruit"—a metaphor for constant dissatisfaction and restlessness (144). Laverty says that today "we can live in an alternate present in which our closest companions are not those in the same house or town as us but people on the other side of the world. . . . We can ignore the pleasures on offer in the same room for those offered in the digital ether. . . . This makes the real fruit given to us in our God-ordained time and place insipid with thoughts of other fruit" (144). Growth in sanctification, Lewis implies, consists in learning to embrace what God has given in the here and now (144). Laverty continues, "The tantalizing prospect of 'a better offer' constantly presents itself to us, but must be refused – it is the tool of the Enemy" (144).

This theme of embracing the will of God continues in *That Hideous Strength*, where the Arthurian image of Logres—a hidden faithful remnant—contrasts sharply with the modern conception of the global technocratic organization that seeks to dominate nature and human beings to quench its thirst for money and power. Holly Ordway observes that Lewis affirms the "irreducibly incarnational quality of Christianity" through this imagery (268). Salvation comes not through grand, centrally organized systems but through humble obedience by flawed individuals. She writes, "The entire planet and all of humanity is threatened by The Hideous

life and work and love wonderful for everyone, no matter what level of reality deprivation they find themselves in.' Don't miss the essential point being made here: a disembodied, virtual existence is not only good; it is an actual matter of equality and justice." Keith Lowery, "The Gnostic Thread: The Anti-Christian Rush Toward Disembodiment," *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* 38, no. 3 (2025): 31.

Strength, but it is not saved by some supra-national organization. Rather, Tellus [Earth] is saved by Logres" (268). Logres, the name for the kingdom of the legendary King Arthur, comprises the novel's odd assortment of regular individuals (and a couple of bears) who are simply living out their true callings by accepting their weaknesses, repenting, growing in self-knowledge, and embracing what God made them to be. Prosaic obedience saves the world.

Michael Ward, author of *Planet Narnia* and *After Humanity*, echoes this focus on the incarnational aspect of the individual living to please God. In his discussion of Mark and Jane, an estranged married couple who play pivotal roles in *That Hideous Strength*, Ward contends that the couple's rejection of "matrimony" (literally, "mother-making") stems from contraceptive self-will: a desire to control life rather than receive it. By using contraception to "subdue reality" and determine their own destinies, they resist God's design for them—to cultivate "moral character appropriate to their physiological natures" (157). Over time, each is transformed—Mark by facing the moral cost of his compromises and Jane through encounters with others who live faithfully. Ward argues that healing comes through repentance and a return to their God-given nature (157).

For Lewis, gender represented "ground zero" for civilization. Gender is not a cultural construct but a reflection of cosmic reality. In his analysis of *That Hideous Strength*, Joseph Minich notes that the dystopia Lewis envisions emerges when sexual distinction is erased, arguing, "At the root of Lewis's dystopian vision lies a world in which the tensions between the sexes have been obliterated by a sexless, posthuman regime. . . . The healing of the conflict is not portrayed as a frontal negotiation between Mark and Jane, but occurs in the individual engagement of each soul with God. . . . [Mark and Jane] are brought together having chosen to take on their manly and womanly vocation *whether or not the other does*" (208).

Christiana Hale concludes with a reflection on obedience as a decisive act grounded in the present. Drawing on *The Screwtape Letters*, she reminds readers that "true obedience . . . is found only in the present. It is not enough to be planning to be obedient at some distant point in the future, a future that may or may not come to exist. . . . The one who truly understands the nature of obedience is in fact the one who has been obedient in the trenches, despite all temptations to the contrary" (97). The Christian calling, according to Lewis and echoed throughout these essays, is not abstract idealism or utopian engineering, but grounded faithfulness—here and now, in one's body, vocation, and community.

Life on the Silent Planet offers both academic rigor and spiritual nourishment. Its contributors engage Lewis's imaginative theology to address contemporary issues of technology, personhood, gender, and morality. Whether for longtime admirers of the *Ransom Trilogy* or newcomers to Lewis's science fiction, the collection provides rich interpretive tools for understanding his vision of a divinely ordered cosmos. Ultimately, this book does more than interpret Lewis; it calls readers to embody the virtues his body of writing celebrates—humility, obedience, courage, and a reverent acceptance of God-created reality. In an era dominated by disembodied technologies and moral confusion, Laverty and his collaborators invite the modern Christian to recover the wisdom of a cosmos alive with divine meaning.