

The Wright Report

Narnia Remains

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On Nov. 22, 1963, all of America and much of the world were thinking about only one thing: the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Kennedy's shocking death absorbed global consciousness for perfectly understandable reasons. Yet that same day, nearly 4,700 miles away from Dallas, C.S. Lewis also passed away in his Oxford home. Lewis was not an obscure figure by any reasonable standard, for he was a world-renowned fantasy author and had been on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1947. Yet in the days that followed, Kennedy's murder, with all the upending of the American presidency and tumultuous cultural landscape it portended, eclipsed Lewis's passing. But sixty years later, Lewis still speaks.



But it seems that history has rendered a different verdict. Lewis and Kennedy represent two very different but oddly connected interpretations of the modern age. Kennedy's humanistic, hedonistic idealism—the Camelot of lunar ascent and social justice and sexual liberation—epitomized the 1960s, indeed creating much of American social and political culture in its image. On the other side, Narnia—the kingdom of mere

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Christianity, of “true myth” and virtue and a world one cannot just “see through” — cut an archaic figure in a modern world that was allegedly leaving religion behind.

Is there any doubt which of these two legacies looks stronger, more prophetic, more likely to meet the needs of the moment right now?

Kennedy’s liberal Catholicism became a cultural touchstone, a metaphor for an emerging American synthesis of faith and self-determining autonomy. This was the eager expectation of everyone from the “modernist” theologians—who stripped Christianity of its metaphysics—to the commercial advocates of abortion and birth control. These drew strict borders around a now-demythologized religion.

What’s more, Kennedy symbolized the sexual revolution in all its debonair vice. His well-documented escapades seemed right in step with the mood of the 1960s. This era was proof, it seemed, that modern people could throw off the repressive demands of Christian morality and invent a newer, more sophisticated, more “compassionate” society.

Lewis’s entire life seemed to point in the completely opposite direction. The man who was a settled atheist by his 20s would later observe that modernist theology is something only lifelong Christians could invent, since “when unbelievers come in all, they come in a good deal further.” And indeed, Lewis came in much further. He did not see the point in worshiping a god who would merely command, “Follow thy heart.” “Christianity, if true, is of utmost importance,” he would write. “If it is false, it is of no importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.”

Precisely because Lewis knew that the claims of Christianity were all-encompassing, he recognized that no civilization that abandoned it could function. This was not because Lewis desired some kind of baptized Anglo-Saxon ethnonationalist state (born in Belfast, Lewis never forgot the high cost of religious intolerance), but because modern man’s alternatives were quite literally inhumane. Lewis saw from afar, with striking prescience, that humans had no choice but to retreat from personhood if they wanted to escape the implications of Christian revelation. In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis would declare that “Man’s conquest of Nature,” —that is, the quest to overcome first principles and natural law— “turns out, in the moment of its consummation, to be Nature’s conquest of Man.” Eighty years from its original publication in 1943, *The Abolition of Man* still speaks.

“Man conquered by nature” could well be the headline summary of the post-1960s West. How did Lewis see this? Part of the answer is that Lewis was deeply rooted in the past. His scholarly magnum opus, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, took Lewis deep into the thought patterns and values of older generations. It was Lewis’s habit of “breaking bread with the dead” (as W.H. Auden put it) that laid bare the pretentiousness

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of the contemporary consensus. How else could Lewis warn of “chronological snobbery,” or observe in *The Screwtape Letters* that “jargon, not argument,” is the way Satan keeps people away from Christ?

By the mid 1960s, American society was determined to divorce its past. Five months before Lewis and Kennedy died, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that public schools could no longer require prayer or Bible recitation. It was a confident decision (8 to 1), the kind that made sense in a world of dazzling social progress like the Apollo program and the birth control pill. Yet the view from our own day reveals that Lewis was right and Camelot was wrong. We are more, not less, like the ones who have become before. Postmodern sensibilities and contemporary technology have not revealed more happiness to us; instead, we are left trying to figure out the meaning of words like “man,” “woman,” and “friend.”

Camelot came to a violent end. But Narnia remains.

It is a remarkable providence that John F. Kennedy and C.S. Lewis died on the same day. It is likewise remarkable that while Kennedy obtained the most powerful office in the world, it is the professor, the letter writer, and the storyteller Lewis whose prophetic voice rings out most audibly and most wisely from the grave. Political power does not a wise man make. This will be something worth remembering 60 years from now.

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