

Of this and Other Worlds: C.S. Lewis on business

TRANSFORMING BUSINESS

by Peter S. Heslam



C.S. Lewis has probably done more than any other modern writer to help Christians engage positively, creatively and imaginatively with contemporary culture. In his day, as in ours, one of the most pervasive and influential dimensions of culture is business. Fifty years after Lewis' death, Peter Heslam argues that his attitude towards business largely reflects the spirit of his age.

Some Christians justify their innate antipathy towards business by appealing to the teachings of the early church expounded by the Church Fathers or encapsulated in the New Testament. But the origins of this attitude are often far more recent. While some of them lie in the Victorian novel, many are rooted in the period between the two World Wars. To British intellectuals and others in the higher social classes at this time, a career in business was often seen as a dull and contemptible way of life.

As this period - the 'interbellum' - coincided with Lewis' conversion and formation as one of the 20th century's greatest Christian intellectuals, it is unsurprising that he harboured similar misgivings. Once he expressed utter disdain for the car manufacturer William Morris (Viscount Nuffield), Oxford's biggest employer at the time and one of the University's most generous benefactors. Comparing Cambridge - to where he moved in 1954 to take up a professorial chair - to Oxford, where he spent most of his career, he wrote to an American pen-friend:

Cambridge is charming. No Lord Nuffield (drat that man!) has come to turn it into a huge industrial city, and one can still feel the country-town under the academic surface. In that way it is more like what Oxford was in my young days.

And he once wrote with disdain about the current 'Managerial Age':

The greatest evil is not now done in those sordid 'dens of crime' that Dickens loved to paint... But it is conceived and ordered (moved, seconded, carried, and minuted) in clean, carpeted, warmed, and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voice.

For Lewis, the excessive value that was placed on buying and selling should be countered by a healthy disdain: 'The distrust or contempt of trade which we find in earlier societies should not be too hastily set down as mere snobbery'.

Precedents for Lewis' attitude are manifold amongst interbellum writers. J. B. Priestley reproached 'the shoddy, greedy, profit grabbing, joint-stock company industrial system we'd allowed to dominate us' as the real villain in English society. H.G. Wells, likewise, dismissed entrepreneurs as belonging to:

the urban variation of the peasant type, for whom urban property, money, and visible triumph over one's neighbour are the criteria for success. (...). And to this day the typical face of the big industrialist and the big financier has a boorish quality. ▶▶

▶▶ ‘Successful business is devastatingly uninteresting’ is the way one of the characters in a novel by C.P. Snow puts it. Even children’s literature reflects this phenomenon, for example in the attitudes expressed by George Banks, the London banker, in P.L. Travers’ 1934 novel *Mary Poppins*.

British aloofness towards trade vexed American visitors. The American educator Abraham Flexner who reported on British universities, noted in 1930:

Practical courses in salesmanship are conspicuous by their absence. The teaching staff are not unfamiliar with American developments, but they are out of sympathy with them. They do not pretend to be practical men capable of advising business concerns; no member of the business or commerce faculty at Manchester has any remunerative connection with industry...they have also found that successful businessmen have nothing to tell their students.

The contrast between the British attitude to William Morris (1877-1963) and the



William Morris the car manufacturer (1877-1963)

American attitude to his older contemporary and fellow car manufacturer Henry Ford (1863-1947) is particularly striking. Whereas Ford became a folk-hero, attracting both fame and controversy, Morris was generally ignored. A consequence of this

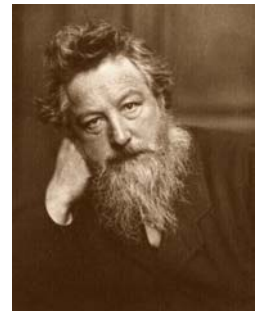
attitudinal situation is that pre-World War Two Britain produced no more than a handful of university business departments, which meant British companies were denied research expertise and able recruits.

Some rebelled, of course, against the prejudices of their parents. Ian MacLaurin, formerly chairman of Tesco and Vodaphone, who was born in 1937, writes in his autobiography about the snobbish anti-trade sentiments of his mother. But amongst those graduating from Cambridge University in

1937-8, fewer sons followed their fathers into business than into any other vocation.

Interbellum negativity towards commerce has proved resilient. The obituary columns of newspapers have shown a relative disinterest in lives spent in business. When historians refer to William Morris it is generally to the

Victorian writer, designer and socialist activist, who targeted his products to the rich, rather than his namesake and fellow Oxfordian who sought to make cars for all.



William Morris the textile designer (1834-1896)

Likewise, entries for business people in the monumental 61 volume *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* are disproportionately fewer than for other major professions. The legacy of such attitudes, which in Christian circles has been strengthened from the 1960s by the impact of liberation theology, is that contemporary business is more frequently seen as the problem, rather than part of the solution, to social ills.

Mistrust towards business can of course be deserved. In recent years, major commercial institutions have been found guilty of a catalogue of errors. Against this background, Lewis’ qualms, however much they were shaped by the culture of his day, reflect in part his prophetic insight. The challenge for us is to imitate him in striving to see the world through Christian spectacles, however much



C.S. Lewis the prophetic author (1898-1963)

the lenses get sullied. As partakers of this and other worlds we need to be able to say with him: ‘I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.’ ■

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