

CATHEDRAL COSMOS: A GLANCE HEAVENWARD INTO THE MEDIEVAL MODEL

Jason Monroe on Avoiding
Chronological Snobbery

My appetite for exploring England could not have been better whetted than by soaking up the smooth prose of the Zaleskis' Inklings study, *The Fellowship*; enjoying Tolkien's tale of Roverandom's adventures on the moon and under the sea; and delighting in the witticisms of Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*. It was an Apologetics in Oxford graduate course occasioning this trip East across the Atlantic. To prepare, mostly I read the Inklings (C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and others). Encountering their shared dreams, discussions, and debates, I longed to engage in dialectic all my own with classmates and professors. The histories of the Inklings and of Oxford afford rich literary and philosophical wells to plumb, but one particular imaginative region attracted me. This major source of the Inklings' stylistic and topical bent is the medieval cosmological model. It is embedded in Oxford's intellectual and aesthetic history, and into this I plunged headlong amid stones, trees, "dreaming spires," and stories that seemed to reach into the present

from some distant, fantastic past.¹ After this singular journey, fed along the way by years of scholarship, I find great value in arguing for a deeper engagement with the old model — today largely unknown or misunderstood — and the imaginative and spiritual benefits it can bestow.

Places often serve as seedbeds for ideas. To understand the Inklings more clearly, the vestiges of their culture enshrined in Oxford were quite instructive. Of course, culture is like cuisine: one can attempt a description, but it can only be fully known by taste. To use Lewis's terms as he stood in a toolshed, regarding the dust in a ray of light, one can "look along" or "look at" the beam — to immerse oneself in or merely analyze it, respectively.² My trip to Oxford helped me to "look along" or experience the English culture, as my reading had "looked at" it from the outside. Hints of an ancient mindset, much relegated to the closets of history, began to emerge, as did the sun when Lewis "looked along" the beam.

The experience of a new culture is similar to that of art. Here, too, Lewis's advice is apt: "The first demand any work of any art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. (There is no good asking first whether the work before you deserves such a surrender, for until you have surrendered you cannot possibly find out.)"³ Even present-day Oxford is suitable

¹ Matthew Arnold's poem *Thyrsis* describes Oxford as ". . . that sweet city with her dreaming spires / She needs not June for beauty's heightening."

² C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 212.

³ C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 19.

for an initial taste of the medieval mind and lifestyle. Whoever is willing to put aside his analyst's cap and to partake in a stroll on Addison's Walk, a lecture at a college, or a bit of research at the Bodleian, will find new insights yielded up as flowers blooming in Spring. Not to mention the old architecture, featuring a lecture on an arch here, a sermon in stone there, where enough exists to fill volumes of books if one wishes.

One lecture cemented in Oxford's art and architecture is the Ptolemaic model of the cosmos which dominated for centuries after Aristotle. The accuracy of this model's astronomy was a work-in-progress, so the question is understandable, "Why emphasize a disproved hypothesis?" Recalling the three Transcendentals — truth, goodness, and beauty — the accuracy of a scientific theory only falls under truth; there is still goodness and beauty to be considered, and these latter two mostly concern us presently. About Lewis's consideration of the pre-modern model, Michael Ward writes, "The wise man does not think only in the category of truth; the category of beauty is also worth thinking in."⁴ Assuredly, credit is due to the Romantic strain in art and philosophy for bestowing equally valid knowledge related to goodness and beauty. A past age, despite incorrect astronomy, could still wisely comment on topics outside science's jurisdiction, like values, meaning, free will, and mysticism. The medieval model enlarges upon these integral pieces to the puzzle of a happy, complete life, giving it a value that speaks beyond the confines of rationalism or empiricism.

⁴ Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia* (New York: OUP, 2008), 27.

Lewis credits his fellow Inkling Owen Barfield with helping him overcome “Chronological Snobbery” — “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited.”⁵ In a world where science is the only road to truth, an easy trap for tech-driven moderns is quickly to patronize a less technological past. Who would reject the cushy, climate-controlled car for the rough, exposed horse-drawn carriage? At best, the label “medieval” implies something outmoded and unenlightened; at worst, irrational and barbarous. But as Barfield helped Lewis jettison the illogicality that his epoch trumped the past simply because it was past, our present age should realize how often it uncritically rejects older outlooks. We could cite much in rich invention, intellectual and material, from before and during the middle ages, but our present focus only allows an exploration of the imaginative effect of their cosmology.

In the imaginative mine of aesthetic Oxford and Inklings Studies, the gem of the medieval model is an instance where medieval thought, considered holistically, is likely superior to modern thought. This is because, to the imagination, it packs much more than our current astronomy implies. Structurally, this geocentric model puts the planets in concentric circles: the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Beyond Saturn is the *Stellatum* (the sphere of fixed stars), then the *Primum Mobile* (sustaining motion in the lower spheres), and finally the *Empyrean* (the immaterial abode of God). Familiarity with the physical

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, 1955) 207.

arrangement is important even if we are concerned mostly with its imaginative impact. This is because even the physical make-up is beautiful, *per se*. There can be much unseen meaning behind, say, a sculpture, but if the visual aspect lacks proportion and balance, few will probe further into the abstract message contained within.

In “Imagination and Thought in the Middle Ages,” Lewis unpacks how the old model brightened the minds of its adherents. After all, the complementarity between orderly cosmos and orderly minds is only common sense: medieval people — like their cosmology — had “a place for everything, and everything in its (right) place.” The typical disposition was to be bookish and clerky and constantly to seek organization.⁶ Given the primary place of religion for them, it is no surprise that they recognized an organizing Maker in the stars since nature readily yields up what corresponds to the mind investigating her. Around Newton’s time, people “began to take the models, whether geometrical or mechanical, literally” and as final truth (instead of as hypotheses). This, and being “more and more surrounded by artificial machinery,” contributed to a materialist, mechanomorphic temper.⁷ But the medieval distinction between personal and impersonal principles retains what George MacDonald’s Lilith saw during her conversion — the “central fire of the universe,” giving her knowledge, and being fed by the “Light of Life,” which is

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 44.

⁷ Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances* (Oxford: Barfield Press, 2011), 52.

the “heart of that fire.”⁸ Lilith submits to the truth embodied in the Ptolemaic model and in the Oxford architecture it influenced: that the existence of personal creatures demands a personal creator.

Hopefully the curious inquirer will see past the medieval model’s obsolete astronomy and realize fully understanding it requires “looking along” instead of solely “looking at” (as discussed above). Upon laboratory analysis, a lover’s adoration for the beloved appears as a mere chemical phenomenon, but to the lover, it is heavily drenched in meaning and purpose, the essence of which only he can perceive. The same obtains with a worldview: it has measurable *and* nonmeasurable (experiential) aspects. A case in point is that the terminus of the pre-Copernican system, calculated to be millions of miles closer than we know the stars to be, was still a boggling distance to the imagination. Therefore, a king or queen could gaze up from their castle’s tower and, like us today, be in awe of the massive expanse of their heavens, even if it was finite in the end. Despite the old model’s quantitative difference from the new, it possessed a great ability to inspire wonder and provide prideful humanity with a humble perspective.

The architectonic beauty of the old model holds a key to re-orienting the straying human spirit. For example, looking heavenward takes on a new (literal) meaning, given an objective up and down, which hints toward deliberate arrangement and away from chaos and chance. This experiment’s distinctive thrill is neutralized by heliocentrism’s lack of universal directions. People a

⁸ George MacDonald, *Lilith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 201-202.

thousand years ago easily would have grasped earthward as down and skyward as up. The medieval cosmos expands upward from the terrestrial to the celestial, complementing and encouraging a natural sense of height. The concentric crystal spheres of the planets with their presiding intelligences expand through Space (in a different sense), not dark and empty, but bright with light and thick with angelic society. Past the moon's orbit, all "was necessary, regular, and eternal, all below it, contingent, irregular and perishable. And of course, for any Greek, what is necessary and eternal is more divine."⁹ One is put in mind of a cathedral's ascendant spiritual layering: progressing in sacredness from narthex to nave to altar, with stained-glass saints peering down from the clerestory. Almost wholly absent from current cosmology, the medieval structure has innate glory able to confer aesthetic and theological benefit to anyone who contemplates it with an open mind.

I saw first-hand how Oxford displays much of the artistic offspring of the medieval *weltanschauung*.¹⁰ The old model populates the heavens with a hierarchical array of spiritual beings, such as demons, longaevi, angels, and archangels; in the city's architecture, life and agency cling to and lodge in the graying stone of the buildings. Attesting to this are gargoyles with their myriad laughing or scowling faces, perched on parapets or gurgling into gutters. Angels in apses and saints in alcoves hint at a universe filled with more personality than can be apprehended by the senses. Apparently, the

⁹ Lewis, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, 42.

¹⁰ "Worldview"; From the German *welt* 'world' and *anschauung* 'perception'.

builders aimed to proclaim to skeptics that there is more to life than meets the eye — a hidden world bursting and teeming behind the veil of matter. Skillfully-wrought carvings and statues of more than average men and women evince that the supernatural was attended to and even worshiped.

The various kings, academics, and saints depicted on domes and walls evoke a sense of being “surrounded by so great a great cloud of witnesses,” which look down on humanity, urging it on toward the divine and praying for it.¹¹ Like the poet skillfully, yet imperfectly, incarnates his ideas in words, these ancient sculptors captured in statues and buildings imagined ideals of saints and supersensible beings. These creations represent a comprehensive picture of reality in which humanity is not alone in a lifeless universe where consciousness is an unusual, temporary anomaly. They instead manifest personality and purpose, playing a central role and even pointing towards a greater being or designer.

The architecture that impresses most people today is exemplified in massive city skylines. It has a certain grandeur, but contrasting with our present theme, it is polished clean of vestiges of life and will — is stark, towering, bleak, and impersonal. Nancy Pearcey, critiquing the popular International Style (most skyscrapers), writes, “This style can be considered a visual expression of logical positivism . . . their slogans were . . . Cut the clutter! Clear away moldings, cornices, scrolls, and gingerbread!”¹² Today’s formalism wipes the slate clean of mysticism leaving pure, hard rationalism.

¹¹ Heb. 12:1, NABRE.

¹² Nancy Pearcey, *Saving Leonardo* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 161.

However, Oxford's old architecture transports one back to when wisdom was anchored in divinity — to when people understood that reason participates with transcendence and that nature is intelligible because intelligence sustains it. These predecessors acknowledged logic, but only because it sprang mystically from the Word, Himself, who precedes all other words. Epistemologically, the International Style and similar movements cut off the branch they sit on: they think consciousness can emerge from the inherently unconscious and meaning from the intrinsically meaningless, but medieval art nurtures its knowledge-branches and remains connected to its roots in transcendence.

Another insight from strolling Oxford's streets and hearing lectures on its past is the parallel between the imaginative impact of the medieval cosmos and of art. Regardless of medium, art uniquely touches the human heart: it exposes voids in our being which can only be filled in a certain way. On the effect of music in her life, Holly Ordway writes, "[Christmas] music formed a little space in my soul, like a cup waiting to be filled, that by its very shape suggested something was meant to go there."¹³ Likewise, churches, their images, and celebrations have virtually always held a special place in our collective soul. The medieval model, viewed in its splendor as art, impresses the same aesthetic significance as do paintings, stained glass, and other creative media. Oxford's creaking doors, pointed arches, and tall turrets are a visual hagiography akin to how the

¹³ Holly Ordway, *Not God's Type* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2014), 22.

stars would remind an ancient of the angelic intelligences steering Venus or Mars. In this pre-Enlightenment era, it was natural to expect the supernatural behind a tree or around a corner, under the Earth or far above it.

In another way, there is a qualitative chasm between the past and the present cosmic ideas. The imaginative import of today's model mirrors the plight of a lost city-wanderer. Cosmic hierarchy is abolished, Earth has no significant locale, and humanity finds itself drowned in a trackless sea of dead space, gas giants, black holes, and supernovae. People may manufacture meaning from immediate experience, but there is no objective meaning in modern science — no fixed teleology for humanity in the endless, indifferent churning of atoms down through the ages. We may ask the philosophers (like a wanderer asking directions) for life's goal, but answers differ as widely as the varying biases underpinning them.

Modern science renders humanity insignificant relative to a huge, uncaring universe. Interestingly, the old cosmology also makes Earth and its inhabitants small compared to the colossal cosmos, but also small (figuratively) to its good components. The countless beings immortalized in Oxford's buildings also spoke to this not unwholesome realization. Lewis notes, "Theology might be thought to imply an Earth which counted for a good deal in the universe," but "the odd thing is that their cosmology does not, in any obvious sense, encourage this view."¹⁴ In other words, Nature is imperfect and fallen — the "cosmic dust-bin," where the universe's inferior parts have collected. This does not

¹⁴ Lewis, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, 46.

differ much from humanity's speck-of-dust insignificance according to the modern model.¹⁵ But importantly, this "dustbin theory" does not preclude the external help of God's love and providence if people are to know truth and salvation. Sure, there are many greater beings than man in the Great Chain of Being (comprising no less than nine levels of angels as one climbs the celestial ladder upward). The key is that far from despair at dark cosmic loneliness, this should inspire spiritual health, humility, and a yearning to grow in virtue, aided by the impeccable beings beyond the moon.

Oxford left me with a new conception of a hallowed worldview in which the imagination glimpses truth and goodness in nature as a sculptor sees saints in a block of wood or piece of granite. Thinkers from Boethius to Aquinas to Dante crafted works with words and metaphors shining with beauty and truth. Did not the Ptolemaic system provide the sunlit terraces on which Dante could carefully raise his *Divine Comedy*? What if one began to see the night sky at least with eyes of renewed aesthetic appreciation? If so, and if she happens to be that lost city-wanderer (having read all the wrong books), she may just see a flicker of meaning up above, a reminder of goodness, constancy, even divine faithfulness.

¹⁵ Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 63.

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