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## Cs lewis on the incarnation

Workers in a building in Sao Paulo, Brazil, by Guilherme Cunha, Unsplash, free use First, my apologies to regular readers and subscribers for disappearing for a while. For the past 6-9 months (or more), this blog has been offline, for reasons still not entirely clear to me, but seeming to have to do with its attachment to an old email address to which I no longer had access. But even before that, I had for years not updated the blog on any but the most sporadic basis. I intend for that to change now, as I am working on a new book (on which, more anon) and will most likely blog through the process as I did with Medieval Wisdom for Modern Christians, published back in 2016. So, as a first shot across the bow . . . [The talk from which the following is excerpted was presented by Dr. Chris R. Armstrong at the Ciceronian Society annual meeting at Grove City College in March, 2022. As always, this material is not to be reproduced or distributed in any form without the express permission of the author.] Introduction: Disenchantment and the sacred-secular divide The faith-work problematic American Christians has been wrestling with a problem for decades. The problem is that many Christians in this country experience a separation in our lives between supposedly sacred activities and supposedly secular activities – and that furthermore our work, which may in the end account for some 100,000 hours of our lives, falls largely in the latter category. You may say, “Wait a minute – what about the torrent of books, blogs, websites, podcasts, and conferences on this subject in the last few decades? Are we really still unable to resolve this existential issue?” And I would respond, “Yes, because we still have no stable, faithful, well-worked-out theological understanding of what work is and how it relates to central teachings of our faith.” In other words, despite some excellent scholarly treatments, the faith and work conversation remains largely ungrounded in three ways: philosophically, theologically, and importantly, historically. Having by the mid-nineteenth century discarded much of the Christian knowledge tradition, American Christianity—or at least, American Protestantism—now unsurprisingly finds itself with precious few resources to address what, at the very least, must be seen as a colossal failure of pastoral care. In this paper, I propose that the longstanding and biblically faithful tradition of Christian humanism—a philosophy of culture that is faithful to central biblically derived doctrines—can and should provide this tripartite grounding, and that scholars who are engaging the faith and work conversation should be recovering and drawing from that tradition today. Shortly we’ll turn to both the distinguishing marks and a skeleton history of Christian humanism. What is work? But first we need to define “work.” In harmony with others in this conversation, I use this word as if it was always preceded by two presumptive adjectives: “culture-creating” and “economic.” By “culture-creating,” I mean that work is organized creative and ameliorative activity in the material and social world that intends to improve the lives of the worker, their family, their community, and society as a whole. By “economic,” I mean that work creates value for others that is exchanged in the market and other civic institutions and that by this creation and exchange, wealth is created that benefits both producers and the consumers. Two glosses are important here. First, the word “wealth” is directly derived from older terms meaning “well-being” – or as we typically translate now, “flourishing.” My use of the term “wealth” therefore means to include goods that go well beyond money. And second, I understand “civic institutions” to include non-profit organizations and families. Taking both of these glosses together, this is to say that I recognize non-remunerated work as nonetheless creating value that is communicated (or often “exchanged”) in non-market spaces. What is the problem? Now secondly, a few introductory words on the separation I suggest many American Christians experience between what we might call our “spiritual” lives and what we often think of as our workaday “secular” lives. While I am not suggesting that all lay Christians need to have a carefully worked-out and theologically grounded understanding of our work as I’ve just defined it, I do blame both the pastorate and our institutions of theological education for perpetuating, largely unintentionally, theological ideas that deepen rather than heal this separation. I can’t give anything like a full profile or explanation here of this culpability, but I see it has having at least two levels or horizons: The first is that without a faithful and full theology of the world, the church cannot equip its people with a compelling and faithful understanding of work. And in particular American evangelicalism (arguably still the culturally dominant form of Christianity in this country) has almost entirely failed to provide its people with an alternative to the modern scientific materialist disenchantment of the world. In fact it has deepened this disenchantment (or to put it plainly, this de-sacramentalizing) of the world—failing to provide a compelling theology of either the material or the social world within which our work takes place, and instead retreating theologically into a heavily spiritualized understanding of the gospel.[1] The second level or horizon of the sacred-secular problematic within American Christianity is that we lack a faithful and full theology of humanity. Instead, we have fallen into one of two kinds of inadequate thinking about human beings—largely depending on whether we are doing that thinking at work, or in church. At work, American Christians tend to think about humanity in ways that owe much more to biological, psychological, and sociological models than to theological models grounded in the doctrines of the creation and the incarnation. Just one example of this is the dominant model of the human person operative within modern economics: the human being as utility-maximizing rational-choice machine, where “utility” is typically defined in narrowly materialist terms. Thus do many providers of goods and services—whether people of Christian faith or not—fundamentally see their customers. On the other extreme, in church—and again I speak especially of American evangelical churches; the milieu I know best—we focus on what seems to us the “important” stuff about being a human: the spiritual stuff—for example having souls or spirits, being separated from God but enabled through Christ to access a way for reunion, and having our ultimate destiny “with God in heaven.” And we leave aside as spiritually irrelevant the “less important” or “not at all important” stuff of our physical and psychosocial makeup, the needs attending that makeup, and the various kinds of work we do to meet those needs. As a subset of these faulty or inadequate anthropologies, I would observe that we have in particular separated faith and reason in ways that would have been unrecognizable from at least the 12th through the 17th centuries—and should be highly suspect even today, for many of the same reasons that would have been articulated during that centuries-long pre-Enlightenment formative period. As a result, insofar as we have (quite rightly) seen our ordinary activities and duties of work largely in terms of the creative capabilities of human reason, we have almost completely cut off huge swathes of our work activity from our faith at a very basic intellectual level. And this despite the fact that a long tradition of Christian humanism has seen reason as the very essence of God’s image in humanity. [Next: Introducing Christian humanism] This article continues in part II. [1] There are two important bodies of modern Christian thought that do address the sacred-secular divide in philosophical, theological, and historical terms, but neither is widely read by evangelicals, and neither is wholly comfortable for many evangelicals. Those are modern Roman Catholic social teaching as it touches human work, and modern neo-Calvinist thought on what we might call worldly vocations. It is true of course that some evangelical thinkers are willing to engage Catholic social thought on matters of faith and work. And certainly some also work from the Neocalvinist stream to address questions related to material and social flourishing, starting with Rich Mouw and continuing with Vince Bacote, Matt Kaemingk, and quite a few others. And finally, there are a few broadly evangelical theological thinkers doing important constructive work on this problem “from within the camp,” including Miroslav Volf, Darrell Cosden, and Jonathan Pennington. But we have so far seen nothing like an evangelical theological consensus on how the church and individual Christians should think and act “for the life of the world” – an understanding or coherent set of understandings that could inform our seminaries and our churches.





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