

C.S. Lewis Then and Now, by Wesley Kort

reviewed by [Gilbert Meilaender](#) in the [April 10, 2002](#) issue

Here's a strange book. Wesley Kort wants to retrieve the thought of C. S. Lewis and make it more readily available and usable in our cultural context. Retrieve from whom? In general, it seems, from Christians who think of their faith as offering a kind of substitute world (in place of and in conflict with the surrounding culture). More specifically still, from evangelicals and Barthians or neo-Barthians for whom the central theological task is not sustaining the larger culture.

All of this I find extremely puzzling. It's not my impression that Barthians use Lewis all that much anyway, so why the need to retrieve him from them? Moreover, how, given his attitude toward Barthians, Kort can suppose (as he explicitly does) that Lewis influenced the (neo-Barthian) "Yale school" of theology baffles me. Many evangelicals do use Lewis, of course, and that seems to bother Kort greatly. But those who use Lewis are, at least in my experience, quite eager to think about the relation of their faith to the culture in which they live. Of course, perhaps they don't read either Lewis or the culture in quite the way Kort does. He is embarrassed by Lewis's enjoyment of hierarchy. He thinks Lewis's writings are racist, sexist and homophobic; none of that is to be retrieved. One wonders why he didn't just write his own book criticizing Christians who see their faith as inevitably in conflict with culture or developing his own theology of culture instead of trying to draw Lewis into such an unlikely project. Moreover, he manages to take a writer who is never merely abstract and always a pleasure to read and make his thought seem opaque. All in all, a strange book.

Kort's project of retrieval has a clear structure: three chapters developing aspects of Lewis's thought about culture, a central chapter on culture itself, three more chapters unfolding elements of Lewis's religious views in their relation to culture--all in service of the general thesis that the point of Christian faith is to make possible the celebration of the world. The church, then, is "the community of those who actively examine, clarify, and try to articulate the right relations between Christian

beliefs and the language of their culture."

Chapters 1-3 draw us into aspects of Lewis's thought about culture, enabling Kort to draw on Lewis the literary scholar and relate Lewis's thought to more recent developments in literary criticism. Chapter one, "Retrieval," reconstructs some ways in which Lewis thought Christianity was relevant to the English culture of his day. Chapter two, "Reenchantment," unpacks Lewis's sense of the world as enchanted and therefore able to draw us out of ourselves and our own concerns. Chapter three, "Houses," uses the metaphor of being at home and of a house as a spatial construction to explain Lewis's sense that the Christian account of the world is more adequate than other accounts. (However, when Kort interprets this as an invitation to be, in William James's words, "at home in the universe," one feels that he has entirely lost contact with the Lewis who penned, for example, "The Weight of Glory.")

Chapter four, "Culture," takes one into the heart of Kort's thesis, though it is no easy task to summarize that thesis, and I may not do it justice here. Putting it in my own terms that are not quite Kort's, I would say that he aims to turn away from a Christianity that emphasizes cross/resurrection and which therefore sees a kind of discontinuity between even the best of our culture and the new life in Christ. Instead, he wants to emphasize not new creation but, simply, creation. What the work of Christ does is make it possible for us to celebrate in all its diversity the world in which we live.

This is, I fear, far too simple a reading of Lewis, whose emphasis might best be said to be incarnational. When God in Christ takes our natural life into his own, that life is--for Lewis--not just celebrated but also transformed. I simply cannot make Kort's account fit, for example, the concluding chapter of *The Four Loves*, in which all our natural loves, in becoming "modes of charity," must undergo a kind of death. This book is late and mature Lewis, as is the almost esoteric *Till We Have Faces*, and both describe a God who puts to death our distorted natural loves.

Chapters 5-7 discuss character, pleasure and celebration respectively as angles of vision that we might retrieve from Lewis for our own time. One will find many useful observations about Lewis's thought scattered throughout these chapters; yet I cannot help thinking that Kort has the words but not the music. It seems foolhardy to try to use Lewis in service of a view that would be far stronger if developed independently and allowed to stand on all fours by itself.

In short, perhaps the best way to retrieve Lewis--or to measure the possibility or worth of such retrieval--would be just to return to his own work and see what one makes of it. Insofar as it is Kort's aim to encourage that, we should honor his intention.