**The Christian Intellectual Life and the Agnostic Bishop in *The Great Divorce***

*By Maria Keller, University of Notre Dame, March 2021*

The Christian life unites the intellect and the heart through prayer, and it is a great sin to separate the intellectual life from the heart, as the agnostic bishop does in the Great Divorce. The intellect deprived of prayerful humility becomes blinding rather than enlightening. Separating the intellect from the heart kills the whole person. The bishop’s utter confusion is terrifying, reminding the reader of the real danger of intellectual sins. The bishop views intellectual pursuits as ends in themselves, rather than a way to grow closer to God. I will approach my argument by explaining how the bishop perverts the intellect in light of *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*. I will first address the bishop’s irrationality, and how intellectual sins can dull the mind. I will then address the bishop’s distortion of the end of the intellect. I will finally explore the real end of the mind and why it must be unified with the heart, drawing from both *The Great Divorce*and *The Roots of Christian Mysticism.*The end of the intellect is union with God through deification, and the path to this deification necessitates humble purgation, a recognition of the limits of the intellect.

The reader first learns that the bishop prides himself on loving intellectual pursuits. He compares himself to the Spirit’s father, who “‘was never prepared to make great efforts’” and used to go to bed when they had theological discussions (Lewis 39). He implies that the Spirit’s father is innately indifferent to theology, which is why he decided not to go on the road-trip to Heaven. The bishop clearly derives great joy from theological discussions, and his curiosity appears to be his motivation for going to Heaven.

However, when the Spirit asks him if there is a real Heaven or Hell, he says, “‘Oh, in a spiritual sense, to be sure. I still believe in them in that way. I am still, my dear boy, looking for the Kingdom. But nothing superstitious or allegorical.’” (39). The bishop is unwilling to believe in a real, physical kingdom. The bishop has accepted a radically individualistic approach – he seems to believe that a spiritual heaven is contained within himself and his intellect. Yet, his claim is highly ironic and utterly ridiculous in light of his physical location. He is standing in Heaven, but he cannot see it, despite all his learning and academic success. The bishop’s pride in his intellectual prowess is repeatedly ironic. Later in the chapter, the bishop claims that he needs to go back to Hell (although he doesn’t call it Hell) to help the other scholars because their intellectual life is “‘Not of a very high quality, perhaps. One notices a certain lack of grip — a certain confusion of mind’” (46). He is exhibiting the same symptoms of intellectual vice he attributes to others, but he is too broken to see it. The bishop has become so confused that he believes the Spirit is arguing that the grey town is heaven in one sense. The grey town is either purgatory or hell, but in no sense is the grey town heaven. He praises the idea as “‘beautiful’” but doesn’t claim that it is necessarily true, or even that it matters whether it is true (39).

The bishop’s confusion arises from the misdirection of his intellect from its proper end to the point that he no longer recognizes the worst of intellectual sins, accepting heresy. The bishop accepts only some secondary sins of the intellect, including “‘hide-bound prejudice and intellectual dishonesty, and timidity, and stagnation’” but denies that “‘honest opinions fearlessly followed” are sins (40). To briefly return to the incoherence of the bishop’s approach to theology, he is already contradicting his previous approach. He didn’t praise the idea that the grey town is heaven as true, he didn’t “fearlessly follow” it, he merely praised it as beautiful. The Spirit confronts the bishop about how his ideas are not honest; rather, he desired praise and prestige, and so he only wrote and said what would be accepted by others (41).

The bishop’s dishonest intellectual life derives primarily from the misdirection of his desires. The motivation for his academic pursuits seems to be primarily pleasure from self-esteem and self-love. He tells the Spirit that “‘For me there is no such thing as a final answer. The free wind of inquiry must always continue to blow through the mind, must it not? ‘Prove all things’…to travel hopefully is better than to arrive’” (43-44). This statement is clearly irrational because one cannot travel hopefully without believing that there is a final destination, as the Spirit points out. The bishop no longer takes theology seriously, he seems to view it as a sort of game, from which to derive pleasure. He views this pleasure as the ultimate goal in his life, and so he has no desire to transcend it. He has no desire to progress in his intellectual life, to believe in truth, because he would have to be purged of his pride in his own cleverness. He refuses to admit the truth in ideas, and only calls them ‘beautiful’ or ‘interesting.’ The pleasure from intellectual prowess is not bad in itself, but if it is viewed as the primary and only end of the intellect, it can undermine the ascent of the mind to God.

Eventually, the Spirit pleads with the bishop to take on a child-like perspective again, and says, “Once you knew what inquiry was for. There was a time when you asked questions because you wanted answers, and were glad when you had found them. Become that child again: even now” (44). The bishop must be humbled. He must accept that the advancement of his powers of reason cannot be the only purpose of intellect. Otherwise, the intellect would be entirely self-centered, and wisdom could be regarded as nothing more than sophistry, only enriching the clever. The Spirit criticizes the bishop’s approach to activities of the mind, saying, “‘You have gone far wrong. Thirst was made for water; inquiry for truth. What you now call the free play of inquiry has neither more nor less to do with the ends for which intelligence was given you than masturbation has to do with marriage’” (45).

The bishop turned intellectual pursuits into ends in themselves because he was afraid of real spirituality, leading him to worship intellectual pursuits instead of God. The Spirit has recognized that this fear was the real motivation behind their so-called ‘honest opinions’: “We didn’t *want* the other to be true. We were afraid of crude salvationism, afraid of a breach with the spirit of the age, afraid of ridicule, afraid (above all) of real spiritual fears and hopes” (41). For the bishop, the intellectual life has become a barrier to spiritual openness and vulnerability, willingness to listen and abide by God’s will. His intellect is a defense mechanism: he redirects from real spiritual life. When the Spirit reveals how their intellectual opinions were not honest, and in reality, they just got caught up in modern currents of ideas, the bishop responds by assuming the Spirit is sketching “the genesis of liberal theology in general” (41). He feebly attempts to redirect the conversation from the state of his soul.

The bishop’s experience of intellectual life is not only perverted; it is limited in scope because of its perversion. The Spirit attempts to explain this to the bishop by saying, “‘You think that, because hitherto you have experienced truth only with the abstract intellect. I will bring you where you can taste it like honey and be embraced by it as by a bridegroom. Your thirst shall be quenched’” (44). The intellectual life should aid one in a radical transfiguration of the world, including the intellect. Clément asserts that “When the intellect is filled with love towards God, it tears this world of death apart, it breaks away from images, passions, reasoning, in order to be no longer anything but gratitude and joy” (184). The deified intellect is not limited to abstract reasoning, and one’s experience of truth through theology transcends the mind.

The intellect is not pure and immutable; rather, it is under the influence of one’s spiritual state, and therefore both sin and deification is possible for the intellect. The Spirit knows that they are responsible for the separation of their spiritual and intellectual lives: “Having allowed oneself to drift, unresisting, unpraying, accepting every half-conscious solicitation from our desires, we reached a point where we no longer believed the Faith” (42). Clément illuminates the necessity of uniting prayer and intellectual inquiry when he writes:

*Prayer and theology are inseparable. True theology is the adoration offered by the intellect. The intellect clarifies the movement of prayer, but only prayer can give it the fervour of the Spirit. Theology is light, prayer is fire. Their union expresses the union of the intellect and the heart. But it is the intellect that must ‘repose’ in the heart, and theology must transcend it in love*. (184)

If the intellect is separated from prayer, it cannot be sanctified by the Spirit, and it cannot lead one to truth. Instead, the intellectual life is redirected from its proper end and its natural union with the spiritual life. One is supposed to transcend the intellect, but if the intellect is separated from the ‘fervour of the Spirit,’ not only will one be unable to transcend the intellect, but the intellectual life will also become defiled and shut off from divine grace.

However, it is important to remember that the intellectual life is good, and a holy intellectual life, where rational inquiry is united with prayer, will transfigure the intellect, making it perfect. Clément writes that:

*The more the intellect is imbued with the light and the love of God, the more it is purified, refined, broadened, and cognisant of conscientious and beautiful thoughts, which Hesychius of Batos compares to dolphins. Just as the dolphin in its leaping interweaves the sky and sea, so the thoughts of the sanctified intellect combine the human and the divine*. (209)

The intellectual life is not abandoned, but the human intellect is limited, so one must transcend it, and through the transcendence, the intellect is transformed. However, the bishop fails to humbly accept the limits of the intellect, so rather than praying for the grace to transcend and transfigure it, he desecrates it. He ignores its final purpose, which is union with God in Truth, a union that can only be achieved by accepting the finitude of the human intellect and desiring its consecration through prayer.

Because the bishop has killed all love of the Faith through his meandering, unguided intellectual life, the Spirit has to ground him, hoping that he can reignite a love for God through a love for a friend. He asks the bishop, “‘Will you believe in *me*?’” (43). The response of the bishop is sickening: “‘in what sense?’” (43). He cannot even bring down the barrier of his warped intellect for the love of a friend. After realizing that the bishop also killed “‘the thirst of the Reason,’” the Spirit asks the bishop if he can still desire happiness (45). The bishop evidently cannot desire happiness, as he believes that happiness “‘lies in the path of duty’” and that it is his duty to engage in endless theological discussions with the Theological Society from Hell (46).

The bishop commits a grave sin by distorting the intellectual life into an end in itself, apart from the desire for union with God. His culpability rests on his separation of the intellect from the heart, and the estrangement of theology from prayer. He ignores Evagrius’ saying that “If you are a theologian you will pray truly; and if you pray truly you are a theologian” (184). The bishop’s incoherence and confusion is a result of his grave sin. Through the story of the bishop, Lewis warns readers of the dangers of intellectual sins, and the necessity of uniting prayer with rational inquiry in theology.