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Book Review

The Restoration of Man: C. S. Lewis and the Continuing Case against Scientism

Michael D. Aeschliman

Seattle: Discovery Institute Press, 2019

Do we really need religion anymore? In this modern scientific era is it not time to throw off the shackles of ancient beliefs that only serve to hamper humanity's progress?

These are probably familiar questions to anyone who identifies with a particular faith tradition or even professes a belief in a transcendent truth. The argument is simple. Religion is nothing but a collection of ancient superstitions. It cannot hold a candle to science and technology that not only explains the world, but also continuously improves humanity's lot.

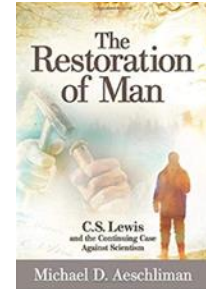
Convinced of the righteousness of their position and the progress of science, many contemporary critics of religion ask whether it is even worth engaging in this discussion. One person who thinks so is author Michael Aeschliman, who in a revised and updated edition of his 1983 book, *The Restoration of Man: C.S. Lewis and the Continuing Case Against Scientism*,¹ makes a compelling case in favour of religious faith and against the unquestioning belief in the supremacy of science. As the title suggests, Aeschliman draws heavily upon the work of the well-known Christian thinker C.S. Lewis to make the case against the proposition that science represents the sole means of understanding reality – the concept known as scientism.

Although Lewis' extensive collection of writings contain many arguments against scientism, one work in particular focuses on refuting the power of science. Published in 1943, *The Abolition of Man*, is one of Lewis' central statements on the subject. Based on the *Riddell Memorial Lectures* that Lewis had delivered earlier that year, the book warns of the danger of scientism destroying the true value of humanity.

Science and technology, Lewis argued, have the potential to reduce humans to "means" or "things" rendering them nothing more than just another part of the material world. As Aeschliman explains, Lewis objected to "the view of modern naturalism exemplified by a statement in Joseph Bronowski's *The Identity of Man*: "man is part of nature, in the same sense that a stone is, or a cactus or a camel" (Aeschliman, 2019, 40).

To Lewis, a human being was much more than a "cactus or a camel." God created humans and gave them the unique ability to discern what was good and virtuous – something that could not be determined through the scientific method. Reason was a gift from God that was available to all and would ultimately lead us to our creator. By placing science upon a pedestal and ignoring this central reality of the human condition, Lewis feared that humanity might be headed for abolition.

Aeschliman shares Lewis' fear of scientism. He finds hope, however, in both the soundness of Lewis' arguments as well as a continuing intellectual tradition prepared to make the case against scientism and, as the title of his work suggests, restore humanity.



¹ The first two editions of the work (1983 and 1998) were titled *The Restitution of Man: C.S. Lewis and the Case Against Scientism*

Aeschliman believes that part of Lewis' strength and popularity as a thinker was both the clarity of his ideas and his ability to express them in ways that were understandable to the ordinary individual. Lewis had great faith in both the common person and the central role that common sense played in leading them to make moral decisions. As Aeschliman explains, Lewis "was convinced that the experience of the intelligible Good is not only available but obligatory to every person at some level and in some sphere" (Aeschliman, 2019, 39).

Science, Aeschliman reminds us, is often amoral and the last 100 years is not an exclusive story of science leading a parade of great societal progress. Hiroshima, Auschwitz and the horrors of the secular Soviet Union all remind us of the need for humanity to control science and recognize its potential for evil. Lewis was acutely aware of this reality. Having served in the trenches during the First World War, Aeschliman reminds us that Lewis saw civilization as "frail" and easily led astray through the rejection of rationality.

Although Lewis is the central figure in Aeschliman's work, it is much more than a survey of his position against scientism. As well as exploring Lewis' ideas, the book devotes considerable space to placing them within a debate that has raged for centuries between what Aeschliman describes as "those who assert the primacy of metaphysical knowledge and those who argue for the priority of physical reality" (Aeschliman, 2019, 45).

Aeschliman's summary of this debate takes up a considerable portion of the book and may disappoint those C.S. Lewis fans hoping for a more personal and focused depiction of this prolific writer and thinker. Readers may also be disappointed by Aeschliman's habit of using other authors and commentators to help explain Lewis' views.

These are minor criticisms. It is clear that Aeschliman is trying to instill in the reader the sense that Lewis was not alone in opposing scientism and that the arguments he made were not only based on hundreds of years of reflection but still have resonance today.

It is also heartening to know that many of history's greatest minds rejected scientism and understood that despite the power of science, it could not explain all. These included many well-known scientists. Aeschliman uses a quote attributed to Einstein to illustrate this reality: "religion without science is lame, but science without religion is blind" (Aeschliman, 2019, 47).

One of the gems in the new edition of Aeschliman's work is the addition of an introduction by the British journalist and scientific author James Le Fanu. In his essay, Le Fanu catalogues the extraordinary scientific discoveries since the Second World War and acknowledges the belief held in many quarters that science has triumphed. He recognizes that many believe humans are nothing more than products of nature – "the powers of reason and imagination, the moral law within and the sense of self – being no more than an illusion generated by our 'selfish' genes and the electrochemistry of the brain to maximize our chances of survival" (Aeschliman, 2019, 10).

The problem with this approach, Le Fanu points out, is that the more science tries to explain the origins of the universe, the principles of genetics or the workings of the human brain, the more we realize their complexities and sciences inability to help us fully understand them. "At a time when cosmologists can infer what happened in the first few seconds of the birth of the universe, and geologists can measure the movements of continents to the nearest centimeter, it seems extraordinary that geneticists can't tell us why humans are so different from flies, and neuroscientists are unable to clarify how we recall a telephone number" (Aeschliman, 2019, 15). As Le Fanu concludes, "our existence as the sole

witness, through our powers of reason, of the splendors of the universe and that is contained within, is... the most persuasive of all evidences for there being 'more than we can know'" (Aeschliman, 2019, 16).

It is not surprising that Aeschliman's work is now in its third printing. It is a well-written and accessible to those with no background in science, theology or philosophy. It is also understandable that it would be republished in 2019. Science and technology's dominance in our contemporary world make this a live debate. As our current technological revolution progresses at lightening speed, many are questioning the amorality of scientific progress and asking how we develop it in a way that reflects meaning and value. As New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman asked in his 2016 bestseller, *Thank You for Being Late*, "Is God in Cyberspace?"

Aeschliman's work is a good starting point for those who question scientism and desire to harness science and technology in a way that reflects the basic human desire for goodness. Although science and technology can contribute much to our way of life, we need to recognize it is not the last word. Aeschliman's book reminds us of the need to protect those aspects of our existence that fall outside of the material or risk the abolition of humanity.