

Milton His Critics and the Gospel

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Preacher: Harvey Guest

[0 : 00] Well, I hope you've got some coffee. Here we are again in room or some tea. Leave out tea drinkers. We're in room 100 in St. John, this edifice at Granville and Natan.

We are in an art, aren't we? In this case, the art is architecture. The Canadian novelist Timothy Taylor, about whom I know nothing, he calls architecture the inevitable art, which I take it is true. I don't know if that's original with him. Good, bad, or indifferent, it's just their architecture, as he says, inevitably. So, if architecture is thus inevitable, what shall we say about words, broadly speaking, about language?

Well, at least it approaches the inevitable. You might call it the medium art. It connects things, it clothes everything. Language words, so important.

Silence may be golden, but even this loveliness, the loveliness which is silence, we wish to celebrate, don't we? And adorn with words, with language.

[1 : 11] There are soft and solemn breathing sounds that even silence wished she might deny her nature and be never more. As I go through this talk, I'll let you decide when it's Milton and when it's me.

First clue will be, if it's elevated and beautiful, it's Milton. Language is an art. It's a something made. Made for many things. It's often made for pleasure, in the case of poetry.

Made for other, poetry is for other things, but at least for pleasure. Language, language sooner or later, as we say, clothes, adorns, everything. Perhaps language at its best, we might say, is the serving art.

And again, as a serving art, it is inevitable. Our poet, I'll give you a look at our poet, I think this is the middle-aged, or getting on in middle-aged, John Milton.

I have, he says, I have some naked thoughts that rove about, and loudly not to have their power out.

[2 : 20] Oh, sorry. And loudly not to have their passage out. And weary of their place to only stay till thou hast decked them, hast clothed them in thy best array.

That's a very early touch of Milton. I have some naked thoughts that rove about. I mean, Milton. Milton was a streaker in his youth. I don't know. There are many tasks for language.

Later on, in Sonnet 14, our poet says, and speak, there's language again, and speak the truth of the unglorious things before the judge who thenceforth bid thee rest and drink thy fill of pure immortal stream.

More of the traditional Milton sound in that, isn't there, as he speaks about language. However, the issue thickens when in Sonnet 16, our poet says this, and here we, there'll be a line here that if you know anything about Milton, you'll remember.

It's one of his, if you might call it, one of his signature lines. He says in Sonnet 16, God does not need either man's work, shall we say, man's speech, or his own gifts, who best bear his mild yoke, they serve him best.

[3 : 36] His state is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed and post or land in ocean without rest, they also serve, who only stand and wait. You know that line, don't you, from the bar, from the great Milton.

Two more little Milton moments. He says in Paradise Lost, so much the rather thou celestial light shine inward and the mind through all her powers irradiate.

There plant eyes, all mist from Hans Purge and dispersed that I may see and tell what a work this is and tell of things invisible to mortal sight.

Very Milton-ish there. Samuel Johnson, I just read this the other day in his Life of Milton, he speaks of Milton's power to surprise or to astonish.

Samuel Johnson, by no means, is an uncritical critic of John Milton, but he does speak of his power to surprise. For me, Milton, Johnson doesn't give examples for me, there's one of his moments where he can surprise you and the mind through all her powers irradiate and there's this little magic moment, there plant I.

[4 : 49] Wow, that's lovely. What the poets can do. But finally for now, what things language attempts from Paradise Lost, book seven. The poet says, here still govern thou my song and fit audience find the few.

He wants his song, his speech, to be governed. Still govern thou my song and fit audience find though few. Let's use that as an intro to a moment of prayer.

Lord, we are few, your people are a small flock, and we ask today that you will govern our song because we need to say and sing only what you have taught in the gospel of Christ, and in his name we pray.

Amen. This little talk, you may have seen it outside, is called John Milton, His Critics, and the Gospel. And so about these things I will talk today.

And about this, I hope in some order, not all at once, it may seem like that, the themes will overlap. I hope not confusingly. Milton, as you know, wrote and said a lot.

[6 : 00] There's a lot to be said about this, therefore, there's a lot to be said about this most remarkable man. Usually, you'll know this as well, usually, he's placed behind Shakespeare in the English-speaking world, sweepstakes for literary accomplishment.

That's his usual standing. Second place behind the bard is not bad at all, is it? I think I'll say without qualification that this man places first in the fury sweepstakes, we'll call them.

The fury that accompanies often literary dispute. Milton engages, says Christopher Ricks, an Oxford scholar. He says, I'm generalizing about a lot of things that Ricks says here.

When we read Milton, he says, we reveal ourselves. He says, Mr. Ricks, that Milton will freshly infuriate. Ezra Pound, a couple of examples here.

Ezra Pound calls Milton's poetry the worst sort of poison. Why sit on the fence? You know. The next time we have an organ fun drive, don't call upon a William Empson, a man who regards Christianity as a form of torture worship.

[7 : 12] He calls Paradise Lost a great poem, quote, a great poem, because it portrays God as so bad. Self-revelation indeed from these critics. Critics know, or they think they know, where one stands, where one is to be placed in the world, spiritually, morally, intellectually, aesthetically, in terms of one's understanding of history, a whole slew of categories, by how one responds to Mr. Milton.

Especially, this comes into stark focus as to how one responds to Paradise Lost. This poem was, I'm going to put this, the first touch of Paradise Lost in front of us today.

This poem was real, I was, is that, is that visible? Yeah. This poem was written late in Milton's life, late in his life, composed in blindness.

Very significant fact about Milton's life. He lost his sight in middle age. It was composed in blindness, this great poem. Composed in the midst of political defeat.

We'll talk about that a bit later. This work stands in a very real sense at the beginning of modernity and poses apparently decisive questions and hence generates the bitter dispute that the scholar above was talking about.

[8 : 38] Bitter dispute about things like the authority which Greek, Roman, and Christian culture should have in our culture in our own day. It affects, when you talk about Milton, you're actually deciding questions about school curricula.

Questions like, as well, was Milton really in the very texture of his mind, the very texture of his spirit, was he really a Christian or was he a denomination of one?

Sort of unique for good or for ill, arrogant, he certainly was arrogant at times, perhaps an early Nietzsche even, born out of due time. Or was he, despite an eccentricity here and there, which we'll talk about, was he a, with apologies to people like myself and others in the room, was he a standard issue Puritan, an orthodox Christian, a member in good standing in the great tradition, a member of Lewis's near Christianity fold, we'll call it.

That last reference is in play in Milton Criticism. In a while, I want to contrast the response to Milton's Paradise Lost of C.S. Lewis and a fierce critic of Lewis at Yale one, Harold Bloom.

Both these gentlemen have written extensively on Milton and Paradise Lost and in this dispute one gets to the heart, in their dispute, one gets to the heart of the Milton dispute, I trust we will.

[10:02] Bloom hardly rejects reading Paradise Lost as if it was a metered version, if you will, a poetic version, a poetry version of Lewis's famous book Near Christianity and says so.

And just an aside here, this is from memory, but I'm sure I'm right, he also, Mr. Bloom, rejects reading Dante. We're going to hear about Dante in a few weeks' time.

He rejects vigorously reading Dante as a poetry version of Augustinian Christianity, which, in case you're wondering, I'll just say, about qualification, it is. Bloom is wrong.

But more of all that in a moment. A few years ago, growing weary of life in our time, you'll forgive a personal reference here, I decided to spend a few hours of each day living in the 17th century.

It turns out that this earlier day, this is not news to the learned ones in this room, was a troubled time, the 17th century, troubled and distressed as our own. No surprise there, I suppose, at all.

[11:02] Eras, I take it, like families are each unhappy in their own way, but, more or less, unhappy. Is that gloomy? I hope not, really.

After all, in Eden, Adam and Eve were happy, but as our poet tells us in Paradise Lost, and this seems to me one of those little moments that makes Milton worth reading, he says about Adam and Eve in the garden, happy, but for so happy, ill-secured.

That is brilliant. And how succinctly how beautifully put. Happy, but for so happy, ill-secured. Sort of describes life, doesn't it?

Milton's time, again, was in turmoil. To venture an anecdote to capture the texture of a time, of course, is ridiculous and foolish, and I'm going to try it. The Geneva Bible was famous and controversial in its day for its glosses.

Brief, sometimes pungent comments meant to illuminate the illuminating word. For instance, Exodus, the book of, portrays Hebrew midwives, you all know this story, defying a pharaoh king's edict and saving the lives of condemned Hebrew children who had been condemned by the edict.

[12:25] The Geneva gloss, the stuff that comes out of Geneva, it's so scary. The Geneva gloss, commends, commends, the midwives for their defiance of the king.

James I, of blessed memory, we Anglicans always speak well of our monarchs, we must be careful here, speaking on behalf of all royalists, one would think, certainly he was, James I, condemned, he condemned this gloss to put it in a word as subversive.

This is an age in which a passing comment, words in a book, may leap into our midst as armed men. Quote a poet.

This is very much Milton's time. Words leap up in arms, Milton said, you know, in our time, armed and ready for battle. That was the time in which they lived.

Of course, this is true of all times, but it probably is safe to say that more so at some times than others. Everything here is shaken in Milton's time.

[13:33] His dates are 1608, 1674, just to make that formal. The settled everywhere is challenged. Marriage was challenged. How to think about marriage.

The press. School curricula. Church order. Thrones, dominions, princetoms, virtues, powers. All ill-secured. That wasn't me, just in case you were wrong.

Thrones, dominions, princetoms, virtues, powers. What do we do about this? Just an aside here to emphasize the point. I learned this first from Nicholas Waltersdorf, the great Yale historian.

He points out that in the Middle Ages, people occupying an office might be challenged to their legitimacy for in that office. But in the 17th century, the office itself might be challenged.

Now that is a difference. Let's reform the Senate. No, let's get rid of it. It's quite a difference. Milton on marriage is astonishing, if not pervert.

[14:37] On the press, he is usually, and he should be, numbered among the angels. And of course, on monarchy, bless him, he is numbered among the subversive, for sure.

He was for parliament. We all know this story. It's part of English-speaking history, isn't it? He was for parliament as the prevailing power and supported with enthusiasm our chief of men, Cromwell, as he called him.

Serving, did Milton, in the Lord Protector's regime, turning government missives into a diplomatic Latin. Not a bad guy to have around for such work. Milton was, in the 17th century kind of way, most learned.

He was learned. Both at Cambridge and through private study, he became a walking repository, it would appear, of Greece, Rome, ancient philosophy, medieval romance, modern science.

He was an early Baconian. I guess everyone was an early Baconian in the 17th century. On a famous tour through Italy, he met the famous Galileo, interested in everything, Mr. Milton.

[15:44] Milton was, and perhaps this is a bit unfair, but I think it serves to round out a picture of him, something of the texture of the man. He was, in his youth, I have no authority for this, but I'm sure I'm quite right about this.

To quote Augustine, he was in love with love. In his 20s, he wrote in Italian a sweet love poetry. This whole thing, I don't, I'm told this happens to the young, I don't understand.

He's in love with love. He was, in all things, passionate, perhaps too. He loved beautiful things, courtesy, and grace, and order, he loved.

Lewis, C.S. Lewis, reminds us that this poet was called, at Cambridge, this was sort of his nickname, the Lady of Christ. The Lady of Christ. He was sweet and gentle.

This was the person that Milton intended to be, at least. This was his idealized self, which he wanted to be. Not a bad thing to dream, is it? Wordsworth, poet of a much later date, captures some of this.

[16:47] He says, you'll know the poem London, 1802, of Milton. He says, thy soul was like a star and dwelt apart. Well, I don't know if Wordsworth is right or not, but there's the way of romantic.

So, no. This man contained multitudes, you can see. And that turns us back to the fierce, angry, and sometimes intemperate, Milton-centered controversy.

Is there a real center in this man? When you contain multitudes, sometimes the center gets lost. And if so, if there's a real center, if the question will be allowed, what is this center?

Does the center in Milton, if he has one, does it hold? Milton, again, Christian, a classicist, a humanist, a controversialist, a Puritan, a political rebel, a reformer of the church, a reformer of just about everything, all of the above.

Again, if you precisely define this man, if that's possible, you will reveal yourself. Our two paradigm critics, Harold Bloom and C.S. Lewis, I mentioned earlier, will lead us, I hope, to the radioactive center, I'll call it, of this discussion in and for our time.

[18:07] I think it is for our time, this discussion. It is not merely of interest to students of a past century. Lewis and Bloom never met.

I'll introduce them a bit. Lewis, you'll know, died in 1963, 1963, and Bloom is of a subsequent generation. He still flourishes amongst us, Mr. Bloom. I just read something by him the other day in a Friday newspaper about Freud.

Their respective writings, it is their respective writings that do battle. If you had them over for one of those long dinners and the wine was flowing, perhaps too freely, these two could conduct a conversation about Milton with nothing but quotations, shorter or longer, from the poetry, especially Paradise Lost.

Bloom is reported on good authority to have all of Paradise Lost committed to memory. And Lewis, as we all know, had a legendary memory. Have a look someday at Paradise Lost and think about that volume being in your head.

Both of these gentlemen love Paradise Lost. This is crucial to understand in understanding their dispute. They loved it. They love it. Bloom still does. Lewis still does in heaven.

[19:22] Well, why do they love it? For its beauty. Beauty in its extended cadence. Its display of, I want to call it, gathering. Those ancient things which should be remembered.

Don't Milton's poetry just filled with echoes of the Bible and Greece and Rome and Middle Ages. Modern science and everything. Things which should be gathered and remembered.

Remembered and not despised. Despising the past was something that I think Lewis lived just long enough to see it coming, but it hadn't really arrived in big force until a few decades after his death. Bloom has lived long enough to be swamped by this hatred and I think to his credit in his own strange way he's tried to resist it. But beware, if you have them over for dinner, best to keep them at some distance.

If you have a long dining room table, keep Bloom there and Lewis at the other end. Don't let them touch elbows. The Milton dispute is, as we say, painful and reveals deep abiding difference.

[20:25] Bloom, in his writings, manages to lose his temper at Lewis. At one point, especially, it seems odd that an editor would say, gee, do we want to leave this in here? At one point, he calls

Lewis a stuffed turkey, which, as far as I know, is not a technical literary term.

He calls him a stuffed turkey. And work. There's work. He calls Lewis a favorite of southern fundamentalists. There is the ultimate insult in the culture wars.

You're a fundamentalist, eh? One of those guys. Lewis would say, and I would think Bloom would know this, he wouldn't be shocked by this, Lewis would say that Harold Bloom, the kind of modernity that he represents, is morally and spiritually alien from Milton and is simply unable to read him seriously.

That is a serious charge to a man who spent his life teaching it and has memorized it. Sorry, you know it all, but you don't know it. Like Jesus talking to the Pharisees. You know the Bible.

Of course you do. Much of it they had memorized. He says to them, you don't understand it. I'm going to present the Bloom case. I hope that it will become clear at the end why it's called a case.

[21 : 41] It will become clear at the conclusion. I'm going to do it in my own language. I hope for reasons of simplicity, but also because in some little measure, Bloom, if not right, is very instructive so I've tried to internalize his argument so I'm not trying to be unfair to it.

In some measure, I think Mr. Bloom is right about Milton. He would say to cross the dinner table to Lewis, have another glass of wine, Jack, while I tell you what I think about Milton.

Milton was a rebel. He was a Puritan wanting to see authority challenged frequently and thoroughly. Milton, Bloom doesn't talk about this too much at all, but I will because Bloom would make the point. Milton waffled on his doctrine of the Trinity. Milton, Bloom would continue, paid scant attention. This is something that Bloom goes out of his way to emphasize, I think in error. More of that in a minute. He paid scant attention to the doctrine of the atonement. Milton, bless him, Bloom might say with a twinkle in his eye, was the proverbial, perhaps a founding member of the Protestant phenom called the Denomination of One.

[22 : 45] After all, Milton's doctrine of Christianity treatise, *Doctrina Christiana*, here I speak, not Bloom, is more or less a theological disaster.

It is, to use another technical term, it is a mess because, and this would be something Mr. Bloom would say, for emphasis to the fact that Mr. Milton is a rebel, he's a total individualist.

He just doesn't stand in any community. In conclusion, Mr. Bloom grows weary for now, in conclusion, he's interesting, I think, Milton, Mr. Bloom wants to say, if not a Gnostic, was on the path and in fact belonged to, was on that path to becoming a Gnostic, in fact, he belonged to Mr. Bloom's form of sophisticated literary Gnosticism.

A Gnosticism of, this is my term, not Bloom's, but I'm sure he, I think he'd like it, maybe I should tell him I said this, it's a Gnosticism of aesthetic listening. It's what Mr. Bloom believes in as a Gnostic. Milton, to put it bluntly, Bloom wants to say, Mr. Bloom, a learned Gnostic scholar at Yale, Bloom is in my camp, Jack Lewis, not yours. Bingo.

[24 : 03] Well done, I think Jack, both these guys are teachers, so we'll, they'll talk to one another like teachers probably. Well done, Mr. Bloom. Jack Lewis might reply, full marks for a fine effort.

And we'll give you half a mark great upwards if you can translate in Latin, stop cursing. I don't know how you do that. There again is the gist of the Milton, of the Bloom case about Milton.

Well, swiftly, our old friend C.S. Lewis replied, to the first issue, Mr. Bloom, of course, this genius of a man was a rebel.

That, in a sense, is where all Milton discussion begins. It's just a fact about him. But at his best, Milton knew the dangers involved.

That is to say, he wasn't just a stupid rebel. At his best, he wasn't just the proverbial reformer radical who just casts aside common sense and from some sort of platform of perfection attacks everything.

[25 : 05] for what for what can war but endless war still breed says our poet in a poem dedicated to a famous Puritan warrior, General Fairfax.

Peace hath her victories no less renowned than war. Lovely line in Milton's poem dedicated to Mr. Cromwell, his friend. There you have it.

Not a naive, not a naive rebel at his best. Sometimes he wasn't at his best and he probably was a naive rebel. On the Trinity, yes, Jack Lewis would say to Mr. Blue, Milton is in error.

We might say he is in gross error. He held the position of some church fathers called subordinationism. Sometimes it's called generically Arianism.

It's more precisely subordinationism. This heir denied the eternal procession of the Son and asserted that the procession, this procession from the Father had a beginning.

[26 : 04] That is it in rough and ready terms. The heir, Lewis goes out of his way to argue and I think demonstrate in his great book on Paradise Lost, the heir is not at all discernible in the poetry, certainly not in Paradise Lost.

Milton was just, when he thought in poetry, he was brilliant. When he thought in prose, he was a disaster. That's what I would say. On the issue of Milton on the atonement, Mr. Bloom, I have another glass of wine, I'm not quite finished yet.

On the issue of Milton on the atonement, with all due respect, Mr. Bloom, this is me speaking, not Lewis, because they never cut, I don't think they ever argued about this. Lewis' writings, if they do, I don't recall. But anyway, this argument is just on shaky grounds.

All of book three of Paradise Lost is redolent of the doctrine, plain and simple. You just don't see it there, Mr. Bloom. This mystery, the mystery of the atonement, demands reserve, demands reticence.

We hear this doctrine from the apostles and we adore. Here, in fact, Milton probably practices these virtues wonderfully. He should have practiced them a lot more in his writings, even in his poetry.

[27 : 15] Sometimes he barrels into areas where angels fear to tread. He was very confident of his powers, Mr. Milton. A forgivable error in his life, but he should have been more reticent at times.

Milton, yes, he was, we'll allow the word, he was an individualist. But he was not, would Lewis have a twinkle in his eyes as he says this? He was not a mere individualist. A denomination of one, he certainly wasn't at the end of the day, not if we're serious about most of the poetry, what the man says there.

He lived and he fought, oh did he fight, and worshipped and died within the household of faith. And for proof, again, simply read the poetry. It's just there. Milton, as a Gnostic, therefore, is the classic case of the scholar peering into the well and seeing his or her own image staring back.

This does not have to happen. This is a correctable error. Look again, Mr. Bloom. Just look again. There you'll see that Milton worships.

He worships God revealed in Jesus. He worships God revealed in Jesus by the Spirit. However inadequately he articulates that. The atoning Savior he worships.

[28 : 27] He awaits this Lord's returning glory. He would not be, he would certainly hate a merely aesthetic religion. Lewis thinks that Bloom's case would falter in the end.

I think it does too, but it's interesting. You can read glorious words from a Christian poet and find yourself listening aesthetically for God.

Bloom wants to do that all the time. Very interesting stuff. There's a real standoff here. And I think Lewis and Bloom go to the heart of the mountain of Milton criticism.

Gets bogged down in a lot of technical areas, some of them very interesting. But at the heart of this real dispute, there are big issues at work. Real standoff. These two, we recall, are reading the same poem, and yet they remain in different worlds as they read it.

Both, again, love the poem, especially the poem Paradise Lost. They love his poetry, but especially this work. They admire its learningness, again its beauty, but something more is at stake.

[29 : 46] And this critical tradition about Milton knows that much is here in play. There's just something going on here that needs to be explored, and the tradition is trying it.

There's another aspect of this dispute that Bloom and Lewis acknowledge in their arguments. It's worth pointing out after this brief foray at the dinner table between them.

At another level, this is an old story about Paradise Lost. This dispute, again, is about Milton Satan and his character and or his status in Paradise Lost.

One party in this dispute, composed of many variations, asserts, I'm sure you've heard this, that Satan is the real hero of the poem. Milton, the political and social rebel.

It's almost too obvious a case at one level. Milton, the political and social rebel, in the end, in his innermost real final self, is on the side of this primal first order rebel.

[30 : 50] Milton must have been on the side of the evil one. He wanted to cheer for him, really. To this argument, the traditionalist reading, the traditionalist party responds.

You might just pause here and say this, that this, we'll call it the traditionalist party, it has other names. Lewis' reading of Paradise Lost is condemned by two critics, I find this funny and instructive.

I find it almost encouraging. Two critics call Lewis' defense of Milton the Anglo-Catholic rationalization argument. That is to say, here we have an Anglo-Catholic defending the radical Puritan, at least Congregationalist, if not a total independent, flying off into goodness knows what kind of ecclesiology, Mr.

Milton. But Lewis, the Anglo-Catholic, is defending him. Lewis might enjoy that, I would think. He would say, yes, that just shows that Milton and the Anglo-Catholics are indeed mere Christian. We know our brothers and sisters. Milton's a troubled member of the family, but there he is, he's one of us. Not one of you, Mr. Bloom. This party responds again to this argument that it's clever, but it does involve constantly not believing what the poetry actually says.

[32 : 10] Milton studies, I think, here, I don't have any authority for this, but I'm wondering if they, some of you who are in touch with formal literary studies as they're conducted these days, can inform me on this in discussion time, but I think they contribute to the famous, infamous deconstruction culture.

I think Milton controversy precedes that kind of argument, at least it precedes it formally. Distrust the surface, pull it apart, and put it back together for yourself.

You're over the author, you don't have to, don't let the author dominate you. Bloom's Milton belongs again to Bloom's party. That's what Mr.

Bloom wants to say. But again, Milton's Satan may be a glorious figure, say the traditionalists, and surely they're right here. Milton would not deny that Satan is a glorious figure.

He is the first and greatest of the glorious ruin. That's how he's presented in the poem, really. He is, in fact, presented in the poem, Mr. Bloom, you must see this. He is a fool.

[33 : 12] He is presented as a moral psychopath. Self-deception grows in him and finally overwhelms him. This is what evil does.

He thinks he shook God's throne. He didn't. He thinks he is, at one point, he argues that he is self-create. He isn't. He calls God a tyrant.

He isn't. No, it is evil rebellion that spawns tyranny and Mr. Milton knew this. This is all interesting stuff, isn't it?

It sort of hovers around that line, another famous Milton line, isn't it? The evil one says, better to reign in hell than serve in heaven. These critics, the non-traditional critics, want to say, well, Milton wanted to be one of those rebels, reigning in hell rather than serving in heaven.

I think about them in conversation. I don't always find it easy to easily say, yeah, Lewis is right all the time, Mr. Bloom is wrong all the time. Mr. Bloom has some real insight.

[34 : 17] He sees things sometimes with some real clarity. There are overlaps. There are differing positions, share certain concerns. There's a lot in common here.

Bloom is formally, more than formally, he is a Gnostic. I like this about Bloom because he knows he's a Gnostic and he says so. Lewis is, as we all know, an Orthodox Christian.

The battle between these beliefs, as we've seen, we might call them the battle between these sensibilities, is fierce. And we must remember that it was fierce, the battle between these two positions in the church's youth, and the battle, as we see in our own time, rages again.

In fact, it's coming to a theater near you this month. Don't miss it, or maybe miss it, wherever you think. The Da Vinci Code is bloom, a tacky form of bloomism on film, is the Da Vinci Code.

But battles are fought because, I'm going on, bloom and everything. Battles are fought because something is in common. I think this is a point not understood enough in Christian reading, in Christian contemplation.

[35 : 34] Jesus and the Pharisees fought because they shared much. Both were agreed that a love of holiness was the first and the last concern of anyone who knew what life was all about.

The fight they had was over what that life would look like. That's what they fought over. So this Milton battle, what is this Milton battle really about?

I'm trying to get again to its radioactive center. It's something like this. Where is the true beauty? Where is true holiness on display in our world?

At least a fragment of it. Something that we can grab hold of. Lewis and Bloom are both of the party that says maybe that would be a place where someone with an aesthetic sensibility and a concern to understand the mystery of life a bit.

They might turn to words like that and hundreds more pages like that. I think at the heart of it they are arguing about that. Where is true beauty and slash where is true holiness?

[36 : 38] Which obvious public defensible tradition may claim that it is or generates an obvious beauty that we can look at?

Which literary sensibility is true here? Bloom's or Lewis's? Lewis again. Lewis, maybe wrongly in one sense, but Lewis quite clearly wants Milton on his side as a Christian and Bloom wants Milton on his side as a Gnostic.

They really have a fight about this. It's real. Why did Milton write poetry? There's an obvious answer in some of his writings that says to morally instruct and to morally instruct and delight.

Kind of a classic definition of poetry. But I don't think that's the most profound answer. At least one answer is quite delightful. It's an answer that regards on the morning of Christ's nativity.

We're not going to read it. That's just a touch in front of you today, a touch of on the morning of Christ's nativity. He wrote Milton to a friend and told him that on a Christmas morning at the age of 21, Mr. Milton was in his rooms at Cambridge alone.

[37 : 55] And he said to him, he woke up that morning and this poem to Christ on the morning of his nativity was just with him. It was just there. We got up and wrote it down. And he says he wrote it as a gift to his Lord on the morning of his birth.

It was a poetry for Jesus and a gift. He received a gift, that is, and he gave it back. There's one reason, one shaping context from the man himself as to how poetry happened in his life.

This yields a more, I think, a bit of a tentative answer to the thing I'm trying to get at. Well, why are these two learned, scholarly, delightful human beings in many ways, Mr.

Bloom and Mr. Lewis, why are they having such a fierce dispute? And this is more intuitive than demonstrated. The Gnostic religionists, and they may be, the reason I want to talk about this today is you'll see a lot of them lining up at movie theaters later this month.

The serious one, the spiritually hungry one, the Gnostic religionist listens for, watches for beauty. Where can I find it?

[39 : 06] The Christian, on the other hand, celebrates the gospel gift from heaven, which we confess to be the only beauty. We're not listening for beauty, we're celebrating a given beauty.

There's a difference between the two positions. I think that's as far as I can get with it, at least. The Christian receives this beauty as the only beauty and celebrates it.

In Gnosticism, in the world of Bloom at a sophisticated level, and in the world of the Da Vinci Code at a banal cultural level, Christ crucified and risen is simply rejected. We don't want that story anymore, thanks very much to Christians, we've already heard it.

They haven't, they think they have, they tell you to get lost. It happens in conversation, doesn't it, to some people? But the Gnostic wants some part of this story on their side.

They want their own version of it. A sophisticated Gnostic like Bloom wants his own version of Milton, period. And he'll argue to the death for it.

[40 : 12] It's so important to him. There you go. This is the Milton dispute. Christianity as it's traditionally understood. Is it true or false?

And by the way, does a cultural icon like Milton back up the Christian claim? Or is he really, can you get Milton out of there and make him join the Gnostic clan?

It's a serious battle between these learned gentlemen about this. They know what's at stake. The whole idea, you know, this is old hat, of objective truth, has been challenged in our time.

More precisely, there's a big battle out there about who owns the truth. Our big institutions, they own the truth and they get to teach it to everybody else. There's a battle about objective truth in that regard.

And some would say, therefore, at this point, why don't we just leave this all alone and make a deal. There's a Milton for modern Gnostics and there's a Milton for Orthodox, Puritan, Reformed, Anglo-Catholic, Southern, fundamentalist-loving guys like Lewis.

[41 : 13] You know, but this is interesting for me and why I stay with Milton and Bloom on, why I stay with Bloom and Lewis on Milton, is that neither of them will make that move.

Bloom will have nothing to do with that. No, he says there's truth out there about Milton and I've got it. And Lewis, you don't. You're wrong. You Christians are wrong about Milton and I'm right.

I like that about Bloom. He doesn't, he believes there's truth out there and that we can get on to a trajectory towards it. Lewis, Bloom, no better.

There's a big divide here and if you're interested in such questions, my goodness, Christians don't have to be, thank goodness. But if you are interested in this kind of dispute, you sooner or later will

find yourself choosing how, is he a Gnostic kind of guy or is he a Christian?

Is Lewis right about Milton or are those guys like Bloom right about him? Somebody's right and wrong here. There is a high classic Christian Catholic evangelical reading.

[42 : 17] Milton's poetry is a listening to, a celebration of a given knowable to be obeyed divine truth. Has it ever been celebrated with speech, with language such as Milton?

Such sober certainty of waking bliss I never heard till now. Oh, to write a sentence like that makes your life worthwhile. Wouldn't it?

What a celebration of the gospel. Whatever context those words are in, forget it. Such sober certainty of waking bliss I never heard till now. What words?

Or, we may join the Gnostics and with them listen for a God unknown. That's what Bloom really wants to invite you to do. With my degree of sophisticated aesthetic sensibility I'll lead you into a world where we listen to aesthetic contemplation for a God unknown.

Bloom knows he worships an unknown God he says so. Somewhere out there there's a God. We're too too far away to ever be in touch with a little. Little echoes of this God may be floating around in the world.

[43 : 32] It's a lonely world view that Mr. Bloom invites you into. It's not Christianity. The best thing about these disputes is simple I hope is that it sends us back to sources and next week with your patience we're going to go through a Milton glory or two and line by line look at this open stuff of Paradise Lost and go through the entire poem called Add a Solemn Music one of the glories of Milton just beautiful stuff.

I keep using this word glory in Paradise Lost when Milton is describing Adam and Eve in the garden he calls them at one of his heightened moments he has a he films poetry filled with cadence he takes you up and down up and down he leads your emotions through valleys and up mountain peaks and he makes you feel put in truth.

He calls Adam and Eve in the garden before the fall of course he calls them he's described the creation as a glorious theater what Calvin called the creation he calls Adam the glory of that glory I wish I could say things like that.

That was Milton that wasn't me. Well you'll see that to bring this down a bit if it needs to be brought down a bit these kind of issues as we draw to a close are about this kind of discussion is about at least a number of things maybe three things the issues that come clear for Christians in this kind of dispute it seems to me we learn more about reading I think we learn more about prayer and we learn something about speech especially in our tradition the Protestant tradition of Christianity broadly understood reading as an art reading as an art should or might profitably receive more attention the gift of careful reading is really a beautiful gift and the church needs it badly and prayer is always in our view as Christians where there's no prayer there's no discipleship and our speech is challenged to be gracious and the Apostle says let your speech be always gracious

I don't think he means by that let your speech be always aesthetically pleasing but the aesthetically pleasing may at least shape our speech sometimes and be more healing perhaps Lewis will give him one last word today he likened reading and prayer both of these activities concentrate on something outside of ourselves both involve a kind of surrender so maybe good thoughtful careful reading does prepare for prayer Lewis apparently believed that and in reading we see the world through many different eyes we learn how to do that this was something that Lewis believed profoundly about reading in the Bible it's true isn't it that we see all things this is what our faith teaches us as God the Trinity wants us to see them so to learn to see the world through other eyes is always more and more a shaping deepening might prove to be for our Bible reading what's the world really like God says look through these spectacles you'll see the world as it really is in divine reading we might hope as we pray and read that again our speech will be healed

[46 : 49] Milton prompts us and prepares us to adore the almighty father high throned above all height about him all the sanctities of heaven stood thick as stars and from his sight received the attitude past well as Lewis says about that particular passage we are silent but he reminds us Mr.

Milton heaven is for thee too high to know what passes there be lowly wise paradise lost okay heaven is for thee too high to know what passes there be lowly wise that is not a Gnostic that is a Christian be lowly wise God has given us what we are to know and adore in Christ only there be lowly wise that is what I wanted to say today about Mr.

Milton maybe I will say a word of prayer and then we will talk Lord we thank you for your servants we confess that some of them we find difficult and strange at times but we thank you for them

anyway and help us to learn from them to grow and in these things to patiently grow in our understanding of the glory of your son Jesus that when you've given us to clearly know and understand through the spirit and in your word thank you Lord for these things they are privileged to look into they are finally about you in Christ's name we pray Amen I'll try and then you correct me I love to do it I do it in the first person because I love to do it as if I'm an autistic because that will make it quicker you're a Christian you're all wrong there is a fullness a pleroma and out from the fullness has come emanations of truth more and more emanations of truth and one of the emanations is so far away from the fullness that it's an incompetent deity that's the God you worship he's an incompetent deity he created a world that's filled with a mess notice that the world's a mess nothing works here that's because the world is a great they're serious when they say this it's an incompetent deity who did this but here's the trick here's an esoteric trick you can use to get back to the fullness everything that this stupid incompetent deity has revealed all you have to do to get true wisdom is turn it on its head therefore when you read about the evil one in the garden that snake he's the good guy see the stupid God tells you that he's the bad guy but because he's such a stupid God he doesn't know that he's the good guy when remnants of this belief show up in libraries in Egypt or whatever therefore they find texts that say oh guess what Judas was a good guy just came out recently didn't a bunch of publicity but pure gnosticism it just inverts the story gnostic texts always take the bad guy is really the good guy that's gnosticism gnosticism therefore teaches you full fledged gnosticism and you can learn passwords and you can fight your way back up through the emanations up up up and find your way back into the glory but you need a private esoteric knowledge to do it it's gnostic means in Greek roughly knowledge they have the true knowledge the Christians don't the first use of the word Catholic in antiquity is used by a gnostic

I've learned this from a Scottish scholar a gnostic uses the word Catholic and uses virtually the swear word Catholic by which he means those people who teach that open public knowledge about Jesus and his father and the spirit that children can understand that's Catholic we are the esoteric gnostic we have the true knowledge that flourished in the early centuries it denied it denied our Lord our Lord they hate this creation created by an incompetent creator is therefore ugly and a mess therefore our bodies are what you have to escape from we all have a divine spark in us that can still hear things from the pleroma that's what Mr. Bloom would start to really like that he's listening to the true fullness with his divine spark therefore Jesus didn't really have a body in some versions of Gnosticism when he was going to be crucified he asked Peter to stand in for him because when they tried to crucify him the nails had nothing to go into in the

[51 : 37] Gnostic text like the Gospel of James there's a moment where Peter says to Jesus how can Mary Magdalene I don't know if they moved to France by then or not Mary Magdalene is a woman or maybe his mother how can she go to heaven she's a male she's a woman she's a woman and Jesus says I'll make her into a male so she can go to heaven so the female is a lot less than the male the body is a bad thing the female would be less than the male because it gives birth to more physical life you see so Gnostics hate the body so it's very popular again if you want to know about it a popular version just go see the Gnostics the Da Vinci code that's pure Gnostics Jim was that B minus that was oh good write that down there are yes yes yes yeah no no

I think that's that's lovely yes yes yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah he might put it in Freudian terms Friday he wrote a big piece for the Wall Street here I wasn't sure if it was still live or if he didn't answer Providence provided me the answer he did a nice piece he always writes beautifully he wrote a nice piece about Freud I suspect he put the background for his assertions would be something Freudian but he does say I hope this goes to your question he says point blank Mr. Mr. Bloom I hate the cross and then he'll look long and hard at the gospel of James a Gnostic text and say see there's no narrative here that has any of that cross nonsense in it so he instinctively is drawn to the Gnostics for that reason now again the background argument for that might be maybe that ensign thing he would be sympathetic to the Christians worship torture there's too much violence in Christianity his modern sensibility would take over so he looks for an early Christian vocabulary that leaves out the cross stuff so he's a Gnostic at that level he hates the cross he says that point blank which I appreciate him saying that because at least he knows where he stands a lot of people in the church who hate the cross they don't think so bishops even thank you so thank you Thank you.

Yeah. I put them down to the accident of his social positioning. As he found himself, when he spoke about marriage and divorce issues, he alienated himself from his pure Presbyterian friends.

[55 : 46] So whenever he alienated himself from some group, he would strike out with a lovely peon of praise to give me my freedom to speak. Let's have a free marketplace of ideas.

It all sounds like John Stuart Mill. But, of course, it's John Stuart Mill in the 17th century. John Milton wouldn't give freedom of speech to Roman Catholics. He'd rather jump off a bridge than do that.

But it's still... I put it down to the accident, although I don't deny the nobility of the sentiment. He's on the right track there, isn't he? At least I think he is. Anglicans in the 17th century...

I read this the other day. Bishop Jewell, for instance, a hero of traditional Anglicans. He thought it... He believed that one of the marks of the apostolic nature of the Anglican church, at least in his time, was the fact that it persecuted heretics.

And it persecuted independence. That was so in the mind of the dominant, prevailing Catholicism of the time, that Milton went overboard in his reaction against that and gave himself the freedom to start speculating about the Trinity, speculating about things which he never should have speculated about.

[56 : 52] I see in Milton the center of modernity beginning to take shape and not holding very well, because I think our tradition is learning to be more Catholic, to listen to communities over centuries as they meditate upon the word and giving a high authority to that.

I would just say to Milton, I'm not giving up the Nicene Creed because you're speculating about things which he... I don't think he ever gave those issues much thought.

At least it wasn't his best thought. I'm sorry, I'm rambling here. Something like that... So I do see Milton as modernity taking shape, and I'm not sure if Milton... He is our own mixed-up time, isn't he? Do you agree? I think he's a mixed-up... He's a lovely man. I've made him in heaven, I'm sure. But if there's a purgatory, he was sent there for at least a year. And sometimes I get angry.

Maybe two. Well, thanks for asking. Next week, I'm going to go through a couple...

[57 : 58] Two or three poems line by line. All of the questions you just asked are still... This is why I find it so interesting that they spark your very intelligent questions. Thank you. Elliot and Leavis...

Elliot, a famous critic of the... Just before the deconstructionists roared on the scene, a famous critic at Cambridge, Leavis and Elliot went through a time when they virtually said, this poetry is just a language that no one ever spoke.

It's a disassociation of sensibility, a famous phrase that Elliot made famous. And then he later qualified his position. So in that tradition, they would be saying, no, this doesn't do you Christians much good.

This is a fantasy language that takes you into nowhere land. This is sort of parade ground language that you've never used. It sort of emphasizes that your religion is a thing apart, a bit antique, a bit precious, a bit unreal.

But that's... But that's their point. That's their point. You see, when Wordsworth says about Milton, you are a star apart, I think that's dangerous. I want to say to Mr. Milton, this is the part of you I don't like.

[59 : 05] I don't like Christians being a star apart. That's Nietzschean for me. I'd rather him be lowly wise. So in the tradition of reading Milton, you get every sort of different sensibility in our culture.

It starts to come into view. And you want... I think the whole tradition is wrong. I'll just put it... And I'll shut up because other people need to take it. I think the whole tradition is wrong here because they misread...

If Milton was here, put it this way. You people missed it. This is eschatological language when it's heightened and flowing. It's a language which attempts to create a sensibility of thinking the unthinkable.

But when Milton starts talking about Adam and Eve in the garden after the fall, when he's talking to... Amazingly enough, Adam's talking to an angel, and the angel's telling him about salvation history.

The language becomes as plain as our speech is right now. And I think Milton does that on purpose. He says that high language is either the language of self-deception, I give that language to the evil one, or it's the language which anticipates heaven.

[60 : 16] But when I'm talking about post-lapsarian life, I give you a drab, straightforward language. I think Milton is that sophisticated.

His rhetorical devices in this poem reflect the spiritual state that people are teaching. So anyway, maybe that is sheer fantasy, but I think that's what he's doing. So does that answer your question? You're a very good question. I don't think Milton has a center that holds because modernity doesn't have a center that holds. We're a mess. And this man is like that. I think he was a denomination of one.

I think he was one of the earliest... This is for us to hear, for evangelicals especially, for an evangelical material. Milton is an early example of the disaster of the Christian alone with his Bible. That stupid tradition, which is arrogant. Of course we should be alone with our Bible, but we should be alone with them in the community of the faith, with our brothers and sisters over many centuries. [61 : 16] Now I'm starting to sound like Lewis, like a small-c Catholic. Milton was out there just, I got it now. There's his freedom doctrine that goes wanky.

I'm free, me and my Bible. And he starts believing all sorts of wrong, stupid things, which the tradition is embarrassed by. I'm embarrassed, as a lover of Milton, that Bloom can make a pretty good case that he's walking on thin ground.

Bloom likes the thin ground. I don't like it. So I'm babbling here. Please do. The trouble is, Bill, that another curve comes in.

This heavenly news, Milton uses this kind of language, and Aeonian Hill, I'm never sure of that pronunciation. He uses this on purpose.

Aeonian now. He'd also say, yes, I'm listening to the same spirit that Plato was listening to, you know. Yeah, so is Plato, the other guys will say. So is Plato.

[62 : 18] You're halfway to Gnosticism. If you want to read it that way. But I think he's just a classicist who revels in each metaphor. The crystal spheres are singing to us. If you listen, you'll hear the angelic choirs singing.

In that poem, on the morning of Christ's Nativity, you have the heavenly orders adoring our Lord. Anyway, there you go. If he shows another particular concept, if the other end of the sign of his statement is not the belief, who would you, who would you, who would you talk about?

Who would you, who would you, who would you, who would you, who would you, who would you, oh, Douglas Bush, at Harvard, an earlier generation scholar who wrote extensively, and I've learned lots now.

I'll talk about him a bit next week. There's another one. But he would, Bush would call himself in the tradition definitely a Christian humanism. There you go. Thanks for listening to this.

Yeah. Thank you. There you go.

[63 : 28] There you go. There you go. .

Have a great day. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.