

Learning in War-Time
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In 1938, Somerville College English Fellow Helen Darbishire told the Somerville Council in Oxford that “it would be advisable to ascertain, if possible, whether in the event of an international emergency, university education would continue, and, if so, on what basis.”¹ One can imagine conversations between Darbishire, Lewis, and other English Fellows in Oxford that addressed this topic during a time when war seemed imminent. That the possibility of war had been on everyone’s mind for quite some time, including Lewis’s, is clear from many sources, one of them a letter published by E. L. Mascall in *Theology* in January 1939, to which Lewis responded in May 1939. In “The Christian and the Next War,” Mascall set forth six conditions for a just war. In his response, “The Conditions for a Just War,” Lewis argued that determining the justice of war was a complex issue best reserved for government officials who knew the full international political story.² Then war broke out on September 1, 1939 with Germany’s invasion of Poland. England declared war on Germany on September 3, and the question of learning in war-time became prominent.

Since the fall term, Michaelmas, began in October, this sermon was delivered by Lewis, a veteran of World War One, quite early in the term. The wartime BBC broadcasts that would eventually become *Mere Christianity* were still a couple of years away. Lewis preached the sermon “Learning in War-Time” at St. Mary the Virgin Church, Oxford, on Sunday, October 22, 1939.³ “Learning in War-Time” presented Lewis’s defense of traditional humanistic learning at a time when many thought that educational pursuits were unnecessary in the light of the war, or worse, irresponsible. The sermon attempted to answer the question, “What is the use of beginning a task which we have so little chance of finishing?” When the world is advancing to heaven or hell, when the liberties of Europe hang in the balance, Lewis wrote, how can students and faculty spend time on what seem to be trivialities in comparison?

The larger issue is not learning in war-time, but learning at any time, especially when our eternal destiny is at stake. The title of the sermon suggests us its basic thesis: we should not stop learning during war-time. Lewis states that if mankind had postponed the search for knowledge and beauty until all of life was secure for everyone, the search would never have begun. There has never been a time when there were no crises, alarms, difficulties, and emergencies. And, after all, learning is part of our nature. In fact, no one can live a life exclusively devoted to war or, on the assumption that the spiritual life is most important, to religious activities. Even the person fully engaged in war is doing many things characteristic of normal life. Furthermore, to surrender oneself fully to a single cause, even one’s country in the time of war, is to remove that person from God.

The problem with war is that it aggravates the human situation, which is that we were not made for this world, but for eternity, and one day we will leave this world for our real destination. But that is good, and it explains why a time of war causes many people to think more

¹ Pauline Adams. *Somerville for Women: An Oxford College 1879–1993*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 193.

² Walter Hooper, ed. *God in the Dock*, 325. Mascall responded to Lewis in June 1939.

³ Originally titled “None Other Gods: Culture in War Time,” the sermon was reprinted for the Student Christian Movement as *Christian in Danger* and then finally as “Learning in War-Time,” when it was reprinted with other collections of essays.

seriously about their spiritual lives. The larger number of people in American churches after 9/11, though temporary, is one example.

In fact, the Scriptures do not ask a person to set aside normal activities. Instead, they invite the Christian to engage in normal activities and offer them to God. Lewis cites 1 Cor. 10:31 as the solution to this problem: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." Any natural activity, if offered to God, is accepted by God; all activities, if not offered to God, will be sinful. He could have cited Rom. 14:23b, "Everything that does not come from faith is sin." No natural activity is intrinsically meritorious. That includes learning. Learning is one of those normal and natural activities that can be offered to God. Whether he knew it or not, Lewis was reflecting Luther's theology of vocation with the words, "The work of a Beethoven, and the work of a charwoman, become spiritual on precisely the same condition, that of being offered to God, of being done humbly 'as to the Lord'" and even more so with his emphasis on each person having his own vocation, or calling.

Lewis goes on to suggest those factors that serve as a tolerable index of one's vocation: one's upbringing, one's talents, and one's circumstances. Having been sent to Oxford by one's parents and having a country that allows one to remain there during war-time are among the circumstances that suggest that the learned life is the best life we can lead to the glory of God. That learned life will also at times be necessary to address mistaken ideas in our culture. "Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered." And Lewis says something similar about the study of history, which can show us what basic assumptions of our day are unique to our time period and ought not to be taken for granted.

Finally, Lewis offers three mental exercises that may help the scholar against the current predicament of the war. He offers self-control in place of excitement, faith in place of frustration, and sobriety in place of fear. Favorable conditions will never come, and the scholar must learn to seek knowledge under unfavorable conditions. That is self-control. No one has time to finish the tasks of life, so the scholar must in faith entrust the future to God. No one will escape death, so the scholar must accept the human condition soberly and yet humbly offer the life of learning to God.

In short, yes, we can and should learn in war-time.