

MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE, LIFELONG SEEKER

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Malcolm Muggeridge's late discovery of Christianity is an example for today's conservative intellectuals.

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Solomon tells us that “there is no new thing under the sun,” and this is also true for the delusions of our postmodern progressives. While today’s revolutionaries seem more insane than their forebears, with our binary-smashing eunuchs and their crusades against biology, it is important to remember that the sinister gullibility of our elites remains unchanged.

I was reminded of this recently when reading Malcolm Muggeridge’s magnificent 1972 memoir, *Chronicles of Wasted Time*, in which he describes the infatuation of Western intellectuals with the genocidal Soviet Union. In 1932, while covering the Soviet experiment in Moscow, Muggeridge and several journalist colleagues held a contest “to see who could produce the most striking example of credulity among this fine flower of our Western intelligentsia.”

Muggeridge nearly won when he convinced Lord Marley that the endless bread lines were not a result of shortages, but rather were “permitted by the authorities because it provided a means of inducing the workers to rest when otherwise their zeal for completing the Five-Year Plan in record time was such that they would keep at it all the time.” It has always taken an unreasonable amount of faith to believe in allegedly progressive ideologies, both then and now.

As Christendom’s twilight gives way to the post-Christian night, it has become a popular pastime of conservative writers to muse on whose past predictions qualify as prophecies. Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and Neil Postman are widely agreed upon; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, too, for those who have bothered to read his still-essential *Warning to the West*. There are other candidates as well. For instance, Christopher Lasch and Alan Bloom, who laid out the revolt of the elites and the collapse of academia.

In addition to these, I would like to echo biographer Gregory Wolfe's proposal that it is past time for Malcolm Muggeridge to get his due. Muggeridge has been the subject of three major biographies thus far—by Wolfe, Richard Ingram, and Ian Hunter. Of the three, only Wolfe's 2003 work can be considered definitive.

Wolfe lays out the narrative arc of Muggeridge's life and reveals him to be a lifelong seeker who long resisted the Christianity that would define his last years, whilst debunking the widely held belief that Muggeridge was simply a hedonistic raconteur who converted once the passing of his youth had dulled the desires of the flesh. Even Christopher Hitchens, who wrote a book trashing Muggeridge's beloved Mother Teresa, observed that "the cumulative effect of Wolfe's narrative ... is so serious and so genuine that the biography ultimately forces a reconsideration of its subject."

Wolfe's case for a reappraisal of Muggeridge's legacy is compelling. His contemporaries, from Orwell to Greene, have received their due. Muggeridge has not, despite his astonishing record of prescient predictions. This is in part because Muggeridge was a journalist and television presenter rather than a philosopher, theologian, or successful novelist. He was also a profoundly modern man: hard-edged, satirical, and possessing a profound sense of absurdity that frequently bordered on cynicism. Despite what he called his "Niagara of words," many now remember him primarily as an omnipresent fixture on the BBC rather than as a writer.

As a journalist, Muggeridge managed to be nearly everywhere. He spent time in India, corresponded with Gandhi, and correctly predicted that the days of the British Raj were numbered. He was one of only a handful to report on the Holodomor in Ukraine, covered the League of Nations from Geneva, and was one of the few who saw war with Germany coming. As an MI6 agent, he engaged in daring escapades in Mozambique, made it to France for the Liberation, and toured the scorched remains of Hiroshima with a delegation that included Emperor Hirohito. He covered the segregation battles in Little Rock, Arkansas, politics in Washington, D.C., and even bumped into the Beatles in a small bar

before they went big. As a BBC host, he interviewed every major figure of his time, from Solzhenitsyn to Stalin's daughter, Svetlana.

Wolfe identifies several reasons for Muggeridge's descent into relative obscurity. Much of what he correctly predicted is now so widely accepted that most have forgotten his prescience. Additionally, Muggeridge's decision to become a television personality enormously damaged his literary output. To read his history *The Thirties*, or his two-part autobiography (he never got around to the long-promised final volume), or any of his collections of essays is to be reminded of the sort of historian and social commentator Muggeridge could have been had his self-confessed laziness not drawn him to the easy money offered by the BBC.

He signed many contracts for books he never wrote and agreed to write others he never finished. He was often tortured by guilt for producing comparably little that was lasting. It is true that he was a brilliant interviewer and a sparkling conversationalist, but his documentaries are nearly impossible to obtain and only a fraction of his massive television output can be found on YouTube. Much of his life's work is now inaccessible to the public—and even if it were accessible, I suspect he would not have the same online cult following that other commentators—such as the Hitchens brothers or William F. Buckley Jr.—have acquired. Muggeridge was simply too complicated a man to have a natural constituency.

Indeed, for most of his life, Muggeridge was a tormented, Augustinian figure plagued by cycles of depression, self-doubt, heavy drinking, and sexual recklessness. Most recently, Muggeridge made the news in 2015, when historian Jean Seaton revealed in her book, *Pinkoes and Traitors: The BBC and the Nation 1974-1987*, that he was given the nickname "The Pouncer" for his reputation as a groper. Muggeridge's #MeToo footnote, however, scarcely made a ripple—there were no statues to topple and no legacy to attack, so nobody much cared. People no longer recognised his name.

Wolfe's biography, however, proves that Muggeridge understood that Christianity was necessary for the survival of Western civilization long before he could believe it was true.

He despised himself for his sinful lifestyle, and his experiences convinced him that pleasure was not happiness. When the sexual revolution began to explode across the West, Muggeridge became a potent critic—not out of hypocrisy but from experience. Many never forgave him for his condemnations of hedonism, summed up in one of his best epigrams: “Sex is the mysticism of materialism.”

Malcolm Muggeridge’s public pro-life stance was also out of step with most of his elite counterparts. He delivered anti-abortion lectures on both sides of the Atlantic, wrote a sadly prophetic play about euthanasia, and penned a powerful pro-life essay titled “The Humane Holocaust,” which was published in Ronald Reagan’s slim 1984 book, *Abortion and the Conscience of a Nation*, in which Muggeridge is quoted twice. (Muggeridge was impressed by Reagan after seeing that his pro-life and anti-Communist views did not vanish when he assumed the presidency, and preferred him to Margaret Thatcher, who he saw as focusing on laissez-faire economics to the exclusion of moral issues.) Muggeridge was not a moral scold, as many assumed: he was a sincere crusader. His conversion to Christianity was not one of convenience but the culmination of a years-long struggle.

Cover of the first edition of Volume 1 of Muggeridge’s *Chronicles of Wasted Time*, originally published by Morrow in 1973.

Muggeridge’s relatively late-life conversion to Christianity, however, does give some the impression that he was merely a committed contrarian, once again bucking the trends of his times. Indeed, there is a perverse symmetry to his life: he was a Communist before becoming an anti-Communist (after visiting the Soviet Union and seeing the socialist experiment for himself); a personal libertine before he became a public moralist; and a TV talking head before he trashed his own set and excoriated the medium, most notably in a series of lectures collected into a short but powerful book, *Christ and the Media*. He was also, in many ways, a traitor to his class—a member of the media elite who, as Wolfe put it, argued that the elites “had become alienated from traditional values, and had launched a sustained assault on the Western tradition, shielding themselves behind the rhetoric of tolerance and free speech.” Muggeridge was maddening, but each passing year

emphasises just how right that analysis was.

Wolfe believes that, in addition to his social commentary, Malcolm Muggeridge deserves a place amongst the great Christian apologists of the 20th century, alongside C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton (who incidentally also insisted that he was, first and foremost, a journalist). Over an almost unbelievably storied lifetime in which he occupied a front seat to most of the century's key events, Muggeridge was drawn slowly but inexorably to a single, all-encompassing conclusion: "It is Christ, or nothing." In 1980, a decade before his death, he reflected on all that he had seen in an essay titled "But Not of Christ":

We look back upon history and what do we see? Empires rising and falling, revolutions and counterrevolutions, wealth accumulating and then disbursed, one nation dominant and then another. Shakespeare speaks of the "rise and fall of great ones that ebb and flow with the moon."

In one lifetime I have seen my own countrymen ruling over a quarter of the world, the great majority of them convinced, in the words of what is still a favorite song, that "God who's made them mighty would make them mightier yet."

I've heard a crazed, cracked Austrian proclaim to the world the establishment of a German Reich that would last for a thousand years; an Italian clown announce he would restart the calendar to begin with his own assumption of power; a murderous Georgian brigand in the Kremlin acclaimed by the intellectual elite of the western world as wiser than Solomon, more enlightened than Asoka, more humane than Marcus Aurelius.

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I've seen America wealthier and in terms of military weaponry more powerful than all the rest of the world put together, so that Americans, had they so wished, could have outdone an Alexander or a Julius Caesar in the range and scale of their conquests.

All in one little lifetime. All gone with the wind.

England now part of an island off the coast of Europe and threatened with dismemberment and even bankruptcy.

Hitler and Mussolini dead and remembered only in infamy.

Stalin a forbidden name in the regime he helped to found and dominate for some three decades.

America haunted by fears of running out of the precious fluid that keeps the motorways roaring and the smog settling, with troubled memories of a disastrous campaign in Vietnam and of the great victories of the Don Quixotes of the media when they charged the windmills of Watergate. All in one lifetime, all in one lifetime, all gone. Gone with the wind.

Muggeridge reached the conclusion that it was "Christ or nothing" the hard way: by hard living, frenetic traveling, and inner struggle. But the path he took may have something to offer other intellectuals who now find themselves where he once was. As the great South

African novelist Alan Paton (author of *Cry, the Beloved Country* and *Too Late the Phalarope*) noted, Muggeridge wrote for years as someone “who wants to believe and who cannot believe.” As we advance into the post-Christian age that Muggeridge saw coming, many conservative intellectuals find themselves in Muggeridge’s precise position—and perhaps a reconsideration of his life’s work can assist them in making the leap of faith.

Many conservative intellectuals today now openly confess that Christianity is essential for the survival of Western civilization, but simply cannot bring themselves to believe that Christianity is *true*. World-renowned historian Niall Ferguson [told me](#) in an interview earlier this year that although he does not believe in Christianity himself, “I do think we should go to church” because “there’s just too much evidence that in the raw, when the constraints of civilization fall away, we behave in the most savage way to one another.” Agnostic Douglas Murray has worried publicly, both in conversation and [in print](#), that the concept of the sanctity of human life may not survive the death of Christianity.

There are others. Charles Murray—social scientist, best-selling author (*The Bell Curve* and *Coming Apart*), and agnostic—[told me](#) that he believes the American Republic cannot survive without the Christianity that he does not believe in. Historian Tom Holland’s recent book, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, argues that Western civilization itself is premised on vanishing Christian values—although, again, Holland himself is not a Christian. And Dr. Jordan Peterson, perhaps the world’s most famous public intellectual, has been [publicly grappling](#) with Christianity for several years, seeming to strain towards it while being held back by the constraints of his own mind. For these men, like Muggeridge in the decades before his conversion, Christianity is a collection of essential myths that we cannot do without—but nothing more.

Wolfe was correct in calling for a revaluation of Malcolm Muggeridge’s writings—of his pre-conversion commentary and his brilliant post-conversion defences of Christianity. But as we advance into the 21st century, perhaps the tortured life of Malcolm Muggeridge can provide an example for those intellectuals who, like him, understand that our culture needs Christ without confessing that they need Him, too. Perhaps men who value intellect and ideas above all can find something to appreciate in the sardonic and sensuous

journalist's surrender to the very God that he had fled from his entire life. Perhaps they, like Muggeridge, can also realize that Christ is a personal necessity as well as a cultural one—and see, as Muggeridge himself once wrote, that “[i]n the end, coming to faith remains for all a sense of homecoming, of picking up the threads of a lost life, of responding to a bell that had long been ringing, of taking a place at a table that had long been vacant.”