The year 2003 marked the centenary birth of Thomas Malcolm Muggeridge, the non-conformist writer, journalist, BBC commentator, Roman Catholic convert, and declared enemy of liberalism. Muggeridge saw liberalism as being the new gospel and great consensus of the twentieth century. In his inimitable style he defined it as a “death wish” responsible for the destruction of the moral and cultural traditions of Western Civilization.

I first came upon Muggeridge’s writing in the early 1980s. I especially admired the heartfelt sincerity, analysis, and spirited style of “The Great Liberal Death Wish,” which had a tremendous effect on me. It was like a prophetic voice in the wilderness. At the time, I was a student at the increasingly secular, purportedly Catholic Boston College. I cherished Muggeridge as a voice of liberation in a civilization under siege.

“The Great Liberal Death Wish” was first published in 1970 when Muggeridge was 67 years old. He wrote well over twenty books that are refreshing and powerful and will continue to speak to the young of the twenty-first century and all those who look for meaning beyond the dictates of materialistic conformity. He will continue to reveal “the meaning that lies embedded in meaninglessness, the order underlying confusion, the indestructible love at the heart of the holocaust of hate, the still, small voice of truth that makes itself heard above thunderous falsity.”

Muggeridge was born at the beginning of the last century in England in 1903. It was an age that his good friend and unappreciated author Hugh Kingsmill (1889-1949) characterized as “New Dawnism”—a time of faith in material progress and a worldly future without God. In the nineteenth century the individualist Henry David Thoreau called this “camping down on earth and forgetting heaven”. The process of secularization has continued unabated. Till Muggeridge characterized his age as out to prove “that when Jesus said that His kingdom was not of this world. He meant that it was.”

Malcolm Muggeridge’s father rose from a humble background and became a Socialist MP. H.T. Muggeridge was part of the age and thus a great believer in the new gospel of liberal progress. In sending his son to Cambridge University his father hoped Malcolm would be prepared to take a leading part as an elite member of the dawning new age.

Muggeridge would both please and perplex his father. He returned from Cambridge with an affected high-pitched accent of his own denomination. According
to Malcolm this pleased his father because it sounded upper class. But Malcolm, though a partisan of the left, had already begun questioning his father’s gospel of material progress.

Gregory Wolfe’s recently reprinted biography of Malcolm Muggeridge proves that Muggeridge had been attracted to Christianity as a young man. While a student at Cambridge he met Alec Vidler (1899-1991), who was studying to become an Anglican priest. Muggeridge also considered this vocation. Vidler would remain a committed friend and life-long Christian influence on Malcolm. He noticed that Muggeridge “had a kind of genius as a talker and writer and even as a seer.”

After graduation Malcolm decided to go to India as an English teacher. In a 1926 letter from India to his socialist reformer father, he asserted, “that the ability to say ‘Dadda’ to God is what people need more than the minimum wage.”

In India he would also begin his journalistic career by writing sketches of Indian life for the Manchester Guardian. In one piece he wrote of a retarded boy who daily drove a flock of geese in perfect order. One day, Muggeridge noticed the boy was absent. Another boy had taken up the chore. This boy “carried a switch like a sergeant-major,” a “bouncing, bumptious fellow” who shouted at the geese. The result was chaotic, with the flock dispersing and geese getting run over by cars. Muggeridge noticed the retarded child seemed happy with his simple task. “When his soul leaves the poor, puny body, with its gapingly vacant face, I believe it will be found to be a rare and beautiful soul, pleasing to its maker.”

This was one of many insights he had on the opposite natures of love and power. Love is an acceptance and a letting go while power clutches and dominates. His book The Thirties (1940) further explored this theme. Muggeridge would become more confirmed in his belief that the twentieth century was a nightmare because man tried to set up an earthly paradise based on human knowledge and power without any reference to God. The result was a bloodletting unrivalled in all of recorded history.

Later as the Guardian’s correspondent to Moscow in 1932, he reported on Stalin’s policy of liquidation through created famine in the Ukraine. Other correspondents like Walter Duranty of the New York Times refused to report the truth of the situation in which seven to ten million people perished. Those seven months in Russia changed Malcolm’s life. His reports made him an outcast among the Western intelligentsia, confirming him on his lone spiritual journey on his lone spiritual journey.

Muggeridge now found it difficult to gain employment. And he had a wife and family to support! He had married Kitty Dobbs in 1927, the niece of Beatrice and Sydney Webb of Fabian Socialist fame. Kitty and Malcolm were their age’s hippies embracing the destructive doctrine of free love. Their marriage suffered painful infidelities by both partners and even raised a child from one of Kitty’s affairs.

The unnaturalness of human sexuality in the twentieth century and his own fleshly sins gave Muggeridge insight into what he called the “counter-movement”: “The separation of the procreative impulse from procreation, the down-grading of motherhood and the up-grading of spinsterhood, and the acceptance of sterile perversions as the equivalent of fruitful love; finally, the grisly holocaust of millions of aborted babies, ironically in the name of quality of life.” Muggeridge came to defend Humane Vitae which was instrumental in his later conversion to the Roman Catholic Church.

Muggeridge was one of the most gifted and original prose writers of the twentieth century. His autobiography Chronicles of Wasted Time (1973) is recognized as one of the beautifully written memoirs of all time. He had been named “Thomas
Malcolm” after the Victorian Thomas Carlyle whose writing style certainly influenced Muggeridge. From Carlyle he also imbied a combative spirit against the forces of materialism. Malcolm also had a non conformist Manichean strain that he struggled to overcome. It would not be fully reconciled until his conversion, along with Kitty, to Roman Catholicism in 1982.

In reacting against what he saw as a declining civilization Muggeridge’s writings also express a certain discontent with the world. His reaction against the world encouraged an individualism and strong egotism. And he could be overly pessimistic. British MP Michael Astor once said Muggeridge had a “genius for disliking human beings.” Muggeridge himself once half seriously said: “there’s nothing in this world more instinctively abhorrent to me than finding myself in agreement with my fellow human beings.” On his BBC programs in the sixties and seventies he exhibited a Byronic posturing and a vein for satire that made him extremely unpopular and hated among the left.

With G.K. Chesterton, he shared a gift for seeing paradox. He evokes many such paradoxes in his writings at times sympathetic and with great tenderness. But he also reveled in a magnificent derisory satire. Muggeridge also wrote plays and fiction. But his great talent lay in linking contemporary observation in time to eternity. This point of intersection became a “Theatre of Fearful Symmetry.” Muggeridge was always peering behind the drama of human existence for God. He would explain this way of seeing by quoting the English poet William Blake:

We are led to believe a lie  
When we see not Thro’ the Eye.

To see with the eye includes the invisible spiritual dimension of reality to which modernity, in its preoccupation with material progress, is blind. Muggeridge in reporting on his century created a new literary genre, a kind of eschatological journalism as yet unappreciated.

He saw paradox everywhere. In an age hell bent on self-fulfillment and the pursuit of happiness Muggeridge saw “True happiness in forgetfulness, not in indulgence of the self; in escape from carnal appetites not in their satisfaction.”

Seeing through the eye, he saw the twentieth century, as a kind of exact antithesis to the gospels. “It plays the Crucifixion backwards, as it were; in the beginning was the flesh and the flesh became Word. In the light of this Logos in reverse, the quest for hope is the ultimate hopelessness; the pursuit of happiness, the certitude of despair; the lust for life, the embrace of death....” Muggeridge had a fondness for language and the sound of words. They flowed from his lips and pen in a crescendo of an ecstatic pessimism, suddenly broken by outbursts of contagious laughter.

While living in Ireland in 1988, I went to visit Malcolm Muggeridge at his home in Sussex, England. I brought with me a plant for Kitty and a book of T.S. Eliot’s poems for Malcolm. Muggeridge had once called Eliot “a death rattle in the throat of a dying civilization.” I thought this phrase in some ways marvelously apt. But at tea I pointed out that Eliot had made a journey similar to Malcolm’s through the wasteland of the twentieth-century.” And that the poet also found peace at the “intersection of the timeless with time.”

I read him the following from Eliot’s Thoughts After Lambeth which he was much taken with—“The world is trying the experiment of attempting to form a civilization but non-Christian mentality. The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient in awaiting its collapse; meanwhile redeeming the time: so that the Faith may...
be preserved alive through the dark ages before us; to renew and rebuild civilization and save the world from suicide.”

Earlier I noted Muggeridge’s Manichean strain, a tendency to reject material creation as evil and flee to the world of the spirit. But man cannot do this. Man is an in-between creature. And this is the whole point and significance of the Incarnation that the divine Christ became human and suffered in order to bring salvation to the world.

Both Muggeridge and Eliot were twentieth-century pilgrims. They both had to re-learn Christianity for themselves and found they could not rescue their age in time, but could rescue their own souls through time for eternity. They both came to love the beauty of the world and to look beyond it for consolation.

Evelyn Waugh once said that Muggeridge expressed the “particularly English loneliness of a religiously minded man suddenly made alive to the fact that he is outside Christendom.” Bishop Fulton J. Sheen as he lay dying had said to Malcolm Muggeridge that he thought Muggeridge’s assessment was correct. “You are right, Sheen said, “Christendom is finished.” By Christendom he meant all of the structures Western man set to guide souls to eternity; all of its art and its creativity seemed to be finished. Sheen added, “And though Christendom is finished, Christ is still valid.”

Malcolm Muggeridge died in November 1990. He suffered a little at the end. We can only pray he flew away to what he deemed “other more commodious skies.” He once wrote a book entitled *A Third Testament* (1976) about prophetic writers who also searched for religious truth—Blake, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard. I believe Muggeridge’s books also serve as a Third Testament succoring man in his search for God.

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*“Recreations are not education, accomplishments are not education. Do not say, the people must be educated what after all, you only mean, amused, refreshed, sustained, put into good spirits and good humor, or kept from vicious excesses.”*  
—John Henry Newman (1801-1890)