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# SCHOLARSHIP AND SPIRITUALITY

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Two related questions appear frequently in discussing the subject of scholarship and spirituality: (1) Can scholarship be joined with spirituality? (2) Can one who is spiritual be a scholar?

The Latin father Tertullian asked: "What is there in common between the philosopher and the Christian, the pupil of Hellas and the pupil of Heaven?" Answering his own question, he replied: "We have no need for curiosity since Jesus Christ, nor for inquiry since the Evangel."[1] This seeming anti-intellectualism appears to stem from the NT itself. The following statements made by Jesus and Paul serve to illustrate the point, quotations being taken from the Moffatt translation:

> At that time Jesus spoke and said, "I praise thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding all this from the wise and learned and revealing it to the simpleminded: yes, Father, I praise thee that such was thy chosen purpose" (Matt 11:25-26).
>
> It is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the sages, I will confound the insight of the wise." Sage, scribe, critic of this world, where are they all? Has not God stultified the wisdom of the world? For when the world with all its wisdom failed to know God in his wisdom, God resolved to save believers by the "sheer folly" of the Christian message (1 Cor 1:19-21).

On Matt 11:25 Donald Carson comments: "The contrast is between those who are self-sufficient and deem themselves wise and those who are dependent and love to be taught." And on v 26: "Those who pride themselves in understanding divine things are judged, those who understand nothing are taught. The predestination pattern is the counterpoint of grace."[2]

Yet this is not the only impression gained from the NT. In the gospels we become aware of Jesus' vast knowledge of and use of the Scriptures. He readily cites their words and makes use of them in creative ways in his teaching and proclamation. The fourth gospel appears to relate the gospel of the incarnation to both its Hellenistic and Hebrew cultural settings. Jerome, in a letter written to his friend Paulinus, declared: "John was no mere untaught fisherman—if so, how could he have written about the Logos, God's

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[1]Cited by E. H. Harbison, *The Christian Scholar in the Age of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 1.

[2]*The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. F. E. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8. 275.

Wisdom?"[3] Once more Paul shows himself a keen student of revelation and human nature as he pens an insightful philosophy of history in his epistle to the Romans.

## I. The Function of Scholarship

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines scholarship as "learning, erudition; esp. proficiency in the Greek and Latin languages and their literature." By some the concept is considered respectable, as when Charles Lamb wrote that one "Matthew Field belonged to that class of modest divines who affect to mix in equal proportion the gentleman, the scholar and the Christian." To others it is not an indispensable quality, as one related: "I did not tell you what the lady said to me on my telling her I was no scholar. 'Never mind that,' said she. . . .'Your no scholarship is no hindrance if you are only faithful.'"

Both in the early Church and during the Middle Ages, Christian scholars saw a connection between sound thinking and moral uprightness. The Greek idea of *paideia* had included training of both mind and body, which would fit the individual for a place in society. The Roman Quintillian (first century A.D.) insisted on the importance of both moral and intellectual training. In the following century Aulus Gellius taught that such instruction would result in one becoming truly human. What was it to be truly human? *Humanitas* was found not in *philanthropia* but in *paideia*, thorough instruction in the liberal arts. It was this "underlying emphasis on the connection between sound thinking and moral uprightness," argues Gillian Evans, that was adopted by Christian teachers in their instruction of the young in succeeding centuries.[4]

The history of the Church shows numerous examples of scholarly demeanor and profound intellect. Jerome with his learning and linguistic equipment produced the Vulgate, a work called "one of the supreme achievements of Christian scholarship."[5] While Erasmus later criticized the Vulgate—both its text and the translation—he seems to have counted Jerome as "the most important patristic writer," actually advocating that he be known as "*the* theologian of the Christian church."[6]

Augustine, bishop of Hippo, taught us that "unless you believe, you will not come to know." This concept became "the foundation stone of intellectual enterprise in Christian Europe" for a millennium after his time. Again he wrote: "If you cannot understand, believe in order that you may understand." He is telling us that man's mind alone cannot grasp the truth—his whole being must seize upon it. The knowledge of God is given to the soul. The *lumen Dei* makes intellectual vision possible. At the age of thirty-three he wrote: "It is now my conviction that what I want most is *to grasp the truth*,

[3]Jerome *Epistle* 53.

[4]G. R. Evans, A. E. McGrath and A. D. Galloway, *The History of Christian Theology*, Vol. 1: *The Science of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 10.

[5]Harbison, *Christian* 12.

[6]Evans, McGrath and Galloway, *History* 118.

not by belief alone but also by understanding."[7] Augustine stands as "the true founder of Christian philosophy," a mediator between classicism and Christianity at a time when ancient civilization was collapsing.

In the time of the Renaissance, scholars laid emphasis upon study of the classical sources directly (rather than relying upon later commentators). This "humanism," as it was called, had important implications for the study of the Bible. Lorenzo Valla, for example, stressed philological precision. He criticized the Vulgate's selection of *sacramentum* for the Greek *mysterion* in Eph 5:31-32, implying that marriage was a sacrament in the strict sense of the word. Similarly, Erasmus challenged the Vulgate text of 1 John 5:7, relating to the three witnesses, on source-critical grounds.

It was this humanist scholarship—with its emphasis on methodologies and love of learning—that made it possible for the Reformation to dawn. One example must suffice. When John Calvin went about determining the meaning of Biblical words and phrases he began by giving a philological explanation and then appealed to grammar and rhetoric. In addition he gave illustrations of the language as used in various ancient sources.[8] These ancient or patristic sources were held—for example, by Philip Melanchthon—to possess unique authority, for they showed a truly Biblical authority (which, he affirmed, was later corrupted through the scholastics). To the extent that these early scholars had interpreted the Scriptures while remaining true to Scripture they were reliable. Further, to the extent that they drove one back to Scripture they performed a service to the later Church.

## II. The Nature of Spirituality

What is spirituality? As this theme has many explications, I will confine my remarks to some significant samples. In a recent volume entitled *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century* some definitive expressions occur: "openness to the transcendent dimension," "the experience of ultimate reality," "the reaction that faith arouses in religious consciousness and practice," "the lived experience of Christian belief." An extended description is given by Sandra Schneiders in her essay, "Scripture and Spirituality":

> [Christian spirituality is] personal participation in the mystery of Christ begun in faith, sealed by baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, nourished by sharing in the Lord's Supper, and . . . expressed by a simple life of universal love that bore witness to life in the Spirit and attracted others to faith.[9]

Urban T. Holmes poses a basic question: "How has Christian humanity throughout its history understood what it is to seek God and to know him?"[10]

[7]Harbison, *Christian* 17.

[8]Evans, McGrath and Galloway, *History* 136.

[9]*Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century* (ed. B. McGinn and J. Meyendorff; New York: Crossroad, 1985) xiii-xvi, 2.

[10]U. T. Holmes III, *A History of Christian Spirituality* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 3.

A large part of that quest, that relation between God and ourselves, he calls "prayer."

Holmes suggests scales for describing Christian spirituality, designated by four terms: apophatic, kataphatic, speculative and affective. The first two make up the ends of the horizontal scale, apophatic denoting an emptying technique of meditation and kataphatic an imaginal technique. The second pair compose the vertical scale, speculative referring to illumination of the mind and affective to illumination of the heart/emotions. His research indicates that most forms of Christian spirituality are combinations of two factors, one from each of the two categories. In the NT, for example, spirituality is mainly kataphatic (drawn from the Jewish use of imagery) and more affective than speculative. One finds that in the synoptics the key images appealing to the hearer/reader are *metanoia* (repentance), the desert (suggesting poverty), and purity of heart (defined by Kierkegaard as "the ability to will one thing"), which leads one to see God. In Paul's letters *nous* (mind—e.g. "the mind of Christ") and the cross are key images (the latter pointing back to the idea of repentance). In the fourth gospel the prominent images are light versus darkness, love, and *Logos*. To elaborate one image, the cross is for Paul "an imaginative shock," while in the fourth gospel it is "an image of glory." Paul stresses the "scandal" of the cross, the evangelist the "lifted up" and "exalted" Savior.[11]

In the early patristic period one may see two main types of spirituality, one based on the eucharistic community and its eschatological orientation (e.g. in Ignatius and Irenaeus) and another based on struggle against passions and striving for moral perfection, more individual, and aiming for mystical union of soul or mind with the *Logos* of God (e.g. in Origen). From the existence of these two types the question (naturally) arose whether the structured Church with its ministries and sacraments or the monastery with its spiritual father (the *gerōn*) was more important in developing spirituality. One great attempt to synthesize the two was found in Maximum the Confessor (late sixth to early seventh centuries). The monastic receives meaning from the eucharist, so that the community is the great source of spirituality.[12]

Another main attempt to achieve true spirituality is seen from the thirteenth century onward in the rise of mysticism. Berthold of Spires, the first quietist, was condemned for preferring "an ignorant layman, enlightened by prayer," as an instructor over "the most learned of doctors." Even John Wycliffe of Balliol College, Oxford, saw university and college degrees "instituted by pagan vanity," serving the devil's purpose as well as God's.[13]

Further, George Fox described the clergy of his day as "frauds who must be exposed," for without "the inner light" they had no right to teach religion publicly. Fox, it appears, had been influenced by Thomas Müntzer and the anabaptists, people known as "enthusiasts" (meaning "indwelt by God"). For

[11]Ibid., pp. 4-5, 17-20.

[12]*Christian* (ed. McGinn and Meyendorff) 41-43.

[13]R. A. Knox, *Enthusiasm* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950) 114.

them the Holy Spirit spoke directly to the believer, and the movement was subjective, individualistic, anti-institutional and anti-intellectual. Fox believed that within each person God had placed a "seed"—which needed only to be awakened. In essence he continued the principles of early monastics, those who retired to the desert and waited on the Spirit.

Other aspects of spirituality are seen in the Catholic practice of liturgy and eucharist and the Eastern Orthodox use of icons for "the fulness of worship." The former places emphasis on the use of the Word of God and the elements as means of grace, while the latter stresses the icon as a witness to the incarnation. Christianity refused to dematerialize matter, and thus one is able to worship "the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take his abode in matter, and who through matter wrought my salvation," wrote John of Damascus.[14]

## III. Criticisms of Each Approach

The differences in people and their traditions have led to criticisms of each of these approaches—scholarship and spirituality. In the Renaissance and the Reformation one sees a revolution against the restraints of logical method and the attempt to find new directions in search of truth. The Renaissance has been called (in part) a philosophical and scientific revolution, the Reformation a theological one. The pietists criticized the orthodox theology—more so its form than its content. "It is by no means enough to have knowledge of the Christian faith, for Christianity consists rather of practice," wrote Philip Spener. A theologian, he argued, could not rightly hold scientific knowledge apart from personal piety.

The fifteenth-century Church of the Brethren distrusted learning in all its forms—even, for example, a knowledge of Hebrew. The seventeenth-century Jansenists (Roman Catholics opposed to the Counter-Reformation), while encouraging learning, stated two hesitations: (1) Love of learning, for its own sake, is likely to puff up the soul with pride; (2) reasoning about the faith sometimes is regarded with disapproval.[15]

On the other hand the criticism of the mystical, spiritual, image-oriented approach has often been sounded. During the iconoclastic periods (eighth and ninth centuries) it was declared that images were obstacles to prayer and the spiritual life because they were made out of "crude matter"—a reflection of the Greek separation of spirit (which is good) and matter (which is evil).[16] The gospel, it was said, could not be expressed in artistic forms.

Jacques Ellul argues that today people prefer images above the word. Thus "language has become sound without sense," and discursive theology has been replaced by mystical (image-borne) theology. He continues: "The essential fact is that people today are utterly indifferent to the question of truth,"

[14]*On the Divine Images* 1.16.

[15]Knox, *Enthusiasm* 221.

[16]*Christian* (ed. McGinn and Meyendorff) 388.

being concerned only with "reality" (that which they experience). He cites as examples such things as evangelistic meetings, even those held by Billy Graham—who is himself an "image"—as well as the influence of television.[17]

## IV. Toward a Resolution

What shall we say, then? Here are some suggestions, in the form of principles, speaking to the existing dilemma.

First, it is not an either/or choice that we face. It is not scholarship or spirituality. Rather, for a full and fulfilling Christian experience we need to affirm and practice both. (I am well aware that not all Christians are suited to attain the same level of either scholarship or spirituality.)

I have chosen as an example of this idea of inclusiveness Anselm of Canterbury (archbishop of the Anglican Church, 1093-1109). Benedicta Ward has noted that the key phrase for understanding him as a spiritual writer/scholar is found in the *Proslogion*: "I believe so I may understand, and what is more I believe that unless I do believe, I shall not understand."[18] Anselm's approach to Scripture is seen when through precise concentration on the text (which is the basis for one's religious belief) "the whole effort of the intellect centers upon the text, thus releasing the emotions of fear and love so that they activate the will in relationship to God." And it is in the prayers of Anselm (read them!) that one sees "a unique combination of theological veracity and personal ardor," which gives his spirituality a lasting value.[19]

Second, together with inclusiveness, to which I have referred, we need balance (not to be confused with fence-sitting) in dealing with the relation of scholarship and spirituality. I refer here to wise insight with respect to God and to ourselves and the communities of faith with which we are associated. We need wisdom to realize where our needs lie and for the appropriation of divine resources available to us. We need to exercise serious discipline—whether it is the discipline of scholarship or the discipline of spirituality.

Our scholarship needs the invigoration given by the Holy Spirit. (It may come down to as simple an issue as to whether we are filled with the Spirit or filled with ourselves.) Our scholarship needs to be under the authority of Scripture. It is of little value to affirm that the Bible is the Word of God while neglecting to acknowledge it in thought and practice. It will not do to hide behind a "spiritual insight" while standing against the divine message that has been written for our salvation and our learning. Here is a curious example from the life of George Fox, only a sample of what any one of us might be subject to. He defended his repudiation of water baptism by citing the words of St. Paul: "I thank God I baptized none of you" (1 Cor 1:14). A little more extended reading of that passage would have shown him the fallacy of that

[17]J. Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 186, 201-202.

[18]*Christian* (ed. McGinn and Meyendorff) 196.

[19]Ibid., p. 203.

isolated dictum. The "inner light" of Fox had replaced the authority of Scripture. Let the reader beware!

An ongoing task, a higher goal for us all, is to join together that which is logically and Scripturally inseparable—scholarship and spirituality—in proper balance.

In conclusion, I shall cite three illustrations that repeat this same message. The first is from the life of George T. Purves, preacher and scholar, written as a tribute by Benjamin B. Warfield:

> It is doubtless idle to ask whether Dr. Purves was more the preacher or more the scholar. The greater portion of his active life was passed in the pulpit, and it will not be strange if he is longer remembered as one of the most impressive preachers of his day. In truth, however, the two things cannot be separated in his case. He was never more the profound instructed scholar than when he stood in the pulpit; he was never more the preacher of righteousness than when he sat in his classroom. He certainly was not a scholastic preacher; and he certainly was not what is called a "homiletical" teacher. He was too ripe a scholar to take the atmosphere of the study into the pulpit with him; he was too skilled in the art of religious impression to carry the pulpit tone into the classroom. But, on the other hand, the whole man, with all his gifts and graces, was present wherever he went; and as he was one of the most reverential of teachers, so was he habitually one of the most theological of preachers.[20]

The second illustration is found in the writings of Kirsopp Lake, late of Harvard University:

> It is absolutely certain that the world will once again some day achieve what it has so often had and often lost—the closer approximation of knowledge and aspiration—so that its religious system may satisfy the soul of the saint without disgusting the intellect of the scholar. What is uncertain is whether this achievement will be made by any form of organized Christianity or is reserved for some movement which cannot at present be recognized.[21]

Finally, an illustration close to home. As I look upon the swinging pendulum of our grandmother clock, which graces the wall of our dining room, I behold a parable. Let us learn from the pendulum: It spends twice as much time in the middle as at either extreme.

[20]B. B. Warfield in G. T. Purves, *Faith and Life: Sermons* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board, 1902) xx.

[21]K. Lake, *Landmarks in the History of Early Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1920) 12.