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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY FOR THEOLOGIANS TODAY

David Tarus¹

Abstract

This article seeks to highlight the significance of intellectual humility for theologians and ministers of God's word today. The argument is that intellectual humility must accompany the acquiring of theological knowledge. Many scholars have been accused of being 'too intellectual' or 'too complicated', perhaps out of an attempt to appear scholarly. Intellectual virtues like honesty, courage, humility and tolerance are diminishing. The paper introduces the study by showing ways intellectual pride is evident among scholars today. Secondly, intellectual humility is defined. Thirdly, because the pursuit of intellectual humility must be rooted in the teachings of the church, the paper will briefly highlight some historical truth gleaned from past Christian writers. Finally, the paper will attempt to establish the biblical teaching on the mind and noetic² sanctification. In a nutshell therefore, this paper seeks to emphasize the promotion of checks and balances to scholars' commitment to reason, rationality and evidence, and encourage the pursuit and attainment of intellectual humility.

INTRODUCTION

There exists such a thing as pride of the educated mind. This very chronic virus infects intellectuals as well as their subjects and has been referred to as the "right answer" virus or intellectual pride. There is a dangerous disposition to impose oneself upon others, a confident egoism far removed from true piety and obedience to God. This paper seeks to counteract this pride by encouraging intellectual humility. The focus of the paper is mainly on theologians.

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² The word "noetic" is derived from the Greek word "nous," meaning mind, intelligence or ways of knowing.

Helmut Thielicke, in his outstanding classic read, reminded his students that they must constantly strive to be true theologians, always seeking to think within the community of God's people, for that community, and in the name of that community.³ Thielicke reiterated that it is possible for theologians to be taken captive by the joy of possession of theological knowledge to such an extent that that possession clouds one's call to Christian love. In fact, Thielicke refers to this as a real spiritual disease, precisely "the disease of theologians."⁴

Following Thielicke's assertion, below are ways that intellectual pride may be evident among scholars today:

- Authoritarianism in speech not giving people time to express themselves
- Intellectual intolerance
- Limited ability to learn from others we perceive as less educated or spiritual
- The desire to be known and heard
- The craving for positions
- The use of difficult terminology in speeches, sermons
- Stereotypes about other people or cultures
- Treating other people as if they were objects of a research enterprise
- Monologue - one person dominating the communication
- Intellectual dishonesty
- Corruption in some academic institutions in order to be rewarded with tenure

INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY DEFINED

Intellectual humility means having a consciousness of the limits of one's knowledge, including sensitivity to circumstance, sensitivity to bias, prejudice and the limitations of one's viewpoint. Intellectual humility is knowledge of ignorance, sensitivity to what you know and what you do not know. It is modesty about what one understands and how much weight should be given to the same. Intellectual humility is contrary to confident egoism, the attitude that our own views are so clearly important and right that they can and must be impressed on others. Intellectual humility is a reminder to scholars that vulnerability is no bad thing. Vulnerability is a reminder to be open to counter-evidence and counter-argument.⁵ Intellectual humility enriches relevance, plausibility and truth, and therefore fosters conversation and dialogue.

³ Helmut Thielicke, trans from German by Charles L. Taylor, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1962), 4.

⁴ Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, 17.

⁵ See Joseph Tussman, *Government and the Mind* (New York: Oxford University, 1977) and John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1966).

Intellectual humility involves a proper assessment of character, accomplishments and positions. What this entails is seeking truth in the right way, for the right reason, using the right methods, and for the right purposes. The opposite of intellectual humility is intellectual arrogance. Intellectual arrogance is contrary to fair-mindedness and tolerance. As Socrates noted *arrogance does not befit the critical thinker*. In fact, the bare recognition that one has attained intellectual humility is pride par excellence! Intellectual humility must remain an ideal to pursue. Pursuing it will bring benefits that might not have otherwise have been attained. An ideal can serve to give our actions direction and to remind us that present achievements remain inadequate.

J.P. Moreland has excellently explained intellectual humility:

Humility and the associated traits of open-mindedness, self-criticality, and non-defensiveness [are] virtues relevant to the intellectual life. We must be willing to seek the truth in a spirit of humility with an admission of our own finitude; we must be willing to learn from our critics; and we need to learn to argue against our own positions in order to strengthen our understanding of them... The purpose of intellectual humility, open-mindedness, and so forth is not to create a skeptical mind that never lands on a position about anything, preferring to remain suspended in midair. Rather, the purpose is for you to do anything you can to remove your unhelpful biases and get at the truth in a reasoned way.⁶

An intellectual person must be a virtuous person. He or she must have moral principles or dispositions that govern his or her own academic behavior. Intellectual arrogance is against virtuous intellectual life. Ancient ethics recognized four cardinal, ethical virtues: temperance, justice, courage and practical wisdom. In the Middle Ages, Christian philosophers added three more: faith, hope, and charity.⁷ A person of virtuous doxastic character habitually avoids the vices of skepticism and dogmatism while exhibiting such virtues as intellectual impartiality and courage.⁸

This paper turns briefly to some historical records that have elevated intellectual virtues.

⁶ J.P. Moreland, *Love God with all your Mind* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 109.

⁷ Ted Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 901.

⁸ Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 901; see also Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Intellectual Virtues and the Life of the Mind: On the Place of Virtues in Contemporary Epistemology* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992).

INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY IN HISTORY

The Jewish Community Rule⁹ document, probably one of the oldest documents of the Essene community, written about 100 B.C., details a life of discipline that included tolerance. The Essenes emphasized a life of virtue, holiness and love. The Community Rule Four (4Q257 2 I) includes more than twenty virtues and more than twenty vices. The virtues the Qumran Community valued included meekness, patience, generous compassion, eternal goodness, intelligence, understanding, wisdom, enthusiasm, justice and careful behavior. The community disdained such vices as greed, falsehood, pride, dishonesty, and impatience among others.¹⁰

The Qumran Community called themselves a *Yahad* (community), “men of holiness” (1QS 8.23), a “witnesses of truth,” and an “elect of grace” (1QS 8:6). 1QS also adds, “So shall all together comprise a *Yahad* whose essence is truth, genuine humility, love of charity and righteous intent, caring for one another after this fashion within a holy society, comrades in an eternal fellowship” (2.24-25).¹¹ The *Yahad* was to constantly pursue charity and tolerance within the members of the ‘eternal fellowship.’ Christians however, must learn to engage intellectually with everybody. They must be open to dialogue, even from ‘outsiders’.

Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 200) had a very strong philosophical and theological training established at the catechetical school of Alexandria. Even with such an education, he still emphasized simplicity of language for the benefit of the audience. Clement strives to express his arguments simply and directly, avoiding eloquence and complication. He drives home his points with apt quotations from authors with whom those present were most familiar. Clement is the first Christian writer to use literature as an instrument of peaceful labor within the church itself, not simply as a tool to combat heretics.¹² He esteems the Bible as the Word of God, which to him is the guide to a holy life and a source of truth. He admonishes his students to:

⁹ Also called Charter of a Jewish Sectarian Association or the Manual of Discipline, contained in the document recovered at the Qumran (1QS, 4Q255-264a, 5Q11). See Michael Wise, Martin Abegg Jr., and Edward Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 113.

¹⁰ See *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, by Florentino Garcia Martinez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, vol. 1 (New York: Brill, 1997), 77.

¹¹ From Wise, Abegg, and Cook *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation*.

¹² Moreland, *Love God with all your Mind*, 54.

Practice quietness in word, quietness in deed, similarity in speech and walking; and avoid impetuous haste. For then the mind will remain steadfast... For the mind, seated on high on a quiet throne, gazing intently at God, must govern the passions... Be on your guard also against signs of arrogance, a haughty bearing, a high head, a dainty and lofty footstep.¹³

For Clement, one must have knowledge and faith. Faith is not mere guessing or an arbitrary decision as to what principles are true. True knowledge is the foundation of faith.¹⁴

Bishop Augustine (354-430) of the North African town of Hippo, in his *De Doctrina Christiana*, sought to vindicate the eloquence of Scripture in the face of elevated rhetoric. Augustine stated his goal: “My argument is with Christians who congratulate themselves on knowledge of the Holy Scriptures gained without any human guidance and who - if their claim is valid - thus enjoy a real and substantial blessing.”¹⁵ Augustine contends that integrity of purpose and absolution of character must form intellectual pursuits. He notes:

... they [referring to those who were prideful] should learn without any pride, what has to be learned from a human teacher; and those responsible for teaching others should pass on, without pride or jealousy, the knowledge they have received.... Let us be aware of such arrogant and dangerous temptations...¹⁶

Augustine emphasized intellectual tolerance. To Augustine, a student of divine scripture must offer himself or herself to intensive, careful study and presentation of the Word. However, a good student of Scripture must exercise an open mind to listen to others’ discussion and views. Augustine said:

So the interpreter and teacher of the divine Scriptures, the defender of the true faith and vanquisher of error, must communicate what is good and eradicate what is bad, and in this process of speaking must win over the antagonistic, rouse the apathetic, and make clear to those who are not conversant with the matter under discussion what they should expect.... If listeners need information, there must be a presentation of facts.... To clarify disputed issues there must be rational argument and deployment of evidence.¹⁷

¹³ J. G. Davies, *Daily Life of Early Christians* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1952), 22-23.

¹⁴ See E. F. Osborn, *The Philosophy of Clement of Alexandria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 113-74.

¹⁵ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, Translated by R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.

¹⁶ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 5.

¹⁷ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 104.

Augustine is careful to caution his readers against the selfish pursuit of eloquence at the expense of clarity. He advises that one must pursue ‘eloquence keeping pace with wisdom.’¹⁸ Augustine notes that it is unwise to speak words that cannot be understood by the intended audience. Therefore, there is a need to exercise restraint in discourse. To Augustine, rational life does not owe its excellence to itself but to the truth, which it willingly obeys. In a memorable passage in his *Tractates on the Gospel of John* Augustine wrote that it was the “obedience of believing” that made understanding possible.¹⁹ Obedience must precede argument.

John Calvin (1509-1564), the eminent exegete and theologian of the Reformation period, emphasized that theologians must exercise humility in their study of God.

No man can have the least knowledge of true and sound, doctrine, without having been a disciple of the Scripture. Hence originates all true wisdom, when we embrace with reverence the testimony which God hath been pleased therein to deliver concerning himself. For obedience is the source, not only of an absolutely perfect and complete faith, but of all right knowledge of God.²⁰

Without humility, self-knowledge serves pride and is the root of all error in philosophy.²¹ Calvin was therefore “far above the weakness of aiming at the invention of novelties in theology, or of wishing to be regarded as the discoverer of new opinions.”²² What he sought to foster was piety and obedience to God. Calvin was a strict interpreter of Scripture. To him, Scripture is God’s Word and we read Scripture that we might know both God and ourselves.²³ This knowledge of God we seek in Scripture is not the stuff of “idle speculations”, it is “piety,” ... “the acknowledgment that God is God and not us, the readiness to delight in God as the ‘fountain of every good’ and

¹⁸ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 114.

¹⁹ See Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, 183.

²⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (1536 Edition). Grand Rapids: Associated Publishers and Authors, n.d. I, 6, 2.

²¹ See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II. ii 10-11; II. xvi. 1; III. ii. 23; III. xii. 5, 6; IV. xvii. 40 and also I. v. 4; II. 1. 1-3.

²² William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburg, 1866), 296.

²³ For a comprehensive treatment of John Calvin as a biblical interpreter and commentator on Scripture, see Donald K. McKim’s *Calvin and the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

grateful to do his will".²⁴ Calvin identifies the purpose of Scripture as that which corrected idolatry and distinguished the true God from all humanly invented gods. God himself defines lawful worship.²⁵

THE BIBLE AND THE MIND

First, we start by affirming that humanity is created in God's image (Gen. 1:26, 27; Gen. 5:3 and 9:6). Every endowment that man possesses has its origin from God.²⁶ This is very significant in that it indicates that the creation of humanity is in a class by itself. Men and women are 'God's masterpiece'. In Genesis 2:7 we are told that God *formed* man. This expresses the idea of an artisan with his magnificent skills. God created man as the *magnum opus* of creation. Both male and female are created in God's image. Human reasoning is part of God's creation. God created humans with the capacity to reach toward Him by thinking, choosing and speaking. Our mind therefore, is God-given. John Stott puts it this way:

Our rationality is part of the divine image... To deny our rationality is therefore to deny our humanity, to become less than human beings. Scripture forbids us to behave like horses or mules, which are "without understanding", and commands us instead to be "mature."... Many imagine that faith is entirely irrational. But Scripture never sets faith and reason over against each other as incompatible. On the contrary, faith can only rise and grow within us by the use of our minds. "Those who know thy name put their trust in thee"; their trust springs from their knowledge of the trustworthiness of God's character. Again, "Thou dost keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusts in thee." Here trusting God and staying the mind on God are synonyms, and perfect peace is the result.²⁷

At the time of creation, finiteness was the only thing that hindered humanity's ability to understand God. What they knew of God was true knowledge (Gen. 2:15-17, 19-20). Man's relation to God was perfect. They had the capacity to learn. They knew God as the sovereign Lord. In addition, they knew God in a Father-son relationship (Gen. 3:8). They knew that they had a responsibility toward God to obey what He said (Gen. 2:16-17; cf. 3:11). Fellowship with God was to become Adam's conscious possession. He was blessed with a moral consciousness.

²⁴ See Roger E. Van Harn, ed., *The Ten Commandments for Jews, Christians, and Others* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 160.

²⁵ Van Harn, *The Ten Commandments for Jews, Christians, and Others*, 160.

²⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.1.1.

²⁷ John Stott, *Balanced Christianity* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1975), 13.

Humanity then fell into sin and they lost their communion with God and from then on fell towards moral and spiritual destruction. The Fall affected humanity's mind such that apart from God's intervention through the work of the Holy Spirit, humanity cannot come to right moral conclusions. As a result of the fall, we all have a depraved and corrupted nature, which so inclines us toward sin that it is virtually impossible to do what pleases God (Rom. 5:18). Sin has affected human reasoning in that humanity continues to act contrary to reason by choosing ungodliness instead of godliness. Humanity will continually suppress the moral implications of the truth (Rom. 1:18). Moreover, not only was humanity's source of personal relationship interrupted, their intellectual functions became erroneous, for example, they began to reason in self-defense. The unregenerate sinner's thinking is fallen (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:21) and even the thinking of believers needs renewal (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23-24).

The mind of man desires to be autonomous. It constantly sits in judgment upon God and His ways and in the process condemns itself. That is what Paul means when he says, "those who hold down the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18). Since the fall of man, reason has been blind, proud, vain, and tangled in self-deceit (Rom. 1:21; 1 Cor. 3:1; Gal. 4:8; Eph. 4:17,18). Fallen reason is not able, without grace, to lift itself up to a fair recognition of the divine mysteries (Matt. 11:27; 1 Cor. 2:14-16). After the fall of Adam and Eve, humanity's noetic condition was therefore, greatly altered.

Noetic depravity, however, does not mean that in a man's mind he commits all possible sins, or that he hates God completely. Humanity still operates according to certain principles of rationality. Human beings still seek after God through various rational means. But noetic depravity implies that we are destitute, in need of a redeemer and we cannot merit forgiveness by our actions (Rom. 7:18).

The Bible does not mention the term "noetic depravity" yet it attests to its reality. The Bible depicts humanity as on a moral and spiritual downward tendency apart from the redeeming activity of the gracious God. Paul, in his description of the increasing universal apostasy from God's truth, says that the mind of man became reprobate, corrupt, and vicious (Rom. 1:28). Paul combines words like "vanity," "darkened," "alienated," "ignorance" and "blindness" to describe sin's effects on the mind (Eph. 4:17). In the same light, Paul writes strong words to Timothy about "people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth" (1 Tim. 6:5). One of the results of this downward tendency is the pride evident amongst some scholars today. Reason may be

harnessed for the service of evil. Reason may be utilized to hinder revelation, love, reconciliation, truth, faith, hope, etc.

In writing to the Colossian Christians, Paul describes their pre-Christian state - “And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind ...” (1:21). The word translated “mind” is *διάνοια* means *spirit, way of thinking and feeling*. It refers to the common daily activity of the rational faculty or simply, the habit of thinking. It does not mean the intellectual pursuit of knowledge. The human mind in its natural, untransformed nature perverts the truth of God. Paul uses the same word (*διάνοια*) in Ephesians 2:3 to affirm that before regeneration, human desires and thoughts were depraved.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul affirmed the limitations of the human mind when dealing with the things of God (1 Cor. 1:18-21; 2:14). These passages attest to more than mere human finiteness. In the Psalms, references are made to the vanity of the thoughts of man (e.g. 94:11). Psalm 14:2-4 is perhaps the most astounding example of this affirmation that people do not naturally understand and seek God. In addition, humanity’s noetic depravity underlies many of Jesus’ statements (Matt. 11:25-27; 16:17; Mk. 4:11-12; Jn. 6:44).

Noesis also is evident in moral degradation. The greater the decline of the moral stature, the more human will strays away from the truth. Similarly, as the moral nature declines the spiritual capacity diminishes, which in turn involves the diminishing of noetic ability (cf. 2 Thess. 2:8-12). Noetic depravity stands behind the fallacious and varied conclusions in matters of philosophy and religion. It is even difficult to find consensus within the university ethos in the field of hermeneutics for example. In addition, there is clear evidence that within the academy and even in the public square there is a form of reasoning that functions without moral constraints.

What can humanity know? How far can we move toward God by reasoning? Faith in God is not alien to the human condition. God has revealed himself to humanity. However, God transcends human understanding. The study of God requires a mind that is disposed to look carefully at language about God, and to use language responsibly in the light of Scripture, tradition, and good moral sense.²⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius (Areopagite) reminded his readers that the mind was incapable of fully understanding God. Reason without faith is dangerous and so is faith without reason. Theological scholarship must be attempted with an attitude of reverential awe and worship. Oden has put it in

²⁸ Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: HarperOne, 1987), 192.

an excellent way: “The goal of the study of God is the delight of knowing God better with our minds, the pleasure of making sense, the joy of understanding and knowing the blessedness of divinity - an incomparably intriguing subject.”²⁹

Christians have the benefit of a noetic restoration in Christ. This restoration does not mean complete perfection for that is not possible in this world, but a restoration in such a way that the only remaining limitation is finiteness. The Holy Spirit illuminates a believer’s mind in a very special way to comprehend God’s truth (cf. Jn. 16:13). The Holy Spirit helps us in our sanctification (1 Cor. 6:19-20; 2 Cor. 6:16-7:1; 13:13; Gal. 5:5-6). We have to play our part by obeying and studying God’s Word (1 Pet. 1:15,16; 1 Thess. 4:3,7; 5:23; Eph. 1:4; 2 Cor. 7:1). Every believer must constantly pray for noetic sanctification.

THE WAY FORWARD: SEEKING NOETIC SANCTIFICATION

Scholarship must aid in the cultivation of epistemological virtues. Virtues are “those habits of seeing, feeling, thinking, and acting that, when exercised in the right ways and at the right times, will enhance one’s prospects of both recognizing, moving toward, and attaining one’s proper end.”³⁰ Christian virtues, especially the virtue of love enhance deeper communion with God.

In essence, theologians must remember that theology is about prayerfully asking questions. One must be open to answers that do not fit into their preset categories. Theology must encourage a language necessary for the propagation of ideas through an open and just environment. An academic conversation should not limit the discussions to categories of “either-or” which sometimes draw boundaries around the discussions. Sometimes there is a need for “both-and” so that the discourse can lead to wider perspectives, for example, wider denominational or ecumenical conversations.

In the academy there is a need for scholars to properly situate our intellectual desires and to accentuate submission of our intelligence to God. Classic Christian teaching seeks to understand in a reflective and orderly way what God has revealed.³¹ The Christian study of God is “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*),³² and demands an attitude of

²⁹ Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 193.

³⁰ Vanhoozer, K. C.G. Bartholomew, D.J. Treier and N.T. Wright. eds. *Dictionary for theological interpretation of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005, 838.

³¹ Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 20.

³² Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 21.

surrender and humility in the face of truth. God is always prior to our thinking. Robert Wilken notes, “The knowledge of God begins in receptivity, in openness to what is revealed and the willingness to accept what is given.”³³ This does not imply that man is just a spiritual reservoir, as opposed to a spring or fountain of eternal empowerment. It is both a willingness to quench innate capacity and a responsible and ardent search for truth.

There is a need to establish a very strong bond of credibility and personal accountability to foster submission of our intellects. Credibility comes by demonstrating that what we are doing is not prompted by a desire for self-aggrandizement. Scholars must demonstrate that they are doing what they are doing for the sake of the people, not their own selfish materialistic or individualistic interests. Responsible scholarship demands a high level of altruism. Desmond Tutu has this to say:

Be that as it may, I want to say that the good leader, the authentic leader has to have credibility. Nelson Mandela is not the most riveting orator, and yet thousands hang on every word as he addresses huge crowds who flock to hear him. Why? It is because they perceive that he is a great man who has credibility. Because he is believable, people believe in him. There is a consistency between who he is and what he says. He has integrity - the medium is the message.”³⁴

We can progress in overcoming noetic depravity by acknowledging three things. The first is that there is sin in our lives and we need God’s help. Secondly, we must acknowledge the role of the Holy Spirit in leading us into all truth through the Scriptures, fellowships, pastors, spiritual mentors, etc. And thirdly, there is a need to acknowledge that our thoughts and ideas must be brought into complete obedience to Christ.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that it is important for Christians, especially those of the academy, to constantly practice intellectual virtues like tolerance, humility and fair-mindedness. Academic institutions such as theological colleges, secular colleges and universities must find a way of fostering these virtues. This will help their graduates to be more intellectually productive and to foster healthy dialogues with various people and ideologies. This might even help foster the church’s quest for a true ecumenical unity. In a society of widespread

³³ Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2003), 88.

³⁴ Desmond Tutu in Boutros Boutros-Ghali, George Bush, Jimmy Carter, Mikhail Gorbachev, Desmond Tutu. *Essays on Leadership: Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of NY, 1998), 69.

tribalism, nepotism, racism and various “unbendable” ideas, intellectual humility will open people’s minds to the need to live together as a community. Intellectual humility disciplines our minds to acknowledge that true knowledge is gained for the benefit of the community. An intellectual must be someone who converses with others in order to enrich their lives. To this end, Christians, especially those of the academy, must seek noetic sanctification.

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