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The Lord is my light: on the discipleship of the mind

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The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? (Psalm 27:1)

These opening words of Psalm 27 are familiar to us all. For me, they have a special resonance. I was a student at Oxford University for seven years, and subsequently went on to serve its Faculty of Theology for a further 25 years. The motto of Oxford University? *Dominus illuminatio mea*, 'The Lord is my light'. In this paper I want to explore with you the ways in which the Christian faith illuminates reality, as a way of encouraging a discipleship of the mind, and a committed and informed engagement with our culture.

Light is an important analogy for truth.¹ In speaking about God as our light, we are speaking both of the human capacity to see, and God's ability to illuminate. The two are interconnected: without light, we cannot see. We need to be helped to see things as they really are. The 'natural' human perspective on things needs to be transformed by divine grace.² The renewal of our minds and the re-shaping of its habits are part of the transformation and renewal that are brought by the gospel (Romans 12: 2).

The shaping of a Christian mind

So how does the Christian faith help us to form habits of seeing and shape directions of gaze which change the way in which we think about things, experience the world, and act within it? It gives us a new way of seeing, of perceiving, the world.³ We understand ourselves and this world in a distinctively Christian

1 See here Hans Blumenberg, 'Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation,' in David Michael Levin, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, 1-29. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993.

2 If I had time, I would have considered the question of whether artistic perspective is 'natural' or 'acquired': see, for example, Martin Kemp, 'Perspective and Meaning: Illusion, Allusion and Collusion,' in Andrew Harrison, ed., *Philosophy and the Visual Arts: Seeing and Abstracting*, 255-68. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1987.

3 The German term *Weltanschauung*, from which we get our English word 'world-view', means 'a perception of the world'. For comment, see Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of how People Change*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008.

way. We acquire a new way of thinking, which differs radically from the habits of thought we pick up from the natural world and secular culture.

My topic tonight is the life of the mind – the dangerous, exhilarating idea that the Christian faith opens up new ways of thinking, and has the potential to impact on the church, the academy, and society as a whole.⁴ I want to commend a ‘discipleship of the mind’, in which we deliberately and intentionally cultivate a Christian habit of thought, as part of the grace-wrought process of transformation by the gospel. It seems a long time since Harry Blamires’s *Christian Mind* appeared back in 1963.⁵ Blamires’s work was clearly inspired by C. S. Lewis, who was one of the formative influences in persuading him to write in the first place. It opens by documenting the ‘lack of a Christian mind,’ before moving on to set out a programmatic vision of how such a mind could be restored.

Blamires noted that most of the books that shaped and moulded culture were being written by non-Christians. He called for a renewal of the life of the mind, especially in the academy and professions. It is far from clear that things have improved since then. I very much fear that Christianity is in danger of becoming detached from public debates and discussions – not because of any failings with the Christian vision of reality, but due to a lack of vision and confidence on the part of some of its leaders and representatives.

I believe that the situation faced by Christianity throughout the west makes the renewal of the Christian mind imperative. The rise of the ‘New Atheism’ has seen fundamental challenges to the rationality of the Christian faith, which must be countered, and are more than capable of being countered. To appreciate the importance of this point, we must reflect on some words of the Oxford theologian and New Testament scholar Austin Farrer. Writing shortly after the death of C. S. Lewis, Farrer tried to pinpoint the root of Lewis’s remarkable and continuing success as a cultural apologist. In part, Farrer believed that this was due to Lewis’s ability to demonstrate the reasonableness of faith:⁶

Though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.

Farrer is right. Responding to intellectual and cultural criticisms of faith may not lead to conversion and conviction. Yet a failure to respond creates the impression that faith is for those who have neither the ability nor inclination to

4 For excellent explorations of this theme from an evangelical perspective, see John R. W. Stott, *Your Mind Matters : The Place of the Mind in the Christian Life*. Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1973; James W. Sire, *Habits of the Mind : Intellectual Life as a Christian Calling*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000.

5 Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* London: SPCK, 1963.

6 Austin Farrer, ‘The Christian Apologist.’ In *Light on C. S. Lewis*, edited by Jocelyn Gibb, 23-43. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1965. Quote at p. 26.

think. That faith is indeed as poorly grounded and illusory as its critics assert. That faith survives only by refusing to think. That the death of faith is the inevitable outcome of cultural progress. The lack of a rejoinder to these criticisms merely solidifies the growing impression that Christian faith is an endangered species, which belongs to a less critical and scientific age.

Anti-intellectualism and the ‘foolishness’ of the Gospel

As a close observer of the Christian scene in the west, I am disturbed at the recent rise of anti-intellectualism and a lack of interest in scholarship within many churches, encouraged by some Christian leaders. I happened to be present at a meeting of some evangelical students back in 2006, when Richard Dawkins’s *God Delusion* was being discussed. The basic consensus was that there was no need to take Dawkins’s arguments seriously, or set out a Christian alternative. The solution their leader recommended? The energetic and frequent public citation of Psalm 14:1: ‘The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” I intend no disrespect here, but this rather smug response is totally unacceptable. It represents a lack of vision, a loss of nerve, and above all a failure to take the gospel seriously, and give good answers when the situation demands it (1 Peter 3:15).⁷

We simply cannot abrogate our responsibilities here. One of the great themes of the glorious Christian vision of reality is that it has the power to attract and convict morally, imaginatively, and rationally. Grasping the truth of this vision inexorably leads on to the appreciation of its delight, wonder, excitement, and challenge. Christian leaders are called on to act as channels, mediums or conduits for the glory of the Christian vision, allowing it to impact upon our culture, using images and words that this culture can understand. I do not believe that this is happening enough, nor that it is being *encouraged* to happen by those who are meant to lead us. I must therefore try to exercise some leadership myself, and insist that the recovery of the life of the mind is essential for the survival and wellbeing of the church.

My concern in this paper is to reaffirm the need to love God with all our mind as an integral aspect of the Christian life.⁸ Not only is this mandated by the gospel; it enables us to go deeper into our faith, and engage with those outside the church who have questions, doubts, or objections concerning their faith. As

7 For a penetrating critique of the evangelical failure to engage adequately with such intellectual and cultural questions, see Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994. There are promising signs that things are changing.

8 For two classic accounts of this theme, still well worth consulting, see A. G. Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life, Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods*. Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1948; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Intellectual*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965. Though writing from a Catholic and Lutheran perspective respectively, both writers develop important ideas and approaches that evangelicalism can apply to its distinctive vision of the gospel.

Christians, we are called upon to love God with all our mind (Mark 12:29-30). Every faculty we possess is to be placed at the service of the gospel. Paul urges his readers to be transformed through the renewing of their minds that the gospel brings about (Romans 12:2). It is essential that this process of intellectual renewal and redirection is encouraged, and that the shape of a Christian mind is explored.

Some Christians resist Paul's injunctions for the renewal of the mind, arguing that he elsewhere asserts that Christianity represents a form of 'foolishness' which confounds worldly knowledge and wisdom (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:18). This represents a misreading of Paul's concerns about Corinth on the one hand, and what is meant by the notion of a Christian mind on the other. Paul's concerns at Corinth were complex.⁹ The church was in danger of being influenced by early forms of Gnosticism, which held that individuals were saved by a secret, arcane knowledge. Others at Corinth prized intellectual sophistication, and were not prepared to tolerate anything that seemed to lack this, or other marks of cultural erudition. Paul rightly rejects any such notions, insisting that the Christian gospel must be taken on its own terms, even if it counters prevailing cultural notions of acceptability at Corinth. But this has little bearing on our topic.

Paul insists that Christians 'have the mind of Christ' (1 Corinthians 2:16), which he distinguishes from alternative approaches to wisdom already present at Corinth. A 'Christian mind' is the distinctive mindset, a way of thinking, that is shaped and nourished by the Christian faith. It is not about a quest for exotic or arcane knowledge, nor the exaltation of academic arrogance, nor a lapse into the discredited rationalism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. It is about allowing the light of Christ to shine upon our intellects, so that the transforming power of God's grace might renew our minds, and not merely our souls. It is the outcome which is encouraged and intended by God, as we seek to serve him in the world.

The Gospel and the illumination of reality

Let me explore further the image with which I opened this paper – God as a source of light, illuminating the realities of human existence and the natural order. It has become familiar through the writings of C. S. Lewis, who explored the idea of God as a sun who allows us to see things properly. God, for Lewis, is both intelligible and the source of intelligibility. 'I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen – not only because I see it, but because by it, I see every-

9 See especially Walter Schmithals, *The Theology of the First Christians*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, 122-3; 146-51. See further Raymond Pickett, *The Cross in Corinth : The Social Significance of the Death of Jesus*. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997, 213-16; Edward Adams and David G. Horrell, eds, *Christianity at Corinth: The Quest for the Pauline Church*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

thing else.¹⁰ For Lewis, the clarity of vision offered by the Christian faith is itself an indicator of its truth.

We must pause here, and make sure we have understood what Lewis is saying. Using a visually striking analogy, Lewis points to the process of observation as involving two elements: the human act of seeing, and the process of illumination, which allows things to be seen. There are limits to human vision, as we all know when we try to make out the features of a landscape on a moonless night, or find our way around a dark cellar. Lewis's first point is that the gospel illuminates the world, so that our natural human limitations are transcended. Because of the gospel, we see things that otherwise we could not. It is a theme familiar to any reader of Scripture. 'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path' (Psalm 119:105). As Augustine of Hippo once remarked: 'The mind needs to be enlightened by light from outside itself, so that it can participate in truth, as it is not itself the nature of truth. You will light my lamp, Lord.'¹¹ We must not overinterpret Augustine's imagery here; the point he is making is that God, as the source of all truth, graciously helps humanity to find that truth. Without that help, there are limits to what we can discover.¹²

The second theme implicit in Lewis's image is the importance of the human act of seeing. While some philosophers used to treat seeing as a passive process in which we merely absorb information from our environment, it is now recognized to be an active process, in which we put together the elements of our picture of the world. We can be trained to see more effectively, by learning what we should be looking for. We can cultivate habits of heightened attention and perception, which make us more alert to what is present around us – things that otherwise we might look at, but not notice.

This way of thinking and seeing is a habit of mind, something that is to be practiced and cultivated. It is nourished by reading Scripture, and inhabiting the worship-shaped world of the church, in which the Christian story is constantly presented and represented. Yet this is not something that we merely absorb passively; we must actively develop it, deliberately and consciously asking how we might deepen our understanding of things, and apply it. This is what I hope we might find, but fear that we often do not find, in Christian preaching.

Christianity gives us a new set of spectacles through which we see the world, allowing us to discern its deeper logic. The world is illuminated by the light of the gospel, and interpreted by the believing mind. This process of 'seeing' involves both intellectual analysis and value judgements. It is not a set of principles that are learned by heart, and regurgitated on demand. Rather, it is an acquired mode of reflection, a habit of thinking, which is both commended and embodied in

10 C. S. Lewis, 'Is Theology Poetry?' In *C. S. Lewis: Essay Collection*. London: Collins, 2000, 1-21; quote at p. 21.

11 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* IV.xv.25. A useful account of this idea in English can be found in Mary T. Clark, *Augustine*. London: Continuum, 2005, 13-25.

12 For the development of this idea, see Steven Marrone, *The Light of Thy Countenance: Science and Knowledge of God in the Thirteenth Century*. Leiden: Brill, 2001.

the Christian story. As Stanley Hauerwas points out, this disciplined habit of thought emerges through sustained, detailed, and extended reflection on the Christian faith, especially its great narrative of creation and redemption.¹³

The primary task of Christian ethics involves an attempt to help us see. For we can only act within the world we can see, and we can only see the world rightly by being trained to see. We do not come to see just by looking, but by disciplined skills developed through initiation into a narrative.

That narrative is transmitted and embodied in the preaching and sacramental ministry of the church, so that the consonance of ideas, values and actions is constantly reinforced within the community of faith.

The Christian faith enables us to see the world in a manner that transcends the empirical. It offers us theoretical spectacles which allow us to behold things in such a way that we are able to rise above the limits of the observable, and move into the richer realm of discerned meaning and value. The natural world thus becomes seen and interpreted as God's creation, bearing the subtle imprint of its maker. We see not only the empirical reality of the world, but its deeper value and true significance. Neither value nor significance, it must be emphasized, are empirical notions – things that we can see around us. They must be discerned, and then superimposed upon an empirical reading of the world.

The 'discipleship of the mind' and Christian witness

We are called to exercise an evangelical discipleship of the mind in every area of life. Whether we are called to serve God in the arts or in music, in health work or in international development, in the academy or in politics, we must work out what it means to be a Christian in these contexts. Sometimes this will mean manifesting and embodying the love, compassion and care that is so central a feature of the life of faith. Sometimes it will involve challenging ideologies that have become deeply embedded in the academy, culture or society. There is no area of life in which we are excused by God of the need to work out our discipleship. We are called to be witnesses, to allow our light to be seen; to be salt to the world around us. And we can only do that through presence – through inhabiting situations to which we feel called.

Christians are called to serve, and to witness. We must never forget that Jesus of Nazareth refused to be served, and insisted that he was the servant, demonstrating this by washing the feet of his disciples. Christians regard service as something that is Christ-like, which is both good in itself and its outcomes, including witnessing to Christ. While many Christians rightly feel called to serve in ordained ministry or professional faith organizations, I want to emphasise the importance of the calling to professional activity. In doing this, I am not devaluing other areas of Christian life and witness. We all have an important role of wit-

13 Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Demands of a Truthful Story: Ethics and the Pastoral Task,' *Chicago Studies* 21 (1982): 59-71; quote at 65-6.

ness and service, wherever we are. My point is that there is an urgent need for an informed and committed evangelical witness in the professional domain, which we must consider to be a matter of priority, tactically and strategically.

Why? Because we need a Christian presence in every domain of human life. I fully concede, and take great pleasure in conceding, that many very able Christians want to enter the professional ministry of their churches. I rejoice that those ministries will be enriched in this way. But I must also affirm the ministry of the laity, who often work and practice in professional areas where clergy find it difficult to gain a credible presence.

Some Christians withdraw from society, believing that it contaminates the purity of their faith and morals. Yet we must understand that to refuse to inhabit society is to deny God the opportunity to use us as a channel and conduit for the presence of Christ. I trust that Christ can find a way of working around this. But why should he have to do this? We are called to be in the world, but not of the world – in other words, to be present and available in secular society, but not to conform to its ideologies, ethos and ideas. The Christian challenge is to transform the world, not to conform to it.

So where do we need to be? Whether this question is posed geographically or sociologically, the answer is the same: *everywhere*. But for the purposes of this paper, I want to emphasise the importance of engaging with the academy and the professions. Whether we speak of poets, economists, lawyers, bankers, or philosophers, the issue is the same: professional competence energized and informed by the Christian vision of reality. The first question that might be asked is: How can your faith make you a better lawyer? But the second might be: How can your faith make the law better? How does the ‘mind of Christ’ bear upon this community?

I have brought you to a point where specificity begins to become important. It is one thing to outline a general principle. But how is it to be put into practice? I must now turn to the question of how faith interacts with professional lives. It is clearly beyond the scope of this paper to look at a wide range of professional activities. In his *Christian Mind*, Harry Blamires explored how the life of the mind could be explored in a number of academic disciplines. You will have to forgive me for restricting myself here to one area of professional activity in which I myself engaged for several years – the study of the natural sciences. I want to use this as an example of the kind of thinking and reflection that needs to be done. So what insights and motivations does the Christian faith bring to this area of activity? How did it make sense of this activity for me, and encourage me to immerse myself in it? How did it help me develop a critical perspective on my field, valuing its strengths yet naming its weaknesses?

A case study: the sciences

My own time as a scientist impressed upon me the privilege of being able to investigate a universe that is both rationally transparent and rationally beautiful, capable of being represented in elegant mathematical forms. One of the

most significant parallels between the natural sciences and Christian theology is a fundamental conviction that the world is characterized by regularity and intelligibility.¹⁴ The natural sciences are founded on the perception of explicable regularity to the world, which is capable of being represented mathematically. In other words, there is something about the world – and the nature of the human mind – which allows patterns within nature to be discerned and represented.

This perception of ordering and intelligibility is of immense significance, both at the scientific and religious levels. As Paul Davies points out, ‘in Renaissance Europe, the justification for what we today call the scientific approach to inquiry was the belief in a rational God whose created order could be discerned from a careful study of nature.’¹⁵ Yet how are we to account for the regularity of nature? And for the human ability to represent it so well? Where do our notions of explanation, regularity and intelligibility come from? Why is nature actually intelligible to us? The human capacity for understanding our world seems to be far in excess of anything that could reasonably be considered to be simply an evolutionary necessity, or a fortuitous by-product of the evolutionary process.

John Polkinghorne is an example of a writer who sees this as pointing to a Christian schema. There is, he argues, a ‘congruence between our minds and the universe, between the rationality experienced within and the rationality observed without.’¹⁶ A naturalistic metaphysics is unable to cast light on the deep intelligibility of the universe, in effect being forced to treat it as a fortunate accident. However, a theistic metaphysics argues that there is a common origin to both the Rationality within our minds, and the rational structure of the physical world around in the rationality of God. In other words, Christianity offers a framework which makes sense of what is otherwise a happy cosmic coincidence.

Others have pointed to the growing interest in anthropic phenomena, and suggested that these are also consonant with a Christian way of thinking.¹⁷ The heavily freighted vocabulary of ‘fine-tuning’ is widely used to express the idea that the universe appears to have possessed certain qualities from the moment of its inception which were favorable to the production of intelligent life on Earth at this point in cosmic history, capable of reflecting on the implications of its existence.¹⁸ Nature’s fundamental constants turn out to have been ‘fine-

14 A point emphasised by John Polkinghorne, *Science and Christian Belief*. London: SPCK, 1994.

15 Paul Davies, *The Mind of God: Science and the Search for Ultimate Meaning*. London: Penguin, 1992, 77.

16 John Polkinghorne, *Science and Creation: The Search for Understanding*. London: SPCK, 1988, 20-1. More recently, see John C. Polkinghorne, ‘Physics and Metaphysics in a Trinitarian Perspective.’ *Theology and Science* 1 (2003): 33-49.

17 Robin Collins, ‘A Scientific Argument for the Existence of God: The Fine-Tuning Design Argument.’ In *Reason for the Hope Within*, edited by Michael J. Murray, 47-75. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999. Interest in this point was catalysed significantly by Barrow, John, and Frank J. Tipler. *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

18 See, for example, Rodney D. Holder, *God, the Multiverse, and Everything : Modern Cosmology and the Argument from Design*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.

tuned' to reassuringly life-friendly values. The existence of carbon-based life on Earth depends upon a delicate balance of physical and cosmological forces and parameters, which are such that were any one of these quantities to be slightly altered, this balance would have been destroyed and life would not have come into existence.

Others have stressed the extraordinary sensitivity of the universe's fundamental characteristics or original conditions for the origins of cosmic life. Sir Martin Rees, Britain's Astronomer Royal and President of the Royal Society, has argued that the emergence of human life in the aftermath of the Big Bang is governed by a mere six numbers, each of which is so precisely determined that a miniscule variation in any one would have made both our universe and human life, as we now know them, impossible.¹⁹

As I point out in my 2009 Gifford Lectures, these themes resonate strongly with the Christian vision of reality.²⁰ They prove nothing, and other explanations are possible. But the Christian mental map certainly makes sense of this aspect of the natural world, as it does of so much of the scientific enterprise. Yet it does more than just make sense of things; it offers us a critical framework within which we can operate professionally. Let me explain what I mean by this.

Science is an activity that is carried out by human beings. The Enlightenment had a thoroughly optimistic view of human nature; we are good people, who do good things. Or do we? What if the light of the gospel shines on human nature, and exposes it as frail, easily led astray, and prone to sin? Tennyson's famous words in his great poem *Guinevere* often seem hopelessly idealist: 'We needs must love the highest when we see it.' Does this bear any relationship to the realities of human experience? In a letter of 1887, Lord Acton famously observed that 'power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' From this, he drew the conclusion that 'great men are almost always bad men.' It is an idea that has become part of the settled assumptions that govern our thinking about public office, and the risks of concentrating too much power in too few hands. The British Prime Minister William Pitt made a similar comment a century earlier, perhaps drawing on his own experiences in government: 'Unlimited power is apt to corrupt the minds of those who possess it.' The idea, here focussed so pointedly, is that an essentially benign human nature is corrupted by power. The natural goodness of humanity is placed under such severe stress by the temptations and privileges of power that it mostly proves incapable of resisting the shadowy side of this poisoned chalice.

Yet this idea of power corrupting innocent, well-meaning people is only one way of looking at this matter. There is an ancient Anglo-Saxon proverb, preserved in a collection in Durham Cathedral, which offers a more disturbing way

19 Martin J. Rees, *Just Six Numbers: The Deep Forces That Shape the Universe*. London: Phoenix, 2000.

20 Alister E. McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe: The Quest for God in Science and Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

of considering the influence of power on human nature. A very literal translation of this proverb would be: 'Man does as he is when he can do what he wants.'²¹ In plain English, it means: 'We show what we are really like when we can do what we want.' In other words, when all constraints are removed, when there is no accountability or limitations, we behave according to our true natures, rather than according to what we think others might expect of us. When we are absolutely free, we are absolutely true to our natures. The possession of absolute power thus allows us to behave as we really are.

It is a very troubling thought. Power, on this reading of things, does not tend to *corrupt*. It tends to *expose* – to bring out what is already there, but which is suppressed through the force of social convention or the need to conform to customs and expectations. Power, on this view, is a mirror of the soul, a diagnostic tool which reveals what we are really like. What is most disturbing of all is that we may not realize our true natures until we are put in a situation when those limits are finally removed. Readers of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* will recognize the point immediately.

Christian theology gives us a critical lens through which to view the complex motivations and mixed agendas of human beings. We bear God's image, yet we are sinful. We are capable of good, just as we are capable of evil. The unsettling implications of this are obvious. Medical advances give us new ways of combating disease; they also give us new ways of creating weapons designed to destroy human beings. The same knowledge can be used to cure or to kill.

This critical framework is of obvious importance in the natural sciences. Its importance can be seen from the career of one of America's greatest scientists, Louis Frederick Fieser (1899-1977), who became professor of chemistry at Harvard University in 1930. He was noted for developing, along with his wife Mary Peters Fieser, the artificial synthesis of a series of important naturally occurring compounds, including Vitamin K, necessary for blood coagulation.²² Fieser's brilliant synthetic procedures made medically important chemicals much cheaper and more widely available, with highly beneficial outcomes for patient care. In this respect, Fieser can be seen as embodying all that is good about science – working for the advancement of humanity.

Fieser also headed a team at Harvard which invented another product during the period 1942-3: napalm. The U.S. Army urgently needed a chemical weapon suitable for burning tracts of jungle and eliminating troops in foxholes in the Pacific war theatre. Fieser and his team developed the weapon known as 'napalm,' which was deliberately designed to use fire as a weapon of war. On the night of 9-10 March 1945, the US Airforce dropped 1,700 tons of napalm bombs on Tokyo, causing massive loss of life. It is thought that 100,000 people died that night – an immediate loss of life greater than that caused by either of the atom bombs later dropped on Hiroshima or Nagasaki.

21 Proverb 14, contained in Durham Cathedral MS. B. III. 32. See O. Arngart, 'Further Notes on the Durham Proverbs.' *English Studies* 58 (1977): 101-4.

22 Louis F. Fieser, 'The Synthesis of Vitamin K.' *Science* 91 (1940): 31-6.

Justification could, of course, be offered for what Fieser did. After all, the United States was engaged in total warfare at the time. Yet when all is said and done, the development of napalm is a reminder that science can be used to kill and destroy humanity, as much as to heal and extend human life. It is a sobering thought, and one that does much to undermine the shallow optimism of those who exalt science as the salvation of humanity.

The cultural critic Terry Eagleton has recently described the Enlightenment dream of ‘untrammelled human progress’ as a ‘bright-eyed superstition,’²³ a fairy tale which lacks any rigorous evidential base. ‘If ever there was a pious myth and a piece of credulous superstition, it is the liberal-rationalist belief that, a few hiccups apart, we are all steadily en route to a finer world.’ Science has become woven into this rationalism myth, and it is time to challenge this naïve account of history. We are called to question fictions about both human individuals and society, even if these fictions are deeply embedded within the secular western mindset.

The new atheism often accuses those who believe in God of holding on to ‘unevidenced beliefs’, in contrast to the rigorously proven factual statements of enlightened atheists. Yet what of its own unevidenced belief in human progress? Eagleton dismisses this myth as a demonstrably false pastiche, a luminous example of ‘blind faith.’²⁴ What rational soul, Eagleton asks, would sign up to such a secular myth, which is obliged to treat such human-created catastrophes as Hiroshima, Auschwitz, and *apartheid* as ‘a few local hiccups’ which in no way discredit or disrupt the steady upward progress of history?

My concern here is not to debate the ethics of napalm or nuclear weapons, but to emphasise the need for a critical perspective which avoids idealization of human history, or any area of professional life. A realistic view of human nature is essential to make sense of the failures and foibles evident in the world of politics, business, science, and economics. In no way should the darker side of human nature and undertakings deter us from getting involved in these areas, and working to make things better. But realism is the precondition for sustained action in these contexts.

The need for cultural witness and transformation

In my reflections in this paper, I have concentrated on an area I know well – the natural sciences. But the approach I have outlined can be applied to professional contexts and academic disciplines far beyond these. What I am calling for is for individuals who are both theologically informed and professionally competent, who can make the connections between these two domains. Professional competence is now a precondition for professional attention. For Christianity to

23 Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution : Reflections on the God Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009, 28.

24 Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 87-9.

be taken seriously in this important area of life, we need committed and competent people who can model professional excellence and personal commitment. They need to see this for what it really is – a vocation, something to which God calls us, which is different from but no less important than ordained ministry.

So why is this important? Let me mention just two points here. The first point is so obvious that I hesitate to develop it. We need competent Christians to be salt and light in the professions and academia. We cannot allow a Christian presence to be excluded from any area of our culture. Some are trying to exclude a Christian voice as part of their secularizing agenda, or in pursuit of a misguided concept of ‘multiculturalism’ which affirms every cultural option except Christianity. These need to be challenged. But I am concerned about something much more disturbing – the failure of the churches to articulate a ‘theology of calling’ which values and above all *encourages* Christians to enter professional sectors.

Second, as I have just noted, many areas of professional and academic life have come to be shaped by ideologies, which often have quite strongly anti-religious tones. As an example of this, we might note the curiously uncontested discursive privilege accorded by many social theorists to atheism. The most obvious explanation of this otherwise puzzling phenomenon is that atheism has successfully presented itself as the ‘rational default category’ against which all other beliefs are to be judged. Atheism is held to offer a neutral standpoint, a position of ‘value-neutrality’, which allows religious beliefs and behaviours to be examined and assessed without the distorting influence of faith commitments.²⁵ Atheism has become the default position, whether this is interpreted at the purely methodological level, or at a deeper ontological level.

The unjustifiably neglected Swiss Protestant theologian Emil Brunner emphasised the role of theology in challenging and contesting alternative ideologies in secular culture.²⁶ There is little doubt that many professional disciplines are informed by ideologies that have explicit or implicit anti-religious assumptions. Questions need to be asked, and they need to be asked by Christians who are active and competent in this fields, and have earned the respect of their peers.

In this paper, I have commended a noble and bold vision of Christian theology as an acquired habit of mind, a mental discipline, which transforms the way in which we see the world and ourselves, and thus inspires us to reflective and informed action. I have emphasised the intellectual capaciousness and resilience of the Christian faith, which enables it to engage meaningfully with the contemporary cultural concerns. Yet I have also raised concerns about the failure of the churches to articulate a ‘theology of calling,’ which recognizes that

25 See the critical analysis in Margaret Archer, Andrew Collier, and Douglas V. Porpora, *Transcendence : Critical Realism and God*. London: Routledge, 2004, 12-13.

26 Brunner’s term for this approach (‘eristics’) failed to win support, largely because it is cumbersome and unfamiliar. For his own account of this approach, see Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics Vol. 1*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1949, 98-101.

God equips and calls people to be his servants and witnesses in every corner of life – including the professional and academic worlds.

I, like all readers of the cultural analyst Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), have appreciated the important role of intellectuals in shaping culture at every level, whether directly or by a long-term trickle-down mechanism.²⁷ Forms of secularism have achieved the predominance that Gramsci described as ‘hegemony’ by following his analysis and strategy. So why are the churches not actively, persistently and enthusiastically encouraging our most able people to be salt and light in this way? And, no less importantly, why are they not studying the social sciences more seriously, in order to understand how processes of social reception and evaluation proceed? As an evangelical, I believe passionately in the power of grace and the wisdom-generating ministry of the Holy Spirit. Yet this does not exempt me – or anyone else – from thinking seriously about how ideas become embedded (and disembedded) within society. I fear we lack the wisdom of earlier generations here, and need to reflect seriously on the challenges, opportunities and resources of our times.

The ‘New Atheism’ has issued a wake-up call to the churches. We need a new generation of public intellectuals who will value the life of the mind, and realise its importance for apologetics and evangelism. Yes, there is more to the gospel than its new vision of reality. But we need to make sure that vision is powerfully and faithfully proclaimed. There is no need to make Christianity relevant, or to make it credible. It already possesses these attributes, which are deeply embedded within its inner logic. Our task is to discover and appreciate the intellectual depths and delights of our faith, and ensure that these are proclaimed and presented to our culture at large. It helps us in our own journey of faith; yet perhaps more importantly, it deepens the quality and power of our witness to God as our Light and our Salvation (Psalm 27:1).

Abstract

This paper represents a manifesto for an evangelical ‘discipleship of the mind’, which affirms and celebrates the intellectual riches of the Christian gospel, and actively seeks to engage our culture on its basis. It is argued that the gospel does not mandate any form of ‘anti-intellectualism’, but rather demands that we engage secular culture at every level – including the life of the mind. The intellectual capaciousness of the gospel is explored with reference to its ability to inform and transform our understanding of human history and culture, particularly the natural sciences. The paper concludes by suggesting that there is a need to re-discover the notion of intellectual vocation, as a means of ensuring that the truth and vitality of the Christian faith are affirmed, commended and defended in the public sphere.

27 See, for example, Antonio Gramsci, *Gli intellettuali*. Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1971, 13-16.