

FIRST THINGS

The Christian Intellectual

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November 18, 2013



The cultural climate today isn't very congenial for men and women of faith. Graduate students tell me they need to be very careful. There are religious colleges and universities, to be sure, but for the most part institutions of higher education are dominated by an aggressively secular culture hostile to faith. These days the love of God often seems to be the one love that cannot speak its name.

How, then, should the Christian intellectual proceed? What should be our approach to higher education and academic work? More broadly, how should we view our distinctive vocation as intellectuals?

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Monday

The first imperative is to avoid overreacting to academic secularism (or for that matter secularism in general). This overreaction often takes two forms. The first tends toward heated displays of piety that want to turn the intellectual life into grand gestures of Christian witness against the age. That's often been my error, one stimulated by reading Karl Barth when an undergraduate. The other tends toward cowering defensiveness and keeps faith at a distance from intellectual work, fearful of the friction it inevitably causes.

Both diminish our intellectual vocations. As much as possible we need enter into the actual conditions of intellectual work today. This does not mean accumulating academic credentials to gain entry into the higher reaches of elite culture so as to evangelize. An intellectual is not an intellectual unless he sees his work as an end in itself.

An intellectual isn't an intellectual because he is secular or religious, but instead because he has something intelligent to say that makes a difference in how we think and act. Getting into the game is necessary because we need to develop our mental muscles and appropriately form our intellectual habits in accord with the issues of our day. We cannot learn to swim unless we jump into the river.

For the most part we quite properly swim with the current. Even in disciplines where deeper assumptions about the human condition guide interpretation—the social sciences, history, literature—the great bulk of instruction is for the best. A Christian sociologist needs to know how to design an effective research program. The faithful literary historian should know the primary sources.

Even when we swim against the stream there's a deep intellectual benefit to jumping in. Too often we're tempted to retreat into a restricted world of

reliable writers: C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton, Flannery O'Connor, and others. They are of course good to read, but they're not sufficient. These figures and others whom we rightly admire and wish to imitate are exemplary not just because they were talented and faithful, but also because they were part of the larger conversation of their time.

That does not mean going along with the latest fashions. Walker Percy engaged in a life-long contest against modern psychology and medicine's implicit claim to have superseded theology.

Nor does it mean spending all one's time reading Giorgio Agamben or whoever else is hot, even if to refute them. A Christian intellectual should never fall victim to "presentism." It's wise to spend an hour with an old author for every hour with a new one. That's a rule of thumb secular intellectuals would do well to adopt as well. The most parochial intellectuals are the ones who know only the latest trends, schools of thought, and ideas. A Christian intellectual should be the opposite. He should be at home with many historical expressions of truth because he is the servant of the truth incarnate.

Another imperative is charity. A genuine intellectual serves truth, a Christian intellectual all the more so. The truth, moreover, is sought by other people as well, which is why the intellectual life means participating in a conversation rather than embarking on a solo voyage. A loving intellect therefore seeks to advance the intellectual lives of others.

Sometimes this requires negation. Love says "no" to falsehood. But more often than not we're hindered by half-truths rather than outright error. For example, charitably understood, postmodern nihilism seeks social—and existential—peace. If nothing is worth fighting for, no one will fight. If nothing makes demands on us, then we can simply live. This nihilism is

both wrongheaded and impossible. (With restless hearts, we're not capable of simply living.) But it's not immoral in the ordinary sense of that word. A loving intellect blows on the embers of truth, however faint.

Finally, we should embrace our freedom in Christ. Intellectuals can be rigidly conformist. This is especially true in America, a highly conformist society. We fancy ourselves great patrons of independent thought, but deviance from established opinion usually invites censure. There's far more diversity of opinion in a typical Catholic parish than among the faculty of an Ivy League university.

The freedom that Christians can contribute to intellectual culture—saying what others shrink for saying or cannot say—does not come from study. I've known many scholars (I include myself) beholden to the petty gods who superintend over a great deal of intellectual work: career, status, and illusions of immortal intellectual achievements. Instead, freedom comes from an interior conformity to Christ in prayer. The mind follows the heart.

Love and freedom. There's nothing uniquely Christian about these qualities in an intellectual. Socrates had both. But grace perfects nature and helps us overcome our weaknesses. The Christian intellectual may not be welcome today as a Christian, but it's as a Christian that he can be salt and light.

R.R. Reno is editor of FIRST THINGS. He is the general editor of the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible and author of the volume on [Genesis](#). His previous "On the Square" articles can be [found here](#). Image via Wikimedia Commons.

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