

The Christian Scholar and the Church

GODFREY T. ANDERSON

7

A university worthy of the name is a community of scholars. Because of its size and complexity, a university involves many others as well — indispensable auxiliary workers in various areas and departments. Professional and even vocational studies are best served in the context of a university, because at the heart of such an institution is a community of scholars representing a variety of disciplines. Scholars are the *sine qua non* of a genuine university.

What does it mean to be a scholar? It means, first, to be diligent rather than indolent. The scholar knows the meaning of arduous, endless effort. It means to possess strict integrity. The scholar is the enemy of all tricks, all humbug, all sham, all pretense, all phoniness. To be a scholar means to be unbiased and fair in dealing with the scholarship of others and modest in the evaluation and heralding of his own accomplishments. Above all, the scholar must stand by the truth as he sees it. The Christian believes in God's imperative to know the truth, which alone makes men free.

Scholarship is a way of handling relevant materials with care and honesty. It requires that one possess the requisite skills and aptitudes for the inquiry he proposes to make and an understanding of the nature of the data he must deal with. It requires that he have the ability to correlate and organize these data in a meaningful way, and he must believe in the value and significance of his investigations. A scholar cannot devote his efforts to proving a pet viewpoint — no matter how enamored of it he has become — while ignoring or discarding all evidence that does not fit his theories and accepting all those things that prove his point. Rather, as objectively as he can, as a finite human being, he must evaluate all the material that his search un-

earths. If a long-treasured theory fades under the glaring light of truth, this is a hazard and a sadness of the search for truth.

This is the kind of scholarship which makes a university respectable. Its strength lies in the opportunity for teachers and students to become part of an investigating, questing community. A university is weakened if it becomes merely a congeries of enterprises working at cross-purposes with each other. It is weakened also if it holds to a rigid and crystallized and, perhaps, an unexamined viewpoint that allows of little probing and discovery. From the earliest days of universities, the strong and influential ones have been those that encouraged full and honest investigation, experimentation, and untrammelled study of the ways of nature, of man, and of God.

8

A seeker for truth in any area need not consider himself as being engaged in merely secular activities. The Apostle Paul includes all Christian believers among those whom God has made priests unto Himself. To be a priest is, in a large sense, to be one who represents man to God, and God to man. The priest stands always in a special relationship that lays upon him the responsibility of doing God's work among men. The "priesthood of a scholar" makes him responsible for searching out and disseminating the truth — all truth. And all truth is God's truth.

One who recognizes the validity of this priesthood concept will consider his work as a scholar and a teacher to be the carrying forward of God's mandate to him. Being a Christian will not necessarily make a man superior in his field, although a Christian will do his best in any work he undertakes. The natural laws of aptitude and ability will influence what a man does and the degree of excellence he may be able to achieve. But a sincere and dedicated Christian will see in his knowledge a better acquaintance with God, and in God's work a means of revealing Him. A Christian will fulfill his priesthood in a consistent and sincere manner.

Does the church need the university? Without reservation, the answer is affirmative. "Religion without learning, or learning without religion, must ultimately prove the undoing of the Church." Both history and the Scriptures make amply plain God's efforts to lead His people from superstition, prejudice, and ignorance to the enlightened vantage point He wants them to reach. The record of their tendencies and habits shows how far they have come and how far they have yet to go in their quest.

We recall how much of an intellectual affair the Reformation actually was. The Renaissance produced scholars who were able to examine the calcified systems of the medieval schoolmen and to reveal their arthritic nature. The Renaissance also awakened men's minds to the cultural heritage

of the past and the wonders of the world around them. They had begun to study nature, the stars above, and the problems of man and his world below. In the growing atmosphere of independent thought thus opened up, Luther found the courage to challenge long-held dogmas of the church. The impetus for the Ninety-five Theses came from his scholarly work in preparing lectures for presentation at the University of Wittenberg. Luther was not primarily a scholar, as were Erasmus and Calvin and some others, but he was a man of erudition, and his contribution to the Reformation came from an intellectual as well as a spiritual struggle.

In France and Switzerland, John Calvin moved forward the work of the Reformation. He was a man whose tastes and choice were for a life of scholarship. Only the exigencies of the situation that developed around him forced him into the activity of church administration and reform. Erasmus was a man temperamentally unsuited to the conflict and dangers of an active reformer's life, but his deep and careful scholarship put translations of the Bible in the hands of those who were able to use them. Scholarship served the church well, and we will be forever in the debt of those who used their intellects in the service of God, without regard to calumny or danger.

In our own nation the church-related college and university have made a unique contribution to American life as well as to the church. Established by dedicated churchmen in the earliest years of our nation, as they were, for the development of an educated and intelligent clergy, Harvard and its successors in higher education exerted a strong influence on the intellectual as well as the ecclesiastical life of early America.

The aim of Methodism's first college, Cokesbury, makes clear the broad intent of that communion for its college:

And although our principal object is to instruct the students in the doctrine, spirit and practice of Christianity; yet we trust our college will in time send forth men that will be blessings to their country in every laudable office and employment of life, thereby uniting the two greatest ornaments of intelligent beings, which all too often are separated — deep learning and genuine piety.¹

In the early years, when most of America's institutions of higher learning were under church control, the American concept of academic freedom was born and nurtured. The product of such schools gave leadership to the nation and contributed to the clear thinking and precise phrasing that we find revealed in many early documents of our nation.

In spite of the magnificent work done for the church by its scholars, there has always existed a spirit of distrust and of anti-intellectualism on the part of those who feared that education would distort the work of the Holy Spirit

on men's minds. This distrust, which goes back at least to a contemporary of Martin Luther's, continues to the present. In the dominant church of Luther's period, the record shows the burning of some who differed on theological points and the suppression of the discoveries of others by the Inquisition. On the American frontier, where education was hard to come by on the western edge of our expansion, there was a strong distrust of erudition and intellectualism. Also, in the building of an industrial culture, there was scant patience for abstract thought that appeared to have no pragmatic value.

10

The most insidious form of anti-intellectualism is that which masks itself as intellectualism. It attempts to deal with intellectual material, but without the background and disciplines of the requisite exposure and competence. "Anti-intellectualism in the church is anti-theology, anti-ivory-towerism, anti-bigwordism, anti-difficult-thoughtism."² When it enters the field of theological study, pseudo-intellectualism is particularly inept. Its stated objective is to present the gospel to the common man in language and concepts he can understand. Its actual achievement is to confuse the issues and to oversimplify theology, which, of necessity, must be concerned with the deep things of God. Theology, like matrimony, must not be taken up lightly, but reverently, carefully, and in the fear of God. It must engage the most profound and penetrating powers of the mind and be under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. and in no case can it be considered as a sort of hobby (such as electric trains or antique automobiles) incidental to another chosen profession.

The estrangement of faith and learning, for a variety of reasons, became marked during the last part of the nineteenth century. More recently, however, there has been evidence of a rapprochement between the church and the educational community. The church has benefited by the contributions of the scholar, and it evinces more respect for the disciplined and thoughtful approach to problems of common interest. This attitude, indeed, is vital to the development of the church, for without a knowledge of contemporary scholarship that contributes to our knowledge of God's Word, the ministry would tend to be cliché- and slogan-riddled rather than powerful in proclaiming valid and timely concepts of religion and its rightful place in human life. Anti-intellectualism also tends to make us provincial, limited in our vision of a world in need, and concerned too much with our own circle of friends, our own community, and our own country, to the exclusion of others less privileged.

The greatest contribution, perhaps, that the Christian scholar can give to

his church is his disciplined, discerning, and critical mind. The ability for self-criticism and self-evaluation is vital in the life of both the individual and the church. It is exceedingly easy for a man, an institution, or a church, to assume that whatever is done with sincere intent for the glory of God is truly His will. Good intentions, then, take the place of reasoned consideration.

The church has always been at its worst in terms of its effectiveness, and has fallen farthest short of the quality of Christian love when it has lost the capacity for constructive self-criticism. The training and the work of the scholar fits him perhaps better than any other type of person for keeping this capacity alive and vigorous within the church. The trained mind, further, has always been the most dependable and effective (though not infallible) safeguard against both spiritual provincialism and . . . exclusivism.³

II

There have been times when the church has departed far from God's plan while at the same time it has been most enthusiastic in its witness, and most devoid of Christian love. The ability to see these things lucidly, and to help the church avoid the tragic large mistakes while it works vigorously to stamp out the small besetments, is a contribution the thoughtful scholar and trained Christian intellectual can make to the church.

Another contribution which the scholar can make to the church is an investigation of the history and significance of the traditions of the faith. It is necessary occasionally to engage in both retrospection and introspection to compare current practices and teachings with the clearcut pattern left by Christ, and to note any distortions and unwarranted amplifications which may have been added through the years. This is a task that is particularly appropriate for the Christian scholar's talents.

The Christian scholar can contribute also to the church a new means of making Christian traditions relevant to an alienated generation of the contemporary scene. The basic tenets of Christianity were given in a form that would permit their being adapted into different cultures and different eras of time. We have observed the schisms that result when too-rigid patterns of tradition within a church refuse to adapt themselves to different times and ways of thinking. By mediating between the pious intentions of each group, the scholar may help the church to find a path of accommodation that will include all who sincerely desire to keep the changeless landmarks and to reach the goal, yet maintain their integrity as reasoning and reasonable members of their communion.

The work of the community of scholars may be relevant to the church, too, in keeping it active and interested in a rapidly changing society. The body of knowledge has vastly increased in recent times. Attitudes change

with the passing of the years, and the problems that the church must attack have to be solved in ways that are different from those that were effective a generation ago. In the search for all of God's truth, and in its comprehension and acceptance, the Christian scholar must fill an active role.

There are symptoms on every hand which suggest essential irrelevance of the church when seen in terms of its mission to be a reconciling community of love to its age. Its formal observances may not be speaking to the deep-lying needs of contemporary man. Its carefully wrought answers to human questions may be slanted toward the questions of earlier generations but not at all related to the questions contemporary man is asking. The scholar is not the only one whose services must be enlisted if the church is to be truly relevant to our time, but here again what the scholar has to give is one of the essential elements.⁴

12

The vital responsibility of the church is communication of the gospel to the world. This is done through the spoken word, obviously. But art, music, writing, and other media of mass communication can today give seven-league boots to the spoken word. The art of a half century or more ago does not speak to youth today. The music our grandparents loved may be impatiently scorned by the younger generation. Writing today has left the stately, balanced, and elegant style of previous eras to become sharp, explosive, direct, and unpolished. Because of this, the traditional approach of the church seems out-of-date and old-fashioned to the younger segment of the church, and to the world as well. Because we are more concerned with getting our ideas out through the world than with studying the means for effective communication, we have become, at times, quaint and limited in our appeal. We have failed to mature in the use of the arts of communication to their full potential. The scholar in this field can help the church to bridge this gap and make its methods and approach more appropriate to the times.

Both the church and the university are devoted to the search for truth and its application to the life of man. Each needs the other, and there must be a continuing dialogue (this is still a respectable and useful word) until intelligent faith and intellectual study understand and relate to each other with insight. For any such cooperative venture between scholar and church, however, it is necessary that each be sincere, that there be mutual respect, and that each be competent to contribute to such a significant dialogue.

The search for truth is not an option that either the church or the scholar can take or leave according to whim. It is a mandate from God. But even the search for truth may become idolatrous. Thus, truth deified, and sought for its own sake, may become a false god.

Atomic energy can be used to heal the sick and feed the poor; or it can be used to secure power so that a man may feel himself strong enough to challenge God.

Indeed, medicine can be used to defy death — either as evidence of Christ's promise, or of man's ability to do without God. In short, men can in their vocations and their lives . . . witness for Christ, or for the State, or for men. . . . This means that men can in their lives show the efficacy of Grace or the devastation of sin and their consequent alienation from God.⁵

In *Ape and Essence*,⁶ Aldous Huxley underscores this fact in a striking way. It is a story of events following a war of total destruction through the use of nuclear devices. The story proceeds with a series of flashbacks after the fashion of a screen story. Several of these flashbacks record events that occurred before the war and that help us to understand how the final destruction came about.

In one of these flashbacks, all of the world is drawn up in two vast, utterly powerful opposing armies. The armies differ only in the shades of their uniforms. There seems to be no essential difference in their size or power. There are no principles at stake. Each side has simply felt that it must prepare for total destruction as a means of protection against the other side, its potential enemy. As one looks more closely, one sees that each general staff is a group of baboons in uniform. Each general staff has its own Einstein, or scientific genius, squatting with a leash around his neck. At some imperceptible signal, each general staff forces its Einstein to pull the levers and turn the wheels that release nuclear destruction upon all the earth. There is a brief period of explosion and fire and screaming. Then all is still. The sky is lighted with a salmon-colored, eerie light, and pillars of smoke ascend. Standing erect here and there are parts of trees, nothing more. All the cities built through the ages of human history are desolate.

The baboons are all dead. Horribly disfigured by burns, the two Einsteins lie side by side under what remains of a flowering apple tree.

FIRST EINSTEIN: It's unjust, it isn't right.

SECOND EINSTEIN: We who never did any harm to anybody.

FIRST EINSTEIN: We who lived only for Truth.

NARRATOR: And that precisely is why you are dying in the murderous service of baboons. Pascal explained it all more than three hundred years ago. "We make an idol of truth; for truth without charity is not God, but His image and idol, which we must neither love nor worship. You lived for the worship of an idol. But, in the last analysis, the name of every idol is Moloch. So here you are, my friends, here you are!"

The church needs the scholar, and the scholar needs the church. What a tragedy it would be if for lack of communication or understanding or appreciation, or if for any other reason, the Christian scholar and the church

do not marshal their total resources to accomplish God's benign purpose for mankind in his deep and desperate need.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 Quoted in JOHN O. GROSS, The Church and the College: A Partnership, *The Christian Scholar* 36, 48 (1953).
- 2 JOHN R. FRY, Anti-intellectualism in the Church Today, *The Christian Scholar* 45, 26 (1962).
- 3 R. N. BENDER, The Scholar and the Life of the Church, *Religious Education* 45, 324 (1951).
- 4 *Ibid.*, 327.
- 5 L. O. KATTSOFF, The Priesthood of the Scholar, *The Christian Scholar* 39, 171 (1956).
- 6 ALDOUS HUXLEY, *Ape and Essence* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948).