

The Stewardship of the Evangelical Mind: An Inclusion of Reason

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If we submit everything to reason our religion will be left with nothing mysterious or supernatural. If we offend the principles of reason our religion will be absurd and ridiculous. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

1. Introduction

There are many issues facing the Evangelical church today. One of the more pervasive topics is that of anti-intellectualism, a disposition that tends to play down the role of learning in favour of experiential faith. This false dichotomy makes the distinction between the life of the mind and the life of faith. Adding to the problem is the fact that evangelical scholars are prone more to ignore the subject, opting either to deny its existence or to do nothing about it. Within the past decade, relatively few works have addressed the anti-intellectualism that exists within the Evangelical Church. The response of Evangelical Christianity to such anti-intellectualism has been fragmentary, yet its very existence depends upon a satisfactory treatment of it. The Acts of the Apostles provides evidence that Christian proclamation was engaged from the very first with the philosophical currents of the time. In Athens, we read that the Apostle Paul entered into discussion with "certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers" (17:18), and exegetical analysis of his speech at the Areopagus has revealed frequent allusions to popular beliefs deriving for the most part from Stoicism. This is by no means accidental. If pagans were to understand them, the first Christians could not refer only to "Moses and the prophets" when they spoke. They had to point as well to "natural" knowledge of God and to the voice of conscience in every human being (cf. Rm 1:19-21; 2:14-15; Ac 14:16-17). Since in pagan religion this natural knowledge had lapsed into idolatry (cf. Rm 1:21-32), the Apostle judged it wiser in his speech to make the link with the thinking of the philosophers, who had always set in opposition to the myths and mystery cults notions more respectful of divine transcendence.

In his book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Mark Knoll (1993:3) points out that the modern Evangelicals are not known for their rigorous thinking, nor

does popular evangelicalism tend to sustain the intellectual life. The rise of anti-intellectualism is based on the direct violation of the Old Testament words that Jesus quotes in Matthew 22:37 “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind” (NIV). For this researcher, this is the heart of the problem regarding anti-intellectualism and its presence in the life of the evangelical believer. Jesus clearly expresses the belief that fully expresses love for and to God, requiring the coherent unity of faith and learning. In the light of anti-intellectualism and its presence within evangelicalism, it is necessary once again to attempt bridging the gap that separates the heart from the mind, if then for no other reason than being obedient to the command of Christ. At root, evangelical anti-intellectualism is both a lack of stewardship of the mind and a sin. It lacks stewardship in the sense of being an offense and a stumbling block that needlessly hinders serious people from considering the Christian faith and coming to Christ. It is a sin because it is a refusal, contrary to Jesus’ two great commandments, to love the Lord our God with our minds. Anti-intellectualism is quite simply a sin. Evangelicals must address it as such, beyond all excuses, evasions, or rationalizations of false piety.

This lack of “stewardship of the mind” within Christianity is not new; during the time of Augustine (354 CE) the North African Church seemed closed to faith and reason, there was little faith seeking understanding. Despite the simple vibrant faith of his mother, Monica, the young Augustine did not receive within Catholic Christianity the intellectual answers to his questions which he so desperately sought. Although the historical, cultural and theological settings have changed, the question regarding the integration of faith and learning is similar today. Augustine engaged in philosophic and academic pursuits that encouraged the life of the mind to co-exist with a life of faith. In this article I shall investigate Augustine’s anti-intellectual environment and its characteristics (especially with regards to the North African clergy) that is characteristic of this present generation, and by using the work of Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, *De Reductione* (1270), offer today’s evangelical solutions to the difficult subject of integrating faith and learning.

2. Augustine's Anti-intellectual Environment

The atmosphere of the North African Christendom in which Augustine grew up reflected the influential thought of Tertullian (CE 220), the North African theologian of Carthage, who once asked, "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?" Tertullian then added, "I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic or a dialectical Christianity. After Jesus we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel, no need for research." Although Tertullian did utilise Stoic philosophy, pre-Socratic philosophers, and even Aristotle, his aversion to philosophy was no secret (Pelikan 1971: 49-50). His fideistic comment, "I believe because it is foolish" was not merely idiosyncratic with Tertullian (Teske 1996:50). He, along with his successor Cyprian exerted a powerful influence upon North African Christendom's anti-intellectualism ('O Connell 1964: 343). In fact Tessle (1970:27) states, "It typified the anti-intellectual Christianity among the Catholic clergy of that entire region. Augustine addressed the council of Bishops of the African Church in October 393, an address preserved in his *Faith and Creed*. Rather than using heavy theological language, he had to resort to very plain speech and followed this by the basic creedal statements of Christianity for high-ranking church officials. Later in 412, Augustine received a letter from Consentius, a fellow bishop, who reflected this lack of appreciation for the intellect: "God is not to be sought after by reason but followed through authority".

The lack of theological rigour had tremendous side effects, one of which was the infiltration of Manichean belief into the Church. Frend (1953:22-23) states that in the third century Mani, an Iranian Philosopher and painter who synthesised Christian, Persian and Buddhist ideas to form Manichaeism founded a dualistic religion. Manichaeism was a complex Gnostic system offering salvation by knowledge. The Donatist would mock the African Catholic congregation because of the proliferation of Manichean heresies within them. Even Augustine mentioned a sub-deacon within the Catholic Church who had concurrently been a member of the Manichees for years. He aroused no one's suspicion. Such a heretical presence within North African Catholicism was commonplace. J O' Meara (1980: 63) elaborates

Men could change their allegiance from Christianity to Manicheism and vice versa without attracting as much attention as they would if they had changed to Donatist. It even happened that Christian ministers were after many years' performance of their function, discovered to have been Manichees all the time.

The death of theological endeavour had yet another side effect: authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism among North African clergy. Closed-mindedness seemed to be characteristic among these Church leaders. Copan (287-95)

quoting from *On the morals of a Catholic Mind* states that Augustine urges the "inquirer" who desires to find truth not to despair when he encounters anti-intellectualism among the Church leadership:

And should the inquirer meet, some bishops or presbyters, or any officials or ministers of the Catholic Church, who either avoid in all cases opening up mysteries, or, content with simple faith, have no desire for more recondite knowledge, he must not despair of finding knowledge of the truth in a case where neither are all able to teach to whom the inquiry is addressed, nor all the inquiries worthy of learning truth.

Diligence and piety are both necessary: on one hand, we must have knowledge to find truth and on the other hand, we must deserve to get the knowledge.

Augustine had once been a seeker in just this same environment, where church leaders intimidated the laity to blindly accept Church teachings without question. Teselle (1996:50) characterises Augustine's environment as stressing, "reverence for divine authority at the expense of rational inquiry and may be even be inclined to counsel blind faith." When Augustine's questions were not answered by the Catholic clergy, he looked elsewhere for intellectual satisfaction, turning to Manicheans. As a hearer for nine years, he challenged Manichaeism by denying Mani's apostleship and condemning Mani's rejection of biblical truth. The challenge for the Evangelical Church today is to create an atmosphere where rational inquiry would lead to divine authority. Ravi Zacharias (2004:159) quoting D. Marquis rightfully argues that "If you make people think they are thinking, they will love you: but if you really make them think, they will hate you." This leads to intellectual bankruptcy that stalks the evangelical church and the existential emptiness of its membership. At a glance one may wish to dispute the allegation that anti-intellectualism is the womb that conceived the moral and heretical malady that seems to be existent in the evangelical church.

In order to deal with the anti-intellectual problem in the evangelical church, we must ask the question what is it to “love God with all our minds.” The philosophical process I have undertaken is a three-step method that leads us to our conclusion namely: our assumptions, our arguments, and our application. This necessitates an incursion into the realm of logic, testing of its conclusions in experience, and mandating those applications as perspectives for others. Only after these steps can one establish norms and make applications for life. When anti-intellectualism is tested on these lines, its vulnerability is seen in contrast to the cohesive strength of a true intellectualism. Reason, as I see it, comes to us at three different levels. The first is foundational, the theoretical substructure upon which inductions are made and deductions are postulated. In plain language reason depends upon the form and the force of argument. Logic, to most minds, has never overflowed with romance and seldom triggered excitement. Ambrose Bierce (1999:134), a writer and journalist defined reason as the “art of thinking and reasoning in strict accordance with limitations and incapable of human understanding.” With this resistance towards intellectualism, however, it is impossible to attack intellectualism without using intellect. For, truth has direct bearing on reality, and the laws of logic apply to every sphere of our lives.

3. Bonaventure and His Contribution Towards Integration Of Intellectualism and Faith

Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1217-1274), a theologian and writer of the Franciscan Order wrote on *The Reduction of the Arts to Theology* (which hereafter will be referred to as *De Reductione*) around 1270. This short project offers insight into the mind of a medieval theologian, who sought to integrate a life of learning with a life of faith. Drawing from his own teaching and ministerial experience in Paris, Bonaventure concludes that spiritual life needs to be connected to intellectual life, because both are from God, “The Father of Lights.” Using Bonaventure’s work *De Reductione* encourages Evangelical thinkers to engage in philosophical and academic pursuits that encourages the life of the mind to co-exist with the life of faith.

The intention of the second part of this article is to explore Bonaventure's understanding on how a believer can be both "intellectual" and "spiritual" at the same time. Bonaventure believed that the natural sciences were "lights" but lesser in importance to that of supernatural theology or revelation. In other words human wisdom, philosophy and the arts are lesser lights than those of faith and spirituality. He calls for a necessity to integrate faith and learning, because there is a finite amount of understanding one can receive from the natural sciences alone. By itself natural science is seen as deficient and in need of the fuller light, a light that can only be supplied through theology and faith.

3.1 The Methodological Approach of Bonaventure

The methodological approach that Bonaventure brings to the "understanding of faith and learning" is his conviction that both aspects of the human person i.e. faith and learning, are taught in Scripture. His starting point to understand the Scripture and its insights into his understanding of the connection between faith and learning begins with his systematic and literal approach to Scripture. This was the method he employed in *De Reductione*. This is important for Evangelicals, as we understand the spiritual life and the interpretation of the biblical text in similar ways. If Evangelicals are not guided by the learning of the text, what use is our spirituality anyway?

Bonaventure's understanding of the interconnectedness of faith and learning hangs upon the verse in Scripture, James 1:17. He applied this text during his introduction and opens it throughout his treatise. James calls God the "Father of all lights" and as the Light he is the source and illumination of all gifts. There it stands to reason according to Bonaventure that there is nothing a human person possesses that is not first given by God. Bonaventure advocates that the life experience of a human being relates both faith and learning through God's provision of natural and supernatural light. In this essence natural light refers to the basic human function possessed by all humanity, the ability to reason. At some point based upon God's choosing,

supernatural light enters into human experience, which is referred to as saving grace. This light made concrete through faith joins with the natural light to form a complete person. Once these two are united, human wisdom and supernatural grace moves towards God in Christ. This is the crux of Bonaventure's understanding of *Reductione*, to draw the soul back to God through a unity of the natural and spiritual light. This integration of faith and learning expresses completely God's creative will for humanity.

How then does faith relate to the mind and learning present within humanity? The work of Bonaventure *De Reductione* is used to explain the natural and spiritual unity of all forms of human knowledge as given by the "Father of Lights". Bonaventure offers up four "lights" inherent to all, which God supplied at the beginning of creation. These lights move in intensity from inferior qualities to the greater ones. They are the exterior, inferior, interior and superior lights. Each light reveals Bonaventure's methodological approach to relate all human arts to the realm of theology. It is beyond the scope of this article to deal with each light in-depth, however what is proposed is a brief look at the main points under each section with concluding remarks as to how Bonaventure's insights can bring a dimension in understanding the contemporary issues of anti-intellectualism.

3.2 The "Lights" of *De Reductione*

Reduction of the Arts to Theology is an elaborate interpretation of a remark by James in the first chapter of his Epistle: "Every best gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights." From this basic image of God as a sun from which flow rays of light Bonaventure distinguishes a variety of participating lights. He speaks of four: an *external* light, or the light of mechanical art; a *lower* light, or the light of sense knowledge; an *inner* light which is the light of philosophical knowledge; a *higher* light which is the light of grace and of Sacred Scripture. Since these lights have their origin in one

source, they are all ordered to knowledge of Sacred Scripture: they are contained in it, perfected by it, and through it ordered to eternal illumination. By using the image of lights Bonaventure shows how the other illuminations of knowledge are to be led back to Sacred Scripture. He then goes on to show how sense knowledge can be distinguished in terms of a *medium*, the exercise of knowledge, and the delight concomitant with it. The means (*medium*) to intellect as suggested by Bonaventure, is the Divine Word; the exercise of sensation gives a pattern for human life, since each sense is directed to its proper object and shrinks from what could harm it. The delight, which accompanies sensation, is a sign of the soul's union with God. This may suffice to indicate how each of the levels of light leads Bonaventure inexorably back to Sacred Scripture and theology. Thus it is obvious how the manifold wisdom of God, is clearly revealed in Sacred Scripture.

The question remains, how can Bonaventure help modern evangelicals understand the importance of an integrated life of faith and learning? Simply stated, he helps provide reasonable biblical and philosophical support that theology is the rubric under which all life activities enjoy their existence. *De Reductione* espouses the belief that there is no human enterprise devoid of God's influence. Since God gives illumination, the kind that pertains to physical and spiritual life, then it follows that he desired an integrated life of learning and faith. Illumination, according to Bonaventure, comes in many forms and comes directly from the Father of lights. To separate a life of learning from a life of faith is to miss the point concerning God's illuminating process. God's creative purpose was for both human elements to coincide in a holistic manner; and Bonaventure upheld a holistic view of life

4. Conclusion

It is because of the lack of the evangelical churches' input into the learning of philosophy that we allow particular philosophical views to contradict scripture. What Augustine experienced, Roland Teske (1996:12) suggests, "stands as a clear warning for the Church of today that the minds of some of the most intelligent young women and men can easily be driven from the Church by a similar anti-intellectualism." If we take Jesus seriously and maintain that the text of Scripture is to be taken seriously, then the answer to this question is uncomplicated. God desires love from the whole person, not just one area of the person. However, this is precisely the dichotomy evangelical anti-intellectualism creates, a separation between the heart and the mind.

5. Bibliography

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