

Recently I opened my copy of the *New York Times Magazine* and discovered an essay by Mark Lilla, recounting his teenage years as an evangelical Christian and documenting his subsequent loss of faith.¹ Apparently, Lilla left the evangelical tradition, and eventually the Christian faith, because it offered him little intellectual stimulation and practically no intellectual resources to help him address the complex issues he confronted in graduate school and beyond. It's tough to write off his perspective as just another example of anti-Christian me-tooism among cynical New York intellectuals when respected evangelical thinkers say much the same thing about their own tradition. Ten years after *The Scandal of the American Mind*, Mark Noll still laments the persistence within evangelicalism of "an immediatism that insists on action, decision, and even perfection right now, a populism that confuses winning supporters with mastering actually existing situations, an anti-traditionalism that privileges one's own current judgments on biblical, theological, and ethical issues (however hastily formed) over insight from the past (however hard won and carefully stated), and a nearly gnostic dualism that rushes to spiritualize all manner of bodily, terrestrial, physical, and material realities (despite the origin and providential maintenance of these realities in God)."²

On one hand, the story of a Pleistocene evangelical intellect is a bit of a canard, since it overestimates the cultural sophistication of the secular academy, which I can attest has a long way to go, and it rests on crude extrapolations from the most intellectually regressive elements of the evangelical subculture (you are free to insert your own villains here). And yet on the other hand, my own experience with students

¹ Mark Lilla, "Getting Religion: My Long-Lost Years as a Teenage Evangelical," *New York Times Magazine*, September 18, 2005.

² Mark Noll, "The Evangelical Mind Today," *First Things* 146 (October 2004): 34-39. See D. G. Hart's critique of Noll's depiction of tentative evangelical intellectual progress in "Theology of Scandal," *The New Pantagruel* 2.3 (Summer 2005). A favorable assessment can be found in Alan Wolfe, "The Opening of the Evangelical Mind," *The Atlantic Monthly* (October, 2000).

from the evangelical subculture suggests that on the whole, they haven't been encouraged to read widely and think deeply. The majority seems to have nurtured unthinking prejudices against certain areas of scientific and humanistic inquiry (for instance, if you say the words "evolution" or "postmodernism" in the first class session of Western Civilization, you get a lot of negative responses, but very few could explain even the most basic concepts within these complex areas of thought). Nearly all of them have inherited an American disposition toward the liberal arts that perceives visual arts, music, theater, history, literature, philosophy, physics, mathematics, and so on as nice enough, but impractical and irrelevant—a mere adornment to the "real" education that prepares you for productive living.³

So yes, I suppose I share Noll's concern that thinking Christians are strangers in their own country, and I worry that some who come of age within the evangelical Christian subculture will conclude that their tradition has an impoverished view of the human intellect.⁴ Perhaps many more will wind up jaded and cynical about the Christian faith. I believe this is where I come into the picture. To the extent that I can get students to understand and embrace our highest ideals as a Christian institution of higher learning, to that extent I can put them on a path toward becoming reflective people who can articulate a system of belief informed by a broader understanding of the world. We tell our students that we are interested in "developing the whole person" and assisting them in understanding "all areas of human knowledge from the perspective of a Christian worldview," while cultivating an "arena for encounter with the world" in our classrooms, dormitories, auditoriums, and playing fields. We impress upon them the necessity of making a "critical and personal response to the issues encountered in the various fields of study" and thinking through the "relationship between their Christian

³ The extent to which this sort of thinking has influenced even Christian intellectuals and professional educators is evident in the most recent issue of *CCCU Advance*, the newsletter of the CCCU, where President Bob Andringa refers to Christian higher education as an "industry" and potential students as a "market." Bob Andringa, "Transitions are Healthy," *CCCU Advance* (Fall 2005), 16.

⁴ On the subject of Christian intellectual alienation, see Daniel Taylor, *The Myth of Certainty: The Reflective Christian & the Risk of Commitment* (Downer's Grove, IL, 1999).

faith, their academic pursuits, their career goals, and their personal lives.” Perhaps my favorite lines come from the last paragraph of our Philosophy of Education statement in the Academic Catalog:

The University recognizes that it is unsuccessful if students learn information but are not challenged to rethink their values; students become familiar with a major field of study but are not ready to do independent and critical thinking in those fields; students learn about current problems, issues and controversies but feel no need to make personal responses to them; students maintain Christian beliefs and practices but insulate their Christian faith from other aspects of their experience and do not think through, broaden, and deepen their faith in response to the challenges presented both by their academic and career pursuits and by their awareness of current problems and issues.⁵

These statements suggest to prospective students that the people here at Huntington—faculty, staff, and students—will push them to develop their capacity for critical thought and expect them to make a personal response to puzzling issues in different fields of study. It assumes that any faith worth its name will be improved by engaging complicated problems and addressing tough, perhaps even unanswerable questions.

I find myself strategically situated in this process, since historically, the traditional academic disciplines in the arts and sciences achieved their stature in the academy by posing foundational questions that fueled the search for truth. The modern historical profession, for example, began as a truth-seeking enterprise. As David Hume once said, history’s chief end is to “discover the constant and universal principles of human nature.”⁶ Over the last fifty years, professional historians have grown less and less convinced that objectivity in historical research is possible or that constant and universal principles even exist.⁷ I’ve encountered Christian historians who equate these developments to moral and philosophical relativism, or even nihilism. They interpret this “postmodern turn” in history as a challenge to faith. I sympathize

⁵ “Introduction,” *Huntington University Academic Catalog, 2005-2007*, pp. 15-16.

⁶ Quoted in Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven, 1964), 71.

⁷ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988).

with them, but I also believe that this has provided a much-needed corrective to Enlightenment modernism's obsession with consistency and certitude.

The historian in me is tempted by the seductions of intellectual consistency and certitude. They play on my human desire for perfect, God-like knowledge and complete individual autonomy. And yet the Christian in me remembers that we interpret the world through a divinely wrought, yet sin-infected organ. Our minds bear the image of the Creator, even as they suffer from the consequences of the fall:

But since the mind, itself, thought naturally capable of reason and intelligence, is disabled by besotting and inveterate vices not merely from delighting and abiding in, but even from tolerating His unchangeable light, until it has been gradually healed, and renewed, and made capable of such felicity, it had, in the first place, to be impregnated with faith, and so purified.⁸

In this passage in *The City of God*, St. Augustine describes what my good friend Jack Barlow, Sr. described to me as the noetic consequences of sin, which is repaired only by means of God's grace through the mediating work of Jesus Christ. If Hume constructs an autonomous human self, intellectually free to discover the universal principles of human nature through philosophical reflection on the human experience in the past, Augustine, on the other hand, perceives the human self as defective, dependent on God's grace for progress in understanding the true nature of reality.

My thinking about integration of faith and learning in the discipline of history was guided less by professional historians than by great Christian writers like St. Augustine, Thomas Merton, and G. K. Chesterton. In his book *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton highlights the fallacies of air-tight materialism, noting that the world is full of contradictions, and the Christian thinker has the means to account for them. The Christian thinker, he writes, "has always cared more for truth than for consistency. If he saw two truths that seemed to contradict each other, he would take the two truths

⁸ St. Augustine, *The City of God* (New York, 2000), 346.

and the contradiction along with them.”⁹ He goes on to describe how the fetishism of the logician and the materialist for consistency and exactitude results in a truncated view of reality devoid of mystery and miracle. Only Christianity, Chesterton claims, can offer a way to account for what is logical about creation, together with the fabulous mystery and miracle of existence. As for the actual study of history, Chesterton shows how Christian belief results in a deeper and more satisfying understanding of the human condition. He accuses the materialists who focus on economics of missing the most important motives that shape history: “The truth is that the thing most present to the mind of man is not the economic machinery necessary to his existence; but rather that existence itself; the world which he sees when he wakes every morning and the nature of his general position in it.”¹⁰

Chesterton illustrates the higher motives and aspirations that shape the historical narrative. And yes, Chesterton thought of history as a story, which had its apologetic uses in his writings: “I had always felt life first as a story: and if there is a story there is a story-teller.”¹¹ Clearly Augustine thought this way too, since his major work, *The City of God*, is structured as a sweeping account of past, present, and future, utilizing the incarnation of Jesus as the pivotal moment of history. A bit after Chesterton’s time, the postmodern agitation in the historical profession reintroduced the idea of narrative. Up to this point, monographs tended to be thematic explorations of various problems and issues, typically organized with no thought to conventions in the narrative form. As I entered graduate school, however, historians were rediscovering the power of narrative and began to use the narrative form to explore old problems and frame new questions.¹² Narrative writers eschew historical patterns or general laws, preferring instead to place greater weight on temporality and context.

⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco, 1995), 32.

¹⁰ Chesterton, *Everlasting Man* (San Francisco, 1993), 138.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹² John E. Toews, “Intellectual History After the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience,” *American Historical Review* 92 (October 1992): 879-907; Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing After the Linguistic Turn* (London, 2005).

They resist the empiricism of social-science history and stress the contingent nature of events. Throughout their work, they depict human beings as meaning-makers; people wrest meaning from the events that shape their lives, and these meanings are tangled in the vexing peculiarities of language. Narrative histories appreciate the *situatedness* of discursive practices, and by extension, human understanding.¹³

These approaches secure us from the danger of equating our verbalized descriptions of God, or our various doctrinal formulations, with Truth itself. They are representations of Truth expressed in language conditioned by social experience, symbolic expressions of an ineffable reality that lies beyond the ability of our minds to grasp completely.¹⁴ As the early Greek fathers attested, it is better to speak of the kernel of Truth embedded in the husks we call doctrines as something to be experienced—through worship, prayer, contemplation, and the sacrament—than to speak of it as something to be known and understood. Dionysius the Areopagite, for example, is known for having ventured a rather postmodern understanding of Christian belief in the face of uncertainty: “The things that are bestowed uniformly and all at once, so to speak, on the blessed Essences dwelling in Heaven, are transmitted to us as it were in fragments and through the multiplicity of the varied symbols of the divine oracles.”¹⁵ In other words, only when we are in God’s presence can the Truth be fully known and understood.

I teach my students that humility of this sort is an intellectual virtue, making possible the practice of other virtues, like open-mindedness and curiosity. And we need

¹³ “Languages evolve in accordance with the effects of migrations, victories and defeats, fashions, and commerce; but not under the impulsion of any historicity possessed by the languages themselves. They do not obey any internal principle of development; they simply unfold representations and their elements in a linear sequence.” Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1970), 91. On the instability of concepts and methods, see Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1996), 126. On the subject of mind, language, and meaning, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, 2003).

¹⁴ See, generally, the work of the Cappadocian Fathers, particularly Gregory of Nyssa. Denys the Areopagite also spoke of the inexpressibility of the essence of the divine, as described by Karen Armstrong in *A History of God: The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York, 1993), 126.

¹⁵ Quoted in James S. Cutsinger, ed., *The Fullness of God: Frithjof Schuon on Christianity* (Bloomington, Indiana, 2004), 17.

more of this in the church and in society at large. I haven't told this to Jeff Berggren, but I don't ache for students with lofty GPAs or killer SAT scores. I do, however, long for students with a higher level of curiosity. Everyone in my line of work wants the same thing. But this isn't a paved expressway on the road through relativism to nihilism. I take seriously the Philosophy of Education statement in our Academic Catalog. It says, "challenges should include unsolved problems and open questions, as well as issues for which satisfactory solutions have already been worked out." A case in point might be the Trinity itself. It is the painstaking work of scores of thinking Christians who struggled to give expression to the unfathomable mystery of the triune Godhead, and the Nicene formula of three *hypostases* united in one *ousia*. This is a satisfactory solution that offers a ring within which to stage a conversation about the nature of God's activity in the world, about which the faithful in Christ must continue to dialogue. In Chesterton's view, the ring of orthodoxy, the "rigid guard of ethical abnegations and professional priests" makes possible a zone of interaction where you will find "the old human life dancing like children, and drinking wine like men." To his way of thinking, "in the modern philosophy the case is opposite; it is its outer ring that is obviously artistic and emancipated; its despair is within."¹⁶

In some ways Chesterton's metaphor helps to work through the problem of creativity within a context where epistemological commitments have been established. He explains that the ring of Christian orthodoxy permits the collision of passions that combine to make Christianity paradoxical (Jesus' humanity and divinity, or losing one's life to save it), and yet comprehensive to the point of offering resources for all of the intellectual problems generated by human inquiry. And the combination of opposites in Christianity has been a wellspring of human creativity throughout history, as artistic movements and theological schools have emerged to give human expression to our most mundane concerns and our highest aspirations. Ironically, the orthodox episteme

¹⁶ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 164.

liberates in a way that drudging materialism can never hope to do, with its crushing determinism and its diminished capacity for wonder.

Most importantly, and most relevant to my teaching, the ring creates a community, and community is the essential ingredient in sustaining a dialogue about Truth. In order to keep a conversation going, you have to rely on another person or group of people to remain engaged. To sustain a dialogue about God, we must recognize our dependence on the community of believers, and together we must rely on the continuous outpouring of grace that Augustine perceived in *The City of God*. If we believe we have finished our doctrinal edifice, then our conversation stops, our mutual engagement ceases, and we no longer remain dependent either upon God or upon one another. Again, it isn't hard to find examples of Christian heroes who have demonstrated the strength of their faith not by proclaiming the acquisition of some new truth, but by their continuous engagement with the community of believers who together recognize their dependence on God. I find particular inspiration in the faith journey of Thomas Merton, an intellectual who sought truth in leftist politics, existentialist philosophy, psychoanalytic theory and modern art, but came up short. It was only through truth-seeking in the context of relationships with faithful, yet open-minded Christians that Merton discovered the purpose for which he had been created, having become "conscious of the fact that the only way to live was to live in a world that was charged with the presence and reality of God."¹⁷

Conversation, dependence, and community inform the way I teach my classes across the spectrum, from introductory courses in Western Civilization to upper division courses in my specialization. For instance, I begin nearly all of my Perspectives on Western Civilization sessions with a question. The question is not about the topic for the day per se, but about the problems we face as human beings in the contemporary world, which the material for the given day will help us to illuminate and

¹⁷ Thomas Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain* (New York, 1976), 191.

explore. When we start our discussion on ancient Greece, for example, I ask my students what they believe is the kind of education that is “most worth having.” Students will offer suggestions like street smarts, common sense, technical knowledge, and so forth; eventually I can prod them into referencing book learning, academic information, and even wisdom. We discuss Greek perspectives in Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and so forth, then attempt to establish a consensus that knowledge about the ultimate reality—what I push them to perceive as God—trumps all the other types of knowledge. I want them to see that all the competing impulses of our culture that push us toward pragmatism and materialism must be challenged by educated people in order to rescue a vital faith that is worthy of our Lord. Other questions, like “what is a just society?” and “is it better to be an excellent human being or an excellent citizen?” (lifted from one of the Socratic dialogues) stimulate similar conversations about essential facets of the human condition.

Nearly all my upper level courses are based on intensive discussion over primary documents, and I strive to integrate student questions and comments into the collective fund of wisdom. A few years ago, I attended an NEH seminar in which the scholars present toyed with the idea of distributed cognition, the idea that some concepts are so complex and multi-faceted that they cannot have been discerned by a single human mind. In some sense, my upper level courses, like Civil War and Reconstruction, American Religious History, and Great Issues in American History proceed under the general assumption that together we can do better at understanding the complexities of the human experience in the past than any one of us can do alone. This is the disciplinary presumption that drives the historical profession, with its welter of methodologies and interpretive schools, each contributing in a small way to growing our collective understanding of the past. This idea guides my thinking in Great Issues in American History, to cite one example, in which students read great books in American political, intellectual, and cultural history, and explore together with me the implications of history-changing ideas for how we live today. At the end of the course,

students are asked to write a paper with an analytical framework that comprehends all our reading material, assessing the impact of these ideas on American culture from a Christian perspective. Then we discuss together what resources exist within the Christian tradition that might help us to more effectively respond to the ideas and forces that drive contemporary American politics, society, and culture. At this point in my career, I can think of no better way to encourage graduating students in History to develop their minds and prepare their hearts for service to their church, community, and world.