

SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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The Call to Think

**The following is excerpted from James Emery White's *A Mind for God* (InterVarsity Press, 2006), released this month. Copies may be ordered at discount through www.serious-times.com, but are also available at all major bookstore chains (e.g., Borders, Barnes and Noble), Christian bookstores, and through www.amazon.com.*

"We may talk of 'conquering' the world for Christ. But what sort of 'conquest' do we mean?," writes John Stott. "Not a victory by force of arms...This is a battle of ideas." Yet there are surprising few warriors. Those who follow Christ have too often retreated into personal piety and good works, or as one BBC commentator I heard over the radio while jogging one morning in Oxford, Christians have too often offered mere "feelings" and "philanthropy." Speaking specifically to the challenge from Islam, he added that what is needed was more "hard thinking" applied to the issues of the day.

What remains to be seen is whether there will be any hard thinkers to do it. The peril of our day is that when a Christian mind is most needed, Christians express little need for the mind, and as a result, even less resolve to develop it. There is even a sense that an undeveloped mind is more virtuous than one prepared for battle. Richard Hofstadter, in his Pulitzer-prize-winning book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, identified "the evangelical spirit" as one of the prime sources of American anti-intellectualism. Hofstadter points out that for many Christians, humble ignorance is a far more noble human quality than a cultivated mind.

Such devaluation of the intellect is a recent development within the annals of Christian history. While Christians have long struggled with the role and place of reason, that the mind *itself* mattered has been without question.

Even the early church father Tertullian (- 220 A.D.), who had little use for philosophy and was famed for his statement, "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" never questioned the importance of the mind. Tertullian's conviction was that Greek philosophy had little to offer in terms of informing the contours of Christian thought, akin to the apostle Paul's quip to the Corinthian church that the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men (1 Corinthians 1:25). But

Tertullian, as well as Paul, would have held any anti-intellectualism that celebrated an undeveloped mind in complete disdain.

Deep within the worldview of the biblical authors, and equally within the minds of the earliest church fathers, was the understanding that to be fully human *is* to think. To this day we call ourselves a race of *Homo sapiens*, which means “thinking beings.” This is not simply a scientific classification; it is a *spiritual* one. We were made in God’s image, and one of the most precious and noble dynamics within that image is the ability to think. It is simply one of the most sacred reflections of the divine image in which we were created. It is also foundational to our interaction with God. As God Himself implored through the prophet Isaiah, “Come now, let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18).

This was certainly the conviction of Jesus, who made it clear that our minds are integral to life lived in relationship with God. When summarizing human devotion to God as involving heart, soul and strength, Jesus added “...and *mind*” to the original wording of Deuteronomy, as if He wanted there to be no doubt that when contemplating the comprehensive nature of commitment and relationship with God that our intellect would not be overlooked. The apostle Paul contended that our very *transformation* as Christians would be dependent on whether our minds were engaged in an ongoing process of renewal in light of Christ (Romans 12:2-3).

All the more reason to be stunned by the words of Harry Blamires, a student of C.S. Lewis’ at Oxford, who claimed that “There is no longer a Christian mind.” A Christian ethic, a Christian practice, a Christian spirituality, yes - but not a Christian *mind*. More recently, historian Mark Noll concurred, suggesting that the scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind. “If evangelicals do not take seriously the larger world of the intellect, we say, in effect, that we want our minds to be shaped by the conventions of our modern universities and the assumptions of Madison Avenue, instead of by God and the servants of God.”

And even if we do not lose our *own* minds, we will certainly lose the minds of others. This is the double-edged threat of our day; apart from a Christian mind, we will either be taken captive by the myriad of worldviews contending for our attention, or we will fail to make the Christian voice heard and considered above the din. Either way, we either begin to think, or lose the fight.

James Emery White

Sources

John Stott, *Your Mind Matters*.

Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (pp. 55-80).

Tertullian, *On the Proscription of Heretics VII*, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 3, ed. Roberts and Donaldson (p. 246).

Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind*.

Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (pp. 11-12, 34).

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