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CHRISTIAN REFLECTIONS ON THE DANGER OF AESTHETICISM IN THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE

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The relationship between Christianity and the liberal arts has again come under scrutiny due to the recent Vatican Schema on Catholic Education. In this thoughtful essay, Dr. Crosby offers a series of reflections which reveal that the Christian faith “radicalizes” one’s relationship to truth and thereby strengthens the liberal arts rather than threatening their “autonomy.”



WRITERS IN MY POSITION HAVE OFTEN ENOUGH DEFENDED THE LIBERAL ARTS against the charge of being useless; the dragon of utilitarianism has often been slain in our midst, and so I do not propose to slay him again here. We have a broad consensus on the worth of liberal education in its own right. I have decided instead to write about a part of our identity on which our consensus is not so broad and unified, namely on our Catholic identity. One of the things which has kept me at the University of Dallas these sixteen years is the Catholic university which UD wants to be, and I know that many of the students and teachers are here for the same reason. Among the Catholic universities in this country, UD has a rather strong Catholic profile, and more Catholic substance than many.

And so I ask: What does it mean to lead the intellectual life at a Catholic university? More exactly, how can the Catholic faith “form, inform, perhaps transform our way of learning, our attitudes towards truth, indeed our very sensibilities? There is also the important question how our intellectual attitudes and sensibilities can stand in the service of our Christian faith; but I shall be mainly concerned with the service of our faith to our attitudes.

I begin with the thesis that for the Catholic, as indeed for all Christians, the value of liberal education has in a sense been relativized, that is, we believe that, in the words of Christ to Martha, there is only one thing needful, and we know that it is not liberal education. This is not to say that this education is antagonistic to the one thing needful; it is not a worldly, not a material good, but a high and worthy good; it cultivates one of the noblest parts of our nature. And yet it is not a necessary element of faith, hope, and charity. You do not have to have a liberal education in order to save your soul, indeed, the mere fact of having received such an education does not even make it any more likely that you will save your soul. We can be sure that all the great universities of the world are well represented in all the regions of Hell. If then liberal education were cultivated at a university as if it had redemptive power of its own, then the ethos of that university would not be Christian, and though this ethos would not lack a religious note, it would be the religiousness of idolatry.

I am convinced that the danger of idolatry in the intellectual life is much greater than it sounds to you when

I state it in the abstract. As the life of the mind opens up to us, and a new world dawns on us, and we feel new powers awakening in ourselves, and we feel how deeply we are being enriched by what we read and admire, it is all too easy to think that this formation of mind confers some kind of ultimate justification on our existence, and at the same time to feel that those whose intellectual life is primitive and unformed have lives unworthy of being lived. It is very easy to fall into an idolatrous relation towards liberal learning at the very time that we reject this idolatry in the abstract. It is after all in general the case that the greater the finite good which we cultivate, the greater the danger of idolatry, for then the more easily the good can be mistaken for a part of the absolute good. And so, where we are so deeply convinced of the surpassing worth and dignity of liberal education, we would do well to be alert to the danger of an idolatrous approach to liberal learning, and to respect it as a real danger for us.

Once the Christian has avoided this danger of idolatry, the question arises whether liberal education can have any real value for him. When the value of liberal education is relativized from a Christian perspective, is it thereby annihilated? Is the Christian left with any good reason for wanting to be formed by liberal education? Sometimes one tries to justify a Christian concern with liberal education in this way: one says that this education provides us with knowledge and habits of mind which enable us to understand and to defend the Christian faith better, and that it therefore has an instrumental value for the Christian.

I do not deny that there is something to this, but I think that we can make much better Christian sense of liberal education in another way. I would prefer to take up an idea of Cardinal Newman, whose magisterial work, *The Idea of a University*, should be one of the main points of reference in all of our discussions on what it is to lead the life of the mind. Newman says that the intellectual life has worth in itself, that it is worth cultivating for its own sake, and that it is therefore not justified merely as a means to some end beyond itself. Newman's idea is that it is a very great good to understand the reasons of things, and to know how to discriminate what is noble from what is base, and to discriminate what you know from what you do not know, and to get a glimpse of the unity of human knowledge, and to perform all the other acts of mind which a liberally educated person becomes capable of; so great a good, in fact, that, according to

Newman, you do not have to go outside of liberal education to find the worth of it, you do not have to make it a means for enhancing the Christian faith, but that you can find an entirely non-instrumental worth within liberal education itself.

Some have disagreed with Newman; no less a Christian author than C.S. Lewis has disagreed with him. Lewis finds it inconceivable that the intellectual life, after it has been relativized for the Christian by being shown to be something other than the ultimate good, should still have some value in itself. Lewis realizes that Newman saw as clearly as any man ever did the non-ultimate, the non-absolute character of liberal learning, but he is puzzled that the same Newman could, in the same work, also hold that liberal learning retains a value which is not just the value of a means for promoting the Christian faith. But this puzzlement in Lewis is in my opinion a rationalistic weakness in him; it is in fact one of the basic ideas of a Christian humanism that there are real and great goods which are less than the ultimate good. When the Christian feeds the hungry and clothes the naked, he is providing the hungry and the naked with goods which fall short of the absolute good of knowledge of God and salvation, and yet he does not provide these goods merely as an instrumental means to the absolute good. It is good to relieve the bodily misery of human beings, even though it is an incomparably greater good to relieve their spiritual misery. The first good does not pale away into insignificance just because it is not the highest, the ultimate good. And so the good of cultivating the mind does not pale away into insignificance just because it is surpassed by the far greater good of cultivating the heart in faith and love.

If the development of our intellectual nature were to conflict with and were to undermine our faith and love, then of course we ought rather to give up the intellectual life than to lose the one thing needful, the pearl of great price, for it is better to enter heaven with an uncultured intellect than to enter hell with a well-developed one. But still the ideal is to develop both our intellectual powers and our faith. It is foreign to the Christian faith, and to a genuine Christian humanism, to say that the only thing important is the one thing needful, and that it does not matter what a Christian makes of himself, it does not matter what condition his body and his mind are in, as long as his faith is intact.

And so I have tried to show that liberal education

is not the ultimate good, and that it is nevertheless a great good in its own right. But is this all we have to know and to act on if we are going to have a Catholic ethos at our university? Does it take nothing more to make the intellectual life Christian than to avoid idolizing it, and to avoid despising it? Does the Christian, after avoiding this Scylla and that Charybdis, simply lead the intellectual life according to its own immanent logic? Does his intellectual life cease to differ from that of an unbeliever once he has avoided these two extremes? Does the Catholicism of a university provide only the broadest frame of reference, and after that have no further impact on the intellectual life of those who live within this frame of reference? Do we end up with a rather extreme assertion of the autonomy of the intellectual life of a Catholic university?

I answer: but of course not! We have only begun to get at what is distinctive about the mentality of a Christian intellectual and the ethos of a Catholic university, though we should not underestimate how much is achieved by re-visioning liberal education from the point of view of Christian humanism. Out of the very many different aspects of our Catholic ethos, I shall select one for closer examination; I want to consider with you how the faith of the Christian intellectual radicalizes his relation to truth. Of course the non-believer also has reasons to respect truth; but the believer is formed by his faith in such a way that these reasons are for him raised to a higher power. In the remainder of this piece I shall develop this idea through three reflections.

1) Newman gives a great deal of attention to the fact that the members of an intellectual community typically develop certain sensibilities, and that these sensibilities make them less responsive to truth and more responsive to other things. Thus a person whose sensibilities have been formed by the intellectual life will often - not necessarily, not rightly, but often - be concerned with what is "interesting", or "original", or "powerful", to the relative neglect of what is true. My revered master in philosophy, Dietrich von Hildebrand, once told me of the following conversation which he had with the German philosopher, Max Scheler. They were discussing a book which denied that the resurrection really took place, and Scheler said that he found it to be such an interesting book. Von Hildebrand protested that the main thesis of the book was false; Scheler agreed that it was false, but insisted that it was still ever so interesting. Von Hildebrand expressed his amazement that Scheler should take

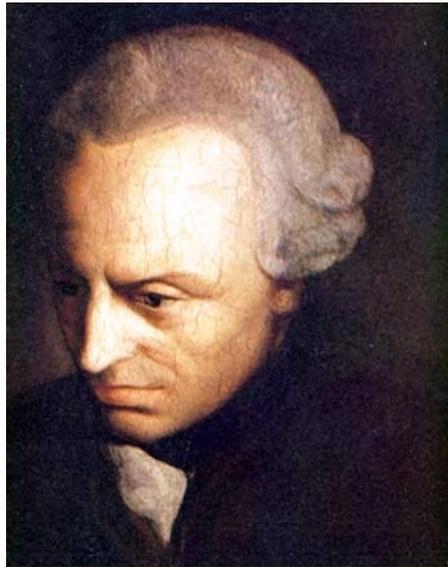
so seriously what he knew to be false; Scheler retorted by accusing his friend of having a *Bauernverstand*, the mindset of a peasant. But surely von Hildebrand was right to imply that those who are really serious about truth will find nothing so interesting, so original, so powerful, as truth, and will find even the most amazing intellectual gymnastics which have no substance of truth in them to be dull and insipid. If one thinks like a peasant in having a single-minded preference of the true over the merely interesting, and in avoiding an aestheticist approach to knowledge, then let us not be ashamed to think like peasants.

Here is another story, also taken from the German-speaking world; it will show us in a dramatic way what it is really to prefer the true to the merely interesting.



There is much in the philosophy of Kant which is interesting, original, powerful. One of Kant's early readers, the important German poet, Heinrich von Kleist, must have been sensitive to these aspects of Kant's thought; and yet in his study of Kant he gave absolute primacy to the question of truth. We have the most moving evidence of this; in a letter, well known in German literature, Kleist explains why he finds that the philosophy of Kant, if true, is a terrible truth: "Not long ago I became acquainted with the Kantian philosophy - and I now have to tell you of a thought I derived from it, which I feel free to do because I have no reason to fear it will shatter you so profoundly and painfully as it has me. We are [according to Kant] unable to decide whether that which we call truth really is truth, or whether it only appears to us to be. If the latter, then the truth we gather here is nothing after death.... If the sharp point of this thought does not pierce your heart, do not smile at one who feels wounded by it in the deepest and most sacred part of his being. My one great aim has failed me and I have no other." My friends: even though Kleist never recovered from this despair, even though his despair led to his suicide, even though many of us are convinced that he was wrong to despair, still; *we cannot sufficiently admire Kleist in his despair*. For even in despairing he is supremely concerned with truth; he does not think that life is worth living if there is no enduring truth to base it on, and he

refuses to be consoled for his loss of truth by all that is interesting in the system of Kant. He stands infinitely more in the truth than all those German professors who were so busy writing learned studies of Kant that they never dreamed of experiencing Kant's thought "in the deepest and most sacred part" of their being, and who quite forgot to ask about what is true and what is false in his philosophy. We need to realize that it is much easier to lead the intellectual life with the busy-ness and the barrenness of such professors, than with the passion for truth which we find in Kleist.



Immanuel Kant

What now shall we say about this passion for truth in relation to Christian faith? Well, it is clear that no one can find his way to faith through the aestheticism of the interesting; only a Kleist-like passion leads to living faith. And Christian faith, once it is lived, radicalizes the Christian's relation to truth. For the Christian believes that the Son of God has become man and has redeemed man, and inaugurated a new creation, and that the whole world is being convulsed in a struggle between good and evil, and that time is short and eternity long. How can the Christian, believing what he does about the drama of redemption, possibly fall into the unreality of mind, the fastidiousness of feeling, whereby he pursues the interesting at the expense of the true? He has no time for such a pursuit; the press of greater concerns, the urgency of working while it is still light, makes him feel keenly the triviality of this cult of the interesting, which seems to him like fiddling while Rome burns.

2) Persons with these aestheticist sensibilities, as I would call them, are typically unwilling to bring an inquiry to a conclusion; they prefer the excitement of the search, they prefer to leave all possibilities open, and they dread having to utter a yes which is yes and a no which is no. They revel in the openness of questions, and feel confined by the definiteness of an answer. Their intellectual life is specifically irresponsible; they play with ideas when they should be making intellectual commitments; they are intellectual aesthetes. They may be ever so industrious as intellectual workers, and ever so learned: still, they are aesthetes. They may still speak of true and false, but they will typically say that what is true is, on closer examination, as false as it is true, and that what is false has after

all its truth, and is no less justified and necessary than its opposite. Thus they relativize the antithesis between true and false, and are always trying to reconcile ever so contradictory positions, and to find some higher point of view from which any and every intellectual position will appear as true and necessary. Thus they deprive truth of its sharp cutting edge, and so render it harmless.

And if they encounter someone with a passion for truth such as Kleist had, they find him abrasive and in bad taste. They will rebuke him for oversimplifying what they take to be infinitely complex issues. It would not be surprising if they called him a "fundamentalist," and asked him when he is going to grow up intellectually, and become intellectually respectable.

Perhaps you will want to ask me at this point whether my ideal intellectual is a simpleton who is always giving out primitive black-and-white answers. Let me answer by telling you what has made a deep impression on me in my study of Cardinal Newman. We find in his writings an extreme fineness of distinction, and the most honest openness to intellectual difficulties, and the most resolute refusal to repress any part of human experience, and the humility to leave open difficult questions: and yet all of this in such a way that truth in his writings takes on an extremely sharp and cutting edge, and his yes is emphatically yes and his no is no. The same broad Newman, to whom nothing human is foreign, is at the same time a sign of contradiction.

This means that there is not only the simplicity of the primitive, but also the deeper, more spiritual simplicity which informs and structures the complex. It is admittedly a mediocre intellectual who has this first kind of simplicity, *but it is no less mediocre an intellectual who expresses the complexity of reality by being diffuse and irresolute.*

The fastidious intellectuals of whom I was speaking are equally embarrassed at the sharp opposition between good and evil. They think that you betray narrow partisan involvement if you posit an absolute antithesis of good and evil, and that you show great breadth of mind when you claim to find the necessity and ultimately

the justification of evil. And so they speak like Oscar Wilde, who in looking back on the most dissolute times in his life realized well enough the wrongness of them and did not want to return to them, but who was still glad that this dissipation was there in his past, lending a color and richness to his life which he thought it would otherwise lack. Those who speak like this make an aestheticist mockery of good and evil, no less than of true and false, and they deserve all of the fierce and merciless criticism which Kierkegaard would make of them.

Now that we have brought out another dimension of the love of truth, and of the aestheticist indifference to truth, we want to ask, as we asked in the first reflection, about its relation to the Christian faith. It is clear that a person formed by this aestheticism can never become a believer; he will postpone endlessly the decision which revelation challenges him to make, and will perceive the challenge as hopelessly oversimple and unsophisticated:

What particularly interests me is that once a person has faith and is formed by it, he becomes especially sensitive to the unreality of this aestheticism. And I think that part of the reason is this. God does not reveal Himself to the Christian as an amorphous presence about whom everything in general and nothing in particular is true. He has indeed revealed Himself as unfathomable mystery, but the Christian, and especially the Catholic Christian, has never expressed this mystery in terms of the diffuse and the undefined. If we think of the affirmations and negations about the divine persons in the Athanasian Creed, we find that God has revealed Himself as having a definite personal nature, in which one person is not another, and we are led to say of Him that He is, to use the phrase of Blake, "organized and minutely articulated." This "definiteness" of the Christian God is also revealed in the way He takes a stand, so to speak, on good and evil. He has revealed Himself not as beyond good and evil, or as the unity of good and evil, but as Goodness Itself, as Love Itself, and so as the absolute antithesis to evil. When then He looks upon human life, He cannot ignore the difference between the just and the unjust, the pure of heart and the doubleminded; he cannot affirm all men as if this difference did not exist for Him. Moral differences among men are not relativized before Him, but are rather radicalized. How, then, can the Christian, whose God takes sides in the struggle between true and false, and between good and evil, try to relativize these antitheses, and to stand above them?

And my point is not just that the Christian intellectual *draws a conclusion* from the fact that these antitheses remain intact before God. My point is also and especially that his sensibilities are *formed* by his faith in this so living, so definite God, so that when he turns to questions of non-theological truth, he instinctively knows, and knows even better than a non-believer knows, that one thing is not another, and that true does not gradually pass over into false.

You might object that I am pleading for an interest in truth which will lead to a fanaticism of truth. Not so; an unconditional concern with truth leads not only to strong affirmations, but also to strong self-criticisms. The more committed we are to truth, the more sensitive we will be to the many ill-founded opinions which we all have, and the more sharply we will distinguish, like Socrates, between what we know and what we don't know. But we can carry out this self-criticism only after we have outgrown the irresponsible fear of saying yes and saying no in our intellectual lives.

3) We have been speaking about what a difficult and challenging thing it is to take truth seriously. I would now add that there is not only an objective but also a subjective aspect to the veneration of truth. I mean that we take it seriously not only by giving it the primacy in all of our studies, but also by appropriating it personally. Let me explain.

It is all too easy to read many authors, and to feel ourselves into their intellectual world, and to come to understand the unity and style of their thought, and to relish the greatness of their thought, to understand with the greatest sympathy what they taught about truth, and yet to live so intensely in their thought that we cease to cultivate our own. As we make our way through the great works, we run the risk of a certain self-forgetfulness, of ceasing to exist as an independent center of thought; it is the risk of a certain spiritual passivity, which is entirely compatible with working ever so hard at our studies. Of course we all know that our own thought will not be worth much if we do not immerse ourselves in the thought of the greatest minds, but still, we fail to be not slaves but freemen in the kingdom of the mind, if we do not know how to put aside our books and, entering into ourselves, into a deep solitude before God, ask ourselves what we, *we ourselves* really think about the great issues.

You see, then, that it is not enough to avoid the cult of the interesting, and the cult of relativizing all antitheses, it is not even enough to raise the issue of truth; our intellectual lives are still being corrupted by aestheticism as long as we are always talking about truth according to this or that thinker; we venerate truth only when we struggle to see it for ourselves and to make it our own.

What does the Christian say about this duty of personal appropriation, which was already familiar to Socrates? He knows he could have never become a Christian, that he would have overheard the call of God, if he had always lived in this dreamy state of self-forgetfulness.

And there is a further point here, which is the one which especially concerns us: once one has faith one is strongly protected against this self-forgetfulness. For as a result of existing before God, and encountering Him face-to-face, and being called personally by name, and preparing for a personal judgment, each Christian has an intense sense of his distinct personal selfhood. It is no part of Christian spirituality to feel obliterated by the divine immensity; just the contrary, the believer comes to himself in the encounter with God. The Christian, then, is the last person who should study other minds in such a way as to forget his responsibility towards his own mind; and the ethos of a Christian intellectual community will be formed by a strong sense of this responsibility.

You have often heard it said that the Christian faith, if it influences the intellectual life, distorts it, im-

porting something external into it. But notice what emerges from our three reflections on the attitudes towards truth which are formed in the Christian intellectual. We owe truth unconditional respect, and this apart from any faith; but precisely we intellectually active people are powerfully drawn by the aestheticist attitude away from this respect. The Christian intellectual finds that his faith gives him special resources for restoring and radicalizing his respect for truth. How then does the Christian faith introduce something external and foreign into our learning, when it acts on us so as to radicalize our respect for truth? We find here, as in so many other places, that grace perfects nature rather than destroys it.

And now you see why I began by saying that the Christian faith, though it relativizes the intellectual life, at the same time, by a kind of paradox, imparts to it an incomparable seriousness, and helps to perfect it.

May these reflections lead us to consider anew what it is to search for truth. Let us realize how easy it is to profess a love of truth, and how difficult it is to have it. Let us take to heart the words of Newman: "the search for truth is not the gratification of curiosity .., the mind is below truth, not above it, and is bound, not to descant upon it, but to venerate it." Let us stir up our faith, and let it have a greater impact on our interest in truth; let us stir up our interest in truth, and let it have a greater impact on our faith. Then the community in which we lead our intellectual lives really will be transformed, and will become, more and more, worthy of the name Catholic.

