

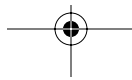
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## Mindless Christianity



What Paul wrote about unbelieving Jews in his day could be said, I fear, of some believing Christians in ours: “I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened.”<sup>1</sup> Many have zeal without knowledge, enthusiasm without enlightenment. In more modern jargon, they are keen but clueless.

Now I thank God for zeal. Heaven forbid that knowledge without zeal should replace zeal without knowledge! God’s purpose is both, zeal directed by knowledge, knowledge fired with zeal. As I once

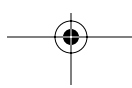


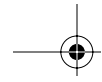


heard Dr. John Mackay say, when he was president of Princeton Seminary, “Commitment without reflection is fanaticism in action. But reflection without commitment is the paralysis of all action.”

The spirit of anti-intellectualism is prevalent today. The modern world breeds pragmatists, whose first question about any idea is not “Is it true?” but “Does it work?” Young people tend to be activists, dedicated supporters of a cause, though without always inquiring too closely either whether their cause is a good end to pursue or whether their action is the best means by which to pursue it. An undergraduate from Melbourne, Australia, while attending a conference in Sweden, heard that a student protest had started in his own university. He wrung his hands in dismay. “I wish I were back home,” he cried. “I’d have been in it. What’s it all about?” He had zeal without knowledge.

Mordecai Richler, the Canadian commentator, has been very outspoken on this issue: “What scares me about this generation is the extent to which ignorance is their armour. If know-nothingness goes on much longer, somebody will yet emerge from a com-



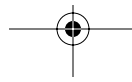


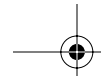
mune having discovered . . . the wheel.”<sup>2</sup>

This same specter of anti-intellectualism rises regularly to haunt the Christian church. It regards theology with distaste and distrust. Let me give you some examples.

Catholic Christians have nearly always placed a strong emphasis on ritual and its proper performance. This at least has been a traditional feature of Catholicism, even if many contemporary Catholics (influenced by the liturgical movement) prefer the simple, not to say the austere. Now outward ceremonial is not to be despised if it is a clear and seemly expression of biblical truth. The danger of ritual is that it easily degenerates into ritualism, that is, into a mere performance in which the ceremony has become an end in itself, a meaningless substitute for intelligent worship.

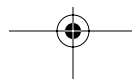
Radical Christians, on the other hand, are concentrating their energies on social and political action. The preoccupation of the ecumenical movement is no longer with ecumenicity itself, or with church union schemes, or with questions of faith and order, but rather with feeding the hungry, hous-





ing the homeless, combating racism, securing justice for the oppressed, promoting aid programs in developing nations and supporting the revolutionary movements of the underprivileged world. Although the issues of violence and of Christian political involvement are controversial, in general one must pronounce the struggle for the well-being, dignity and freedom of all men a Christian quest. Nevertheless, historically speaking, this new preoccupation owes much of its impetus to the widespread despair of ever reaching doctrinal agreement. Ecumenical activism thrives on the rebound from the task of theological formulation, a task which cannot be avoided if the world's churches are ever to be reformed and renewed, let alone united.

My third example is Pentecostal Christians, many of whom make experience the major criterion of truth. Leaving aside questions regarding the validity of what they seek and claim, one of the most serious features at least of some neo-Pentecostalism is its avowed anti-intellectualism. One of the movement's leaders said recently, apropos of the Catholic Pentecostals, that what matters in the end is "not doctrine



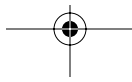


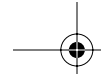
but experience.” This is tantamount to putting our subjective experience above the revealed truth of God. Others say they believe that God is deliberately giving people unintelligible utterance in order to bypass—and so humble—their proud intellect. Well, God certainly abases the pride of men, but he does not despise the mind which he himself has made.

These three emphases—of many Catholics on ritual, radicals on social action and Pentecostals on experience—are all to some extent symptoms of the same malady of anti-intellectualism. They are escape routes by which to avoid our God-given responsibility to use our minds Christianly.

In negative terms I would like to subtitle this essay “the misery and menace of mindless Christianity.” More positively, I want to try to summarize the place of the mind in the Christian life. Let me survey the field I hope to cover.

In the second chapter, by way of introduction, I shall marshal some arguments—both secular and Christian—why it is important for us to use our minds. In the third, as my main thesis, I shall describe six aspects of Christian life and responsibility





in which the mind occupies an indispensable place. In conclusion, I shall issue some cautions against jumping out of the frying pan into the fire, that is, against abandoning a superficial anti-intellectualism in favor of an arid hyper-intellectualism. I am not pleading for a dry, humorless, academic Christianity, but for a warm devotion set on fire by truth. I long for this biblical balance and the avoidance of fanatical extremes. I shall urge that the remedy for an exaggerated view of the intellect is neither to disparage it, nor to neglect it, but to keep it in its God-appointed place, fulfilling its God-appointed role.

