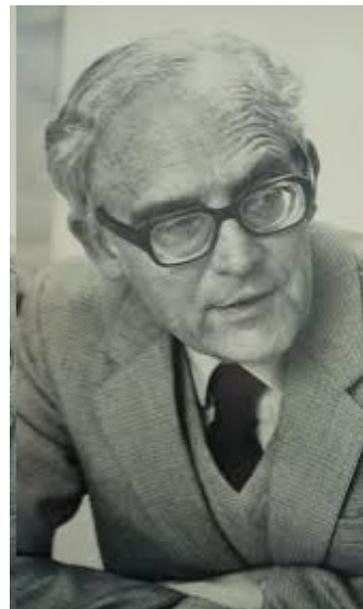


The Christian Mind

In the late 70s, as I was trying to wrap my mind around the fact that “all truth is God’s truth,” I read Harry Blamires’ classic work, *The Christian Mind*. He was an Anglican theologian, literary critic, and novelist. He was once head of the English department at King Alfred’s College (now University of Winchester) in Winchester, England. C. S. Lewis was his tutor at Oxford University and in later years his friend and mentor. At Lewis’ encouragement Blamires began writing in the late 1940s. He died at the age of 101 in 2017.

In 1963, Blamires wrote, “There is no longer a Christian mind. It is a commonplace that the mind of modern man has been secularized. For instance, it has been deprived of any orientation towards the supernatural. Tragic as this fact is, it would not be so desperately tragic had the Christian mind held out against the secular drift. But unfortunately the Christian mind has succumbed to the secular drift with a degree of weakness and nervelessness unmatched in Christian history. It is difficult to do justice in words to the complete loss of intellectual morale in the twentieth-century Church. One cannot characterize it without having recourse to language which will sound hysterical and melodramatic.”¹



Blamires left no doubt as to the state of the Christian mind. He lamented the demise of the thinking Christian and the church’s “abdication of intellectual authority” which he claimed led to “the modern Christian’s easy descent into mental secularism.”² His critique was unequivocal, “We have too readily equated getting into the world with getting out of theology. The result has been that we have stopped thinking christianly.” Christianity has been “emasculated of its intellectual relevance,” convictions are looked upon as “personal possession,” and we have been reduced to encountering one another on the shallow level of gossip and small talk.³

As Christian thinking shrinks, secular thinking about Christian matters expands. The Christian preacher thinks christianly about Sunday’s sermon but thinks secularly about hiring a worship leader, administrating the building fund, or negotiating his salary. For an hour a week we think christianly, although even that time may be debatable, and the rest of the time we think just like the world. In many cases, Christians have grown so accustomed to secular thinking that they are not even aware that it is secular. For example, the Christian who claims practicing homosexuality is a sin, but refuses to take that stand publicly, because it may turn people off, is thinking secularly. It has become so common for us to “treat worldly possessions as status symbols rather than as serviceable goods” that we hardly see the contradiction.⁴ We don’t even bother to think christianly about war, politics, advertizing, sports, business, education, marriage and divorce.

¹ Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (London: SPCK, 1963), 3.

² Blamires, 4.

³ Blamires, 38, 16, 40, 13.

⁴ Blamires, 29.

Blamires' emphasis on the difference between thinking Christianly and thinking secularly is rooted in the radical distinction made by the apostle Paul in his Corinthian correspondence. Paul asked, "Where are the wise? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"⁵ The followers of Jesus do not expect the message of the cross to impress the social and cultural elite. Then and now, the intelligentsia reject the meta-narrative of salvation history and the revelational epistemology of the Christian mind. But the apostle's critique of social status was never an argument against thinking Christianly. Christians may not be "wise by human standards" nor influential in the eyes of the world, but the apostle Paul does not use this fact to disparage the importance of the mind. On the contrary, Paul said, "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise."⁶ In Christ, the mind realizes its true significance, not as a capacity for self-advancement and self-expression, but as a gift to be developed and disciplined for the sake of the truth—all God's truth. The importance of the mind is a positive tension challenging all believers to a rigorous engagement and rethinking of all of life in accord with the person and work of Christ.

Of particular interest to me as a young teacher was Blamires distinction between the scholar and the thinker:

"The scholar evades decisiveness; he hesitates to praise or condemn; he balances conclusion against competing conclusion so as to cancel out conclusiveness; he is tentative, skeptical, uncommitted. The thinker hates indecision and confusion; he firmly distinguishes right from wrong, good from evil; he is at home in a world of clearly demarcated categories and proven conclusions; he is dogmatic and committed; he works towards decisive action."⁷

Blamires referred to the scholar in a pejorative way. He had in mind the proud, self-reliant academician. What we need, he claimed was more thinkers less academics. "The thinker challenges current prejudices. He disturbs the complacent. He obstructs the busy pragmatists. He questions the very foundations of all about him, and in so doing throws doubt upon aims, motives, and purposes which those who are running affairs have neither the time nor patience to investigate. The thinker is a nuisance."⁸

Scholarship as a necessary intellectual enterprise was encouraged by Blamires, but the dark side of scholarship as a self-serving, career-enhancing, ego performance was exposed. One way to tell whether you are a scholar or thinker is to ask whether you are pleased or resentful when someone expresses a truth that you hold dear. Blamires was critical of a scholar who cornered truth as his or her very own intellectual property. As if they had propriety rights to their discovery and that the world was in their debt for a good idea. Thinkers, on the other hand, rejoice when others express the truth that they have understood and embraced. They never think to themselves, "That's my idea and you stole it." In Blamires' critique scholars are competitive. They want credit for their good ideas. Thinkers are cooperative. They want the fellowship of fellow thinkers.

⁵ 1 Cor 1:20

⁶ 1 Cor 1:26-27

⁷ Blamires, p. 51.

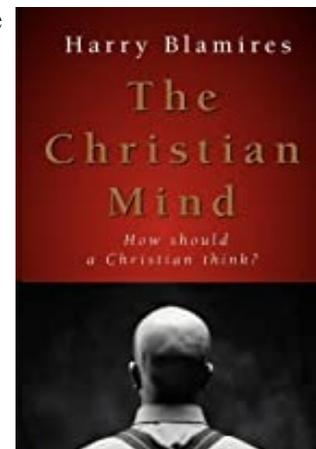
⁸ Blamires, p. 50.

Competitive scholarship has its roots in a broken and fallen, sin-twisted academic world. Cooperative thinking has its roots in a home environment that celebrates learning, honors understanding, and encourages reflection. Obviously, the home environment is fallen and sin-twisted, too, but where parents read to their children and encourage their children to think and explore, learning has a chance to take root in a non-competitive environment. The academy can be a war-zone of conflicting self-interest, crushing the relational dynamic essential for true learning. Competitive scholarship tends to be highly individualistic and isolationist.

Blamires describes six marks of the Christian mind. Each mark highlights an aspect of the truth tension:

(1) *Its Supernatural Orientation*: a mind that cultivates the eternal perspective, that believes in the fact of Heaven and the fact of Hell, that understands that all of creation, all of history, all of humankind is under the sovereign control of the triune God. One of the places that I am most aware of the supernatural orientation of the Christian mind is at funerals. I sense a strange collision of perspectives cutting right through the sanctuary, between those who believe death ends all and those who believe in eternal life.

(2) *Its Awareness of Evil*: a mind that understands the pervasive and pernicious presence of evil, that is alert to the tragic extent of human depravity and resists evil in all of its manifestations within fallen creation. The Christian mind “assumes that the powers of evil will exploit every possible occasion” and in the name of morality seek to blur concepts and twist values.⁹ The Christian mind is also sensitive to the extent to which evil pervades our own judgments. The tragedy of this world is not primarily social nor political, but personal. Evil begins with me. The prophet Jeremiah wrote, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure” and Isaiah likened our righteous acts to “filthy rags.”¹⁰ British author G. K. Chesterton was asked to write a magazine article on the subject “What’s Wrong with the Universe?” He responded to the editor’s request with two words, “I am.”



(3) *Its Conception of Truth*: a mind that is transformed by the revelation of God, that is founded on doctrines of Divine Creation, the Incarnation, the Redemption, the work of the Holy Spirit, and that accepts as a description of fact, the Virgin Birth, the efficacy of Christ’s atoning sacrifice, and life everlasting. The truth of the gospel is an audacious truth that must “be defended for the right reason.”¹¹ We must not beguile unbelievers into thinking that Christianity is good because it builds self-esteem, strengthens marriages, offers comfort, and leads to success. “We have to insist that the Christian Faith is something solidier, harder and tougher than even Christians like to think. Christianity is

⁹ Blamires, p. 102.

¹⁰ Jer 17:9; Isa 64:6

¹¹ Blamires, p. 120

not a nice comforting story that we make up as we go along, accommodating the demands of a harsh reality with the solace of a cherished reverie. It is not a cosy day-dream manufactured by each person more or less to suit his own taste. It is a matter of hard fact.” Blamires continues, “We Christians appreciate its hardness just as much as those outside the Church. We are as fully aware of its difficulties as the outsiders are. We know that, in a sense, Christianity leaves us with an awful lot to swallow. . . We must outdo the unbelievers in agreeing with them on that subject.”¹²

(4) *Its Acceptance of Authority*: a mind that submits to the God-given nature of truth, revelation, and the Church, that finds its freedom in surrender to the will of God, and that leads “to that state of personal inadequacy, human dependence, utter lowliness and lostness, which brings the Christian to his knees and throws him into the hands of our Lord.”¹³ The secular mind that is “trying to hold the Christian Faith in its grip” cannot understand this humility. It invariably leads “to a case-hardened self-satisfaction of the pharisaical kind” which refuses to accept the truth of a crucified and risen Jesus Christ.¹⁴ People who ask, “Can the Church survive?” have no idea what they are asking. The survival of the world is in question, but not the Church. “The Church can never be destroyed. It cannot even be gravely damaged. It cannot be decimated numerically: too many of the Church’s members are already beyond the barrier of death; too much of the Church is already safe home.”¹⁵

(5) *Its Concern for the Person*: a mind that values the human person in light of the Incarnate One, that holds to the sacredness of the human personality, and that seeks to preserve the person against all forms of dehumanization. Blamires identified various forms of dehumanization that the Christian ought to be committed to “pointing the finger of condemnation” at including “servitude to the machine,” “the eerie loneliness of personal solitude in the midst of the crowded urban civilization,” the exalted status attributed to the user of “mechanical gadgets,” behavior modification, transactional relationships, and target-market evangelism.

(6) *Its Sacramental Cast*: a mind that is focused on “life’s positive richnesses,” that is life-affirming, rather than life-rejecting, and that revels in the beauty, truth, and love derived from the Divine Nature.¹⁶

Blamires describes the Christian mind’s positive view of life:

“A living Christian mind would elucidate for the young a finely articulated Christian sacramentalism which would make sense of, and give value to, the adolescent’s cravings towards the grandeur of natural scenery, towards the potent emotionalism of music and art, and towards the opposite sex. A living Christian

¹² Blamires, p. 120.

¹³ Blamires, p. 146

¹⁴ Blamires, p. 146

¹⁵ Blamires, p. 152

¹⁶ Blamires, p. 173

mind will not be content to refer to these things only in cold abstract terms which annihilate wonder and transmute them into bloodless modes of experience, unrecognizable as the stuff of passion and exaltation. Nor will the Christian mind allow these riches of life to be vaguely identified with sins of the flesh, or even with a life of the body which it is the Christian's duty to transcend."¹⁷

This brief sketch of Blamires' description of the Christian mind, is meant to convey a sense of the fullness and richness of a Christian world-view. Blamires' contrast between the self-promoting scholarly specialist and the breadth and depth of the Christian thinker recalls the contrast between the genius and the apostle drawn by Søren Kierkegaard. To praise the apostle Paul for his brilliance or eloquence is to miss the heart of his message. Paul was not a genius that we should celebrate his clever and creative rendition of some new idea. He was not a man ahead of his time with a high I.Q. Paul was an apostle, called and appointed by God, to proclaim the revelation of God. His authority resided in his calling from God and in the message given to him by God to proclaim. His voice was heard, not because he was a great speaker, but because he was submissive to the revelation of God.

Kierkegaard complained that "the pernicious thing" about Christian discourse in his day was that "the whole train of thought [was] affected."¹⁸ Preachers relied on their own ingenuity and profundity as if the truth depended on their abilities and powers, instead of relying on the authority of the Word of God. A person is a genius by virtue of his or her extraordinary abilities, personal uniqueness, and self-sufficiency. An apostle is one who is called of God, submissive to God, and compelled by God to be faithful. Kierkegaard compares the leisurely life of the scholar, who is "momentarily clever, and afterwards a publisher and editor of the uncertainties of his cleverness," to the faithful life of the follower of Christ, who lives purposefully and obediently under the authority of God.¹⁹ In relationship to the truth, Kierkegaard contended that the former is blasphemous, the latter beautiful.



¹⁷ Blamires, p. 175

¹⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age & Of The Difference Between A Genius and an Apostle* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 103

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, p. 106