

Let My People Think: Restoring the Christian Mind

by Os Guinness

ONE OF THE MOST CELEBRATED PERSONALITIES of the Middle East is Nasreddin Hodja, the endearing holy- man- cum- scholar of Turkish folklore. His famed wisdom is often threatened by his equally famed stupidity. One day, so a particular story goes, the Hodja dropped his ring inside his house. Not finding it there, he went outside and began to look around the doorway. His neighbor passed and asked him what he was looking for.

"I have lost my ring," said the Hodja.

"Where did you lose it?" asked the neighbor.

"In my bedroom," said the Hodja.

"Then why are you looking for it out here?"

"There's more light out here," the Hodja said.

Perhaps the Hodja in his frankly acknowledged folly is wiser than most of us in the concealed stupidity of our pretended wisdom. It is surely the easiest thing to look for what we lost where we lost it-except that humans characteristically either forget what we lost or look for it anywhere except where it can be found.

This is certainly true of the Christian mind, or, more simply, just of wisdom. Exactly what it is, where we lost it, and how we can find it again are urgent but basic questions.

I say that because we could easily examine "the ghost mind" of evangelicalism and its vulnerability to "the idiot culture" and then be sidetracked by the grand cultural questions raised, especially the political. ...

We therefore turn to sketching the rudiments of the needed reformation in evangelical thinking. The word "sketched" should be underscored. What is outlined briefly here deserves a book by itself. But an introductory sketch is important to spell out what is meant by "thinking Christianly" and equally important-what is not meant by it.

back to our right minds

The first step in reformation is repentance. We evangelicals need to confess individually and collectively that we have betrayed the Great Commandment to love God with our minds. We need to confess that we have given ourselves up to countless forms of unutterable folly. God has given us minds, but many of us have left them underdeveloped or undeveloped.

- God has given us education, beyond that of most people in human history, but we have used it for other ends.
- God has given us great exemplars of thinking in Christian history, but we have ignored them or admired them for other virtues.
- God has given us opportunities, but we have failed to grasp them because we have refused to think them through before him.

As we think of not only our individual lives but our evangelical heritage, community as a whole, reputation in the wider world, and prospects-and as we survey the old and new influences that have shaped us, whether the eight earlier influences or the eight modern pressures-we must ask some key questions.

- Are we as truly biblical as we think?
- Have we not been more shaped by the world than we realize?
- Would we see it more clearly if brothers and sisters of other traditions, such as Catholics, pointed it out to us? Or former evangelicals who have dropped out from the faith altogether?
- Is there any question that we evangelicals have often stressed every other possible Christian theme except those of truth and thinking?
- Can we deny that American evangelicals have a long and unbroken history of pervasive and systematic anti-intellectualism?

-In short, who can disagree with the sorry fact that our evangelical anti-intellectualism confronts us today as a monumental scandal and a sin?

It is not for me to say how repentance should be expressed. Doubtless sometimes it will have to be by individuals, sometimes by local pastors and churches, sometimes by Christian organizations and ministries, sometimes by Christian magazines, and sometimes by Christian colleges. And surely in a wise and responsible way it will need to be confessed by the official, national organs and institutions of evangelicalism itself.

But repentance at this point has to be as serious and far-reaching as repentance at any other point. Like Nebuchadnezzar who had to be reduced to eating grass, or the prodigal son who only saw his situation in the mirror that was the pigsty, we may have to be jolted by the shame of our present sorry state into returning to our right minds. For it is certain that the community of faith in America that identifies itself as evangelical has been out of its mind for two hundred years.

minds in love

The second step in reformation is to define what we actually mean by "a Christian mind" or by "thinking Christianly." Obviously, for example, the term "thinking Christianly" has two parts that require serious attention. Thus we must first ask what we mean by "thinking." For as Dorothy L. Sayers laments in her celebrated essay, *The Lost Tools of Learning*.

Is not the great defect of our education today ... that although we often succeed in teaching our pupils 'subjects,' we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think: they learn everything, except the art of learning.

In my experience no single point of cultural differences between America and England is greater than this one: in English schooling we were given the tools of learning and were taught to think.

My focus here, however, is not on "thinking" but "thinking Christianly." Because of the deep confusion over what is meant, some negative statements must precede the positive. First, thinking Christianly is not thinking by Christians. As a moment's thought will show, it is perfectly possible to be a Christian and yet to think in a sub-Christian or even an anti-Christian way. Jesus said bluntly to his disciple Peter, "Away with you, Satan. You think as men think, not as God thinks."

Second, thinking Christianly is not simply thinking about Christian topics. Such topics as prayer, Bible study, and the spiritual disciplines all fall within the bounds of recognizable Christian themes. Thus they are surely candidates to be part of the Christian mind. But the trouble with that approach is that it leaves out the greater part of life. The nineteenth-century maxim applies not only to theology but to life as a whole: "If Jesus Christ is not Lord of all, he is not Lord at all."

Third, thinking Christianly should not be confused with adopting a "Christian line" on every issue. Even where a "Christian line" is desirable at all — and that is a good deal rarer than many Christians think — developing a Christian line is impossible without first developing a Christian mind.

Expressed positively, thinking Christianly is thinking by Christians about anything and everything in a consistently Christian way— in a manner that is shaped, directed, and restrained by the truth of God's Word and God's Spirit.

As I use it, the phrase "thinking Christianly" is not as important as the idea it expresses. For thirty years many of us have followed Harry Blamires and found that "thinking Christianly" best captures the substance and spirit of what it means for the follower of Christ to grow in the mind of Christ. But others have used different phrases to express the same point—for example, "Christ-centered thinking," "biblical thinking," "developing a Christian mind," "thinking under the lordship of Christ lifelong learning under Christ developing a Christian world-and-lifeworld," and so on.

What matters is not the term but the substance and spirit of the truth. Is it not absurd to affirm that Jesus Christ is Lord of all, the Alpha and the Omega, our creator, redeemer, and judge, the source, guide, and goal of all there is, and yet not be decisive over our minds and thinking? Evangelicals who rightly glory in all the new things in the gospel—a new birth, a new people, new powers, and a new age—must reinsert the vital, missing component of "new minds." Nowhere are the lordship of Christ and the power of the gospel more needed at the beginning and more glorious at the end.

Expressed differently by Ambassador Charles Malik, in all our thinking "the critic in the final analysis is Jesus Christ himself." Thus from the Christian point of view' has no solid foundation unless the word Christian here means Jesus Christ himself. So from the very start I have put aside all such questionable phraseology as "from the Christian point of view," "in terms of Christian principles," "applying Christian principles or values" "from the standpoint of Christian culture," etc.

The only question that finally counts is, What does Jesus think? Aside from that standard, all our thinking is "an exercise in fuzziness, in wobbly human effort, in subjectivist rationalism, in futility.

What matters above all-whatever term we use—is that the idea and practice be kept simple, practical, and biblical. When all is said and done, the point is to love and obey God by loving him with our minds. For the Christian mind is a combination of intellectual light and spiritual ardor that, in Dorothy L. Sayers's term, is simply the "mind in love" with God. ...

going mad for God

The (next) step in reformation is to count the cost of discipleship entailed in thinking Christianly. For cost there is. The same truth that is good sense before God is nonsense to our world, which sees and sets itself over against God. The follower of Christ must therefore break with the world to be faithful to Christ. We must be prepared to bear with the world's folly.

Such "holy folly," or fool-bearing, is the proper understanding of Christian foolishness. It is as integral to thinking Christianly as it is to living Christianly. Russian orthodoxy, for example, has canonized thirty-six "holy fools." Blaise Pascal wrote: "Men are so inevitably mad that not to be mad would be to give a mad twist to madness." G. K. Chesterton wrote similarly that a man who has faith must be prepared not only to be a martyr, but to be a fool. Far earlier Dante pronounced, in words that illuminate the cross of Jesus, the wisest person in the city is "He whom the fools hate worst."

If this is true, some Christians have embraced folly of the wrong sort-boasting in what is literally foolish and becoming "fools proper." Others have made the equal but opposite mistake of seeking to escape foolishness altogether, including the necessary scandal of the "foolbearer." Thus a common but false motivation for evangelical engagement in higher education is an overwhelming desire for respectability-as if academic success were a milestone of social mobility on the long, painful climb out of the intellectual slums of fundamentalism. Yet our Lord himself was dismissed as "mad" and "possessed," and the Apostle Paul was told by the Roman governor Festus that he was "out of his mind" because of his Christian thinking. We can expect no less. ...

no automatic pilot

The (next) step in reformation is a commitment to thinking Christianly as a form of active obedience. Like every other part of the Christian life, thinking Christianly is active and demanding. It is neither easy nor automatic. St. Paul writes to the Corinthians that "we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." Thus thinking Christianly is inevitably moment by moment, question by question, issue by issue, point by point, and thought by thought. As Oswald Chambers wrote,

God will not make me think like Jesus,
I have to do it myself,
I have to bring every thought into captivity
to the obedience of Christ.

... In so far as the assumptions of any age differ from those of the gospel, they are the false assumptions that circulate in the air like latent heresies. Yet when someone becomes a Christian and either old assumptions are left over in his or her thinking or new assumptions are allowed in later, the result is not a mind made new but a patched-up mind. For alien assumptions, old or new, are like a Trojan horse in the city of the believer's mind.

If Christ's own disciples were guilty of thinking "as men think, not as God thinks," are we likely to do better? How do we know we are not thinking as Americans (or English, French, or Australians) think and not as God thinks? Have we checked that we are not closer to the twentieth-century (or sixteenth or first-century) mind than the mind of Christ? Is our agenda closer to a liberal or conservative agenda than to the agenda of the kingdom of God? Are we more like the profile of Washingtonians (or New Yorkers, Los Angelenos, or Londoners) or of lawyers (or doctors and teachers) than of followers of Christ?

In each case the questions remind us that we are always worldlier and more culturally shortsighted than we realize. But the call of Jesus is radical. If our eyes offend us, pluck them out, he said. The same must be true of every intellectual assumption, authority, and conclusion that is closer to how humans think than the way God thinks. The search is on. The war has been declared. "All truth is God's truth," so we can welcome truth wherever it is to be found, even among pagans. But equally, "all that is not of God is not of truth" and therefore not for us, even if it is we who believe in it devoutly.

no, not that way

The (next) step in the reformation of evangelical thinking is to mark clearly the pitfalls and by-paths of Christian thinking. Put differently, thinking Christianly is not what it is often thought to be. Here are (two) common pitfalls and by-paths.

One misconception concerns the idea that thinking Christianly is purely an intellectual activity — a "head trip" as it is often attacked. Far from it. As always the Bible addresses the heart as the center of the whole person and the understanding as the road to the whole person. The concept of "intellectual" in its modern sense of a person devoted to the nearly disembodied life of the mind is alien to the biblical understanding of human nature. Just as spiritual disciplines involve the body, so thinking Christianly engages the whole person. Modern intellectualism is as wrong and extreme as modern anti-intellectualism. Thinking Christianly is different from both. It engages us as whole people in the whole of life.

(This) common misconception concerns the idea that thinking Christianly is purely a human activity — as if to think is automatically to think purely in one's own strength and rely solely on one's own wits. Once again the

opposite is true. Intellectualism is certainly a form of humanism because it concentrates on the human intellect in isolation from all else. And "Athens" has little to do with 'Jerusalem' because of the place it gives to reason by itself. Christian thinking, in contrast, is anything but a purely human activity.

Thinking Christianly is premised only on the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom. Likewise, it proceeds only when we rely continually on God's word and Spirit. It always operates with the awareness of the supernatural source and dimensions of false thinking. As Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth, "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of this world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." Much of today's Christian scholarship would be transformed simply by returning to the classical notion of study as a spiritual discipline.

(A Second) misconception concerns the idea that thinking Christianly is a form of uniformity — in other words, that if we all think Christianly we will all think the same way. When this happens, the goal of thinking Christianly collapses into a frantic search for the one particular correct way of thinking or acting. The result is the fallacy of "particularism," the uniformity of a particular "Christianly Correct" way of thinking.

...The (most) common form of particularism stems from a false desire for uniformity in the realm of practice—the fallacy that if we all think Christianly we will all behave the same way. For one thing the idea itself is false. On the one hand, the community of Christ is diverse, not uniform. Uniformity therefore denies the proper place of freedom and diversity. On the other hand, our highest accomplishments in this life are provisional, not final. Our best thinking and behavior is therefore not fully, finally Christian, but only more or less Christian than it was previously.

For another thing, applying the idea of uniformity is disastrous because it leads inevitably to legalism and judgmentalism. There is only a short and easy step from "This is the Christian way" to "There is only one Christian way" to "Anything different from this way is not Christian!" to "All those who differ from my way are not Christians." Far too many a letter from one Christian to another has begun in reality or in spirit, "Dear former brother/sister in Christ."

The fallacy of particularism stems from the fact that God has not spoken definitively to us about everything. Obviously he did not intend to. Thus if it is an error for some Christians to make relative what God has made absolute, it is equally an error for others to make absolute what God has left relative. Put differently, where God has not spoken definitively we can legitimately say "This conclusion (or policy or lifestyle) is not Christian." But it is not legitimate to go further and say, "This conclusion (or policy or lifestyle) alone is Christian."

We must all think Christianly, but for that very reason we must not all think the same way. There is no one Christian form of politics any more than there is one Christian form of poetry, raising a family, or planning a retirement. Again, many ways are definitely not Christian, but no one way alone is. Diversity rather than uniformity is a direct consequence of Christian freedom as well as Christian fallibility. Helmut Thielicke, the German theologian and ethicist, was right to ask, "Do we not have to respect the fact that under the shadow of forgiveness different decisions are possible and different liberties and loyalties may exist?" ...

knowing means doing

...A full exposition of Christian thought-style would require a book in itself. For example, we have already noted in passing two of the defining features of the Christian thought-style — collegiality and corrigibility. Other obvious ones include the certainty, humility, spirituality, rationality, mystery, and intensity of Christian knowing. But one of the most decisive features — and one directly opposed to modern styles of thinking — is the biblical insistence on the responsibility of knowing.

Modern knowledge is characteristically noncommittal. Much is known, but all is consequence-free. What we know and what we do about it are two different things. ... Never has more been known; never has less been required of what is known. From abstract mathematical formulas to anguishing international atrocities, the common reaction to modern knowledge is, So what? Who cares? What do you expect me to do?

We could argue that this response is philosophically unwarranted — that in fact responsibility is an inescapable assumption of all human knowing. But this point is stronger for the follower of Christ who is committed to thinking Christianly. For what is at best a small assumption of the better modern philosophy is a central assertion of Christian theology.

The Christian idea of the responsibility of knowledge is rooted in the notion that God is there and that he speaks. He is therefore the one with both the first decisive word on life — in creation — and the last decisive word — in judgment. Thus human life is essentially responsible, answerable, and accountable. Such responsibility of knowledge is the silent assumption in many basic doctrines. Sin, for example, is a deliberate violation of the responsibility of knowledge—human beings become responsible where they should not be (playing God) and refuse to be responsible where they should be (denying guilt)...

We can see the biblical understanding of the responsibility of knowledge supremely in Jesus. For where the first man, Adam, severed the link between knowledge and responsibility, the second Adam reunited them. Refusing the devil's temptations to make claims that had no consequences, Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem and the cross. The responsibility of his knowing who he was and what he had come to do marked his way to his death.

Needless to say, what matters for our thought-style is not simply doctrine but the Christian responsibility of knowledge exhibited in all our knowing. Possible applications are myriad in our attitudes to education, careers,

specialization, elitism, cynicism, resistance to evil, and a score of different areas. But the recurring motif is the costly obedience of Christian knowing. Knowledge for the Christian is never noncommittal nor consequence-free. Knowledge carries responsibility. Knowing means doing. What we do with what we know is what Christian knowing is all about-and the responsibility of knowledge is only one example of the importance of Christian thought-style.

the defense never rests

The (final) step in reformation is to recover the practice of Christian apologetics, or of making a persuasive case for the Christian faith for today's generation. Apologetics has usually held an honored, if controversial, place throughout Christian history. Most of the great theologians-including Paul, Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin-have also been unashamed apologists for the Christian faith. Benjamin Warfield even claimed that the Christian faith "stands out among all religions, therefore, as distinctly 'the Apologetick religion.'

Evangelicals today, however, display a troubling ignorance and unease about apologetics. As stressed earlier, the lack of a powerful, contemporary evangelical apology is one of the four great facts of our shame and a key part of the persuasionlessness that has befallen us. Where we meet people who are open, interested, and needy, we are ready to share our faith because most of our methods of witnessing assume that people are so. But when we find people who are not open, interested, or needy, we are stuck-though we mask our impotence by the compensating vehemence of our proclamation (or in the political arena by our protest and picketing).

Thus ironically, evangelicals now collude with liberals against traditional Christian apologetics. Whereas the broad liberal tendency of the past half century has been to say, "Don't defend, dialogue, the broad conservative tendency has been to say, "Don't persuade, proclaim." As philosopher Antony Flew lamented a generation ago, "Belief cannot argue with unbelief. It can only preach to it."

Caught in this pincerlike grip, traditional apologetics has commonly been rejected or neglected. What remains is all too limited and contained. Sometimes, as I said, apologetics today is limited to addressing the open and interested-a shrinking audience in a society growing increasingly secular in public life and pluralistic in private life. Sometimes it is limited to addressing the needy-as if, as Peter Berger wrote, "the necessary counterpoint of the Christian proclamation was an anthropology of desperation." Sometimes it is limited to addressing rational, literary, abstract, middle-class thinkers- so that, as critics have said, our style appeals mainly to the more complicated heirs of a Christian culture and education who are by that very fact more likely to be closed to our message.

Worst of all, evangelical apologetics today is frequently contained in Christian circles-so that entire courses are given and weighty books written and debated that never in a million years will touch real flesh-and-blood nonbelievers. As one professor of apologetics said to me of his eminent predecessor at a well known evangelical seminary, "He taught people how to teach apologetics, not to do it." ...

The time has come for evangelicals to wake from our lethargy or turn from our fear, blaming, and victim-playing. We must move out into all spheres of society, presenting the case for the gospel of Jesus in ways that are fresh, powerful, imaginative, compassionate, and persuasive. A sure sign of a genuine reformation of our appalling anti-intellectualism will be the rise of a new generation of Christian apologists.

for God's sake

The immense project of going beyond the initial reformation of evangelical thinking to recapturing the great establishments of modern thought lies far beyond this slim volume. We have looked at only half, though perhaps the harder half, of what Charles Malik called the two tasks — "the twofold miracle of evangelizing the great universities and intellectualizing the great Evangelical movement." But our challenge is to begin. I would add one last spur.

One of the greatest sadnesses of a thinking evangelical is knowing the thousands who have left, and are still leaving, evangelicalism because evangelicals do not think. ...

The writer Dorothy L. Sayers is (one) who self-consciously rejected evangelicalism because of its anti-intellectualism. Her time at the Godolphin School in Surrey, England, left her with a distaste for evangelical pietism. There were two kinds of Christian faith, she concluded. The pietistic and evangelical was sentimental and made her feel uncomfortable; the other appealed openly to the understanding. "The cultivation of religious emotion without philosophic basis," she explained, "is thoroughly pernicious." Her evangelical schooling, she reflected later, was simply a period for "gawky young souls growing out of their spiritual clothing.

When we ponder such stories and the thousands of people whose feet they have had to shed their evangelical clothing, is it not time for anger or tears? This book is not meant to be an academic exercise. It is a cry from the heart for thought, debate, prayer, action, and reformation. One of the great legacies for those of us who knew the late Francis Schaeffer was that truth mattered to him. He took God seriously, he took people seriously, and he took truth seriously. Friedrich Nietzsche's aphorism could be applied to him, "All truths are bloody truths to me." ...

Perhaps as we ponder the length and breadth of our anti-intellectualism, as we survey its consequences, as we remember its casualties, and as we meditate on its core disloyalty to our Lord, it is time for us to stammer and hesitate — and seek God's help to change our minds and our ways of thinking.