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*HABITS*  
of the *MIND*

*Intellectual Life as a  
Christian Calling*

*JAMES W. SIRE*



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# I

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## CONFESSIONS OF AN INTELLECTUAL WANNABE

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I remember it very clearly. It was a sunny day in the fall of 1954. We were standing in front of the Museum of the Nebraska State Historical Society. I said to the young woman who would one day be my wife, “I’d really like to be an intellectual.”

When I reminded her of this forty-three years later, she said. “It’s funny that I married you. You were such a snob.”

The word *intellectual* has certainly had its detractors, so many that one might wonder why anyone would want to be one. Perhaps I was a snob, seeking a place in the university sun. Certainly my origins were humble enough. Born on one ranch—literally, my mother gave birth to me in the ranch house—raised on another ranch, educated for the first six years in a one-room schoolhouse where one teacher, a high-school graduate, taught from four to eight children individually because all of them were in different grades: to be sure, I did not have the benefits of a great Montessori elementary education.

My parents did, however, instill in me a love for reading. *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier's*, staple reading in my rural community, arrived regularly. So before the end of the sixth grade, I had learned to read well and had developed a taste for good literature. By the seventh grade we had moved to Butte, a county seat of six hundred (now five hundred) people with a high school of ninety. There were twenty-three in my graduating class.

I loved the beauty of the ranch land, and in my childhood days I roamed the hills above our tiny house in the wooded valley of Eagle Creek. But as I grew older I came to dislike, then detest, the work of ranching. Milking cows was one thing. I didn't like it, but it came easy. Lifting bales of fresh-cut hay, shocking wheat and riding a horse through the tall marijuana that grew wild and unharvested—that was another matter. Great clouds of pollen would rise from the marijuana, my eyes would water and close, my nose would drip, and I would sneeze my way back to the ranch house, letting the horse find the way.

When we moved to Butte, I escaped much of the agony. But the University of Nebraska was the great escape. My uncle, only sixteen years older than I, had escaped before me. He had become a pharmacist and an amateur photographer with a Rollicord, a Leica and a wife who was also a pharmacist and photographer. I loved them and I loved their cameras. My aunt was city always, my uncle was country-turned-city with a love, like mine, for the beauty of the country and a loathing, like mine, for the mindless work.

The conversation with my future wife in front of the State Historical Society could almost have been predicted, but only given the knowledge that I had rejected not only the work of ranching and farming but the anti-intellectual tone set by my father.

### **Intellectual: A Populist Version**

I learned very early from my father that intellectuals were not to be trusted. Dad was a rancher, a farmer, a county assessor, for seven years a county agricultural agent, then again a farmer and rancher,

cream-station manager and cattle-feed salesman. He was appointed to the job as county agent in 1945 just as World War II was ending. A college degree was normally required, but no one was qualified. Most men who otherwise would have been were in the military. Dad had had to leave college, Nebraska Wesleyan University, before the end of his first semester because of illness and a financial disaster at home. Over the years he had become known for his work as a 4-H leader, a county assessor and an active breeder of purebred Herefords. So he was appointed county agent.

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***Egghead: A person of spurious intellectual pretensions, often a professor or the protégé of a professor. Fundamentally superficial. Over-emotional and feminine in reactions to any problem. Supercilious and surfeited with conceit and contempt for the experience of more sound and stable men. Essentially confused in thought and immersed in mixture of sentimentality and violent evangelism. Subject to the old-fashioned philosophical morality of Nietzsche which frequently leads him into jail or disgrace. A self-conscious prig, so given to examining all sides of a question that he becomes thoroughly addled while remaining always in the same spot. An anemic bleeding heart.***

LOUIS BROMFIELD  
 “The Triumph of the Egghead”

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Then the soldiers came home, went to college and became more qualified than my father. So he lost his job to a younger man, much more educated, much less wise. I think that all his life Dad had railed against pointy-headed intellectuals. After he lost his job, these comments surfaced with greater regularity.

The last time I remember hearing my father complaining about the intellectuals was not long before his death. I had asked him why the new bridge across the Niobrara River had been placed a half-mile downstream from the old one. “To save a tiny tract of wetlands,” Dad said. “The road should have just gone straight across the river, but those pointy-headed environmentalists (nuts and radicals, they are) put up a fuss, and it cost a lot more to reroute the road.”

I can only imagine how my father might have exploded had he picked up *The Saturday Evening Post* and begun to read there the opening lines of *Rameau's Nephew*:

Come rain or shine, my custom is to go for a stroll in the Palais-Royal every afternoon at about five. I am always to be seen there alone, sitting on a seat in the Allée d'Argenson, meditating. I hold discussions with myself on politics, love, taste or philosophy, and let my thoughts wander in complete abandon, leaving them free to follow the first wise or foolish idea that comes along, like those young rakes we see in the Allée de Foy who run after a giddy-looking piece with a laughing face, sparkling eye and tip-tilted nose, only to leave her for another, accosting them all, sticking to none. In my case my thoughts are my wenches.<sup>1</sup>

"A man with too much time on his hands," we might say today. My father's words would be unprintable. What I imagine would have been his definition of an *intellectual* is not unprintable.

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**The average American would rather be driving a car along a highway than reading a book and thinking. The average Frenchman would rather be drinking an extra bottle of wine than watching a play by Racine. The average Britisher would rather fill up a football-pool form than listen to Elgar's *Enigma*.**

**GILBERT HIGHET**  
*Man's Unconquerable Mind*

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Dad would have simply defined an *intellectual* as someone educated beyond his intelligence.<sup>2</sup> At times it seemed to me that he thought anyone who had a college degree, let alone a doctorate, was indeed so educated.<sup>3</sup> But perhaps my father was unwittingly echoing Bertrand Russell, who would surely fit most people's definition of an intellectual:

I have never called myself an intellectual, and nobody has ever dared to call me one in my presence. I think an intellectual may be defined as a person who pretends to have more intellect than he has, and I hope this definition does not fit me.<sup>4</sup>

**Intellectual: An Ideological Version**

One needn't be limited to negative definitions coming from populists. There are also negative academic definitions of an *intellectual*. Paul Johnson—who, like Russell, is himself an intellectual—attacks the breed of secular thinkers who he says have set themselves up as kings and high priests of a modern, not just secular but religionless world.<sup>5</sup> Speaking of the first intellectuals who began to emerge as the credibility of the church began to be shattered in the Enlightenment, Johnson writes:

The secular intellectual might be deist, sceptic or atheist. But he was just as ready as any pontiff or presbyter to tell mankind how to conduct its affairs. He proclaimed, from the start, a special devotion to the interests of humanity and an evangelical duty to advance them by his teaching.<sup>6</sup>

Like a modern Prometheus, the intellectual felt confident that he (and it was always a he) could select or reject any or all wisdom from the past, diagnose, prescribe and cure all social ills, and expect that even “the fundamental habits of human beings could be transformed for the better.”<sup>7</sup>

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**If we look back to the sixteenth century, the era in which the class of independent word-workers emerged, we may notice several types who reappear in subsequent history: withdrawn scholars, militant freethinkers, militant defenders of the establishment, skeptics, failed politicians, curious seekers of novelties and polyhistorians.**

**LESZEK KOLAKOWSKI**  
*Modernity on Endless Trial*

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In writing such a description Johnson says he is trying to be “factual and dispassionate,” but the book itself belies him. He may often be factual—in fact, he may always be factual—but he is seldom dispassionate. Johnson has a much blunter instrument than a stiletto to grind, and grind it he does, then relentlessly swings it. Down come some of the tallest of intellectual trees in the forest of modern society—from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Karl Marx, from Bertrand Rus-

sell to Jean-Paul Sartre. It may be well to fell these trees, but to use the term *intellectual* to describe only those Johnson finds perhaps justifiably reprehensible is to play into the hands of those who are anti-intellectual for less than worthy reasons.

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**Power, power everywhere,  
And how the signs do shrink.  
Power, power everywhere,  
And nothing else to think.**

**MARSHALL SAHLINS**  
*Waiting for Foucault*

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If I had had in mind either the populist definition of my father or the academic and ideological definition of Johnson, I would never have yearned to spread my branches in their woods.

### **Intellectual: A Fundamentalist Version**

But there was one intellectual who was worse than the populist and the academic versions. This was the intellectual according to biblical fundamentalism. I was fortunate. I did not encounter this version in a fever-pitched form. I knew something was awry with what I saw symbolized by Bob Jones University.

Still, the form it came in was strong enough. “If you go to the godless University of Nebraska, you are likely to lose your faith,” I heard my Baptist pastor say. He probably said no such thing, but I heard him say it anyway. I knew he wanted me to go where his children went—Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota. I wanted to go there too, because I wanted a Christian education. My father, despite his anti-intellectualism, wanted me to have an education, but not at an expensive private school like Bethel. It had to be the University of Nebraska, the major public university in our state. So that’s where I went.<sup>8</sup>

But I went with some trepidation—not much—and a great deal of Nebraska rancher bull-headedness. I encountered skepticism, atheism and agnosticism, but none of them ever fazed my faith. “You

read lots of books,” my atheist anthropology professor told me, “but you read all the wrong ones.” He was actually more correct than I then gave him credit for, for I was reading what I now think of as the mad ravings of a man who claimed to have worked with the great Egyptologist Sir Flinders Petrie. I remember him telling a packed fundamentalist church in Lincoln that the buzzing hornets referred

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**Fundamentalism created major problems in several ways for the life of the mind. First, it gave new impetus to general anti-intellectualism; second, it hardened conservative evangelical commitments to certain features of the nineteenth-century evangelical-American synthesis that were problematic to begin with; and third, its major theological emphases had a chilling effect on the exercise of Christian thinking about the world.**

MARK NOLL

*The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*

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to in Joshua were really the engines of Egyptian aircraft. Archaeologists had found the buttons worn on the uniforms of the pilots. Well, here was a pseudointellectual masking as intellectual and putting himself at the service of the church.

When I asked my anthropology professor if he had ever met this archaeologist, he said, “Yes, he came by to visit me. He’s a nice old man.” After that, what intelligent person would want to be a Christian and intellectual? Well, I for one.

I soon met other Christians who were brighter than I. We supported each other, had our faith deepened by daily devotions, group Bible studies, prayer meetings and intelligent Christian speakers. There was never any question in the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship I joined that Christianity was somehow intellectually second-rate. It obviously was not.

Still, there was considerable reason for my pastor and other fundamentalists to be concerned about *intellectuals*. And this warning sticks with me and, if anything, is stronger in me today than ever before. Both Jesus and the apostle Paul had some hard words for those who thought they had the truth tacked down tight. Paul espe-

cially is known for his warning: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God” (1 Cor 8:1-2). The warning here is against intellectual pride.

But Paul’s strongest warning comes in his first letter to the Corinthians:

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. . . . For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength. (1 Cor 1:20-25)

Again he writes to the Colossians: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Col 2:8).

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**Anti-intellectualism is a disposition to discount the importance of truth and the life of the mind. Living in a sensuous culture and an increasingly emotional democracy, American evangelicals in the last generation have simultaneously toned up their bodies and dumbed down their minds. The result? Many suffer from a modern form of what the ancient stoics called “metal hedonism”—having fit bodies but fat minds.**

OS GUINNESS  
*Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*

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Many Christians have interpreted these passages to mean that Christians should avoid the world of scholarship and philosophy. This is surely not a proper understanding of Paul’s word. He is not objecting to good thinking but to inaccurate thinking, especially of the sort that insists on its accuracy. Paul is rather pitting God’s genuine knowledge against claims to human knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

It has always puzzled me that some Christians have thoroughly

rejected the life of the mind, for Jesus commanded us to use our mind: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mk 12:30). But anti-intellectualism is a major strain in American Christianity, and it’s not likely to fade away anytime soon.<sup>10</sup> As Mark Noll says, “The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind.”<sup>11</sup>

Is the only good intellectual a dead intellectual? That’s what the first three definitions would suggest.<sup>12</sup> But those three just can’t be the only choices.

### **The Intellectual Cast of Mind**

One way out of the morass of anti-intellectualism spawned by populism, ideological conservatism and misguided fundamentalism is to look at what constitutes the basic nature of an intellectual cast of mind.<sup>13</sup> Surely we can reach less tendentious conclusions than that to be an intellectual is to be some sort of cultural or religious pariah. In his study of anti-intellectualism in America historian Richard Hofstadter gives us a helpful list of the qualities characteristic of intellectual life: “disinterested intelligence, generalizing power, free speculation, fresh observation, creative novelty, radical criticism.”<sup>14</sup>

To be sure, each one of these qualities carries with it an implied ability. It assumes, for example, that one actually could have an intelligence that pursues truth regardless of its implications for one’s life or the life of one’s community or country. It assumes that one can speculate without the restraints of prejudice, self-interest or prior commitment to a way of life or set of values. It assumes the ability to see with eyes no longer clouded by past vision. It assumes that newness of vision and novelty of notion are, at least for the most part, virtues. And finally, it undermines all of the above by recognizing radical criticism as an essential element, not at the moment noting that if radical criticism is turned back on the other qualities, it is possible that none of them will remain. Radical criticism is indeed the sharpest ax in the intellectual forest, and it has been wielded so

well by those masters of the hermeneutic of suspicion—Marx, Freud, Nietzsche—that the whole notion of intellectual is suspect.<sup>15</sup> But this is to get ahead of my story. We will look at some of the work of these critics later.

Hofstadter distinguishes between *intelligence* and *intellect*.<sup>16</sup> Intelligence is simply mental ability, being able to use the mind well in a wide range of circumstances. In this sense, most professionals—lawyers, doctors, editors, accountants, engineers—use their intelligence much of the time. But, says Hofstadter, deferring to Max Weber, professionals live “*off* ideas, not *for* them.”<sup>17</sup> Living off ideas is employing *instrumental* knowledge: knowledge for the sake of something

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**To me an intellectual is a person who has devoted his or her life to thinking in general terms about the affairs of this world and the broader context of things. . . . That is, their principal occupation is studying, reading, teaching, writing, publishing, addressing the public. . . . Often . . . it leads them to embrace a broader sense of responsibility for the state of the world and its future.**

VÁCLAV HAVEL

*The Art of the Impossible*

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other than knowledge itself. The intellectual, on the other hand, has an almost religious dedication to ideas as such, which, when it is not balanced by playfulness, can quickly turn to ideological fanaticism.<sup>18</sup> True intellectuals, however, have fun with ideas; they move them around, back and forth, turn them on their heads, submit them to ironic reflection, test them with their imagination and don't get so enamored of their own brilliance that they become nothing more than sophisticated, arrogant prigs.<sup>19</sup>

There is a spontaneity about the intellectual life. It is not fueled by a passion directed solely toward one objective. And because of this the true intellectual occasionally sees some things, makes true observations and has insights that few if any before him have seen or had. If there is any danger in this, it is not in having a one-track mind but in having a mind with so many tracks that it either arrives at many places at the same time or never gets out of the station.

My experience resonates with Hofstadter’s description of the intellectual life. Though Hofstadter was yet to write his book when I said to Marj, “I would really like to be an intellectual,” it was Hofstadter’s notion that seems now to have been implicitly mine.

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**One ought to make good use of one’s intellect in order to live a morally good life. Stated another way, one ought to lead an intellectual life. But many of us do not lead intellectual lives. Many of us are anti-intellectual. Many do not use their intellects beyond those uses they cannot avoid—its cooperation with the sensory powers in acts of perception, memory, and imagination.**

**MORTIMER ADLER**  
*Intellect: Mind over Matter*

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So what shall we say about the desire to be an intellectual? Should we wannabe one? If being an intellectual is dangerous, if it is hazardous to the health of both the intellectual and society, if it is biblically problematic, is it worth it? I am not yet ready to answer that question.

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**What I mean [by an intellectual] is a person playing a particular role. It is the role of the thinker or writer who engages in public discussion of issues of public policy, in politics in the broadest sense, while deliberately not engaging in the pursuit of political power.**

**TIMOTHY GARTON ASH**  
*“Prague: Intellectuals and Politics”*

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But I am ready to offer an initial definition of what an intellectual is and how that relates to being a Christian intellectual. These will stand at this point as proposals. In the chapters that follow I will examine other positive contributions to these definitions and suggest how any person who still “wants to be a Christian intellectual” might take positive steps in that direction. But first the definition:

*An intellectual is one who loves ideas, is dedicated to clarifying them, developing them, criticizing them, turning them over and over, seeing their implications, stacking them atop one another, arranging*

them, sitting silent while new ideas pop up and old ones seem to rearrange themselves, playing with them, punning with their terminology, laughing at them, watching them clash, picking up the pieces, starting over, judging them, withholding judgment about them, changing them, bringing them into contact with their counterparts in other systems of thought, inviting them to dine and have a ball but also suiting them for service in workaday life.

*A Christian intellectual* is all of the above to the glory of God.

We will get a further perspective on these definitions when we consider the perspective of John Henry Newman, surely one of the great intellectuals of the nineteenth century. Of course Newman is one of those good intellectuals who is also a dead intellectual. But his death for us is rather an illusion. For Newman is not only now very much alive in God, he is a living intellectual presence in many twentieth-century minds, mine included. I hope to show why in the next two chapters.