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An Approach to a Christian Outlook on Reality: Integration of Knowledge

By John Elbert, S. M., Ph.D.

I would preface the presentation of this subject, by drawing attention to the fact that it is not a mere splinter issue. It is, factually, one of the most vital questions in modern life and perhaps the most crucial issue in the history of Western Civilization. Here are the considered words of a former president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, written in the mid twenties of our century:

The greatest event in the world today is not the awakening of Asia (at this writing he should add, Africa) nor the rise of communism—vast and portentous as those events are. It is the advent of a new way of living, due to science (add technology), a change in the conditions of work (automation) and the structure of society which began not very long ago in the West and is now reaching out over all mankind. (Cited by Charles A. Coulson, in “Approach to Christian Education,” p. 42.)

The Christian scholar and educator of today must reckon with the generally-diffused opinion that the whole field of genuine human knowledge is compassed by the narrow confines of the world of time and space, which makes science-education the dominant subject in all education, and technology the solution of all the problems of modern life.

The contrary view that there is room for any other kind of real knowledge, besides science and technology in the present-day world of scholarship, or that there is need for any other kind of real or pretended knowledge, is definitely a minority view and one that is at variance with the prevailing outlook in American life and education today. There is, perhaps, some occasional lip-service paid to the humanities or some gesture of recognition to philosophy and theology as homogeneous elements in our civilization, but in hard reality the trend everywhere is toward the complete subordination of the creative arts to pure science, and the subordination of pure science to the overwhelming pressure of technology. Knowledge has become merely functional.

The temper of mind implicit in the outlook described above is not something new in the history of human thought. St. Thomas, writing in the thirteenth century, found it expedient to begin his *Summa Theologica* with this question: Is it necessary that there be such a branch of knowledge as Sacred Theology in addition to Philosophy?

The question had meaning in view of the fact that philosophy then, as science now, claimed for itself the whole field of reality. In practical form, therefore, the question of Aquinas could be posed thus: Is there any need of divine Wisdom (Theology) in addition to human Wisdom (Philosophy) for man to achieve his full human stature?

The answer of the Angelic Doctor is evidently in the affirmative and from this preliminary question he goes on to explain patiently the nature and domain of Sacred Science, before providing a "Summary" which has stood as a monument to a happy marriage between faith and reason over the past seven centuries.

If, however, a modern Aquinas were writing an introduction to a synthesis of knowledge today, he would be obliged to start in this wise: Is it necessary that there be any other knowledge, *besides the natural sciences*, for man to achieve the fullness of his human stature?

The question in this form would be appropriate because the intellectual world of our time, and especially in our own country, has cut itself loose not only from divine Wisdom which is Theology, but also from human Wisdom which is the proper field of Philosophy. This situation has come about, for the most part, by the simple expedient of denying gratuitously and reiterating endlessly, that there is any real knowledge beyond sense knowledge and any reality beyond physical reality. For the non-Christian scholar, Metaphysics is a chimera and Theology is a myth. In consequence, a Christian interpretation of life is an idle fancy and a concession to vestigial remains of "Medievalism."

On the other hand, we need only to use common sense to realize that our generation is rushing precipitately into the realms of nature's secrets, without the guidance of divine or human wisdom, goaded mostly by the fear of destruction and pursued by the still audible voice and the relentless footsteps of God, as he penetrates the inner worlds and outer realms of space. Modern man's restless search for new worlds seems to be just another flight from himself, on finding that he is naked before his God and in fear before his enemies.

The task of a modern Aquinas would be formidable indeed, nothing less than to provide a synthesis of theology, art, philosophy, and the natural sciences for a world that embraces the earth and the stars and for a mind that can seek and find God in His word and in His works.

For a Christian philosophy of life, and, in consequence, for a Christian philosophy of education, there must be an integration of all fields of knowledge where the mind of man ranges in its pursuit of truth; in theology, in the arts and crafts, in philosophy, in the natural sciences and technology.

The actual situation is simply a factor to be reckoned with in formulating a Christian outlook on reality, not a condition to be slavishly accepted. We do not, in the words of a well-known agnostic, "bow down humbly before a fact" just because it is a fact. There are facts, especially in the field of human affairs that must be repudiated.

In connection with the subject at issue, let us first recall that science in its present form is a newcomer in the cultural life of man by comparison with religion, art, and philosophy. Moreover, it is not an autonomous field of knowledge, but an offshoot from philosophy; many of us can still recall that our texts in physics were titled "Natural Philosophy." Present-day science is simply philosophy restricted to the material order of reality and sparked by a characteristic method. Its roots are deep in religion, in art, in philosophy; its most fruitful lines of discovery are opened by the intuitive flights of the constructive imagination in every field where human genius flowers.

What then precisely does science lack in order to be a true guiding light, to lead man to the perfection of his human destiny and not a will-o-wisp to lead him to destruction?

In the Book of Ecclesiasticus we read: "Wisdom it is that gives meaning to all of our knowledge, all our powers of discernment; hold her fast and she will set thee on a pinnacle of renown; root of her is fear of the Lord and long life the fruit of her." Eccles. 1:24. In brief, *wisdom* must guide all our researches and align all our knowledge. In our day we have more knowledge than ever before in the history of the world. We do not seem to have more wisdom to apply the knowledge which we have in abundance. Why not? We do not have the "root" of wisdom which is "fear of the Lord." Fear we have, almost in proportion to the abundance of our knowledge—even fear of knowledge itself—fear of external enemies—fear of internal enemies—fear of devastating diseases—fear of being surpassed by others; why not fear of the Lord?

The greatest need, therefore, in every human activity is wisdom, divine wisdom which is the subject-matter of theology; human wisdom which is the pursuit of the philosopher. It is a high calling whether followed on the divine or on the human level; yet, in a certain measure, it is the calling of every man made to the image of God; it is, in fact, God's call to every man in proportion to his gifts.

In the introduction of his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, St. Thomas makes a rare personal reference to himself when he describes the office of a wise man engaged in the study of his proper field of learning. He says: "And so in the name of the divine mercy, I have the confidence to embark upon the work of a wise man, even though this may surpass my powers, and I have set myself the task of making known, as far as my limited powers will allow, the truth that the Catholic faith professes, and setting aside the errors that are opposed to it. To use the words of Hilary: 'I am aware that I owe this to God as the chief duty of my life, that my every word and sense may speak of Him.'" (C.G. Chap. 2, Sec. 2) Such is also the chief duty of every man, more especially that of teachers in any field, because in a Christian philosophy of life and education, all knowledge has God for its ultimate object. This is the truth which furnishes the deepest and firmest foundation for every organized body of knowledge, including the whole structure of modern science and technology. For all genuine knowledge is the product of a common search in common sources for a common truth. All true knowledge, therefore, however fragmentary, is related

to the general body of reality. Moreover, the basic assumptions and pre-suppositions of science and research are common to all fields and subjects—there is order and constancy in nature—there is rationality in back of the secrets of the universe—these and similar truths, which modern science has inherited from theology and philosophy, lie hidden deep in its roots and foster its growth and homogeneous development. Here is the testimony of a great mathematician on this subject, one who has no leanings toward a Christian interpretation of the universe. Says Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) in his SCIENCE AND THE MODERN WORLD:

I do not think, however, that I have even yet brought out the greatest contribution of Medievalism to the formation of the scientific movement. I mean the inexpugnable belief that every detailed occurrence can be correlated with its antecedents in a perfectly definite manner exemplifying general principles. Without this belief the incredible labours of scientists would be without hope. It is this instinctive conviction, vividly poised before the imagination, which is the motive-power of research—that there is a secret, a secret which can be revealed. How has this conviction been so vividly implanted in the European mind? When we compare this tone of thought in Europe with the attitude of other civilizations when left to themselves, there seems but one source for its origin. It must come from the medieval insistence on the rationality of God, conceived as with the personal energy of Jehovah and with the rationality of a Greek philosopher. Every detail was supervised and ordered: the search into nature could only result in the vindication of the faith in rationality. (Cited in "An Approach to Christian Education," 1956, The Philosophical Library, Inc., New York, p. 46.)