

**The Life of the Mind in the Service of God:  
Why a Thinking Faith Still Matters**

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Just one generation ago the comments I will make today about the importance of a thinking faith would have seemed so obvious they would require no rehearsal at all – let alone any defense. Reformed Christians historically have been considered among the leaders in thinking about faith, though we certainly would not have been alone in this. But something has changed.

Nicholas Kristof, the columnist for *The New York Times*, wrote an essay a few years ago in which he mourned the passing of an intellectually rigorous faith. The American public at large, according to Kristof, has grown increasingly credulous. By contrast he remembers his grandfather, “a devout and active Presbyterian elder” who regarded the virgin birth as a more or less legendary aspect of the Christian faith and evolutionary theory as a fairly sensible scientific explanation of how nature works.

Kristof writes: “Those kinds of mainline Christians are vanishing,” and they are being replaced by Christians who prove the fervor of their religious convictions by refusing to test their convictions intellectually. He argues that his intention is not to pour contempt on anyone’s sincere religious devotion. He is just puzzled, and he is concerned “by the way the great intellectual traditions of Catholic and Protestant churches alike are withering, leaving the scholarly and religious worlds increasingly antagonistic.” He worries because of the conversations he has had with certain “self-satisfied and unquestioning” representatives of what we commonly call Islamic fundamentalism. As he explains, “the Islamic world is in crisis today in large part because of a similar drift away from [its own] rich intellectual tradition” toward unquestioning, emotional religious fervor. “The heart,” Kristof concludes, “is a wonderful organ, but so is the brain.”<sup>1</sup>

I share Kristof’s concern. I became a Presbyterian as a young adult in large measure *because* of the Reformed tradition’s belief that our love of God is somehow incomplete until we love God with our minds, as well as with our hearts and souls; and I worry what will become of Christian faith, indeed I worry what will become of the world we live in, if Christians fail to ask the tough, deep, critical, sometimes intractable questions about faith, if we choose to ignore life’s profound mysteries and insoluble riddles, if we retreat from the public sphere where ideas must fight for their lives among competing views and interests, if we abandon the curiosity that is unafraid to swim at the deep end of the pool, if we jettison the love of ideas, knowledge and wisdom for their own sake. Our age is not unique. There have been other times in history when knowledge was treasured by only a few. And in some of those times the world’s intellectual treasury was preserved by those few. We all know the stories, for example, of how tiny cells of Christian monks, in the darkest of the Dark Ages, hid away for safe-keeping in remote Irish and British monasteries the wisdom of the ancients. But the crisis we face today implicates the church no less than society in general. Today, perhaps more than at any time since the Protestant Reformation, we need to recover that commitment which is so memorably expressed in John Calvin’s phrase, “the life of the mind in the service of God.” And if we are determined to recover this commitment, we need to be aware of the forces against which we must contend and the steps we must take to recover in our church a healthy regard for an intellectually rigorous faith, a reasoned faith, a *thinking faith*.

Some of these forces arrayed against a thinking faith are not new, though they have taken on peculiarly American features.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas D. Kristof, “Believe It, Or Not,” *The New York Times*, Friday, August 15, 2003, A29.

Anyone who has read Arthur Schlesinger's epochal study, *The Age of Jackson*, first published in 1945, knows that the populism which has lent such vitality to American political and social life has also often manifested an underbelly of anti-intellectualism, and that this anti-intellectualism, sometimes identified as a rejection of elitism, is particularly evident in certain expressions of Christian faith.<sup>2</sup> When yoked together with the deep strains of individualism and anti-institutionalism that run through American social history, the suspicion of thinking, of scholarship and rationality becomes almost an article of faith among some American Christians.<sup>3</sup>

This bias against thought is based on assumptions that go so deep in our social psyche and are so much a part of the culture in which we live, that many American Christians have never even noticed that they are assumptions at all, and not conclusions based on hard-won experience. These forces, again, linked to American populism, have long been with us, and have gained traction at particular moments of national insecurity and anxiety. David Brooks recently described the growth of the newest expression of such populism which, he says, rejects "every single idea associated with the educated class," from global warming to abortion rights, from gun control to foreign affairs.<sup>4</sup> The fact that this populism often reflects a deeply religious, specifically *Christian*, identity only compounds the problem facing advocates of a thinking faith, because this populism securely binds its Christian faith with reactivity to those forms and expressions of scholarship and education that are most resistant to the control of religious confessions or political ideologies.

There are other forces arrayed against a thinking faith, and I would like to mention three in particular: (1) the contemporary cult of superficiality; (2) the insecurity that drives many to demand certainty; and (3) the generalized anxiety of our culture in the face of rapid, and far-reaching social and technological change.

### **The Contemporary Cult of Superficiality**

A few years ago, Tom Long, a professor at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University, observed that the greatest heresy the Church faces today is not atheism; it is superficiality.<sup>5</sup> Tom's thesis may surprise many Christians who view evangelists of atheism like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins as the supreme threat to faith in our time, but I think Tom is right. In fact, the single greatest antidote to books like *God is Not Great* or *The God Delusion* is not a defensive mode of retrenchment against their ideas, but the rather more ironic response of engaging their lack of knowledge, their over-simplification and inadequate critical reflection in relation to their subject matter. Christian scholars have been far more sophisticated, searching and self-critical (and, at times, scathing) in analyzing the problems in Christian faith than either Hitchens or Dawkins. Such scholarship – from the work of Renaissance humanists like Erasmus to that of contemporary scholars like Bart Ehrman and John Dominic Crossan – clears the underbrush of superstition and sloppy thinking so that stronger faith can emerge.

One might go a bit further than Tom Long's assessment, however, to argue that it is the contemporary *cult of superficiality* (and not simply superficiality itself) that represents the greatest obstacle to a thinking faith today. I say "cult" because the cultural bias in favor of superficiality takes on so many of the characteristics of a cult, especially the unquestioning ideological loyalty it demands of its adherents and its relentless compulsion to proselytize. The superficiality that dominates so much television news coverage is just one aspect of this cult.

Strangely enough, it is often the self-anointed guardians of communication in the church, especially among some denominational judicatories and in Christian publishing, that represent some of the most strident voices that advocate for the cult of superficiality and against any deep thinking about our faith. It is hard to imagine how we could, with a straight face, argue that the understanding of God and of our relationship with God should be trivialized and dumbed-down while (at the same time) virtually no one would think it responsible to treat

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company), chapters I – IV.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh Heclo, *On Thinking Institutionally* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), 1- 43, charts the history of anti-institutionalism and its implications.

<sup>4</sup> David Brooks, "The Tea Party Teens," *The New York Times*, January 5, 2010, A17.

<sup>5</sup> Tom Long, "A Matter of Depth," sermon preached at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia, Sunday, October 5, 2003.

subjects like physics or economics so blithely. And, yet, the publication of books that reduce God-talk to baby-talk proliferates in virtually every Protestant press. And the pressure on writers to participate in the cult of superficiality is tremendous, especially for beginning authors who feel they must conform to the ideology of the cult or never see their ideas in print.

Although I often hear editors of church presses and church magazines argue that “Christian lay people just aren’t interested in theology,” or, worse still, that “lay people simply can’t understand theological concepts,” when I speak in congregations around the country I am more likely to be confronted by crowds of lively, intelligent lay people hungry to know more about their faith, lay people (incidentally) who in their daily lives run businesses and shape economies, teach school, read (and sometimes write) important books on a variety of serious subjects, argue legal cases before judges and juries, write laws that shape our common life, and cure our diseases of the mind and body. These lay people are tired of being infantilized at church, and they want to understand their faith more deeply.

The comments of lay people who want to learn more about their faith are often along the lines of what an elderly woman said (again to Tom Long), one Sunday, after he had preached in one of the many congregations in which he has spoken around the country. As he was making his way from the pulpit to the sanctuary exit, she stepped forward to greet him. Tom had invited members of the congregation to share with him any messages they’d like him to take back to the future ministers he teaches.

As this woman stepped forward, Tom greeted her with the question: “Is there a message you’d like me to take back to the school, something you’d like me to tell our students?”

“Yes, there is,” she said. “Tell them to take us seriously.”

Now, I know that not every person in our churches or our society craves to understand God, or, indeed, anything else, more deeply. But I would also maintain that at the core of the Christian gospel there is a sacred mandate, we call it “the Great Commission,” to go into all the world to make disciples. And we know (do we not?) what the word disciple means, a “willing learner.” That’s what a disciple is, a “willing learner.” We have this duty, this mission, this commission: to kindle curiosity and to renew minds. And there are many, many people only too eager to learn.

*But please – for just one moment – I want to invite you to be depressed with me.*

A recent episode of The Jay Leno Show featured one of those sidewalk interviews for which Leno is so famous. In this one he asked passersby to tell him who lives at “1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.”

No one knew the answer.

But in answer to the question, “who lives in a pineapple under the sea?” everyone he asked knew it was Spongebob Squarepants.

Now, I do not wish to underestimate the significance of any contributions Mr. Squarepants has made to American society or popular culture, but, I’m just saying: We know the forces we face when it comes to the contemporary cult of superficiality. Sometimes our duty goes beyond taking people seriously. Sometimes we need to take people more seriously than they take themselves.

## Insecurity and the Demand for Certainty

Truth (so the saying goes) is the first casualty of war, but self-criticism is the first casualty of insecurity, especially that insecurity which transforms persons into a herd. According to the leading Christian intellectual of the last century, Reinhold Niebuhr: “Nations ... do not easily achieve any degree of self-transcendence, for they have inchoate organs of self-criticism. That is why collective man [sic] always tends to be morally complacent, self-righteous and lacking in a sense of humor.”<sup>6</sup> A herd is still a herd, whether it sits complacently before its television set being told what it wants to hear, being confirmed in its prejudices and reinforced in its self-serving ideologies, or whether it stampedes, rushing like a mob from one extreme to another in its search for certainty.

Niebuhr’s statement has come to mind often this year as I have watched the taunting, jeering, sometimes frighteningly irrational, faces of groups of our fellow citizens shouting down elected representatives at “town hall meetings.” The Christian creed revels in an irony that almost always evokes a smile if not an outburst of self-deprecating laughter. Think, for example, of Tertullian’s ancient confession: “I believe because it is impossible.” Or, remember Will D. Campbell’s well-known formulation of the Christian message: “We are all bastards but God loves us anyway.”

The mentality of the insecure demands certainty and conformity, and denounces irony, ambiguity and self-criticism as past-times of the intellectual elite. But irony, ambiguity and self-criticism are not merely optional accessories of intellectualism; they are (to use a term often used in very different circumstances) fundamentals of faith in God because they underscore the “infinite qualitative difference” between creatures and the holy, eternal Being of Beings.

Niebuhr observed the cost of insecurity during the decade following the Second World War. Niebuhr was specifically interested in the ways in which the “religion of communism,” as Niebuhr described it, was countered by its American opponents. Communism represented, for Niebuhr, “a foe the fires of whose hostility are fed by [a] ... humorless pretension” that “no laughter from heaven could possibly penetrate.” But communism, he said, was being countered by a “frantic” American anti-communism, the “hatefulness” and “fury” of which was like nothing so much “in spirit” as the communism it opposed. Thus Niebuhr concludes, “the spirit of humanity is not preserved primarily by a correct definition of the nature of ‘*humanitas*’ but rather by an existential awareness of the limits, as well as the possibilities of human power and goodness.”<sup>7</sup> Undoubtedly Niebuhr opposed communism; but his Christian faith (with its sense of irony, humor and self-criticism) raised the alarm against our becoming spiritually that which we oppose.

A thinking faith is a self-critical faith. A thinking faith knows its own limits, not only because of the accidents of history, but because of the basic reality of being human, creaturely, in distinction from God. It is its reverence for transcendence that relativizes the claims of a thinking faith. Thinking faith is characterized as much by its reticence as by its pronouncements: its reverence for God and respect for others is characterized by a kind of irreverence toward its own sense of certainty. One might regard thinking faith as a faith chastened by knowledge and experience. One would certainly regard thinking faith as a faith that has made its peace with ambiguity, because it cannot and it will not try to justify itself in the presence of God. But it is inevitable, for these very reasons, for thinking faith to be thought “weak” by many.<sup>8</sup>

It has become commonplace in our culture for many Christians to believe they can only prove their faith by claiming to know the mind of God. Yet pretensions to certainty do not signal a superabundance of faith, but its paucity. Religious dogmatism, as Reinhold Niebuhr understood, is the child of insecurity. And, so, Niebuhr, in

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<sup>6</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), 169.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>8</sup> For example, by those who represent the so-called “New Calvinism” or the self-proclaimed “tough-minded Christianity.” On the latter group, see: William Dembski and Thomas Schirrmacher, eds. *Tough-Minded Christianity* (Nashville: B. & H. Academic, 2008).

arguably his most important study, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, describes how important it is for Christians to try to achieve some degree of that intellectual and spiritual objectivity that always accompanies self-criticism.

“Periodically,” Niebuhr says, we would be well advised “to moderate” our “pretensions and admit” that we are only very little animals “living a precarious existence on a second-rate planet, attached to a second-rate sun.” This awareness, he says, which cuts the legs from under *hubris*, is shared with modern scientists who stand flatfooted in the presence of an expanding universe. But, he adds, “it was no modern astronomer who confessed, ‘When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained: what is man that thou art mindful of him?’ (Ps. 8: 4).”<sup>9</sup>

As I invited you to be depressed with me earlier, let me now invite you to hope with me, if only just a little. I believe there is reason to hope today that the yearnings for transcendence we see in our culture may well be the one thing that can overcome the demand for certainty.

A decade ago Donald Miller, a professor of religion at the University of Southern California, observed how new expressions of Christian faith were offering people “meaning that is grounded in a transcendent experience of the sacred.”<sup>10</sup> I would argue that this yearning among people for transcendence and reverence, combined often with a desire for a deeper understanding of God and curiosity about the “big questions” of human existence, which we are witnessing among so many young adults appearing in college and graduate classes today, offers a sign of hope in our time.<sup>11</sup>

### **Generalized Anxiety**

It is almost a truism to say that we live in the most anxious of times. A few brush-strokes can paint the background.

- The structures that shape society show stress fractures from top to bottom.
- Institutions long taken for granted suddenly are subject to renegotiation.
- The meanings enshrined in basic social frameworks of mutual obligation governing families, marriages, religions, and providing the logic for morality, are up for grabs.
- Hallowed assumptions about the most basic loyalties and allegiances, what it means to be a citizen of a country or a member of a society, even the ordering of such allegiances in relation to one another, is subject to the most radical new questions.
- Innovative technologies are leading to an explosion of previously unimagined information sources and media unsettling long-established spheres of authority and undermining long-respected official resources for reliable wisdom and knowledge. One could drown in the flood of information provided by these new technologies.
- Reports of violence multiply around the globe.
- Militant Islamic forces threaten Western culture.
- Radicalized forces within Western culture itself pose a serious threat to internal stability.
- It is a time of unprecedented anxiety.

*Oops!*

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<sup>9</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, Volume I, *Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941, 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Note, on the point of interest in self-transcendence and reverence, Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004). And related to the issue of young adults asking, “big questions,” see: W. Robert Connor, “The Right Time and Place for Big Questions,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 9, 2006, B8.

I'm so sorry. Apparently I got my notes mixed up. I've just given you my notes summarizing the characteristics of Europe in the years leading up to the Protestant Reformation which I prepared a few months ago for a lecture on the sixteenth-century.

Every age believes its time is the most difficult. And it is precisely the long-view of things derived from a careful, critical study of history and the ideas that shape history that help us most to face our own challenges. While it is natural to feel anxious when threatened, anxiety can paralyze us, limit our range of vision and options, and constrain our imaginations precisely when we most need to think creatively.

The best antidote to anxiety is perspective. And, yet, anxious people make poor decisions because their anxiety undercuts the ability to imagine and to see options. Anxious believers are not immune to the kind of tunnel-vision that limits perception. And, tragically, anxious religion tends to retrench, draw-back, retreat, freeze in place at the very moment when it most needs to explore.

Recently some analysts of our culture described the peculiar variety of anxiety, the generalized anxiety we are experiencing, as "free floating anxiety," that is, anxiety that is not necessarily attached to any specific worry or concern but floats around attaching itself first to this issue and then another. Such anxiety is similar to a virus. It is highly contagious, and unaffected by antibiotics. About the only effective counter-measure we can take to "free floating anxiety" is to build up our immune systems – and wash our hands frequently.

If we return to the age of Reformation, for example, we will find among reformers like John Calvin a sense of adventure in the face of generalized anxiety. Calvin and others embraced the newest information technologies, i.e., the printing press. Rather than retreating from the wild proliferation of ideas, they actually encouraged the extension of education and founded an astonishing array of new educational institutions for all classes of citizens, preparing the way for the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution that followed. Despite his reputation to the contrary, Calvin (and other reformers) actually liberalized deliberative decision-making processes in a way that led to the birth of modern democratic states.

Imagine if you will, what would have happened if the sense of adventure among the Reformers had not triumphed over the cultural virus of anxiety: *Another Dark Age? Another bonfire of the vanities?* It could have happened. There's no reason to assume the inevitability of progress. Remember: After the fall of Rome we forgot how to mix concrete and flush a toilet for a millennium!

Generalized anxiety, free-floating anxiety, the dread and panic that ripples through our churches afraid of the future, afraid for their survival: these are real factors with which we must deal. And they are real barriers to a thinking faith. Again and again we are told that a thinking faith is unpopular, that it is elitist, irrelevant, that it just won't sell to today's market. But, I would suggest that the best way to deal with all of these barriers is by demonstrating the gift of historical and critical and creative reflection, by placing this candle on a lampstand instead of hiding it under a bushel.

I will give you one example. Several years ago it became quite in vogue to say that the mainline church is facing an unprecedented challenge to redefine itself. The church must change or die. In supporting this argument some reviewed the history of the church and divided its history into three periods: the Apostolic period; the Christendom period; and the present unprecedented period. It was argued that the Apostolic period lasted until Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, after which the age of Christendom dawned. And it is this age, the Christendom age, that is just now disintegrating. We don't know what's going to happen next, we were told, because we have had so little experience as a church with different forms of church life. The church has only known two ways of being the church in 2000 years! Nobody knows what to do next!<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (Washington D.C.: Alban Institute, 1991), 4-9.

The next comments from the church consultant *de jour* usually went something like this: “Flee! Scurry! Panic! Run for your lives! And do what I say to do, because it’s your only choice!”

Now, if you want to guarantee a steady flow of consulting jobs, I would suggest that this is exactly the kind of argument to put forward: simplistic in its vision and trembling with generalized anxiety. The problem, of course, is that the analysis was woefully inadequate. Indeed its premise was utterly false. The analysis fueled a sense of *crisis*, when what was needed was what Ed Friedman often referred to as *adventurous leadership*.<sup>13</sup>

Over the past two thousand years the church has in fact lived through scores of different forms of ecclesial life, not just two. The church has adapted, revolutionized, floundered, thrived, failed, succeeded, fallen, died and risen, and looked like all sorts of things and functioned in all sorts of ways along the way. Our options are many as we face the uncertain future. And the adventure in which we are engaged is suffused with the presence of the God who has always loved freedom more than safety and on whose broad shoulders rests the future of the church.

### **Where Are Our Reinhold Niebuhrs?**

The barriers to a thinking faith are not insignificant. But I would suggest one thing more about them. Perhaps the reason we find it so hard to overcome these barriers, is that we haven’t really used very well the tools at our disposal.

I have already said that often we have trivialized the Christian faith’s message and treated our membership like children rather than engaging the deep matters of faith and life. This fact hardly needs further demonstration. However, it is also true that too often those of us engaged in scholarly pursuits have remained content to publish our findings in jargon-laced academic monographs with little or no sense of obligation for how our subject matter might connect with persons trying to live faithfully in today’s world.

Arrogance is not unknown among scholars, some of whom do seem to think it below them to communicate with non-specialists. And it is not unknown for some of those who are willing to communicate to do so in the most un-engaging (even patronizing) manner. While relevance can become a voracious idol, perhaps we ought also to confess that the quest for irrelevance seems hardly worth the trip.

What is needed today is thinking faith in the service of faithful living, intelligence and faith linked together by a commitment to encourage the flourishing of human life. What is needed today, as many people have observed, is the kind of thinking that another generation found in people like Reinhold Niebuhr, a theologian who was also a public intellectual. And often our desire for this kind of thinking faith is expressed in the form of a lament, in fact, as a question: “Where are our Reinhold Niebuhrs today?”

I have thought about this question a lot. And I have come to a conclusion: To ask where today’s Reinhold Niebuhrs are may be to misunderstand the moment in which we live and our own culpability in those things that characterize this moment.

Niebuhrs emerge, at least in part, because we will listen to them. In fact, Niebuhrs, I would argue, are still among us today, if we would only hear them speak. They do not speak in sound-bites; though they are often quite eloquent. They will not answer to the call of our anxieties; in fact they may ask us to find the courage to resist anxiety. They will not give us empty promises of certitude; but they can help make life’s ambiguities more enduring and perhaps even more creative and life-giving.

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<sup>13</sup> Edwin Friedman, the most persuasive proponent for “adventurous leadership” in the face of what he called “the chronic anxiety that characterizes the emotional processes of contemporary American civilization,” developed these ideas most fully in his posthumously published *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, Margaret M. Treadwell and Edward W. Beal, eds. (New York: Seabury Books, 1999/2007), note particularly 29-50.

Garry Wills, a few years ago, noted with reference to contemporary leadership that we get the leaders we demand. Maybe we also get the leaders we deserve. But we definitely will not get better leaders unless we demonstrate more responsible followership. “Show me your leader,” Wills said, “and you have bared your soul.”<sup>14</sup> Perhaps much the same holds true for public intellectuals and theologians of the caliber of Reinhold Niebuhr.

In an age dominated by celebrity-worship and its flipside of envy and contempt for celebrities, when we are asked to believe that sordid family squabbles deserve national media coverage and epoch-changing events on the other side of the world are of little consequence to us; in a time when a twenty-four hour news cycle generates an army of fake experts and stokes a pornographic melee of sensationalized trivia; when considered judgments and political discourse give way to self-promotion and demagoguery, when abusive shouting is given more weight in the public square than the thoughtful silence preceding a carefully considered response; in such a time as this we can hardly expect to hear through the din of noise the voices of a thinking faith or of a faithful reason. But the voices do remain. And, for God’s sake and for our own sake, we need to find ways to hear them. We need to encourage and cultivate them from every pulpit, every lectern and in every pew in our country.

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<sup>14</sup> Garry Wills, *Certain Trumpets: The Call of Leaders* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 21.