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Editorial

Humility and Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Any journal predicated on a dialogue between Christian theology and social science must confront, directly or indirectly, the relationship between faith and reason. To understate the matter, the topic is one that has received considerable attention over the course of the history of Christian thought. The conversation can be traced from the earliest and most famous articulation of the problem—Tertullian's "What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem?"—to Augustine's *City of God*, to Anselm's ontological argument for God, to Aquinas and scholastic philosophy (in both Catholic and Protestant variations), to the teachings of recent popes, to the reflections of contemporary scholars such as Mark Noll and Samuel Gregg.[1] The permutations of the question and the cast of characters could be multiplied indefinitely.

While the *intellectual* dimension of the question naturally attracts most of the attention, the relatively neglected *moral* dimension is perhaps equally important.[2] For one of the errors to which the banishment of faith from academic work gives rise is intellectual hubris. There are many aspects of this problem that could be analyzed; here I will focus on one that is especially pertinent to this journal: the implications for interdisciplinary collaboration.

There are a growing number of journals, university departments, and institutes dedicated to or at least open to interdisciplinary projects; indeed, the popularity of the phenomenon led the authors of one study to declare, "Interdisciplinarity is the battle cry of the contemporary university."[3] Working across disciplines nonetheless remains a difficult task. The training needed to achieve competence in a single subdiscipline is so substantial that it is normally impractical, if not impossible,

for an individual scholar to achieve competence in another field. Collaboration with colleagues in other fields seems to be the best way around the problem, but that solution entails its own complications. Where does a theologian wishing to explore economics begin? There is a bewildering array of methods, schools, and viewpoints; the theologian's very choice of economist to consult is itself laden with import and will determine to a large extent the path of the project.

Leaving those questions aside, there is a more fundamental issue to consider. Is the theologian prepared to defer to the economist (or vice versa) on any question of importance? Is the historian, through study of the past convinced of certain truths concerning human nature or human society, willing to bow to the philosopher's conception of the same? Here is where thorny questions about disciplinary boundaries emerge.

The nineteenth-century priest and scholar John Henry Newman, in his lectures describing the "Idea of a University," explored the ontology of disciplinary boundaries. "All that exists, as contemplated by the human mind," he said, "forms one large system or complex fact, and this of course resolves itself into an indefinite number of particular facts, which, as being portions of the whole, have countless relations of every kind towards one another." As all of these facts "taken together form one integral subject for contemplation, so there are no natural or real limits between part and part; one is ever running into another." The human mind "cannot take in this whole vast fact at a single glance, or gain possession of it at once." Thus the mind approaches universal knowledge by "partial views or abstractions," and each of these partial views is one of the sciences (in the older, broader sense of the term). Newman concludes that, because

> sciences are the results of mental processes about one and the same subject-matter, viewed under its various aspects, and are true results, as far as they go, yet at the same time separate and partial, it follows that on the one hand they need external assistance, one by one, by reason of their incompleteness, and on the other that they are able to afford it to each other, by reason, first, of their independence in themselves, and then of their connexion to the subject matter.[4]

In other words, even the most comprehensive and penetrating mastery of any single field of human inquiry yields, at best, a partial truth. And the only way to gain fuller appreciation of reality is by drawing on the knowledge afforded by other fields. This makes the virtue of intellectual humility indispensable.

The Dominican luminary A. P. Sertillanges pointed out that humility is fundamental to the intellectual life, because that vocation requires *submission*—not only submission to the discipline of intellectual work but also to the "discipline of truth." "Truth will not give itself to us," Sertillanges warns, "unless we are

first rid of self and resolved that it shall suffice us." This submission "implies humility" as well as receptivity to truth wherever it may be found. "Wide culture, filling the mind with ideas, starts it on new lines of thought and increases its capacity," he writes, "but without humility this force of attraction exerted on the outside world will be a fresh source of falsehood. On the contrary, to a cultured and humble mind, flashes of light come from all sides, and strike on it as the rays of dawn do on the hilltops."[5]

The insights of other disciplines can be rays of light that illuminate aspects of reality that are hidden from the methods of our own field of study. Humility—"knowledge of one's own deficiency"[6]—is the key to being alert to such illumination. Yet humility is less a characteristic of the mind than it is of the soul. To be persuaded of its importance for the intellectual enterprise is not to guarantee its practice: "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom. 7:15 NRSV). Like all virtues, it must be acquired by habitual subjection of the individual will to the divine will.

Thus we see that real intellectual prowess—meaning an exceptionally expansive embrace of the truth—depends in some measure on a proper religious orientation. "Wherever the God of truth has left us something of Himself," Sertillanges urges, "we must eagerly welcome it, venerate it religiously and utilize it diligently. Where the eternal Sower has passed, shall we not gather in the harvest?"[7]

We are grateful to all of our contributors and readers, in whatever field they labor, for being coworkers in the harvest.

—Kevin Schmiesing, Executive Editor

Notes

1. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (1998); Pope Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections," Lecture of the Holy Father, University of Regensburg, 12 September, 2006, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html; Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); Samuel Gregg, *Reason, Faith, and the Struggle for Western Civilization* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 2019).

2. Stipulating that intellectual errors are often though not invariably related to moral failures, it remains true that the moral dimension is distinct.

3. Regina F. Bendix, Kilian Bizer, and Dorothy Noyes, *Sustaining Interdisciplinary Collaboration: A Guide for the Academy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), viii.

4. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University, Defined and Illustrated*, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (1852; repr., Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 33–35.

5. A. P. Sertillanges, OP, *The Intellectual Life: Its Spirits, Conditions, Methods*, trans. Mary Ryan (1920; repr., Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1987), 130–32.

6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, Q 161, A 2.

7. Sertillanges, *Intellectual Life*, 136.