

# *An Educated Ministry*

STUART C. HASKINS

## I.

**I**N HIS fascinating book, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, Richard Hofstadter has documented a widespread historical tendency to regard with resentment and suspicion the life of the mind and those who represent it as well as to minimize its value. Nowhere is this more evident than in American religion. I do not have time this morning even to outline the many causes of this phenomenon. Suffice it to say that Americans have tended to stress a religion of the heart rather than of the mind, preferring to focus Biblically, for example, on the simple, unlettered, zealous folk attracted to the early church rather than on the astute, knowledgeable Jesus who disputed so intelligently with his well-educated peers and was in this respect their full equal, and who never failed in his teaching to offer strong food for thought. From the indisputable fact that religious faith requires **more** than intelligence, much of our American religion has drawn the dubious inference that intellect can be completely divorced from other human and ostensibly more spiritual qualities and is thus finally irrelevant to a deep and real religious faith. And more than a few have reached the conclusion that intellect is actually opposed to the whole religious venture and is quite likely a creation of the devil. The conviction that you can only be a Christian from the neck down was most powerfully articulated by the great nineteenth-century revivalists. Dwight L. Moody was a relatively temperate example. He considered education an encumbrance to a man of the spirit. "I would rather have zeal without know-

ledge," he said. Billy Sunday was much more violent and colorful. "Thousands of college graduates are going as fast as they can straight to hell," he shouted in one of his revival sermons. "If I had a million dollars, I'd give \$999,999 to the church and \$1 to education . . . When the word of God says one thing and scholarship another, scholarship can go to hell."

The Scopes trial was the high water mark of this rabid religious anti-intellectualism. During the trial of that Tennessee teacher who dared to teach the doctrine of evolution in the public schools, one irate Tennessean, apparently convinced that intellectual reflection was a capital offense, shook his fist under defence attorney Clarence Darrow's nose. "Don't you reflect on my mother's Bible," he shouted, "or I'll tear you to pieces." Linking anti-intellectual religion with popular democracy, William Jennings Bryan rested his case against evolution at the trial on the ballot box. "Mind worship is the greatest problem we have in America today," he said. "There's too much mind worship and too little simple, religious faith. Our good Christian Tennessee families don't want the teaching of evolution, and people have the right to the kind of education they want for their children. We can trust the judgment of the vast majority of simple Christians against the small minority of intellectuals, and if we took a vote tomorrow, these simple people would prove by their vote that evolution is false."

Now today we can laugh at Bryan and his attempt to establish questions of fact, truth and morality at the ballot box, but only after recognizing that the more you study the Scopes trial the more it sounds like the things people are saying in our own community today, as they approach such issues as Denver school segregation. Populist and anti-intellectual sentiments are heard on every side. Many people

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say that no matter what the findings of various studies on integrated education, they won't believe them. What really counts is what the people want. We should pay no attention to the small, intellectual minority who are trying to "run things." Suspicion and resentment of the life of the mind is still a reality.

You need only spin your radio dial to discover that the anti-intellectual mind-set still exists today in its most extreme form, but on the whole it has a much more subtle expression in our churches. Dr. Rockwell Harmon Potter, the late dean of the very liberal Hartford Theological Seminary, and for years a grand old man of Congregationalism, used to point to a young seminarian and say, "There goes a **good** boy—not smart, but so good!" Then he would go on to say, "The trouble with seminarians today is that the good ones are never smart, and the smart ones are never good." Such observations, however humorous or harmlessly meant, perpetuate the notion that intelligence is always purchased at the expense of sincerity, morality and religious conviction. The suspicion of "egg-head" theologians as well as the belief that the word of God is always made clearer by inspired simplicity, and never by a careful, objective Biblical scholarship are other examples of the pervasive and subtle suspicion of the mind that exists even in liberal American religious life. And, if, as Hofstadter shows, this anti-intellectualism has a wide popular appeal, we need to recognize that it has turned many away, convinced that no one with any interest in the life of the mind could possibly have anything to do with religion.

## II.

The Puritan ministers were America's first fully intellectual class, not just by preference, but because their congregations insisted on and expected a scholarly clergy. Someone has said more than half seriously that the public school system in America originally sprang from a New England desire to understand the preach-

er's sermon. That a people should feel compelled to educate themselves to understand complexity rather than simply to demand a greater simplicity from a preacher says a lot about our ancestors and about our historic roots as a church. Nor was this interest in education confined to a narrow theology. In recent years the reputation of the Puritan clergy has been somewhat rehabilitated. To view them as a rigid, narrow and gloomy group of men is to measure them unfairly against our time and not in terms of their own. They were, on the whole, far ahead of their time, men whose education and training made them knowledgeable and often gifted in all the arts and sciences. Cotton Mather, the mythical epitome of Puritan repression, was proud of his membership in the scientifically prestigious Royal Society, and once had a bomb tossed through his study window because he publicly advocated the fearsome, radical reform of inoculation against disease. A majority of the educated clergy petitioned the government to take steps to stop the mass hysteria of the Salem witch trials. That popular history should blame them for this and for all of the repression and intolerance of **New England Puritanism** is an ironic commentary on the plight of the American intellectual who apparently will be blamed, no matter what.

## III.

No one doubts that intellectuals can be arrogant, power-hungry and generally as obnoxious as any one else. If even this sermon is an example of that self-justifying original sin, so be it. I plead guilty. And no one doubts that intellect can be overvalued or quarrels with the attempt to put it in its proper perspective in the totality of Christian faith. No one suggests that the non-intellectual is not a Christian or that he is not valued by God. But neither should we of the United Church of Christ grovel apologetically for the intellectual aspect of our heritage and of our present identity. We have been bullied long enough by those who support the charge that we lack the spirit

of God by perpetuating an anti - intellectual mythology. For example, we need to face the fact that most of the young people in our churches who commit themselves to the professional ministry find that commitment not in the inspiring, emotional piety of some local parish but in the heady, intellectual atmosphere of the college classroom. Apparently the life of the mind has some capacity to breed commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, contrary to another popular myth, every recent study has provided overwhelming testimony that religious devotion, and by that I mean such mundane expressions of it as church attendance, tends to increase with the level of education. In a recent massive study of parochial education, the Roman Catholic Church was astounded to discover that this was true and that it was true whether the education was religious or secular. Practically everyone knows someone whose faith was undermined by learning, but few stop to wonder why it is that others **find** their faith in learning. If they did, they would realize that those who blame loss of faith on education almost invariably have other and deeper reasons. Only an anti-intellectual bias keeps alive that ancient myth that education destroys faith. It's not true.

Furthermore, there is every indication that education not only tends to foster religious participation, but that it also has a positive effect on religious values and attitude and behavior. The same study of Catholic parochial education showed that tolerance, the capacity to understand and accept individual differences, thus the capacity to sustain relationships of love, even marital stability, tend to increase

with the level of education, and that this is true whether the education is religious or not. Apparently the power to practice Jesus' basic commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" has something to do with the mind. Is it not more than possible that, contrary to popular myth, the life of the mind makes an important contribution to a Christian faith when that faith is measured by moral behavior and not by emotional fervor of adherence to dogma?

Instead of our characteristically defensive posture, I would suggest that we be a little offensive for a change, and at the risk of overstating our case, which of course can be overstated, say to the anti-intellectual Christians in our society that stupidity and ignorance are sins against God, that the refusal to learn the facts, the refusal to seek the truth, the failure to use the mind to its full potential in facing the issues of our faith and of our time, is an offense against the Almighty. If there is a hell, we may be surprised to find it populated not only by the immoral intellectuals who we have been assured so often will be there, but also by the piously ignorant. God gave us our minds to use. He didn't make us headless horsemen. If we don't use our minds, then surely we stand under His judgment and in need of His forgiveness for a failure of stewardship. Against all of the tendencies in American religion to resent and belittle the life of the mind, we firmly take our stand with those words from II Timothy:

Study to show yourself approved of God, a workman who does not need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

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