

Fool-osophy: Gracefull thought

by [Richard J. Mouw](#) in the [March 24, 2009](#) issue

I collect expressions of anti-intellectualism. I even consider myself to be a connoisseur of the sorts of things that fall within this genre. But this is no mere hobby. I was raised in a spiritual environment in which the intellectual life was regarded with suspicion, even with overt hostility at times. The anti-intellectual one-liners of my childhood still echo in my heart. “The only school anyone has to go to is the Holy Ghost’s school of the Bible!” “If you have to get educated, be sure to get the victory over it!”

There were times when those warnings hit close to home. Just before I went off to graduate school in philosophy, for example, a dear family friend sent me a letter expressing concern for my soul. He quoted Paul’s warning in Colossians 2 about not being corrupted “through philosophy and vain deceit.” In quoting the verse he spelled the key word “fool-osophy.”

I take time on occasion to remember my spiritual roots, to examine my collection of anti-intellectual expressions, and to meditate on this or that warning against the life of the mind. Testing the state of my soul against the complaints of those who view people like me—people devoted to intellectual pursuits—with suspicion has led me to practice an important personal exercise in spiritual self-examination. To be sure, that takes some discernment. By their very nature, attacks on the intellect display considerable rhetorical overkill, so in most cases I must separate the wheat from the chaff.

Here is one of my favorite overkill examples, quoted by Richard Hofstadter in his classic study, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. Peter Cartwright was a 19th-century Methodist circuit rider who observed that he served the cause of the gospel with wonderful results without ever having darkened the door of a theological school. He and his friends, he declared, have “preached the Gospel with more success and had more seals to their ministry” than all of those “sapient, downy D.D.’s in modern times who . . . are seeking presidencies or professorships in colleges, editorships, or any agencies that have a fat salary, and are trying to create

newfangled institutions where good livings can be monopolized”—and all of this “while millions of poor, dying sinners are thronging the way to hell without God, without Gospel.”

As someone who occupies both a presidency and a professorship, I take some comfort in knowing that I don’t exactly fit Cartwright’s description of the “sapient, downy” type. But there is enough of me in his account to force me to be sure that I have set my priorities right.

Some of the anti-intellectual statements in my collection force me to probe a little deeper spiritually. A case in point is on the opening page of the great devotional classic *The Imitation of Christ*, where Thomas à Kempis urges us to forsake the pseudowisdom of “the world” in order to render our lives wholly “conformable to Christ.” He spells out his plea with a couple of choice examples. It doesn’t do us much good, he says, to be able to argue eloquently about the Trinity if we lack the kind of humility that is pleasing to the triune God. What is the merit, he asks, of being able to define *compunction* if we are not “pricked in heart” by the sins we have committed? And this: “If you knew the whole Bible scientifically, and the words of the Philosophers; what good would it all be, that loveless and graceless knowledge?”

It’s easy to point out here that Thomas is presenting us with some false choices. Of course it is regrettable when a person can set forth all sorts of arguments defending the Trinity but for all of that is living a life that displeases the Trinity, and yes, it is better to experience compunction in your own soul than to offer a learned definition of the word *compunction*. Graceless knowledge is surely something to be avoided. But isn’t it good to have some people who are able both to speak carefully about trinitarian dogma and also to live in ways that are pleasing to the triune God? Or what about someone who not only has experienced genuine compunction in the soul but also has managed to write a book on the subject? Surely one alternative to pursuing a graceless knowing is the cultivation of gracefull knowledge.

A grace-filled life of the mind will draw on some important virtues, not the least of them being humility and a desire to serve others by showing the kind of love with which we have been loved by God. Simone Weil says somewhere in her writings that the virtues necessary to sustain the intellectual life are pretty much the same as those that are necessary to sustain the spiritual-contemplative life. Thinking carefully, then, can itself be an important exercise of the imitation of Christ. Not a bad reason for at least some of us to take on the task of “fool-osophy.”