

# Mere Discipleship

Growing in Wisdom and Hope

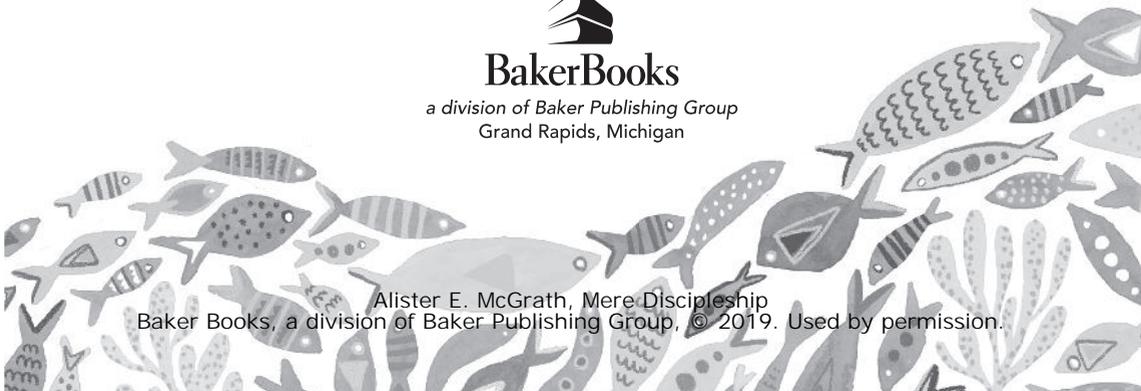
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To Regent College,  
Vancouver

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# Introduction

We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom.

Edward O. Wilson<sup>1</sup>

This short book deals with the theme of Christian discipleship—the quest to go beyond a superficial grasp of our faith, discover its depths and riches, and be refreshed and transformed by them. “Discipleship” is not a biblical term; it is, however, most certainly a biblical theme. It is about a conscious and committed decision to be followers of Jesus Christ in every way possible, including the way we think, love, and act. It is about growing in our faith, as we quest for wisdom rather than the mere accumulation of information about Christianity. Discipleship is rooted in a secure, reflective, and deepening grasp of the Christian gospel. This kind of wisdom goes far beyond a simple (and often superficial) knowledge of basic Christian ideas. It arises from a deep and prolonged personal reflection on the Christian faith over an extended period of time, informing both thought and action.

This quest for Christian wisdom lies at the heart of a “discipleship of the mind”—an acquired habit of understanding and imagining ourselves and our world that is firmly rooted in the Christian gospel.

It allows us to see things as they really are, stripping away illusions and misunderstandings. It also helps us with what the American philosopher John Dewey called the “deepest problem of modern life”—that we have failed to integrate our “thoughts about the world” with our thoughts about “value and purpose.”<sup>2</sup> We don’t just want to know how things *work*; we want to know what they *mean*.

Yet the discipleship of the mind does not take the form of an immediate illumination of our minds, as if there is some dramatic moment of clarification through which we suddenly find ourselves in possession of full answers to all of life’s questions. Rather, it is a process of gradual growth in wisdom, paralleling an athlete’s training regime, through which we absorb and assimilate the Christian vision of reality and allow it to percolate through our minds and inform the way in which we think, imagine, and act. Happily, other people can help us do this—especially those who have thought about this over many years. This is one reason why engaging with writers who are thought to be wise—such as the four figures considered in the second part of this work—can be so helpful.

As in my earlier work *Mere Theology* (2010),<sup>3</sup> I engage regularly and appreciatively with C. S. Lewis, now widely regarded as one of the most significant Christian writers of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> I draw on Lewis in two ways. First, I endorse Lewis’s notion of a generous consensual Christian orthodoxy, famously set out in his classic work *Mere Christianity* (1952). This emphasizes the core ideas that Christians share in common, without advocating any specific denominational agenda. Christian discipleship transcends denominational boundaries, even though it can be enriched by the spiritual traditions of individual denominations.

Second, I frequently use Lewis himself as a point of reference in this work, not least on account of his idea of Christianity as offering a “big picture” of reality, which helps us to see ourselves and our world in a new way. This basic theme is expressed with particular clarity in an image used by Lewis in the concluding sentence of his

landmark lecture “Is Theology Poetry?” (1945), which is explicitly referenced at three points in this work and implicitly assumed at many others: “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”<sup>5</sup> For Lewis, the “big picture” that lies at the heart of the Christian faith allows us to discern the patterns of meaning and value that lie behind and beneath our observations. Discipleship is about grasping this picture and living meaningfully within its frame.

Each of the thirteen chapters gathered together in this collection addresses aspects of the theme of discipleship. Some had their origins as sermons, some as informal talks, and some as major public presentations over the period 2010–17. I have edited these lectures and presentations to reduce their size, achieve consistency of style, and sharpen their focus.

The work is divided into three parts. The first consists of five substantial chapters introducing the discipleship of the mind, developing the general theme of what I like to call the “reflective inhabitation” of the Christian faith. To be a Christian is not to passively accept a set of intellectual beliefs, but to take delight in them and explore their implications for the ways in which we think and behave. As the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset observed, we exist within a world that is shaped and nourished by beliefs,<sup>6</sup> which in turn shape our mental and spiritual life. These beliefs shape our vision of reality: “In them we live, move, and exist.”<sup>7</sup> They concern what really matters and the difference that this makes to the business of life.

Ludwig Wittgenstein made a similar point, suggesting that religious belief is about “passionately taking up” an interpretation of the world, so that it is not simply a way of thinking but “a way of living.”<sup>8</sup> Good theology is thus about fostering authentic and meaningful living, not simply right thinking. And for Christians, that life of faith is supported and nourished by the community of faith—by the church.<sup>9</sup>

Christians stand within and belong to a community of reflection and proclamation, deeply rooted in the past yet able and willing to engage the issues of the present. We gain insights and wisdom from those who have journeyed in faith before us, as well as those who are now journeying alongside us on the road. These five chapters open up and explore some important themes, such as how the creeds help us deepen our faith, the role of the church in encouraging discipleship, and the place of books and mentors in our personal growth.

The second part of this work is more focused, looking at four leading recent exemplars of a discipleship of the mind—Dorothy L. Sayers (1893–1957), C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), John Stott (1921–2011), and J. I. Packer (born 1926). These chapters were originally public lectures. These four writers have developed their own distinct modes of reflective inhabitation of the Christian faith from which there is much to be learned. These are only four of the writers who have become my fellow wayfarers on the road of faith. It goes without saying that many others—such as Marilynne Robinson—could easily have been included. I have highlighted some points made by these four that I personally find both wise and illuminating. Most of us end up adopting a group of writers as our trusted friends—not because we agree with them on everything, but because we find them to be thoughtful, engaging, and helpful. Even when we disagree with them on some things, we find others that they help us find new insights into.

Finally, the third part of this work brings together four sermons touching on the discipleship of the mind, focusing on how we cope with journeying in hope through darkness. The elusive word “hope” has been the subject of immense interest in recent years. Dozens of theories and definitions have been put forward about what the word means, and the difference that hope makes to human life.<sup>10</sup> Christianity has always known this idea, which it sees in its own distinctive way as allowing us to cope with suffering, to journey through darkness, and to live meaningfully in a world in which things often don’t seem

to make complete sense. The Christian philosopher John Macmurray captures this aspect of hope well: “The maxim of illusory religion runs: ‘Fear not; trust in God and he will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you’; that of real religion, on the contrary is, ‘Fear not; the things that you are afraid of are quite likely to happen to you, but they are nothing to be afraid of.’”<sup>11</sup>

Two of these final four pieces are university sermons, one preached before the University of Oxford in 2016, the other before the University of Cambridge in 2015. These sermons are traditionally seen as substantial reflections on aspects of the Christian faith, intended to engage and stimulate university audiences. The remaining two are much shorter, representing sermons preached in Oxford in 2013 and 2014, which were broadcast live on BBC Radio 4. As the BBC allowed me only 1,000 words for these sermons, I found myself struggling to pack as much insight as possible into such a short piece.

It remains for me to thank those who invited me to give these lectures and presentations in the first place, and my many correspondents who urged me to publish them in the second. There is much more that needs to be said about all the themes engaged in this collection, yet I hope these pieces will serve as useful starting points for going “further up and further in” (C. S. Lewis) to the life of faith.

I have pleasure in dedicating this small volume to Regent College, Vancouver, a school of theology that excels in bringing together heart and mind in exploring and grasping the riches of the Christian faith. I have long valued my association with this school and its dedicated and talented faculty.

Alister E. McGrath  
Oxford

PART 1

# The Discipleship of the Mind

*Five Reflections*

# 1

## The Lord Is My Light *On the Discipleship of the Mind*

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?  
Psalm 27:1

These opening words of Psalm 27 are familiar to us all. For me, they have a special significance, given my long association with Oxford University, as its motto is *Dominus illuminatio mea*, “The Lord is my light.” My topic in this chapter is the rich and exciting idea that the Christian faith opens up new ways of thinking and has the potential to have an impact on the church, the academy, and society as a whole.<sup>1</sup> I want to commend a “discipleship of the mind,” in which we deliberately and intentionally cultivate a Christian habit of thought, as part of the grace-wrought process of transformation by the gospel.

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This chapter is based on the 2010 Laing Lecture, delivered at the London School of Theology on February 23, 2010.

The Christian faith helps us to form habits of seeing and shape directions of gaze that change the way in which we think about things, experience the world, and act within it. It gives us a new way of perceiving the world,<sup>2</sup> allowing us to understand ourselves and this world in a distinctively Christian way. We acquire a new way of thinking, which differs radically from the habits of thought we pick up from the natural world and from secular culture. We need to be helped to see things as they really are; the “natural” human perspective on things needs to be transformed by divine grace. In this chapter, I shall explore some ways in which the Christian faith illuminates reality, as a way of encouraging both a discipleship of the mind and a committed and informed engagement with our culture.

Light has long been seen as an important analogy for truth.<sup>3</sup> In speaking about God as our light, we are speaking of both the human capacity to see and God’s ability to illuminate. The two are interconnected: without light, we cannot see; the effectiveness of a source of light is judged by what it enables us to see and how well it allows us to find our way through the darkness. The renewal of our minds and the reshaping of its habits are part of the transformation and renewal that are brought by the gospel (Rom. 12:2).

## The Shaping of a Christian Mind

It is more than half a century since Harry Blamires (1916–2017) published his landmark work *The Christian Mind*.<sup>4</sup> Blamires’s work was clearly inspired by C. S. Lewis, who was one of the formative influences in persuading him to write it. *The Christian Mind* opens by documenting the “lack of a Christian mind,” before moving on to set out a programmatic vision of how such a mind could be recovered.

Blamires noted that most of the books that shaped and molded culture in his day were being written by non-Christians. He called for a renewal of a Christian life of the mind, especially in the academy and professions. It is far from clear that things have improved since

then. I very much fear that Christianity is in danger of becoming detached from public debates and discussions—not because of any failings with the Christian vision of reality but due to a lack of vision and confidence on the part of some of its leaders and representatives.

I believe that the situation faced by Christianity throughout the West makes the renewal of the Christian mind imperative. The rise of the “New Atheism”—a rhetorically aggressive movement associated especially with Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens—has seen fundamental challenges to the rationality of the Christian faith that are more than capable of being countered, if (and it is a big “if”) Christians know enough about their faith and are willing to affirm and defend its core themes in the public domain.

We need to develop a discipleship of the mind that will help Christians appreciate the rational and existential strengths of their faith, as well as the corresponding weaknesses of the New Atheism. There are three basic criticisms that can be made of the New Atheism, to which others could easily be added.<sup>5</sup>

1. The New Atheism criticizes concepts of God that bear little relation to those associated with Christianity. It ridicules caricatures and parodies of Christianity rather than engaging respectfully with authentic Christian ideas and practices.
2. It offers hopelessly oversimplified accounts of religion—such as the discredited but still influential Victorian notion that science and religion are necessarily and permanently at war with each other—without indicating that these views are no longer taken seriously by academic scholarship.
3. It demands that religious people “prove” their ideas, while failing to apply these same criteria of judgment to its own beliefs.

This third point is particularly important, given the New Atheism’s persistent and uncritical suggestion that “faith” is invariably “blind faith.” The philosopher Bertrand Russell is often described as an

“atheist” in popular secularist publications. In fact, Russell was far too sophisticated a thinker to allow himself to be categorized in this way. Rather, like the earlier philosopher David Hume, Russell maintained a skeptical attitude to metaphysical questions. Philosophy teaches us how to cope with such uncertainty, Russell suggested—including uncertainty about whether there is, or is not, a God. “To teach how to live without certainty, and yet without being paralysed by hesitation, is perhaps the chief thing that philosophy, in our age, can still do for those who study it.”<sup>6</sup> Epistemologically, Russell was an agnostic, who knew he could not prove atheism was right; he therefore, in effect, chose to live as an atheist, realizing that this attitude (like its religious counterpart) lay beyond final verification.<sup>7</sup>

When all is said and done, the New Atheism is a rhetorically supercharged agnosticism that hopes the ferocity of its words will divert attention from the poverty of its arguments. Everyone, whether religious or secular, ends up believing some things—often some very important things—that they cannot *prove* to be true. That’s just the dilemma we face as human beings.

My point here is that Christians need to gain confidence in their own ideas if they are to offer a plausible rebuttal of the New Atheist worldview. To appreciate the importance of this point, we might reflect on some words of the Oxford theologian and New Testament scholar Austin Farrer. Writing shortly after the death of C. S. Lewis, Farrer tried to pinpoint the grounds of Lewis’s remarkable and continuing success as a cultural apologist. In part, Farrer believed that this was due to Lewis’s ability to demonstrate the reasonableness of faith: “Though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.”<sup>8</sup> Farrer is surely right. Responding to intellectual and cultural criticisms of faith may not lead to conversion and conviction. Yet a failure to respond creates

the impression that faith is for those who have neither the ability nor inclination to think, that faith lacks any evidential basis, or that the death of faith is the inevitable outcome of cultural progress. The lack of a plausible and informed rejoinder to these criticisms merely solidifies the growing impression in Western culture at large that Christian faith is an endangered species that belongs to a less critical prescientific age.

### **Anti-Intellectualism and the “Foolishness” of the Gospel**

As a close observer of the Christian scene in the West, I am disturbed at the recent rise of anti-intellectualism and a lack of interest in scholarship within many churches, encouraged by some Christian leaders. I happened to be present at a meeting of some evangelical students some years ago, when Richard Dawkins’s *God Delusion* was being discussed. The basic consensus was that there was no need to take Dawkins’s arguments seriously or set out a Christian alternative. The solution that their leader recommended was an energetic and frequent public citation of Psalm 14:1: “Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’” I intend no disrespect here but this rather smug response is totally unacceptable. It represents a lack of vision, a loss of nerve and, above all, a failure to take the gospel seriously and give good answers when the situation demands it (1 Pet. 3:15).<sup>9</sup>

One of the great themes of the rich Christian vision of reality is that it has the power to attract and convict morally, imaginatively, and rationally. Grasping the truth of this vision inexorably leads on to the appreciation of its delight, wonder, excitement, and challenge. Christian leaders are called on to act as channels, mediums, or conduits for the glory of the Christian vision, allowing it to have an impact on our culture, using images and words that this culture can understand. A recovery of the life of the mind is essential for the survival and well-being of the church.

My concern in this chapter is to reaffirm the need to love God with “all [our] mind” (Mark 12:29–30) as an integral aspect of the Christian life of faith. Not only is this mandated by the gospel; it enables us to go deeper into our faith and engage with those outside the church who have questions, doubts, or objections about the Christian faith. Every faculty we possess is to be placed at the service of the gospel. Paul urges his readers to be transformed through the renewing of their minds that the gospel brings about (Rom. 12:2). It is essential that this process of intellectual renewal and redirection is encouraged and the shape of a Christian mind is explored.

Some Christians resist Paul’s injunctions for the renewal of the mind, arguing that he elsewhere asserts that Christianity represents a form of “foolishness” opposed to human knowledge and wisdom (such as 1 Cor. 1:18). Yet this represents a misreading of Paul’s concerns about the situation at Corinth on the one hand and what is meant by the notion of a “Christian mind” on the other. Paul believed that the church at Corinth was in danger of being influenced by early forms of Gnosticism, which held that individuals were saved by a secret, arcane knowledge, known only to a few privileged insiders. Others at Corinth prized intellectual sophistication and were not prepared to tolerate anything that seemed to lack this or other marks of cultural erudition.<sup>10</sup> Paul rightly rejects any such notions, insisting that the Christian gospel must be taken on its own terms, even if it counters prevailing cultural notions of acceptability or wisdom.

Paul declares that Christians possess “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16), which he distinguishes from alternative approaches to wisdom already present at Corinth. A “Christian mind” is the distinctive mind-set, a way of thinking that is shaped and nourished by the Christian faith.<sup>11</sup> It is not about a quest for exotic or arcane knowledge, or the cultivation of academic arrogance; rather, it is about allowing the light of Christ to shine on our intellects, so that the transforming power of God’s grace might renew our minds, not merely our souls. Christianity is shaped by a rich and coherent trinitarian

logic of faith, which calls into question the thinner rationalities of secular culture and offers a more satisfying view of the world.<sup>12</sup>

## **The Gospel and the Illumination of Reality**

Let me return to the image with which I opened this chapter—God as a source of light, illuminating the realities of human existence and the natural order, and showing them up for what they really are. It has become familiar to many through the writings of C. S. Lewis, which regularly explore the idea of God as a sun or a source of light that allows us to see things properly. The Christian idea of God, for Lewis, is both intelligible and the source of intelligibility—a theme summed up in his signature declaration, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”<sup>13</sup> The clarity of intellectual and spiritual vision offered by the Christian faith is thus itself, in Lewis’s mind, an indicator of its truth. I regularly make use of this landmark statement, which is both imaginatively engaging and intellectually illuminating.

Let us pause here and make sure that we have understood what Lewis is saying through this visually striking analogy. Lewis suggests that the process of observation involves two elements: the human act of seeing and the process of illumination, which allows things to be seen. There are limits to human vision, as we all know when we try to make out the features of a landscape on a moonless night or find our way around a dark cellar. Lewis’s first point is that the gospel illuminates the world, so our natural human limitations are transcended. It is a theme familiar to any reader of Scripture: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105). As Augustine of Hippo once remarked, “The mind needs to be enlightened by light from outside itself, so that it can participate in truth, as it is not itself the nature of truth. You will light my lamp, Lord.”<sup>14</sup> We must not overinterpret Augustine’s imagery here; the point he

is making is that God, as the source of all truth, graciously helps humanity to find that truth. Without that help, there are limits to what we can discover.<sup>15</sup>

The second theme that is implicit in Lewis's image is the importance of the human act of seeing. While some philosophers of the Enlightenment era used to treat seeing as a passive process in which we merely absorb information from our environment, it is now recognized to be an active process, in which we put together the elements of our picture of the world. We can be trained to see more effectively, by learning what we should be looking for. We can cultivate habits of heightened attention and perception, which make us more alert to what is present around us—things that otherwise we might look at but not notice or appreciate.

Part of the process of Christian discipleship is the cultivation of theological attentiveness, which helps us to deliberately see things from the perspective of faith and savor what we find. The American novelist Henry Miller captured this point well when he noted that “the moment one gives close attention to any thing, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.”<sup>16</sup> Christ's command to “consider the lilies of the field” (Matt. 6:28–29) is an excellent example of the outcome of such attentiveness, paralleled in some ways by Geoffrey Chaucer's “Ode to a Daisy.”<sup>17</sup> More recently, Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem “God's Grandeur” models a theologically principled and spiritually fruitful attentiveness to the created order, arising from a disciplined Christian engagement with the world of nature.<sup>18</sup>

This way of thinking and seeing is a habit of mind, something that is to be practiced and cultivated. It is nourished by reading Scripture and inhabiting the worship-shaped world of the church, in which the Christian story is constantly presented and represented. Yet this is not something that we merely absorb passively; we must actively develop it, deliberately and consciously asking how we might deepen our understanding of our faith. This is what I hope

we might find—but fear that we all too often do not find—in Christian preaching.

Christianity gives us a new set of spectacles through which we see the world, allowing us to discern its deeper logic. The world is illuminated by the light of the gospel and interpreted by the believing mind. This process of “seeing” involves both intellectual analysis and value judgments. It is not a set of principles that are learned by heart and regurgitated on demand. Rather, it is an acquired mode of reflection, a habit of thinking, that is both commended and embodied in the Christian story.

The Christian faith enables us to see the world in a manner that transcends the empirical. It offers us theoretical spectacles that allow us to behold things in such a way that we are able to rise above the limits of the observable and move into the richer realm of discerned meaning and value. The natural world thus becomes seen and interpreted as God’s creation, bearing the subtle imprint of its maker. We see not only the empirical reality of the world but also its deeper value and true significance. Neither value nor significance, it must be emphasized, are empirical notions—things that we can see around us. They must be discerned and then superimposed on an empirical reading of the world.

## **The Discipleship of the Mind and Christian Witness**

We are called to exercise a Christian discipleship of the mind in every area of life. Whether we are called to serve God in the arts or in music, in health work or in international development, in the academy or in politics, we must work out what it means to be a Christian in these contexts. Sometimes this will mean manifesting and embodying the love, compassion, and care that is so central a feature of the life of faith. Sometimes it will involve challenging ideologies that have become deeply embedded in the academy, culture, or society. There is no area of life in which we are excused by God

from the need to work out our discipleship. We are called to be witnesses, to allow our light to be seen; to be salt to the world around us. And we can only do that through our presence in the world—through inhabiting situations to which we feel called.

Some Christians withdraw from society, believing that it contaminates the purity of their faith and morals. Yet to refuse to inhabit or engage society is to deny God the opportunity to use us as a channel and conduit for the presence of Christ. We are called to be in the world but not of the world—in other words, to be present and available in secular society but not to conform to its ideologies, ethos, and ideas. The Christian challenge is thus to reflect on how we might transform the world rather than conform to it. Yet we can only transform our world by inhabiting it, learning its language, and telling it about the “boundless riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8).

So where do we need to be, if this is to happen? Whether this question is posed geographically or sociologically, the answer is the same: *everywhere*. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I want to emphasize particularly the importance of engaging with the academy and the learned professions. Whether we speak of poets, economists, lawyers, bankers, or philosophers, the issue for Christian discipleship remains essentially the same: a quest for professional competence that is both energized and informed by the Christian vision of reality. The first question that might be asked is, How can your faith make you a better lawyer? The second might be, How can your faith make the law better? How does the “mind of Christ” bear on this specific professional community?

We have now come to a point where specificity begins to become important. It is one thing to outline a general principle, but how is it to be put into practice? I must now turn to the question of how faith interacts with professional lives. It is clearly beyond the scope of this chapter to look at a wide range of professional activities. In his *Christian Mind*, Harry Blamires examined how the life of the mind could be explored in a number of academic disciplines. You will have

to forgive me for restricting myself here to one area of professional activity in which I myself engaged for several years—the study of the natural sciences. I want to use this as an example of the kind of thinking and reflection that needs to be done. So what insights and motivations does the Christian faith bring to this area of activity?

### **A Case Study: The Natural Sciences**

My own time as a scientist impressed on me the privilege of being able to investigate a universe that is both rationally transparent and rationally beautiful, capable of being represented in elegant mathematical forms. One of the most significant parallels between the natural sciences and Christian theology is a fundamental conviction that the world is characterized by regularity and intelligibility.<sup>19</sup> The natural sciences are founded on the perception of an explicable regularity to the world, which is capable of being represented mathematically. In other words, there is something about the world—and the nature of the human mind—that allows patterns within nature to be discerned and represented.

This perception of ordering and intelligibility is of immense significance, at both the scientific and religious levels. As Paul Davies points out, “In Renaissance Europe, the justification for what we today call the scientific approach to inquiry was the belief in a rational God whose created order could be discerned from a careful study of nature.”<sup>20</sup> Yet how are we to account for the regularity of nature? And for the human ability to represent it so well? Where do our notions of explanation, regularity, and intelligibility come from? Why is nature actually intelligible to us? The human capacity for understanding our world seems to be far in excess of anything that could reasonably be considered to be simply an evolutionary necessity or even a fortuitous by-product of the evolutionary process. As Albert Einstein observed, “The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible.”<sup>21</sup> Einstein rightly saw that

the question of the intelligibility of our universe might be raised by science but cannot be answered by science.

The physicist-turned-theologian John Polkinghorne is one of many who have highlighted the importance of the “congruence between our minds and the universe, between the rationality experienced within and the rationality observed without.”<sup>22</sup> A naturalistic metaphysics, he suggests, is unable to cast light on the deep intelligibility of the universe. A theistic metaphysics argues, however, that there is a common origin to both the rationality that we experience within our minds and the rational structure we observe in the physical world around us. Both are grounded in the rationality of God. In other words, Christianity offers an intellectual framework, a way of understanding and seeing our world, that makes sense of what is otherwise little more than a happy coincidence or an inexplicable (though fortunate) cosmic accident.

Others have pointed to the growing interest in anthropic phenomena and suggested that these are also consonant with a Christian way of thinking.<sup>23</sup> The heavily freighted vocabulary of “fine-tuning” is widely used to express the idea that the universe appears to have possessed certain qualities from the moment of its inception that were favorable to the production of intelligent life on Earth at this point in cosmic history, capable of reflecting on the implications of its existence.<sup>24</sup> As I point out in my 2009 Gifford Lectures at the ancient University of Aberdeen, these themes resonate strongly with the Christian vision of reality.<sup>25</sup> They prove nothing, and other explanations are certainly possible, yet there is an intellectual resonance that can hardly be ignored. The Christian mental map makes sense of this aspect of the natural world, as it does of so much of the scientific enterprise as a whole. Yet it does more than just make sense of things; it offers us a critical framework within which we can operate professionally. Let me explain what I mean by this.

Science is an activity that is carried out by human beings. So what understanding of human nature undergirds this enterprise and

informs its outcomes? The Enlightenment had a thoroughly optimistic view of human nature; we are good people, who want to do good things. Science thus enables us to build a better world. Yet few would now share this charmingly innocent and naive view of human nature. The wars of the twentieth century have put an end to such naivety, not least because of the widespread application of science to the development of weapons of mass destruction.

The history of the twentieth century is perhaps the greatest obstacle that the metanarrative of secular progress has to overcome, especially in relation to its core assumption of the fundamental goodness of humanity. The First World War, the Great Depression, and the Second World War all raised awkward questions about the plausibility of this narrative. We were told that if we got rid of religion—or at least neutralized it, pulling out its teeth—then the likelihood of war would be drastically reduced, since religion was a key element in causing global conflict. Yet as far as scholars can see, there were no significant religious motivations for either the First World War (death toll around 16 million) or the Second World War (death toll around 60 million).

The cultural critic Terry Eagleton ridiculed the Enlightenment dream of “untrammelled human progress” as a “bright-eyed superstition,” a fairy tale that lacks any rigorous evidential base. “If ever there was a pious myth and a piece of credulous superstition, it is the liberal-rationalist belief that, a few hiccups apart, we are all steadily *en route* to a finer world.”<sup>26</sup> Science has become woven into this rationalist myth, and it is time to challenge this naive account of history. We are invited to question fictions about both human individuals and society, even if these consoling fictions are deeply embedded within the secular Western mind-set.

Richard Dawkins and other writers associated with the New Atheism often accuse those who believe in God of holding on to “unevidenced beliefs,” in contrast to the rigorously proven factual statements of their own enlightened atheism. Yet what of its own

unevidenced and uncritical belief in human progress? Eagleton dismisses this myth as a demonstrably false pastiche, a luminous example of “blind faith.”<sup>27</sup> What rational soul, Eagleton asks, would sign up to such a secular myth, which is obliged to treat such human-created catastrophes as Hiroshima, Auschwitz, and apartheid as “a few local hiccups” that in no way discredit or disrupt the steady upward progress of history?

My concern here is not to debate the ethics of napalm or nuclear weapons, but to emphasize the need for a critical perspective that avoids any idealization of human history or any specific area of professional life, such as the natural sciences. A realistic view of human nature is essential if we are to make sense of the failures and foibles evident in the worlds of politics, business, science, and economics and do something about them.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have concentrated on an area I know well—the natural sciences—but the approach to discipleship that I have briefly outlined here can be applied to other professional contexts and academic disciplines. We need individuals who are both theologically informed and professionally competent, who can make the connections between these two domains. Professional competence is now a precondition for professional attention. For Christianity to be taken seriously in this important area of life, we need committed and competent people who can model professional excellence and personal commitment. They need to see this for what it really is—a *vocation*, something to which God calls us that is different from but no less important than ordained ministry.

So why is this important? Let me mention just two points here in closing. The first point is so obvious that I hesitate to develop it. We need competent Christians to be salt and light in the professions and the academic world. We cannot allow a Christian presence to be

excluded from any area of our culture. Some are trying to exclude a Christian voice as part of their secularizing agenda or in pursuit of a misguided interpretation of the idea of “multiculturalism” that affirms every cultural option except Christianity. These need to be challenged, but I am concerned about something much more disturbing—the failure of the churches to articulate a “theology of calling” that values and, above all, encourages Christians to enter professional sectors and see themselves as having a ministry there.

Second, as I have just noted, many areas of professional and academic life have come to be shaped by ideologies that often have quite strongly antireligious tones. As an example of this, we might note the curiously uncontested discursive privilege accorded by many social theorists to atheism. The most obvious explanation of this otherwise puzzling phenomenon is that atheism has successfully presented itself as the “rational default category” against which all other beliefs are to be judged. Atheism is held to offer a neutral standpoint, a position of “value neutrality,” that allows religious beliefs and behaviors to be examined and assessed without the distorting influence of faith commitments.<sup>28</sup> This is simply not the case, yet it can easily become the accepted wisdom of our age if Christians fail to challenge it and demonstrate that there are better readings of this situation.

I have set out a vision of the “mind of Christ” as an acquired habit of mind, a mental discipline, that transforms the way in which we see the world and ourselves, and thus inspires us to reflective and informed action. I have emphasized the intellectual capaciousness and resilience of the Christian faith, which enables it to engage meaningfully with the contemporary cultural concerns. Yet I have also raised concerns about the failure of the churches to articulate a “theology of calling” that recognizes that God equips and calls people to be his servants and witnesses in every corner of life—including the professional and academic worlds.

The New Atheism has issued a wake-up call to the churches. We need a new generation of public intellectuals who will value the life of

the mind and realize its importance for apologetics and evangelism. Yes, there is more to the gospel than its new vision of reality, but we need to make sure that vision is powerfully and faithfully proclaimed. There is no need to make Christianity relevant or to make it credible. It already possesses these attributes, which are deeply embedded within its inner logic. Our task is to discover and appreciate the intellectual depths and delights of our faith and ensure that these are proclaimed and presented to our culture at large. It helps us in our own journey of faith, as we aim to grow in wisdom; yet perhaps more importantly, it deepens the quality and power of our witness to God as our light and our salvation to those around us.