

O N E



## The Christian Mind

*"Most Christians would rather die than think; in fact they do."*

BERTRAND RUSSELL



One summer while studying at Oxford University in England, I was invited to a reception for visiting students. Within the first five minutes, I found myself in conversation with two women, one from Florida and the other from California. After exchanging the usual pleasantries, I was asked what I did for a living.

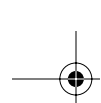
I told them that I was the pastor of a church.

The woman from Florida seemed primed for the moment. "Well, I'm glad somebody like you is at a place like this so that you can give people the truth. You know, the *real* story. Why don't more ministers do that?"

"Well," I said, "I'm not sure I know what you're talking about."

"You know, all of that stuff about Jesus having died on a cross, resurrected on the third day and all the miracles. I mean, he





never died like that. In fact, he lived a long, full life, got married and had kids.

“Oh, really?” I said.

“Don’t you believe that?” She was incredulous.

I had just met this woman and didn’t want to immediately launch into a debate with her—it was, after all, such a pleasant English afternoon—but this was a bit much. I searched for the least inflammatory response I could think of: “I’m sure there are those who might agree with you, but I confess that I am not one of them.”

“You mean you believe all of that stuff in the Bible?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“You mean, like the virgin birth?”

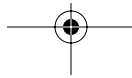
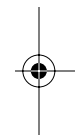
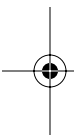
“Yes,” I said.

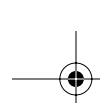
You could see it written all over her face. Here was a seemingly intelligent man studying at Oxford who says he believes the Bible. There was, to her eyes, something terribly wrong with this picture.

Our conversation went on in earnest but with a fascinating twist. While the woman from Florida continued to ask questions and raise objections, her friend from California joined with me to try to explain that perhaps some of the sources for her reconstruction of Jesus and the Christian faith were less than sound.

Impressed by her perspective, I said to my new ally, “So would you consider yourself a Christian?”

“No,” she said. “I’m open to it, but would still consider myself something of a seeker.”





Then to my surprise, the woman with whom I'd been debating said, "Well, I would certainly consider *myself* a Christian."

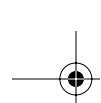
Such conversations raise a foundational question: What does it mean for a mind to be Christian? In that English garden, behind Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford, a woman who was not a follower of Christ was more orthodox and biblical (and informed) in her thinking than one who professed an allegiance to Christ. Is a Christian mind something that can be detailed? Of course. This is one of the principal tasks of the queen of the sciences, Christian theology. As I teach my seminary students, one of the primary goals of Christian theology is to determine what is—and what is not—orthodoxy. There is right thinking, and there is wrong thinking. *Wrong* thinking, in theological terms, is called heresy.

And there is much heresy.

The National Study of Youth and Religion, conducted from 2001 to 2005 and perhaps the largest research project on the religious and spiritual lives of American adolescents, cataloged the demise of a Christian worldview *among Christians*. While the vast majority of U.S. teenagers identified themselves as Christian, the "language, and therefore experience, of Trinity, holiness, sin, grace, justification, sanctification, church, Eucharist, and heaven and hell appear, among most Christian teenagers in the United States, . . . to be supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness, and an earned heavenly reward."

Principal investigator Christian Smith writes, "It is not so much





that U.S. Christianity is being secularized. Rather more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith.”

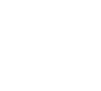
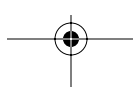
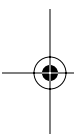
Smith and his colleagues call this new faith “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” a belief system that embraces the existence of a God who demands little more than to be “nice,” with the central goal of life to be happy and feel good about oneself. God is not particularly needed in daily life except to resolve various problems that might come our way (think “Divine Butler” or “Cosmic Therapist”). And regardless of religious convictions, beliefs or commitments, good people go to heaven when they die.

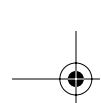
This is *not* a Christian mind based on a biblical worldview.

So what is?

A Christian mind is not simply thinking done by those who consider themselves Christians. Jesus confronted Peter and bluntly informed him, “Away with you, Satan. . . . You think as men think, not as God thinks” (Matthew 16:23 NEB). It is not simply thinking about Christian *things*, such as reflecting on Jesus or grace or the nature of the church. Also it should not be confused with attempting to adopt a Christian perspective on every issue. Even if such perspectives were possible, they would flow *from* a Christian mind—they would not constitute a Christian mind in and of themselves.

Instead, Os Guinness wisely writes that “thinking Christianly is



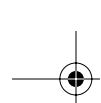


thinking by Christians about anything and everything in a consistently Christian way—in a manner that is shaped, directed, and restrained by the truth of God’s Word and God’s Spirit.” The Christian faith is not simply a defined worldview but a faith which claims to be based on *revelation*. Unlike a political system or body of humanly produced legislation, the Christian faith contends that God has chosen to reveal himself and truth about himself through Scripture and supremely in Christ that could not otherwise be known. The very meaning of the word “revelation” from the Latin *revelatio*, is to “draw back the curtain,” to reveal to us that which would have remained hidden had God not chosen to engage in the act of revelation.

There is then a great divide when it comes to how we approach the very act of thinking. The nature of this divide should not be underestimated, for it has separated humanity from the dawn of civilization. Its distinctive wedge has shaped discourse and debate, philosophy and reason, science and commerce. Yet as broad as the divide may be, the essence of the chasm is simple: *there is either something outside of ourselves that we must take into account or there is not.*

The *Christian* mind is a mind that operates under the belief that there is something outside of ourselves that we must take into account. There is a God, a God, as Francis Schaeffer said, who is not only there but is not silent. Thinking in light of God’s existence and his self-revelation is what it means to have a Christian mind. It is



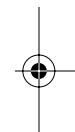
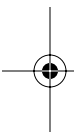


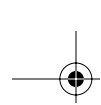
seeing the world in light of faith. Or it is being a “Christian Realist,” as Flannery O’Connor would refer to herself, which reflected her conviction that she lived in the presence of certain theological truths, such as the doctrine of creation, the fall and redemption. These were not simply matters of subjective belief; they were part of the nature of reality, as solid as the laws of physics.

For O’Connor the Christian faith could not be something without substance, without meaning, without an absolute rooting in reality. In “Novelist and Believer” she wrote:

It makes a great difference to the look of a novel whether its author believes that the world came late into being and continues to come by a creative act of God, or whether he believes that the world and ourselves are the product of a cosmic accident. It makes a great difference to his novel whether he believes that we are created in God’s image, or whether he believes we create God in our own. It makes a great difference whether he believes that our wills are free, or bound like those of other animals.

This, then, is the stark divide between a Christian mind and what might best be called a naturalistic mind, meaning a mind that, in terms of truth and meaning, accepts nothing outside of the natural realm. The Christian mind believes that God is on the loose; a naturalistic mind does not. A Christian mind believes this God brought forth truth and order, purpose and authority into the





created cosmos; the naturalistic mind believes there is no truth, no authority outside of ourselves and the naturalistic processes of the universe. This is the great divide, and its nature is what sets the Christian mind apart from all others.

It is also what presents the great challenge to the Christian mind from the modern world.

