



Nuances in Public Theology

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A distinctive of good scholarship is that it attends to the nuances of life and our world. As we host public lectures and make them available in written and recorded versions we have thus called this series of lectures and recordings Nuances in Public Theology.

ATHLETES OF THE MIND: THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE *CORAM DEO*

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A.G. Sertillanges' *The Intellectual Life* is the best book I know of for the spirituality of academic work. Published nearly 100 years ago, it remains remarkably contemporary. I recently gave this paper as an introduction for postgraduates to Sertillanges' book.

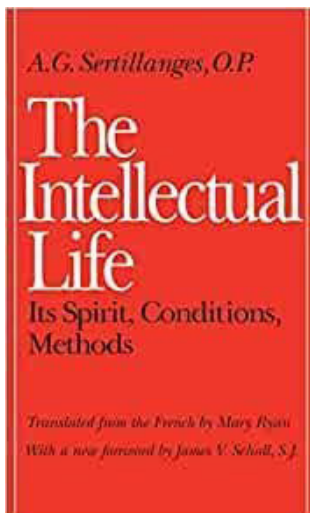
Athletics is a good metaphor for all vocations, as we see in Hebrew 12:1-2. However each vocation has its own particular challenges and requires its own particular forms of Christian spirituality.

I do not think that I have ever heard a sermon in which the intellectual life has been mentioned as an example of being in holy orders, but such it is. Every Christian is in holy orders, i.e. in the full-time service of the LORD Christ. The only question is where and how we serve. The intellectual life is no better than other vocations, but it is unique and presents its own challenges, as any discover who embark on it. Intellectuals are “athletes of the mind” with the genitive keying us into the particular challenges of academia.



As a pastor and then an academic I realised that I needed an inner life that would sustain my vocation. As a typical academic I find it easier to read many books about Christian spirituality from which I learn a great deal, but spirituality is about *practices* and not just more information. The key to such practices is *repetition*, decidedly not a sexy term for someone born around or after the '60s.

Even as I slowly learn the practices of Christian spirituality, I found I needed to



attend to the distinctives of my vocation as an intellectual and writer. I am constantly on the lookout for the best writing in this area and without a doubt pride of place must go to A. G. Sertillanges' *The Intellectual Life: Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods*. Indeed, the expression "athletes of the mind" comes from this book.

When I was in Canada my spiritual director and I worked through this volume together. It is one that I return to again and again. To whet your appetite here are some of the major insights I have gleaned and developed from chapter 1 of Sertillanges.

The Intellectual Life as a Response to a Call

This is what we mean by the intellectual life being a vocation. As with any call from God, we need to attend closely to it and make sure that we are hearing God correctly. In modernity intellectual life is often wrongly prized above other vocations with the result that people are often drawn to it for the wrong



reasons. If you reflect on any of the major characters in the Bible who responded to God's call – Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Paul – you will soon see that responding is exhilarating and arduous. The intellectual life is serious and Sertillanges notes that "The athletes of the mind, like those of the playing field, must be prepared for privations, long training, a sometimes superhuman tenacity. We must give ourselves from the heart, if truth is to give itself to us. Truth serves only its slaves."

Discerning the Call

Calvin begins his Institutes with the exhortation to know yourself, to know God. An important way in which we discern the call to the intellectual life is through getting to know ourselves. This is where cookie cutter spirituality which tries to turn us all into evangelists, missionaries or preachers is unhelpful. These are

glorious vocations, but they are not the only ones. Your vocation will emerge from who you are, from how God has made you.

You begin to discern this by getting in touch with your deepest desires. Make a habit of reflecting on each day at the end of the day – what in spirituality is called the examen – and journal about your day. As you reflect quietly before God, ask yourself, what in my life today brought me alive? Discerning what brings you alive will tap into your deepest desires and thus orient you towards the journey to which God is calling you. In Sertillanges' words a vocation "comes from heaven and from our first nature." In this sense, Sertillanges argues, Disraeli's statement that you can do what you please provided it really pleases you is true!

I am the only one with a degree in my family. But, even as a child I wanted books for Christmas. As my friends know I cannot go anywhere without wondering if there is a local bookstore nearby, even amidst the effect of Amazon upon such treasured places. Speak to me about books, authors, ideas, stationery, pens, paper and writing and my face lights up. When I am rested and refreshed the desire to write – even though it is not easy – resurfaces. These are some of the ways in which I hear God's call on my life.

Cultivating the Virtues

The call is the beginning and not the end. Indeed, we need to hear it again and again. The journey of the long obedience in the same direction lies ahead, to allude to Nietzsche. And our extroverted cultures in which we move from one event and high to another with little or no time for reflection are not conducive to the intellectual life. Not surprisingly, therefore, much of Sertillanges' book is devoted to the virtues that are essential to the intellectual life: virtues like curiosity, discipline, tenacity, dedication, finding the balance between solitude and activity, attending to the foundations before erecting the roof, etc.

I often encourage young scholars not to let the fruit ripen too soon while remaining aware that what you do now will connect integrally with what you do in twenty and thirty years' time. As a young academic it is always tempting to produce ripe fruit as quickly as possible, to get published, to make a name for

yourself, etc. However, a great wine takes time to mature and so does scholarship; it matures over a lifetime. Patience is thus an indispensable virtue of the intellectual life, as is healthy community which can keep you on track and give you perspective.

The expression about attending to the foundations before erecting the roof comes from Sertillanges. This is particularly important for those of us who study at major public universities which exclude the Christian tradition. One can emerge from a distinguished public university with your PhD in hand, without ever having reflected on the Christian foundations of academia. Indeed, you might not even be aware that such foundational work exists. Here the virtue of humility becomes crucial, a willingness to see what you do not know rather than revelling in how bright you are! Especially in the foundational discipline of philosophy Christians have done extraordinary work in recent decades, work that every Christian scholar needs to be familiar with.



Hopeful realism is another virtue intellectuals need. Sertillanges is well aware that many intellectuals cannot work as such full-time. He argues that two hours a day is adequate provided they are used well.

Sertillanges helped me recover a virtue that has to be at the heart of academic work, namely truth. While doing my PhD I attended conferences on literature which were in reality exercises in postmodern theory, what George Steiner evocatively and critically calls the secondary city in his Real Presences. I learnt a lot but soon realised that a casualty was the very possibility or goal of truth in

scholarship. Amidst the creative play of postmodernism it was easy to become jaded and to relinquish the goal of truth in one's work, a fatal error.

A Crazy Proposal for Our Times

In 2008 I had a front row seat in academia as the bottom nearly fell out of the US – and thus the world – economy. The job market for academics dried up almost immediately. I expect the pandemic will have a similar effect. Too often the result is that we accompany students on the mountain climb of the PhD dissertation and then wish them well as they enter the desert of job applications, promising to pray for them.

For some time, as an Evangelical, I have thought that we need to retrieve a monastic model with a monastery or monasteries set up where academics can pursue their calling and survive, in community, circling in and out of jobs as they become available. Of course we will only entertain such an idea if we repent of Western individualism and if we see the glory of the intellectual life as being in holy orders. If someone reads this who would be willing to endow such an experiment I would love to hear from them!



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