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*Thinking like a Christian*  
Part 1:

## The Starting Point

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### The Egocentric Predicament

The title of this series, “Thinking like a Christian,” denotes both a topic and its context; it also points to what ought to be the consequences of a Christian education. In the modern era, “thinking” has been equated with the human state of existence by both philosopher and medical ethicist. René Descartes declared, “*Cogito, ergo sum*” (“I think, therefore I am”). In elevating sheer “thinking” to the acme of all argument for existence, Descartes and his followers diminish all qualitative measures of human experience. Why “I think”? Why not “I love, I serve, I give”? Cartesian rationalism gives fuel to the so-called Enlightenment, empiricism, the scientific method, the primacy of logic, the objectivity of reason, the preeminence of mechanical and managerial efficiency. By extension, Descartes’ maxim results in mechanistic reductionism. Thus in hospitals today where patients are being sustained by life-prolonging technology, decisions to pull the plug and terminate artificial means of support will be made on the basis of whether the patient is “brain-dead”—no longer capable of transmitting brain-wave evidence of life.

According to William Temple, late Archbishop of Canterbury, the moment of Descartes’ *Cogito, ergo sum* may have been “the most disastrous moment in the history of Europe”—the birth of scientism.<sup>1</sup> For as Jacques Maritain points out in *The Dream of Descartes*, the French mathematician was not interested in *what*

he thinks, *why* he thinks, or the moral obligation on the thinker. The goal of Cartesian reasoning is not really to *know*, says Maritain, but “to subjugate the object.” Thus “rationalism is the death of spirituality” because, Maritain notes, Descartes’ aphorism leads straight to self-worship: “Here is man, then, the center of the world.”<sup>2</sup> Baillie agrees in speaking of “the egocentric predicament” brought about by the exaltation of rationalism.<sup>3</sup>

Today people have learned to express Descartes’ slogan with an emphasis on the first-person pronouns: “*I* think, therefore *I* am.” People have accustomed themselves to think primarily of self: “What’s good for me? What’s in it for me? What have I got to gain or lose?” But such egoism, the doctrine of enlightened self-interest, quickly declines into *egotism*, the heresy of the imperial self. And from there it plummets to the cult of *solipsism*, a theory proclaiming the omniscient self, the repository of all truth.

Contemporary manifestations of this delusion are evident everywhere. “Whatever you think is true, is true,” Sally Jessy Raphael advises her nationwide radio audience. A bumpersticker reads, “Question authority.” A Valley Girl chomps on her bubblegum and emits her wisdom: “I’m comfortable with that.” A TV psychotherapist counters a question about deity, saying, “The supernatural is interesting, but so far there’s no scientific evidence that the supernatural exists. It’s healthier to count on what’s real.”

Rationalism, egotism, solipsism—these represent “the egocentric predicament.” One dare not consider “thinking” in a vacuum but only in a moral context, within the parameters of a moral position, determined by an awareness of and submission to moral responsibility. For in the end, *how* a person thinks affects *what* he thinks, which in turn affects what he does.

By the words “how we think,” this writer does not mean to discuss a variety of cognitive theories—electrical impulses on the cortex, left side of the brain versus right side, Bloom’s taxonomy of *knowing*, and other concepts. Instead, “how we think” speaks of the system of values that informs one’s thinking, the vantage from which his thinking obtains its perspective, the platform on which a person stands; in short, “how we think” derives from one’s *Weltanschauung*, his world and life view.

From the Cross and empty tomb a Christian can see cause for hope, even in the face of cruelty, despair, and death. This is not a feckless hope, a sort of silly optimism; it is hope tried out in the fires of adversity and hostility. It is, in every sense of the word, hope-against-hope, except that, in this case, a Christian’s hope stems

from the fact of the Resurrection: because Jesus Christ lives, believers too shall live. This fact of faith determines “*how we think*” about everything. It is the ultimate hope, for it points to the ultimate Good, of which the ancient philosophers spoke and for which all mankind searches.

### Plato’s Line

In *The Republic*, Plato offered a visual aid to describe various ways of thinking, as a person ascends toward knowledge of the Good. A vertical line is cut in two unequal parts. The bottom represents the visible world of appearances; the top, the intelligible world. Again each of these two sections is cut in the same manner, separating the material from the ideal. Lowest on Plato’s line are mere images or shadows; above them are the material objects they reflect. This is the world of appearances, physical and moral, inhabited by those whose grasp of reality is limited to the material order of things. The intelligible world exists in similarly related stages. Below are opinions and hypotheses, such as may be used in solving a geometry problem; above, the abstract ideals (which Plato called “Forms”) to which the geometric figure one draws can be only an approximation. These ideals or forms may be perceived only by intuition or enlightened reason.

Taking these four divisions on his line, Plato related them to what he called “four faculties in the soul,” arranged in an ascending order of perception. At the bottom is *conjecture*, what Francis Cornford calls “the wholly unenlightened state of mind.”<sup>4</sup> Next comes *faith*, or “common-sense belief.” In this context Plato was not commenting on religious faith; rather, he equated this level of perception with trust in the visible assurance of things—perhaps in the same way a general has faith because of the number of tanks he sees ready for combat, or an investor has faith because he knows the strength of his diversified stock portfolio. But such faith is nonetheless inferior to the next level, *understanding*, suggesting deductive thinking or logical analysis. In fact Plato served up a gag line for Socrates to deliver: “One who holds a true belief or faith without understanding is just like a blind man who happens to take the right road.” Highest on the line comes *knowledge*, or *intuitive reason*. But above and beyond the apex of the line lies the Good, that impersonal source of truth, virtue, justice, beauty, and goodness. For as Plato would have Socrates say, “The Good has a place of honor higher yet.”

Plato's line is a representation of today's methods for perceiving and valuing reality. At the bottom of today's mass culture are those poor souls endlessly chasing after the phantoms and illusions of materialism: followers, fans, spectators, imitators. Unconsciously searching for the realities called philosophical truth, political power, and social freedom, the masses clutch at shadows and images: teenagers adoring a reprehensible singer, union members reelecting a corrupt official, indolent sophisticates clogging their nostrils with cocaine.

At the next level are today's materialists. Western civilization has always worshiped material things. Trinkets, toys, baubles, luxuries, yes; but above all these, gadgets and whizbangs and better mousetraps called "labor-saving devices." Modern society believes and puts faith in them. Henry Ford's assembly line at Dearborn is the Lourdes of American industrialized society, where the miracle of mass production began.

So much for the visible realm. At the level of opinions and hypotheses are the ideologues and perpetrators of half-truths under the guise of "information." Most if not all broadcast journalists, news commentators, investigative reporters, editorial spokesmen, and other more or less surreptitious shapers of public opinion rise no higher than this stage. They are to truth what rumor is to fact. The polls they conduct contain the same sort of disclaimer now required for automobile advertising: "Your mileage may vary."

Not to be excluded from this same group are too many of the evangelical broadcasters whose programming similarly thrives on sensation, personality, and the reduction of complex issues to the simplest formula. This writer has appeared on some of these programs, once sandwiched between a converted hooker and a faith healer who can make cancerous tumors disappear; another time, preceded by a Cuban revolutionary and followed by a recipe for granola. If citizens whose only source of news may be "You give us 22 minutes and we'll give you the world" are ignorant of cause or consequence, then Christians whose diet of spiritual nourishment depends largely on religious broadcasting remain in a state of arrested development and stunted growth. They are deprived of an authentic Christian education.

At the top of Plato's line stand those few individuals committed to the moral principles existing as intimations of the Good—justice, virtue, truth, beauty, goodness. Their ascent to the level of intuitive reason, said Plato, nominates them to serve the state as

poet, priest, and philosopher. They have chosen to live the life of the mind, but since no one—not Plato nor Socrates nor Solon the lawgiver nor Pericles the patriot nor Sophocles the poet—can live perpetually in rarified transcendental illumination, this ephemeral insight keeps slipping out of reach, leaving frustration. For as Plato wrote, “No one is satisfied with the appearance of goodness—the reality is what they seek.” So Plato offered a parable, perhaps foreshadowing the Incarnation, telling of “the child of the Good, whom the Good begat in his own likeness, to be in the visible world . . . what the Good is in the intelligible world.”

Christians will naturally interpret such a parable to point to Jesus of Nazareth, but they must guard against twisting Plato to suit their theology. Devout Hindus, reading the same passage, will find support for one or another of their avatars. Nor does it follow that philosophers and theologians since the Incarnation will necessarily identify the Good exclusively with Jesus Christ. The liberal and modernist heresies have long since made their positions clear.

For example more than 150 years ago an apostate Unitarian minister made Platonic idealism his gospel. In 1832 Ralph Waldo Emerson was considering demitting his ordination. He disapproved of the Unitarian custom of celebrating the Lord’s Supper on stipulated Sundays. Emerson’s journal records that crisis. On June 2, 1832, he wrote, “I have sometimes thought that, in order to be a good minister, it was necessary to leave the ministry. . . . Were not a Socratic paganism better than an effete, superannuated Christianity?”<sup>5</sup> And on October 1, four weeks before he resigned his pastorate, Emerson wrote,

Instead of making Christianity a vehicle of truth, you make truth only a horse for Christianity. . . . You must be humble because Christ says, “Be humble.” “But why must I obey Christ?” “Because God sent him.” But how do I know God sent him? Because your own heart teaches the same things he taught. Why then shall I not go to my own heart at first?<sup>6</sup>

In Emerson, an orthodox Christian today may still see the corrosive defects of heterodox denial and liberalist dismissal of biblical integrity. Thinking with “my own heart” becomes the final authority; thereby religious guesswork yields to solipsism. Thus for Emerson as well as for many other neo-Platonic idealists in pulpits and seminary classrooms, “understanding” rises above “faith,” and “reason” above all, since “reason” is the intuitive moment, a moment in which a new set of absolutes may be glimpsed by transcendent illumination.

Of course this new set of absolutes can be located only within oneself. Here is the dogma of idealism, whether presented as rationalism, secular ethics, liberal theology, heterodoxy, or cult. At root, "the egocentric predicament" causes rebellion in the human consciousness against any revelation of truth from a source outside oneself. This rebellion permits an idealism whose branches deny authority, deny historical example, deny accountability. Even within the Christian community are advocates of "the right of private judgment" rejecting traditional hermeneutical consensus. Also within Christianity are proponents of "the word of knowledge," whose idiosyncratic behavior derives its warrant from an equally unique hotline to heaven, over which God gives them special instructions withheld from other believers.

### **The Fear of the Lord**

To return to a faith less subjective, one needs to find a different starting point, the right starting point. A world-class woman runner entered a 10-kilometer race in Connecticut. On the day of the race, she drove from New York City, following the directions—or so she thought—given over the phone. She got lost, stopped at a gas station, and asked for help. She knew only that the race started in a shopping mall's parking lot. The attendant also knew of such a race scheduled just up the road. When she arrived, she was relieved to see in the parking lot a modest number of runners preparing to compete, but not as many as she had anticipated. She hurried to the registration table, announced herself, and was surprised at the race officials' excitement at having so renowned an athlete show up for their event. No, they had no record of her entry, but if she would hurry and put on this number, she could be in line just before the gun would go off. She ran and won easily—four minutes ahead of the first man! Only after the race did she learn that the race she had run was not the race she had earlier entered. *That* race was being held several miles farther up the road in another town. She had gone to the wrong starting line, run the wrong course, and won a cheap prize.

To begin thinking like a Christian, one must find the authentic starting point. That point can be none other than a recognition of the immutable God, Creator and Judge, before whom all nature and human nature must be accountable. The pronouncement of this responsibility before God is found in the pages of Holy Writ. There are inscribed the words whose weight Christians have

already borne in their untutored hearts. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps. 111:10); “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7). Wisdom and knowledge, not reason and intuition, are the goal of all cognition, all learning, all thinking. And the beginning point is an obligatory reverential awe before God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

To recognize wisdom, to respect knowledge, one first needs recognition of and respect for the Source of wisdom and knowledge. This means reverence for God, awe before the Lord of the universe, worshipful humility before the Judge of all the earth and heavens. Paralleling such reverence for God must run a realization of one’s own dependent state. Wonder of wonders, no human is in charge of the universe! No mortal is the center of the cosmos! No human being controls the weather or the metamorphosis of the gypsy moth caterpillar or the miracle of human love and its fulfillment in the birth of a child. Someone Else is responsible, the sovereign Lord who deigns to invite people to join with others in calling Him “our Father.” The formula is clearly stated: God’s sovereignty means mankind’s dependency. That dependency also means the beginning of wisdom, knowledge, order, and truth—the beginning of a genuine Christian education.

But so too must the contrary formula become clear: Disregard for a minimal or nonexistent God produces autonomy in the human spirit, which leads to folly, ignorance, chaos, and falsity. Remember that the psalmist also declared, “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Ps. 14:1). Atheism is the religion of autonomous man, whose folly is the perversion of wisdom.

“The fear of the Lord” means initial acknowledgment of God. To begin thinking like a Christian, a person must come in faith, believing first “that God exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Heb. 11:6, NIV). That reward will be confirmation that the Scriptures are true; that what the Bible says about God’s faithfulness can be relied on as trustworthy; that what the Bible tells of Jesus Christ can be believed to the eternal good of one’s soul.

But if an individual is to begin thinking like a Christian, he must know what the Bible teaches. This simple, logical, common-sense fact has been the glory of Dallas Theological Seminary and its curriculum. Sadly, too many seminaries—not to mention the roster of most evangelical colleges—have eliminated all but the most minimal diploma requirements in biblical studies. And those

institutions then presume to “integrate faith and learning”? But they cannot integrate out of ignorance!

Christians need, instead, to immerse and steep themselves in the Word of God, as the Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent states:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.<sup>7</sup>

“Hear . . . read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest.” Surely such a pattern for learning must lead to thinking and living out the truths one has learned.

### The Claims of Christ

Furthermore thinking like a Christian means, implicitly, thinking like Jesus Christ. But before one can think *like* Christ, he must first think *of* and *about* Christ. What claims are made for Jesus of Nazareth? The paramount question of history is not whether life exists on other spheres or whether the Dallas Cowboys will ever again win the Super Bowl. The single most important question echoes and reechoes from the time it was first asked: “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15); its corollary is this: “What do you think about the Christ?” (22:42). Thinking about Christ—reckoning with His identity as “the Son of the living God” (16:16)—is the only way to think like a Christian. Griffith Thomas was succinctly accurate in entitling his book *Christianity Is Christ*.<sup>8</sup> A person cannot be Christian in his thinking and living apart from acknowledging and then submitting to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Thereafter, thinking like a Christian must mean what Paul called for in 2 Corinthians: nothing short of all-out war against the sophistry of Satan. “We demolish arguments,” wrote the apostle, “and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (10:5, NIV).

Why must Paul be so bold, so aggressive, in his use of language? Because he wrote at a time and to a people well acquainted with the rhetoric of “the Big Lie.” Five hundred years before Paul of Tarsus strolled the *agora* and climbed the *acropolis* of Athens,



troubled by idolatry and cynical polytheism, that city had divested itself of genuine belief in its gods. Under the influence of the Sophists, particularly Protagoras, the young men of Athens had been introduced not only to a new way of arguing but also to a new set of propositions. Knox writes that the Sophists' teaching

tended inevitably towards the substitution of man for god as the true center of the universe, the true measure of reality; this is what Protagoras meant by his famous phrase, "Man is the measure of all things." The rationalistic scientific mind, seeking an explanation of reality in human terms and assuming that such an explanation is possible and attainable, rejects the concept of God as irrelevant.<sup>9</sup>

Far from being a religious people in the theistic sense of the term, the Greeks had become a political people. Pallas Athena was no longer the goddess of wisdom but the patron economic focus for the city of Athens. So too with Artemis (or Diana) and her relationship to Ephesus; so with Aphrodite (or Venus), the goddess of erotic love, whose city was Corinth. Most Greeks of the first century had fallen prey to the Big Lie, the folly that says, "There is no God," except for power, wealth, and sensual pleasure.

For such an opponent there can be no other weapon than the dynamite of the gospel, capable of razing the specious arguments and theories of Satan. Mere refutation and rebuttal have no weight; pretty speeches prove unconvincing. Paul himself had delivered one of the most perfectly formed examples of classical rhetoric extant, his speech to the Areopagites in Acts 17. Yet its results were mixed at best: sneering rejection, polite dismissal, but only a few believers. Years later, in writing to the church at Corinth, Paul was ready for a different approach. He urged the Corinthians to go on the offensive against every alien notion, forcibly subjecting it to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

C. S. Lewis, when engaged in serious discussion with disbelieving colleagues at Oxford or Cambridge, was anything but the jolly and avuncular spinner of Narnia tales. He would whirl on his antagonists, bellowing, "I challenge that!" Then with the remarkable gift for analysis given to him by God, Lewis would proceed to destroy their feeble objections to Christian faith. Few Christians today, however, possess either the courage or intellect to emulate Lewis. Too often what results is a smart aleck's retort or a quipster's snide jab, a little below the belt.

If people today are to begin thinking like Christians, pride must yield to humility as they acquire the mind of Christ. Paul described that frame of mind in writing to the Philippians: "Your

attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:5-8, NIV).

Thinking like a Christian means adopting the humility of a servant. Christian thinking has no place for arrogance, no room for self-importance. All need to hear again the words of Comenius, the Moravian pastor credited with being the father of modern education: "God does not call us to heaven asking us smart questions. It is more profitable to know things humbly than to know them proudly."<sup>10</sup> Or we need to hear this statement by the Christian humanist Nicholas of Cusa: "We then, believers in Christ, are led in learned ignorance to the mountain that is Christ."<sup>11</sup>

The United Negro College Fund has a slogan: "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." This writer would adopt that slogan to state that a Christian's mind is too precious to waste on its own flattery and preening. Instead Christians are needed who are willing to think with the mind of Christ, which means—as Paul again informed the Philippians—to ponder and become absorbed in thought by only those things which are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy. "Let your mind dwell on these things," commanded the apostle (Phil. 4:8).

Believers need not fear for the adequacy of their resources, if they dare to begin thinking like Christians. After all, they are assured that in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). They are also promised access to God's secret wisdom, "the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God" (Rom. 16:25-26, NIV).

Coming full circle, thinking like a Christian begins with believers acknowledging God's sovereignty and ends with their being welcomed to share in the very riches of divine wisdom revealed in Jesus Christ. Likewise the purpose of this quest becomes centered on the Person of Christ. This writer's favorite quotation from Desiderius Erasmus expresses that purpose: "All studies, philosophy, rhetoric are followed for this one object, that we may know Christ and honor him. This is the end of all learning and eloquence."<sup>12</sup>

For those who wish to begin thinking like a Christian, the

starting point and the goal of Christian thinking are one and the same.

### Editor's Note

This is the first in a series of four articles delivered by the author as the W H Griffith Thomas Lectures at Dallas Theological Seminary, November 5-8, 1985

### Notes

- 1 William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London Macmillan and Co , 1964), p 57
- 2 Jacques Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes*, trans Mabelle L Andison (New York Philosophical Library, 1944)
- 3 John Bailie, *Our Knowledge of God* (New York Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), p 152
- 4 Plato, *Republic*, trans Francis M Cornford (New York Oxford University Press, 1955), p 222
- 5 *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed Stephen E Whicher (Boston Houghton Mifflin Co , 1957), p 9
- 6 *Ibid* , pp 10-11
- 7 *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York Church Pension Fund, 1945), p 92
- 8 W H Griffith Thomas, *Christianity Is Christ* (1909, reprint, New Canaan, CT Keats Publishing Co , 1981)
- 9 Bernard M W Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes* (New Haven, CT Yale University Press, 1957), p 161
- 10 John Amos Comenius, cited by John Edward Sadler, *J A Comenius and the Concept of Universal Education* (New York Barnes and Noble, 1966), p 51
- 11 Nicholas of Cusa, *Of Learned Ignorance*, trans Germain Heron (New Haven, CT Yale University Press, 1954), p 161
- 12 William Harrison Woodward, *Desiderius Erasmus Concerning the Aim and Method of Education*, quoting Erasmus, *Ciceronianus* (New York Teachers College, Columbia University, 1964), p 95



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