Epilogue

Phillip Cary

IT LOOKS LIKE WE have a problem with Protestant activism. By that I mean the Protestant turn away from the contemplative ideal, which has been central to the life of the mind in the West since Plato and which was well represented in the *vita contemplativa* of the middle ages. If activism is a kind of ailment, then American evangelicalism has a particularly bad case of it. Yet we may hope that what makes it so bad in this case has less to do with Protestant theology than with the pressure to appeal to consumers in the spiritual marketplace of modern America. If such hope does not disappoint us, then a renewed attention to theological traditions with roots older than consumerism might teach us a thing or two, especially about how to do the work of education in the liberal arts. That at any rate is the hope that moved the editors, both of whom are my colleagues at an evangelical Christian university, to assemble the essays in this volume.

They have presented the essays in roughly chronological order, according to the age of the tradition each one represents. Roughly, I say. The roughness smoothes out a bit if we take the essay on Eastern Orthodoxy to have its home base in the church fathers and the essay on Roman Catholicism to be grounded in the achievements of medieval thought. (Let's not try to adjudicate between Orthodoxy and Catholicism when it comes to claims of priority). What the chronological order displays is a kind of nearness to the ancient Platonist ideal of contemplation in Orthodoxy and Catholicism, compared to something more distant from ancient thought in the essays at the end, where a Mennonite and a Methodist present versions of Protestant activism. In the middle are three essays that might show us something about why Protestantism turned away from ancient contemplation to a distinctive kind of activism.

The question in my mind is what wisdom there is in Protestant activism and its distance from ancient contemplation. It is a question that brings

us back—as always in Western thought—to Plato, who invented the very idea of the liberal arts and connected them from the beginning with the experience of contemplation. The preface to this volume reminds us of his vivid and extraordinarily influential way of illustrating this connection: it is like ascending out of a cave of shadows and into the light of the supreme Good, a turning or conversion from the realm of appearances to a contemplative intellectual vision of true reality, which is divine. We must learn to doubt the shadows, Plato teaches, because they represent not only the superficial appearances of the visible world but the sophistry woven into the active life of political opportunism, the game played by prisoners of the cave, who offer rewards—honor and money and power—to those who succeed best at naming the shadows. Liberal education, by contrast, gets people turned around to see the light of truth—seeing it for themselves, not just giving the right answer on a test—for without such vision they remain captive to the shadows, driven by "the heavy pressure for results" described by Mark Noll in the words quoted in the Introduction. This education is called liberal because it is for free people, those who must see for themselves what justice is if they are to bear the burdens of civic responsibility, and who must begin to develop real wisdom if they are to live a good life. From a Christian perspective, such education is clearly a work of love—for love seeks the good of the neighbor, and it is a great good in the lives of young people to learn to see the truth for themselves.

So it is a real problem if Protestant activism means giving up contemplation altogether, and the longing which desires wisdom for its own sake. "The beginning of wisdom is this: get wisdom," says the biblical proverb, "and whatever you get, get understanding" (Prov 4:7). It is not just that our activist projects to change the world are likely to fail if we don't take the trouble to know what we're doing. It is that we fail to love our students if we educate them only as "change agents," tools for our agendas of social transformation, experts at naming the shadows but unacquainted with wisdom and the good life. For as another proverb puts it, wisdom "is a tree of life to those who get hold of her." (Proverbs 3:14) To promote an education without love of wisdom is a sin, contrary to the love of neighbor and the biblical commandment to choose life (Deut 30:19).

"But where shall wisdom be found?" as the good man asked (Job 28:12). The Christian answer cannot be quite the same as Plato's, because what Christian faith ultimately desires to contemplate is a quite distinctive divine reality, the Father who gives us his own Son in human flesh so that

we may know him through his own Spirit. The nature and consequences of that distinctive contemplation afford us a kind of thread to follow as we move from the more ancient to the more modern Christian traditions represented in this book.

1. James Carey's essay on Eastern Orthodoxy identifies the core of Christian contemplation as a theological *noesis*, using the Platonic-Aristotelian word for what mind does (rendered *intellectus* in Latin, and understanding or intuition in English) when it does more than merely reason discursively, moving logically from one step to another as we figure things out. Reason indeed is something precious, for more than anything else it is reason (*logos*) that constitutes in us the image of God, who has his own precious Logos, the eternal word and reason by which he made and redeems all things (John 1:1–18). Yet the movement of our reason is insufficient without the prior movement of the divine Logos who becomes flesh for our sake in Jesus Christ. Hence the vision of the supreme Good and Truth and Beauty is not impersonal, but is a theological *noesis* moving us in an infinite progress towards the triune God who elevates us into participation in his own nature. It is clear that something more than intellectual vision is involved in the Christian notion of contemplation.

2. R. J. Snell, presenting a Roman Catholic vision of education, interestingly shies away from the metaphor of vision. He does not invoke the classic Thomistic description of the chief end of man as beatific vision, the intellectual seeing of God, which makes us eternally happy. Yet he does not abandon the contemplative life, but on the contrary sees it as the ground and source of the active life of work and learning. The contemplative life in turn, with its love and delight and knowledge, is grounded in the self-communication of the divine life: the Father giving being to the Son, and Father and Son together giving being to the Spirit, a giving which freely spills over in the sheer gift of creation and the yet deeper gift of redemption. The fact that vision is not quite the right metaphor for what it is like to be on the receiving end of this divine self-communication is suggested by Bernard Lonergan, the twentieth-century Catholic thinker who is at the center of much of Snell's own scholarship.[1] For Lonergan, human knowing can't be like "just taking a look." It requires more than vision and understanding,

1. See especially Snell, *Through a Glass Darkly*.

but must proceed to the discursive judgments of reason, which are precisely its means of access to reality, its opportunity to say: "it is so." This may seem like collapsing intuitive and discursive reason, but it would be better to say it is an account of *noesis* that gets us beyond Plato's ocular metaphor. It affords us a modern version of the Aristotelian-Thomist view of knowledge as forming the soul. To know is not just to see the form of things at a distance but to take on the form of what is known—as if, to use the biblical metaphor, it were written on the heart. That is why, in Snell's Catholic account, the contemplation of divine beauty is at the foundation of everything. Everything else, including the active life of work and justice, follows from the way the knowledge of God as beauty forms us in love and delight.

3. In Lutheran theology, the name for this formation is faith. In his lectures on Romans, Luther teaches that "there is a similar form of the Word and the believer," and in his lectures on Galatians he speaks of the Christ himself as "the form of our faith," so that believers "have the same form in their mind that God or Christ has."[2] We are justified by faith alone because only the Gospel word has the power to form Christ in us. Since faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ (Rom. 10:17), the Lutheran form of contemplation is to hear the Gospel. In place of Plato's ocular metaphor we have something more like music forming our hearts, like a favorite song or story in which we find ourselves. The formative power of the Gospel underlies the theology of the two kingdoms that Korey D. Maas, in his essay, uses to articulate a distinctively Lutheran view of the place of liberal education. Like Plato, Luther sees the liberal arts as necessary for a just and healthy civic order. But in addition, the liberal arts contribute to the kingdom of Christ by sharpening the skills of reading and speaking and singing needed to take hold of the word of God and teach it. So liberal education serves Christ as he gives form to our hearts through his word. This in turn is the source of Protestant activism. Once the Gospel frees us from the anxious need to justify ourselves, it leaves us no work to do but to serve our neighbor. Thus in the famous paradoxical formulation of Luther's *Freedom of a Christian*, Christians are both free and slaves at the same time: free lords of all, liberated

2. See Luther's comment on Rom 3:7 in AE 25:211, and his comments on Gal 2:16 and 4:20 in AE 26:130 and 431. (AE = American Edition of Luther's Works, cited by Maas in footnote [X-REF], cf., expanded citation in Maas bibliography.)

from sin and death, and yet dutiful servants of all, subject to their neighbors. For once Christ has given himself to us in faith, there is no work left for us to do but to give ourselves in love to others. What drops out of the picture here is not only the metaphor of intellectual vision but also Plato's metaphor of ascent. The Beloved, the supreme Good in person, has already descended and given himself to all who believe, like a bridegroom who has promised himself to his bride. This good news has ample room for comfort and joy as well as works of love for the world, but no place for a spirituality in which love is our way to God. It turns out, that is not what love is for.

4. Mennonite seminary president Sara Wenger Shenk speaks for a tradition that habitually thinks much more of action than of contemplation. The focus is on a community that seeks to "organize goodness" by following Jesus. Yet I notice a number of similarities with the other traditions represented in this volume. She too thinks in terms of formation, about identifying so closely with the life and practices of Jesus that "one's life is shaped by that life." She too sees the Gospel as the story of Christ, which the whole community indwells by means of bodily practices as well as by reading and interpreting Scripture together. Because Anabaptists learn Christ's story by living it out in communal *practices*, they seldom insist on a sharp contrast between faith and works. Yet if we adopt Luther's definition of the Gospel as focusing on what Christ does (received in faith), in contrast to the Law which focuses on what we do (actualized in good works), then the Gospel is clearly at the foundation of her "vision for God's shalom—made know to us in Jesus—who in his body made peace and created one new humanity, reconciled to God." Here too faith comes before works: prior to the work of following Jesus is the good news of Christ's peace as the basis of the good life for the whole world. There is no explicit account of contemplation here, but there is something higher and prior to our activism, to which an education for shalom must continually return.

5. It is typical of the Reformed to be epistemologically ambitious, to insist that reason serve faith and that all knowledge as well as culture be shaped by Christian convictions. In the Dutch Reformed tradition that formed Esther Lightcap Meek, this means that the Gospel receives the philosophical ministrations of a whole worldview and its presuppositions. But Meek is concerned that the worldview approach

may be too fond of what Abraham Kuyper called the *antithesis* between Christian culture and the secular world. The problem is not that Christ claims anything less than the whole world, but that the concept of worldview has a distinctively modern and rationalist pedigree, too inclined to define knowledge abstractly as if it consisted only in having the right views about the world, which means it fails to fully "invite the real." Hence also it fails to fully engage the whole of embodied, social, hermeneutical selves, and thus leaves out too much of how we learn and love to know. Meek's own covenant epistemology harnesses insights from philosopher Michael Polanyi to provide an alternative, which resonates most deeply with the previous essays when it takes the paradigm of knowing to be "the redemptive encounter, enacted in the Eucharist." This is what I would take to be a properly Christian account of contemplation, a foretaste of the consummation of all things in which, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it, we "glorify God and enjoy him forever."

6. The Reformation Anglicanism described by Ashley Null shares the distinctively Protestant understanding of the Gospel as the word and story of Christ, and sets it in the context of worship. In Null's wonderful analogy, it is as if God had nothing better to do than spend hours and hours telling us his story, so that at the end we can get up and dance knowing who it is who loves us. Yet the more you look at it, the less distinctively Protestant this looks, and the more it seems to be what good Christian liturgies have been doing all along. Here—as with Lutheranism also—we have two ways of forming the soul, feeding it with both word and sacrament. So it is no surprise that Anglicanism has always been open to a high church traditionalism, as is evident especially in nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholicism. Many of our evangelical students at Eastern University are attracted to Anglican worship precisely because of its piety of word and sacrament, where the Gospel is not a technique we use to get saved, but is Christ giving himself to us in external words and signs every Sunday, so that we may feed on him in our hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.

7. The educational vision of Methodism—a tradition deeply imbued with Protestant activism—is often summarized, W. Stephen Gunter informs us, in lines from a Charles Wesley hymn asking God to "unite the pair so long disjoined, knowledge and vital piety." The history of Methodist higher education that Gunter sketches for us culminates

in the story of how these two have gradually come apart. It is a story that is hardly confined to Methodism, as George Marsden and others have shown. From our standpoint in the Templeton Honors College at Eastern University, it is a story from which we would like to learn some lessons—especially, how to resist the social and cultural forces that pull these two apart and result in the secularization of once-Christian universities. One lesson, clearly, is to honor professional academic standards without letting them dictate our vision of the good of education. But I'm thinking another lesson is suggested by the next two lines of the hymn, which goes on to pair "learning and holiness" as well as "truth and love." A purely activist reading of that last pair would put truth at the service of love of neighbor. But surely we must begin with a more contemplative reading that would form us in love of truth for its own sake. In the non-Platonist form that I have been suggesting, this means a joyous reception of the truth in person, Christ the Beloved given to us in the word of the Gospel, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). Whenever Protestant activism forgets to love and contemplate the truth of the Gospel, it gets cut off from its roots.

So here is what I propose we can learn by setting the essays on these seven traditions side by side. First of all, everything begins with God's good gift, which begins with himself. The life of learning can never do more than circle back to this gift, even when it is simply learning the ways of God's creation in one of the so-called "secular" disciplines. To do less than this is to try making our activism into the ultimate source of the good, and that can at best be failure and at worst idolatry. We will surely see enough in the years to come of human beings trying to define their own good by their own activity. Christian education must stand as a witness to a better good than can be achieved by our activism or defined by our efforts, a good we can only receive with gratitude and await with longing (even so, come Lord Jesus) and in the meantime must obey in our active lives.

And therefore we must learn. We must educate ourselves and our students in the good that is the ground of our activism because it is prior to our activism. Our various traditions may call this grounding by the name of faith in the Gospel, love of truth, following Jesus, feeding the soul, forming the heart, contemplating the Good, or participating in the triune life of God, but however we call it, our educational work cannot do without it. Yet by the same token, our various traditions cannot continue as traditions—as

the active handing down of wisdom known originally as *traditio*—without the work of teaching and education that forms young people in the life of the tradition, so that their hearts are formed in the image of the good to which the tradition is devoted. Because of this good, we have good work to do.

Bibliography

Snell, R. J. *Through a Glass Darkly: Bernard Lonergan and Richard Rorty on Living without a God's-eye View*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2006.