
The Beginning of Wisdom

by W. Stanford Reid

Professor Stanford Reid, of the Chair of History in the University of Guelph, Ontario, is one of the most faithful and welcome of our contributors; he has also, as our readers know, been for many years one of our Editorial Correspondents. This paper was originally read to the convocation of the Academic Honours Society at Wheaton College; we are glad to give it wider circulation. In it Professor Reid insists afresh that the whole of creation lies open for human exploration and that it will yield its secrets most readily to those who approach its study in acknowledgment of the sovereignty of the Creator.

I. THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF WISDOM

WISDOM is a term employed very commonly in the Bible, and one which is often taken for granted as being a general term without much specific content. Yet as we examine biblical statements, particularly the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, we find that "wisdom" had a quite definite meaning for the Old Testament believer, and in like fashion it has an equally specific significance for the Christian. Furthermore, we find that this term is related clearly to the intellectual endeavour of man. Consequently we must attempt to look at it in our day in relation to scientific activity, using that term in its broadest sense.

In order to understand the meaning of "wisdom" in the biblical sense, we should perhaps begin by seeing what is meant by "knowledge." This latter word seems to deal primarily with the intellect. It refers to man's acquisition of facts, and then to man's reasoning and understanding of those facts as they appear, according to the writer of Ecclesiastes, "under the sun." Such knowledge is important and necessary, but it is by no means final nor ultimate, for it operates on the surface of things, dealing primarily with spatio-temporal phenomena and their immediate relationships. Such knowledge, we are told, may be misused, misunderstood and mistaken in its conclusions (Job. 38 ff.; Prov. 14: 12).

Wisdom, on the other hand, is of a different character and order, for it goes much deeper. It reaches to the "heart of man," the very core of his being, the centre of his personality. Thus it involves the whole man, his intellect, his emotions, his will. It determines the presuppositions of all his action and thought in this world, which means that his "wisdom" goes back to what we might call his "religious faith", whatever that faith may be, whether Christianity,

Mohammedanism or atheism. It refers to the personal frame of reference with which he approaches the world in which he lives, moves and works (Prov. 4: 23; 23: 7).

In this way we may perhaps see the biblical distinction between wisdom and knowledge. Wisdom includes knowledge, but goes much farther, for while knowledge gives some understanding of the phenomena of experience and their relationships, wisdom seeks to interpret the facts, the experience of the individual and of all men, in a more ultimate sense. It also seeks to give man some idea of what his life means, and consequently what it should be (Ps. 111: 10; Eccles. 12: 13). It thus indicates not only what is, but also what should be, if we admit that there is ever a "should" in the human vocabulary. It attempts to indicate to us how we should act and how we should use the things of this world in which we live. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament, particularly Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and many of the sayings of Christ recorded in the Gospels as well as passages in the letters of Paul such as 1 Corinthians 1 and 2, and Colossians 1, show this very clearly.

Yet wisdom is by no means infallible, for there is a false and a true wisdom. The unbeliever has wisdom, it is true, but since he begins with wrong presuppositions (as both Ecclesiastes and 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 indicate), his wisdom is in fact folly. He may have all kinds of knowledge and understanding of the phenomena—physical, psychological and social—of this world, but still be completely off course when he comes to making any evaluation of the ultimate meaning of things. The reason for this is that the wisdom of this world is centred on this world, that which is "under the sun." He may of course attempt to understand the ultimate meaning of existence, but he always does so on the basis of earth-bound experience, which means that even his gods are always subject to the limitations of the space-time continuum. For this reason the rationalists of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries have never been able to go beyond an empty deism and a purely speculative immortality. For all practical purposes, their wisdom has left them still bound to that which is "under the sun." In sharp contrast to this point of view, the Christian believes that true wisdom is of a very different order and category, for it arises from very different presuppositions, from a wholly opposite religious starting point: the sovereign Triune God who has revealed himself to man in history.

The Old Testament position on the matter of wisdom is that it begins with "the fear of the Lord." Thus the believer's wisdom is something which is not of his own devising, but depends upon his relationship to the sovereign, covenant God. Yet this relationship is not one of "fear" in our usual sense of terror or fearfulness, but has a very different meaning. As Psalm 103: 13 indicates, it is rather the

fear of a child at the possibility of breaking the filial relationship with God. It is a childlike trust and confidence which results in heartfelt love and obedience. This is what the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) means when it states that our only hope in life and death is:

That I with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, who with his precious blood satisfied all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil. . . .

Similarly the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647), Question 34, explains:

Adoption is an act of God's free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges, of the sons of God.

The Christian thus begins his thinking concerning himself and his universe from presuppositions very different from those of the non-Christian.

These presuppositions are summed up in Christ himself, who has been made unto us wisdom, for in him is all the wisdom of God incarnate (1 Cor. 1: 30; Col. 1: 15 ff.). True wisdom, therefore, ultimately results from our personal relationship to him by faith. When we have laid hold upon him by faith as our Saviour and our Lord, when we have been joined to him by the Holy Spirit who works in us saving faith, we then begin to see all things in a new light and in a different way. "Behold, all things have become new" (2 Cor. 5: 17). The Christian by this regeneration, which he has experienced by God's grace, is enabled to see the kingdom of God, which means that he now recognizes God's rule through Jesus Christ in and over all things (John 3: 3, 5). From this point on, he is to seek to understand all things in this light for only as he does so does he have a true understanding of both their meaning and their purpose. Only then does he have true wisdom for his starting point.

But what is exactly the nature, the content, of this starting point? To speak of God's sovereignty is good, but what do we mean by it? Perhaps the best statement of it is given to us in Colossians 1: 15 ff., in which the Apostle Paul speaks to us of Christ as the creator of *all* things, the one who holds *all* things together and who redeems *all* things, with the result that *all* things are under his sovereignty, both in heaven and upon earth. We may add to this statement the statements of the Apostle John in the first chapter of his Gospel and the declarations of the first chapter of the Epistle to Hebrews. All this means that whatever may be our interest or purpose in life, as Christians, whenever we look at God's creatures we see them in his creative—providential—redemptive light. These are the presuppositions with which we must begin if we are to think in a Christian manner.

As we look back through history since the earliest days of the Church, this has always been the position of those who have striven

to think in Christian terms about any or every aspect of the universe. This has been the beginning of true wisdom. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, found that it was necessary to have the sovereignty of God, the Lordship of Christ, as the foundation for his explanation of the fall of the Roman Empire, that is, for the meaning of all history. The same assumptions lay behind the thought of a man such as Thomas Aquinas, for although we may not agree with much of his theology, nevertheless this had to be his starting point whether he sought to set forth a summa of theology or attempted to convert the pagans. John Calvin of the sixteenth century was in much the same situation, and as one studies his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* one cannot but be impressed that his whole structure of thought rested upon this base. Unfortunately, just as natural science became more important, Christians tended to retreat from this presupposition of thought. They stressed the doctrine of salvation, but creation and providence became unimportant. True, they stressed creation of a certain type, modelled largely on Aristotelian ideas; and providence, particularly in terms of Christ's rule over all things, became anathema to many. The result has been the loss of true Christian wisdom and, all too frequently, the take-over of scientific activity by unbelievers who have made science the enemy of the Christian faith.

II. BIBLICAL WISDOM IN CONTEMPORARY SCIENTIFIC ACTIVITY

We now come to the place where we must ask ourselves if Christian wisdom has any place or significance in contemporary scientific activity. I use the term "scientific" here in its widest possible sense, not applying it only to physical or biological studies, but to all systematic investigation of creation including both man and his environment. In this broad field we find that scientific knowledge today is doubling every ten years, to the distress of a great many undergraduates. The gaps in our knowledge and understanding of the universe are becoming narrower all the time, with some biological scientists declaring that they now believe that they have the secret of life. In the latter part of the nineteenth century a good many scientists of various types were proclaiming that man had about reached the limits of scientific knowledge. All he had to do was cross a few t's and dot a few i's to make human knowledge complete. The developments of scientific knowledge since 1945, however, has changed this whole picture with the result that we do not know what the limits of future scientific knowledge may be; and the possible consequences are not merely intriguing, but are positively frightening in their prospects. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* will look like a description of an old ladies' tea party compared to what will actually happen, if we continue to increase our knowledge at the pace at which we are now advancing.

My reason for saying this is not that the increase of knowledge is in itself bad, but rather that while man increases in his knowledge of the universe, he does so as though he and the universe were both self-existent, autonomous entities. In a positivistic fashion he collects his facts, relates them, applies them to his own use in a truly Comtian manner. He believes that if only he can find out all the facts, he can have virtually ultimate knowledge. Furthermore, in so doing he believes that he is the only interpreter of hitherto uninterpreted facts which he can now use as he pleases without let or hindrance from any ethical or moral restraints. What this can mean has been pointed out repeatedly by men such as Herbert Marcuse and Floyd W. Matson.¹ The fact is that man without the light of the Gospel simply lacks the wisdom to direct and control his own knowledge.

Perhaps it is for this reason that we may sympathize with a good many Christians who fear science and wish to stay as far away from it as possible. Ever since 1500 or thereabouts, the tendency of many devout and well-meaning Christian people has been to view any increase in knowledge as evil and as fundamentally contrary to the will of God. Many down to the present time have accepted a more or less Aristotelian outlook on the universe which they have modified to suit a Christian point of view, subject of course to certain scientific facts which they cannot avoid, such as the fact that the earth is a globe which has an orbit around the sun (although there is a "flat earth" society in Britain which denies all these conclusions). But the general attitude of many of these Christians has been that Christian faith and modern science are mutually incompatible. I have had students come to me at registration time to ask how they can avoid taking a science course since they do not feel that their Christian faith and the prescribed course in physics, chemistry or biology will fit together. This is one solution to the Christian's problem of relating his faith to modern scientific endeavour.

We have seen this attitude come out whenever a new and radical development has taken place in scientific thinking. For instance Luther and his supporter Osiander rejected Copernicus's theory of the solar centred universe as contrary to the biblical teaching.² When Galileo set forth his views on the universe he was dealt with rather drastically by the Holy Office of the Inquisition; and Richard Baxter along with others of his way of thinking were by no means happy with the developments which led to the publication of Sir Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica*. The real explosion came, however, with the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* and

¹ Cf. H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, 1964), passim; F. W. Matson, *The Broken Image* (Garden City, N.Y., 1966), passim.

² M. Boas, *The Scientific Renaissance 1450-1630* (London, 1962), pp. 72, 126.

Descent of Man. Usually instead of attempting to come to grips with the problem Christians sought to laugh it off, as in the case of Bishop Wilberforce, or they ran for the cover of ignorance. Fortunately some, such as W. R. Thompson, F.R.S., editor of the most recent "Everyman" edition of the *Origins*, have pointed out the fallacies of the theory.³ Even more recently many Christians opposed space-travel, on the ground that it was not biblical. Hiding one's head in the sand is not limited to ostriches!

Other Christians have attempted to solve the problem of the threat of science to Christianity by developing a "philosophy of gaps." While they have been willing, sometimes too willing, to accept every new scientific theory that has come along, wherever a gap in man's knowledge has appeared they have held that it was an evidence of God's working. Moreover, wherever or whenever something particularly favorable to their side, whether in matters of economics, politics, or religious beliefs, has appeared, they have insisted that this is a revelation of God's reaction. The action of many Christians to the evacuation of the British troops at Dunkirk in World War II is a good example of such thinking. If something happens in science, or human history, for which there is no explanation either as to its cause or its timing, they tend to claim that this shows that at this point God is acting.⁴

The only difficulty with this type of thinking is that we then make God merely the "god of the gaps." His area of operation is that of man's ignorance. Thus, as man's knowledge of physical or human nature and history increases God is gradually closed out. The gaps are disappearing one by one with the result that this type of thinking can only lead to the disappearance of God altogether from this universe, with deism or atheism as the outcome. Even in the case of events such as Dunkirk we still have to ask ourselves the question: if God brought about the appearance of the mist that help with the evacuation, did he not also bring about the defeat of the British forces a few days earlier at Abbéville? How can we talk of God ruling in one episode and not in another? The gap theory really has very little in its favour. To say that the unbeliever cannot explain this or that phenomenon either in the physical or biological sphere, or in the sphere of human history, does not really enable the Christian to cope with modern non-religious scientific thinking, for we may eventually find the cause or be able to explain what happened, and then where does God go?

³ S. F. Mason, *A History of the Sciences* (New York, 1970), p. 181; G. Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution* (New York, 1968), pp. 268 ff.; C. Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, ed. W. R. Thompson (New York, 1956), Introduction.

⁴ Cf. R. H. Bube, "Man Come of Age: Bonhoeffer's Response to the God-of-the-Gaps," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 14 (1971), 203 ff.

Another way out of this dilemma of the so-called conflict between Christianity and science is to accept the various theories and conclusions that are set forth by scholars and scientists while at the same time we try to hang on to our Christian beliefs. This has been the method of Roman Catholicism through its use of the concepts of "nature" and "grace." It has left scientific thought largely autonomous, while stressing that the only way to attain to eternal life was through the repository of grace held by the church. This was the position of Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, and although it has suffered some serious modifications as a result of scientific developments since 1600, the principle is still accepted.⁵ In much the same way one might say that so-called neo-orthodoxy has attempted to follow a similar road, in its doctrine of the Word of God, and its distinction between man's time and "God's time."⁶ Yet the result in both cases usually leads to shipwreck of the faith, for in the long run man finds it impossible to hold in tension the two contrary ideas of the sovereignty of God and at the same time the independence of man and creation. The outcome has usually been that the individual attempting to hold such a position has eventually forgotten about God and has concentrated on the autonomous, self-governing universe.

All these approaches, however, seem to avoid the real issue. Why should the Christian fear science or history? After all if we believe that the whole of the physical universe and man's history in it is the handiwork of God, created, sustained and governed at all times by his almighty power, why should we have any doubts about it? As we increase our knowledge of chemistry, physics, biology, society, history and all the other spheres of existence, do we not increase our knowledge of the work of God, who also reveals himself in every fact of the world in which we live? Such scientific investigation and study we should regard as one of the highest responsibilities which man has. Fear which results in the Christian's attempt either to fly from the growing scientific knowledge or to compromise with it, is not only unbecoming, it is sinful, for he is thereby revealing that he does not believe that Jesus Christ is truly Lord of creation. What we must do, therefore, is seek to look at the whole of the universe in the light of Scripture, to see it as God's possession. Unbelieving man, on the other hand, interprets wrongly because of his faulty assumption of his own and creation's autonomy, which to him means that he is able to interpret and use it according

⁵ Cf. J. A. O'Brien, *Evolution and Religion: Facing the Facts* (New York, n.d.). This is a tract that carries the "nihil obstat" of the censor of books and the "imprimatur" of the Bishop of Peoria. Teilhard de Chardin and others have set forth the same ideas.

⁶ Cf. O. Weber, *Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics*, tr. A. C. Cochrane (London, 1953), pp. 43 f., 120 ff., 159 ff.

to his own knowledge and will, without regard for anyone but himself.

What we need today in the light of contemporary scientific developments is more of the approach of Francis Bacon. As a Christian and a scientist he manifested an attitude to scientific endeavour very different from that of many Christians, and for that matter, many scientists today. Insisting that God has revealed himself through two books, special revelation in the Bible and natural revelation in the world around us, he stressed the responsibility of the Christian to know both. As he insisted in *The Advancement of Learning*:

... let no man upon a weak conceit of sobriety or an ill-applied moderation think or maintain, that a man can search too far, or be too well studied in the book of God's word, or in the book of God's works; divinity or philosophy [science]: but rather let men endeavour an endless proficience in both. . . .

At the same time he believed that the two knowledges were not the same, for while science gave a knowledge of the creatures it gave only a broken image of God who could be known truly through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments alone. Scientific knowledge, he held, should be employed for man's benefit and use, but the study of creation is ultimately to reveal the power and the glory of God.⁷ In all of this, Bacon was simply carrying out the thinking of John Calvin to its logical conclusion.⁸

Yet in setting forth such a position, Bacon did not reject or deny that the non-Christian could and did learn much concerning the spatio-temporal universe. Nor should we. By God's common grace to all men even the most blatant atheist can learn much of the physical characteristics of the universe and its contents. He can work out various hypotheses which he can verify by experiment. He may even reach distant stars. But the trouble is that he misinterprets and misuses his discoveries, for he believes that he is the final arbiter, the ultimate interpreter of all things. He forgets or rejects the sovereignty of God over himself and over the whole of creation. In this way he loses contact with the pole star of knowledge, and so fails to gain true "wisdom." This is why the psalmist said that "the fool has said in his heart, There is no God" (Ps. 14: 1). Without true wisdom, while there may be knowledge, there can only be folly.

What the non-Christian seeks to do is give a completely immanent explanation of all things, as though his explanation is something entirely new and is ultimate. But in so doing he eventually runs aground on his own temporality, for he can really give no ultimate

⁷ F. Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, ed. G. W. Kitchin (London, 1954), pp. 4 ff., 37 ff., 216 f.

⁸ W. S. Reid, *Christianity and Scholarship* (Nutley, N.J., 1966), pp. 55 ff.

explanation of anything on a purely spatio-temporal basis, unless he comes to the conclusion that everything happens by chance. Then he is reduced to the position of Sir James Jeans who at the beginning of *The Mysterious Universe* says:

Into such a [hostile] universe we have stumbled, if not exactly by mistake, at least as the result of what may be properly described as an accident. The use of such a word need not imply any surprise that our earth exists, for accidents will happen, and if the universe goes on for long enough, every conceivable accident is likely to happen in time.

He then goes on to quote Huxley's conjecture that six monkeys strumming on typewriters for a million years would eventually turn out all the books in the British Museum—presumably his own included.⁹ But he has to end the book by saying that the creator of this universe must have been a consummate mathematician, which seems to contradict his basic premise of chance, for chance is no explanation of experience. The only other possibility is the meta-physical world of Max Planck who holds that

. . . the real world—in other words, objective nature—stands behind everything explorable. In contrast to it, the scientific world picture gained by experience—the *phenomenological* world—remains always a mere approximation, a more or less well divined model.¹⁰

But what this real world remains, as it does for men such as Planck and Sir Arthur Eddington, is basically a mystery. Neither chance nor sheer mystery, however, provides much wisdom for man in this temporal existence.

The Christian, on the other hand, has a radically different approach. True, he does not seek to see directly the hand of God moving in the events of nature or history. God governs normally and usually through secondary causes, by what Calvin has called the "secret operation of his Holy Spirit." The element of mystery is always there, but it is not the mystery of the unknowable and the unknown. It is the mystery of the action of the eternal God, the creator, sustainer, ruler and redeemer of the world. It is the mystery of the relation of time and eternity. Therefore, the Christian does not think that every reaction of natural phenomena nor every action of man in history shows God's acting directly in time. Only when he himself reveals that he is so working directly can we know.

Yet believing that God is sovereign over all things and "works all things after the council of his own will" (Eph. 1: 11), the Christian holds strongly to the idea of a coherent universe, God's universe. And because it is God's universe it is, as Francis Bacon and many Christian thinkers since have maintained, man's responsibility to

⁹ J. Jeans, *The Mysterious Universe* (Cambridge, 1944), pp. 3 ff.

¹⁰ M. Planck, *Scientific Autobiography and Other Papers*, pp. 80 ff., 90, 105 ff., quoted in F. Le Van Baumer, *Main Currents of Western Thought* (New York, 1970), pp. 674 ff.

investigate and employ as a steward its wealth and riches whether physical or human, to God's eternal glory. The scientific endeavour, therefore, whatever its sphere, for the Christian, is a God-given duty and responsibility. This does not mean, as some would claim, that the Christian believes that the universe must be raped of its wealth and beauty, but rather that man is to use what God has given him of physical, esthetic, emotional and intellectual wealth for the benefit of himself and his fellowmen and to manifest the goodness and power of God. For, as the Apostle Paul says, the universe is the manifestation of his "eternal power and Godhead." This is true wisdom, and as we increase our knowledge of the universe parallel with our knowledge of God, so we shall increase in wisdom, and in favour with God, if not always in favour with man.

This all takes us back to the thought with which we began. The Christian sees the whole of the universe, including himself, in a different light from that of the non-Christian. The fact is that they both begin from diametrically opposed presuppositions. The unbeliever's starting point is that of Henley:

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul¹¹

—and, for that matter, of the universe. The Christian, on the other hand, has begun his pilgrimage with the words of the publican: "God be merciful to me a sinner." This is the true fear of the Lord which is the starting point for true wisdom. Through his knowledge of God in Christ, the Christian has a true and proper perspective on himself, on life and on all things.

For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, whether the ordered world, or life or death, or the present or the future, all are yours, but you are Christ's and Christ is God's (1 Cor. 3: 21).

The Christian's faith in Christ is the *beginning* of wisdom. By his acceptance of him as Saviour he is "converted" or turned around to a new outlook and understanding. But this is only the beginning. After this first step has been taken he must grow not only in grace but also in understanding and wisdom. He is to gain a greater knowledge of the universe in which he lives and a greater knowledge of his fellow-men and of himself. This he does to a considerable extent through his own intellectual growth, resulting from his scientific labours. And as his true wisdom expands, he gains an ever greater knowledge of his Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who increasingly is given the glory, that in all things he might have the pre-eminence.

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¹¹ W. E. Henley, "Invictus," *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. A. Quiller-Couch (Oxford, 1927), p. 1019.