



Habits of the Mind: Intellectual life as a Christian calling

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A 2001 Christianity Today Book of the Year! What is an intellectual? How can you learn to think well? What does it mean to love God with your mind? Can the intellectual life be a legitimate Christian calling? Is the intellectual life your calling? James Sire brings wit and wisdom to bear on these questions and their possible answers. And he offers an unusual "insider's view" of learning how to think well for the glory of God and for the sake of his kingdom. In *Habits of the Mind* Sire challenges you to avoid one of the greatest pitfalls of intellectual life--by resisting the temptation to separate being from knowing. He shows you how to cultivate intellectual virtues and disciplines--habits of mind--that will strengthen you in pursuit of your calling. And he offers assurance that intellectual life can be a true calling for Christians: because Jesus was the smartest man who ever lived, Sire argues, you can and should accept the challenge to think as well as you are able.

Habits of the Mind: Intellectual life as a Christian calling Details

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Reasonable Ruben says

I just finished James W. Sire's "Habits of the Mind: Intellectual Life as a Christian Calling." (yes, that was rather quick) I somehow knew that I was going to thoroughly enjoy this book. Its subject matter is so powerfully pertinent to where I'm at, that I found that I could defer to such annoyances as sleep and work alone in putting it down.

Sire argues (almost obviously) for intellectualism as a legitimate calling for certain Christians. He considers anti-intellectualism charitably, and rejects it as a misguided, pitiable notion. He then proffers his own definition of "intellectual," and then, additionally, the adjective-noun compound of "Christian intellectual." He then commends John Henry Newman as somewhat of a paragon of Christian intellectual virtue; (not least because Newman himself has much to say about the intellect) specifically, his notion of the perfection of the intellect. I enjoyed becoming acquainted with Newman, a mind I had previously been on unfamiliar terms with.

Sire considers the moral dimension of mind; of thinking and knowing. He considers what he takes to be intellectual virtues and disciplines. He considers the idea of thinking by reading. He then considers the person of Jesus Christ, and attempts to portray him, with Dallas Willard, as "the smartest man who ever lived." (an admittedly provocative statement, which requires a chapter of justification and qualification, with fruitful results, I think) Finally, he considers what might be the responsibility of the Christian intellectual, so defined.

I'm giving Sire 9/10 for this book, for majestic (I mean really excellent and riveting) prose, for humility, for great structure, and above all for inspiring me. I haven't been so into a book since (almost embarrassingly) "On Guard."

A favourite quote from Sire:

"What must strike any alert reader of the Gospels is the unexpected character of the Jesus who emerges from their pages. When we pay attention, there is an ever-renewed freshness to the Jesus we encounter. As we spend time away from the text, our image of Jesus fades. His striking, unique reality loses its sharp edge. He becomes more and more like a Norman Rockwell illustration, domestic, homey - a nice, rather wise man who lives down the block who each week comes to church to worship with us but not to call us to account.

But when we read the Gospels, we are struck with a towering figure who upsets us at every turn, alternately fascinating and frustrating, comforting and deeply disturbing at the same time. As we try to deal with this reality, we face both an intellectual and existential task. Here is the Jesus of the first-century time and space now becoming the Jesus of the present in the kairos of our own lived twenty-first-century moment. All our previous readings of the Gospels, all the comments of the scholars, all the meditations of the saints we have reflected on in our times of quiet devotion are called into question each time we read a Gospel afresh."

Sire, J. (2000, p. 185). Habits of the mind (1st ed.). Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

Austin Hoffman says

Mediocre. Read Sertillanges instead.

Audrey says

A book for those who are considering scholarship or other intellectual pursuits as a Christian. Excellent, though sometimes difficult reading. The first few chapters about John Newman were less interesting to me than most of the rest of the book. At one point, I found myself in tears thinking about how the things he was discussing might apply to me. Not that I think everyone would be moved to tears! But it was definitely life-changing for me.

Matt says

James Sire's Habits of the Mind was one of the books assigned while I was a student of the Summit Semester program in Pagosa Springs, CO. In the course of the program, we covered only the first two chapters, due to time constraints. The book has sat on my shelf ever since, until this semester.

Upon reading, I was amazed and excited to Sire quoting and referencing so many familiar names - George Marsden, Josef Pieper, Steven Garber, who I've read and appreciated since Semester, and many others who I've not yet been able to read, but intend to, such as Wendell Berry, Simone Veil, Karl Barth, Thomas Merton, and John Henry Newman, among others. It's the Blessed Newman who Sire holds up as a model of Christian intellectualism, and Sire spends two early chapters exploring his life and thought. Not having read Newman prior to this, I found him fascinating and insightful, though Sire's use of his quotes seemed just a bit excessive.

As another reviewer pointed out, Sire leaves out any reference to community, and, I think tellingly, dismisses Peter Berger's work on the sociology of knowledge off hand. Steven Garber, who I mentioned above, builds strongly on Berger's work in his own The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior, a book both Sire and myself highly recommend. This focus on the individual mind, alone, is the biggest critique I would offer of the book. Case in point: In Chapter 5, Sire writes:

"Indeed, public intellectuals are notorious for their failure to live up to their stated moral values. But at least they can think of themselves as worthy intellectuals. They do not have to bear the burden of *doing* in order to lay claim to *knowing*". (Habits, p. 105)

Sire's explanation of this is that these intellectuals do not really know what they claim, thus, they don't do it. But this seems both dismissive and overly simplistic. What about desires, affections, habits, environment? Each can play a role in how a person acts, and are often realized by the individual themselves. For a more complete picture, I would recommend Steven Garber's book The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior and James K.A. Smith's paradigm-shifting Cultural Liturgies series, beginning with Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation.

On a more positive note, much of what Sire has to say about the intellectual disciplines themselves were worthwhile. In particular, I found Sire's section of Lectio Divina both particularly informative and helpful.

I thought Sire rested a bit heavily on quotes from other writers, particularly Newman and A.G. Sertillanges, to make his point. The book tends to feel like a collection of quotes, rather than an expression of Sire himself. The writing style also felt a bit disjointed. Though Sire wrote in everyday language, such as would be accessible to the general public, much of the quotes and material are in far more academic language, leading alternatively to Sire seeming overly simple, and the quotes seeming inaccessible and out of place. Also, on a design note, block quotes are frequently inserted into the text, often slicing paragraphs and sentences in two. This design faux pas severely disrupts the flow of reading, and often makes keeping track of what Sire's trying say difficult.

Another point of contention: In the last chapter, Sire names C.S. Lewis, George Marsden, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Alvin Plantinga as the only four examples of Christian intellectuals he sees as assuming a public role as Christian scholars. Frankly, this seems absurd to me. What about Dorothy Sayers, Owen Barfield, or Malcolm Muggeridge? What about Walker Percy or Karol Wojtyla, better known as Pope John Paul II? How about Wendell Berry or T.S. Eliot? Each certainly fit Sire's own definition of an intellectual, and have had a significant impact both in and out of the church. I may be misunderstanding Sire, and I hope I am, but it does seem a huge oversight.

Though helpful in parts, and though I agree with much of what Sire says, I can't recommend Habits of the Mind. It's fairly derivative, borrowing heavily from other writers, by-and-large one-sided, and occasionally unclear. There's simply better books to read on this topic.

Ci says

Sire has a mixture of scholar and conversational tone in this book. It is essentially a self-help styled book to examine and encourage the intellectual habit of mind in Christian life. The value of this book to this reader is the introduction to John Henry Newman's life and work.

(A quick read in the library.)

Matt Crawford says

Do not let the first few chapters fool you. This book is awesome! It is engaging and really poses the question if you are a Christian intellectual or just claim to be. All that head knowledge must be backed up by action. Sire shows how that action plays out!

DaFDC says

3.5/5 STARS

About: What is it like to be an intellectual? How about a Christian intellectual? That's the premise of this nonfiction read.

My Thoughts: The most useful thing for me about this book is that it describes the kind of person who will do well as an intellectual. (Or, if you're a Christian, the person who is called by God to become an

intellectual.) Sire marks the difference between having intelligence and being an intellectual. I'm kicking myself for not taking down that quote, but basically it means this: Being intelligent means seeking knowledge for what it can help you do; being an intellectual means examining ideas for the sake of the ideas themselves. Reading this, I knew immediately that I would fit better in the former camp—which is exactly what I picked up this book to discover. I prefer to read things that are of immediate use to me; I want to be intelligent in my field (which will hopefully be writing genre fiction, one day), but I'll never be an intellectual.

I ended up skimming a lot, after the preface and first chapter (although I also enjoyed the chapter “how thinking feels”) because I found it was not relevant to my life after the above revelation. But other readers might find other chapters to be extremely relevant and helpful, such as the one about “Thinking by Reading.” As an English major, I already do that, but it was a nice refresher—especially the section about reading with an attention to the worldview of the author.

Other Ideas That Stood Out:

“All intellectuals are in love with ideas; not all intellectuals are in love with truth. Some whom I am willing to call intellectuals do not even believe there is a truth of any substantial kind.” Basically, he says (and I agree) that Christian intellectuals should develop a love of truth, as our worldview clearly necessitates the existence of absolute truth.

I found his breakdown of the intellectual virtues stimulating. For example, he discusses courage at length, and here's a quote I loved: *“Courage is also needed if you discover something new or culturally different, something that proves odd to others but true to you. The problem is greater yet when what you come to think of as true is seen not just odd but ‘heretical’ within your own ‘cognitive community.’”* He talks about how it can be difficult to lose friends, this way; but you find new ones!

Learning about *Lectio Divinia* was of major interest, to me, as well. It's a multi-technique method of deep-soaking in the Bible that I had not come across before. I usually study the Bible, but *Lectio Divinia* is less about thinking and more about absorbing. He warns us not to do this with other books, as we must allow our “thinking to direct our reading,” in those cases. *“We read not just to listen to what others say and to discern what others think; we read to learn the truth, do you know and participate in the reality God has created, not the reality only imagine by others.”* The Bible is the truth; other books are the human's picture of the truth.

On that note, the section on “reading worldviewishly” is extremely helpful for anyone looking to pay attention to the way an author thinks.

I think I'll end this review & summary with the happiest quote of the book, for book lovers worried about all those books they'll never get to: *“Ah! But there's a heaven! Heaven will be a place that fulfills my longest longings. Either I will have time to read all the books that I have not read before or I will receive something even better.”*

Overall: I probably won't read anything else by this author because I've hardly broken the surface of the Christian intellectual scene and have a huge booklist as is; but this book told me exactly what I needed to know about myself, and for that I'm very grateful.

Karen Glass says

One of the best books I've read--a keeper. You've got to love a book that makes you think of David Hicks, Charlotte Mason, and Augustine, and reminds you why they are all on the same page. How thinking feels...Jesus is the smartest man who ever lived...and a crystal-clear reminder that thinking validates itself in *doing*. This is wonderful book that will justify the time you take to read it many times over.

Mike says

It is possible to be an intellectual and a Christian. In fact, you can even enjoy it. Sire identifies what an intellectual is, how he goes about his work, and offers sage advice on how to grow in your thinking. I particularly enjoyed the chapter "Jesus the Reasoner"

Andres Vera says

It has been a while since I read a book that showed me things about myself that I didn't know before. I'm not talking about learning new doctrines or spiritual realities about what it means to be a Christian, or a husband, or anything like that; I mean learning about how I think from someone else. In this book, Sire celebrates the mind, the intellect, and the delightful task of thinking. Furthermore, he defends the notion of a Christian intellect and cheers on the Christian mind to think and to continue to enjoy thinking for the glory of God. After proposing a spectacularly creative and dynamic definition of "intellect"(and the distinguishing characteristic of the Christian intellect), Sire introduces us to one of his intellectual heroes, John Henry Newman.

He spends two chapters describing the mind, work, and thought of Newman and in particular his contributions on the perfection of the intellect. The next chapter, "How thinking feels" is one of the most well-written chapters of the book. Here, Sire connects what is often disconnected in conversations about intellect: the mind and emotions. This chapter repudiates (and laughs at) any notion that intellectuals are so unemotional that they are almost not human. On a more serious note, Sire then addresses the relationship between ethics and thinking and discusses the importance of pursuing holiness in our thinking. Overall, he argues that we only know what we act on and we only believe what we obey.

After laying a foundation for the Christian mind and the Christian thinker, Sire then tackles the issue of perfecting the intellect by discussing what he calls the intellectual virtues and the intellectual disciplines. The passion for truth and the passion for holiness (in the framework of humility) comprise the Sire's intellectual virtues. To these, though, he adds A. G. Sertillanges' virtues (constancy, patience, perseverance, courage, and humility). Although there is no secret formula guaranteeing the perfection of the intellect, Sire argues that there are disciplines that can enhance whatever native abilities we have. These disciplines (which he sees as inextricably connected with spiritual disciplines) include solitude, silence, attention, lateral thinking, and prayer—the downy wing of truth.

An important and undoubtedly anticipated chapter on thinking and reading follows. Inspired by Augustine's epic transformation upon reading the words of Romans 13:13-14, Sire explains how reading that directs our thinking can have mighty power to change our lives. It is not just reading that should direct our thinking, though. In fact, in a discussion on *lectio divina*, Sire suggests that reading anything other than the Bible demands that thinking direct reading. In fact, this is the normal mode of studying. The scholar moves slowly through the text not just to listen to what others say and to discern what others think, but to learn the truth, to know and participate in the reality God has created and not just in the reality only imagined by others.

Sire spends an entire section of the book interacting with the idea that Jesus was the smartest person that ever lived—"Jesus the Reasoner." Sire dives into the New Testament and shows that Jesus argued using: 1) a fortiori arguments, 2) arguments from evidence, 3) reasoning in dialogue and in direct conflict with others, 4) exegeting Scripture, 5) telling stories. As God incarnate, Jesus was not only the wisest man that ever lived, he was the smartest one too. Finally, Sire closes with a chapter on the responsibility of a Christian intellectual. First off, being an intellectual is no big deal; there is nothing to particularly admire or condemn. All Christians are called to be as intellectual as befits their abilities and the work they have been called to do. No one is called to be a sloppy thinker, though. All thinking, all living of truth should be done with the recognition that our ultimate responsibility is to God.

Tim says

Sire's book is not so much a defense of the intellectual life for Christians as a manual of sorts. It has some excellent points and Sire does a good job with quotations from important thinkers (when these are brief), but it is also disjointed, has too many long block quotes (especially from John Henry Newman), and lacks any sense of the necessity of intellectual community. The intellectual life seems a solitary affair tied to books and ideas, without a sense of community life.

I like Sire quite a bit - he got me reading Lesslie Newbigin and I really like his books on worldviews and on reading. This book generated less affection. It begins with two chapters on Newman, full of block quotes of his flowery Victorian prose, but only sparingly uses Newman later in the book. That is a blessing as I am not fond of Newman, following the Frank Turner school that sees Newman as an evangelical hater. I do not find much in him that models the Christian intellectual, especially the doing sort that Sire praises. And that is the problem. Sire has good chapters about thinking and about intellectual virtues and disciplines. Glad to have read them, but still wondering how exactly Sire sees the intellectual life as benefiting the church, especially the decidedly anti-intellectual church in America. I agree that it does and should, but Sire's book is directed at the individual. So, after skipping the two Newman chapters, read through the other chapters, and consider what an intellectual (especially one not involved in Biblical studies or perhaps philosophy) might do for the church.

Ralph says

As others suggested, I did not find this quick read. After a couple of starts, I found it better to read a chapter at a time and highlight or underline as I went. I would place this book in the same category as Mortimer Adler's "How to Read a Book". Neither is easy, but both are good foundations for what comes next. In fact, I plan to use some of the techniques in Adler's book to better grasp this one and as I continue reading others by Sire and several listed in his bibliography.

Melanie says

He quotes Sertillanges so much, I think I'll just read Sertillanges. The title is misleading; there's not much in this book about habits. Also the layout is terrible -- quotations set apart right in the middle of every page. Very distracting.

Steve Watson says

The chapter on Jesus as reasoner was interesting, as is Sire's emphasis on humility and wisdom.

Peter Krol says

I had high expectations for this book. But, dare I say it? Sire was a bit too...intellectual. I believe one may have a better chance of winning an audience to a thesis when the content and vocabulary are more plain and understandable.
