

THE MYSTERY OF CHRISTIAN INTELLECTUAL DISCERNMENT

Learning from Ephrem the Syrian and Anastasios of Sinai

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LITERATURE ABOUT CHRISTIAN DISCERNMENT in general has been produced prodigiously throughout church history. Leaders and church fathers have written great wisdom concerning both the pitfalls and the godly measures that Christians should consider as they make professional, personal and practical decisions in daily life. By comparison, almost nothing has been written about how Christians might navigate analogous dynamics in their intellectual endeavours.

Should Christian academics, researchers and others pursue intellectual work in different ways from those who do not share their faith? Is all knowledge equally accessible to the equipped intellect or is there room for unique Christian modes of pursuit? These questions seem especially pertinent in the information age. After all, every Christian today must anyway wrestle with the quandaries of how to absorb, analyze, and apply the over-abundance of knowledge that floods our minds.

Because intellectual topics and conversations are often associated with precise, discursive language, it could make sense to approach these questions in the same way. However, I propose that a distinct Christian perspective on intellectual discernment may involve precisely the *disruption* of such discursive reasoning. This is provided by my two titular figures in Christian history—Ephrem the Syrian (c.306–373) and Anastasios of Sinai (c.630–700).

At first glance, these thinkers may seem like a strange pairing: they come from quite different times and theological backgrounds. However, the uniqueness and peculiarity of these men disrupted the standard intellectual expectations in their day and promises to provide similar disruption even now. Stated briefly, Ephrem challenges notions of *systematic reasoning* and Anastasios challenges notions of *idealism and perfectionism*. The combined thinking of these Christian intellectuals

offers encouragement and inspiration to those pursuing intellectual vocations today.

In a superb essay in *The Way*, Nicholas Austin alludes to the snares associated with ‘human reason’ and explores how both logical discernment and paradoxical mystery are involved in spiritual progress.¹ Here, I am following a similar approach in exploring the *mystery* connected to what I am calling Christian intellectual discernment. Although the idea of mystery receives an awkward welcome in much of the Western world, I hope at least to demonstrate the thoroughly Christian heritage of the term.²

Intellect and Mystery in St Paul

Throughout Christian history, a measure of tension has existed between the intellectual and spiritual impulses of the faithful. While much theology (especially since the Enlightenment) has been typified by more intellectual emphases, the rapid proliferation of pentecostal-charismatic Christianity in the last century is just one expression of a faith that characteristically demotes ‘cerebral theology and creedal formulae’.³ The tension between intellectual and spiritual foci is sometimes perceived as a *defect* of the faith, but it may also be argued that it serves as a God-given safeguard against the error of idolizing either. No biblical author articulates this mystery better than St Paul.

Given his rigorous education under the illustrious Gamaliel, Paul is arguably the supreme example of a Christian intellectual in the apostolic age. It is telling that the vital intellectual transformation required for Paul to come to terms with the new place of the Gentiles in God’s divine economy lasted several years, if not the entire remainder of his life.⁴ Even a cursory assessment of Paul’s thought shows the great weight he placed upon reason, but also the surprising ways in which he appropriated his intellectual achievements in service of an ultimate

¹ Nicholas Austin, ‘The Ignatian Art of Moving Forward’, *The Way* 61/3 (July 2022), 12.

² The Eastern Orthodox tradition has classically used this term to articulate its entire ethos. See Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1957).

³ See Johnson Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, ‘“I Will Not Leave You Orphaned”: Select Impactful Contributions of Global Pentecostalism to World Christianity’, *Pneuma*, 42/3–4 (December 2020), 370–294, here 374; Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

⁴ Reconciling Paul’s autobiographical account in Galatians with information in other places is notoriously difficult, if not entirely impossible. Nevertheless, it is clear that Paul spent a considerable span of time processing his Damascus experience before he felt prepared to discuss his call with the church leaders in Jerusalem.



Paul the Apostle, *seventeenth century, artist unknown*

mission. Three Pauline passages illustrate this dynamic particularly well: 1 Corinthians 1–2, Ephesians 3 and 1 Timothy 3.⁵

The provocative statements made by Paul about human knowledge in 1 Corinthians 1:18–2:16 are among the most famous in scripture. Paul first quotes Isaiah 29:14: ‘I will destroy the wisdom [σοφίαν] of the wise, and the discernment [σύνεσις] of the discerning I will thwart’ (1 Corinthians 1:19). He proceeds to build upon this future-facing prophetic vision by rooting it in the historical realities of the incarnation. Consequently, he incarnates his message by shifting focus from the abstract concept of wisdom to wise people themselves (ultimately culminating in the person of Christ): ‘God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise [σοφούς]’ (1 Corinthians 1:27).

The irony of Paul’s own prestige as a former Pharisee could not have escaped his readers. It is within, and probably resulting from, this paradoxical context that we encounter one of his earliest uses of the term

⁵ While I am well aware of the various arguments against Pauline authorship of Ephesians and 1 Timothy, I do not consider them ultimately convincing and side with the minority of scholars who maintain genuine authorship in one form or another. See Paul Foster, ‘Who Wrote 2 Thessalonians? A Fresh Look at an Old Problem’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 35/2 (December 2012), 150–175.

‘mystery’ (μυστήριον), which he employs some twenty times throughout the *corpus Paulinum*. Paul understands ‘mystery’ not as contrary to his own intellectual prowess but as a sort of lens through which it can truly be situated against the empty wisdom of the world.

The beautiful language of Ephesians 3 includes more paradox and three more occurrences of ‘mystery’ (3:3, 3:4, 3:9). Here, however, Paul specifically uses this word to describe the previously unconscionable fact that the Gentiles have now been made ‘fellow heirs’ within the family of God. Although, in Galatians, Paul insists that his message for the Gentiles was received by divine revelation, it is also apparent that he made full use of his intellectual abilities and discernment to articulate that revelation in terms most constructive for fledgling Christian communities.⁶ As in 1 Corinthians, Paul here resorts to paradoxical language to express profound spiritual experience: ‘to know [γνώναι] the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge [γνώσεως]’ (Ephesians 3:19). As before, Paul is not diminishing the value of intellectual activity but rather promoting it as a legitimate, yet partial, way of approaching divine realities that are ultimately beyond our complete grasp.⁷

Perhaps most revealing is Paul’s language in 1 Timothy 3. This pastoral epistle is filled with intimate writing and personal advice that requires keen discernment. Accordingly, Paul’s use of ‘mystery’ in this context is the most unexpected of all. In 3:9, Paul instructs deacons to ‘hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience’. If this ‘mystery’ were something opposed to intellectual activity, it is difficult to imagine how exactly these instructions could be followed. The fact that Paul speaks of a ‘clear conscience’ (καθαρᾶ συνειδήσει) recalls an earlier passage in the same letter:

... instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith. But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk (1:3–6)⁸

⁶ Paul was probably trying—at least in part—to distance himself from negative aspects of his Pharisaical training in light of the damage being caused by the ‘Judaizers’ in Galatia.

⁷ Although the terms ‘apprehend’ and ‘comprehend’ are commonly used interchangeably, theologically speaking God can be sufficiently apprehended for salvation but never fully comprehended. I use them with this specific understanding below.

⁸ See also 1 Timothy 4: 2.

Thus, it would seem that the ‘mystery’ here functions especially to prevent leaders from getting carried away by fruitless intellectual activity, which can lead either to confusion or arrogance. For deacons, Paul sees the ‘mystery’ as being both clarifying and humbling. Ultimately, Paul concludes his practical instructions for deacons in chapter three by, once again, highlighting the mystery of the faith, which he expresses through the use of rhyming poetic verse.⁹ This gracefully displays how intellectual discernment in the service of God can be shaped by the profound nature of the venture itself.

Several basic ideas about intellectual discernment can be culled from these various passages. Epistemologically speaking, it seems that Christian intellectual discernment has its ultimate *telos* in God, the source of all knowledge and wisdom. For Paul, it is not wrong to excel in intellectual activity, but discernment is required in knowing when such activity is being directed towards something other than Christ, who is the very wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:30). Paul does not isolate intellectual activity from other tasks but situates it within his overarching paradigm of a disciplined life holistically devoted to God (Romans 12:1–2).

While ‘mystery’ today sometimes conjures up ideas of uncertainty, secrecy or even deception, the Septuagint tradition upon which Paul builds communicates quite the opposite.¹⁰ The divine mysteries of God are in fact the most reliable truths in Creation and, for that reason, are concealed from those unwilling to devote the type of intellectual discernment necessary to apprehend them.¹¹ Regardless of how exactly Paul might have described his personal method for practising intellectual discernment, it is evident that his years of Pharisaical training laid the groundwork for the monumental ways in which he articulates the implications of God’s mysteries now revealed through the Christ event.

Somehow, Paul maintains his ability to debate effectively with the brightest minds in Athens while also recognising the acute inadequacy of his intellect in comprehending the full scope of God’s mysteries. It is instructive to recall that Paul’s conceptually brilliant letter to the Romans—sometimes regarded as his theological *magnum opus*—also

⁹ The likelihood that the 3:16 represents an early credal formula should not cause us to overlook the obvious metrical and rhyming characteristics of this unique passage, which was probably recited to with a melody set to music.

¹⁰ Despite the serious threat of various ‘mystery religions’ in late antiquity and the perpetual danger of resurgent ‘gnostic’ tendencies, the idea of mystery has remained vital throughout church history.

¹¹ Indeed, one of the main reasons the divine ‘sacraments’ have been so called throughout history is precisely because they communicate ultimate realities in ritual ways that words alone cannot match.

reiterates the deep concern for personal relationships noted in 1 Timothy. Romans 16 includes almost thirty individual names, exemplifying the inextricable link between intellectual discernment and pastoral concern in Paul's post-Damascus life.

Ephrem and Anastasios

Ephrem the Syrian and Anastasios of Sinai are quite different in their theology and thinking, but several similarities should be highlighted from the outset. Although Ephrem was never properly a monk, his ascetic lifestyle has been described as proto-monastic and thus bears resemblances to the more developed monastic system in which Anastasios participated several centuries later.¹² Both men were also heavily involved in combating heresy, which they believed prevented people from experiencing the true work of God in their lives. Indeed, the idea of God's indwelling in the believer is a prominent theme in both of their writings and each describes this phenomenon with impressive creativity.

Most important here is the deep respect both authors give to intellectual discernment, while exhorting their readers not to 'pry' into divine things beyond their comprehension.¹³ Although the prevalence of 'mystery' in both writers is hardly surprising, the similar ways they discuss it is perhaps their strongest point of connection. Accepting the infinite mysteries of God is never an excuse to shrink from the discipline of intellectual discernment, but rather an impetus to strive ever harder to receive even just a few more 'crumbs' from God's table.¹⁴

Judging from an early index of hymns preserved at St Catherine's monastery, where Anastasios was active, it seems likely he was at least aware of Ephrem's work (although in Greek translation).¹⁵ Slight similarities in style and language probably reflect influence from the Syriac tradition in general, but it is currently not possible to demonstrate that Anastasios pulled anything directly from any of Ephrem's work.

¹² See Sebastian P. Brock, 'Introduction', in *Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary, 1990), 26. For an excellent introduction to the thinking of Anastasios, see Joseph A. Munitiz, 'Introduction', in *Anastasios of Sinai, Questions and Answers*, edited and translated by Joseph A. Munitiz (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011).

¹³ Ephrem writes: 'There is intellectual enquiry in the Church, /Investigating what is revealed: /The intellect was not intended to pry into hidden things', quoted in Brock, 'Introduction', 45; and see *Ephrem the Syrian: Select Poems*, translated by Sebastian P. Brock and George Anton Kiraz (Provo: Brigham Young University, 2006), 211.

¹⁴ This metaphor is one of Ephrem's most characteristic. See *Ephrem the Syrian: Select Poems*, 213.

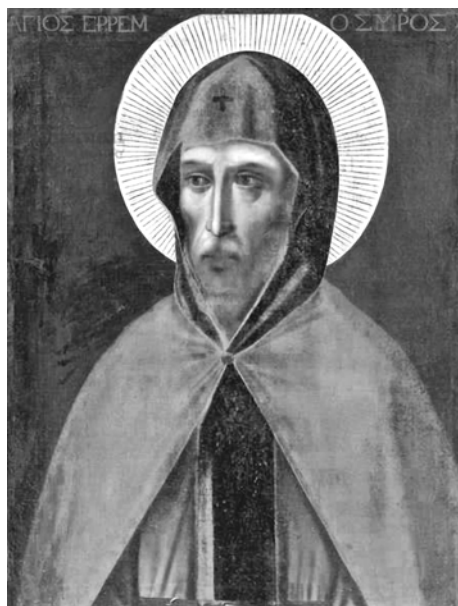
¹⁵ Brock, 'Introduction', 36.

Ephrem: Faith Adoring the Mystery

Ephrem stands out in Christian history for his wisdom and is venerated in several different traditions. Perhaps the best way to summarise Ephrem's thought is to juxtapose it with that of another seminal figure. Anselm's dictum '*fides quaerens intellectum*' (faith seeking understanding) both summarised and propelled much of Western theology. In contrast, Sydney Griffith has argued that Ephrem's approach is one of 'faith adoring the mystery'.¹⁶ This is confirmed by Sebastian Brock: 'Ephrem's approach to theology ... avoids—indeed abhors—definitions, which he regards as boundaries (Latin *fines*) that impose limits; his own method, by contrast, is to proceed by way of paradox and symbol'.¹⁷ By accepting our own cognitive limitations, we are free to marvel at God's limitlessness.

Ephrem was known not just for his intellectual brilliance but also for his humility and remarkable acts of charity. When severe famine struck Edessa, he abandoned his normal life to devote himself entirely to caring for the sick.¹⁸ The posthumous account that describes Ephrem's dramatic ploy to avoid becoming a bishop is probably an embellishment, but it nevertheless touches upon the shock felt by many of his readers on learning that Ephrem never advanced beyond the position of deacon. Ephrem was deeply pastoral and prioritised solidarity with common Christians, even if it required feigning insanity like King David.¹⁹

While certainly aware of the proceedings of the Council of Nicea, Ephrem did not know



Ephrem the Syrian, by Giuseppe Franchi,
early seventeenth century

¹⁶ See Sidney Griffith, *Faith Adoring the Mystery: Reading the Bible with St Ephraem the Syrian* (Milwaukee: Marquette U, 1997).

¹⁷ Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1992), 14.

¹⁸ Brock, 'Introduction', 14–15.

¹⁹ See 1 Samuel 21:10–14.

Greek and seems to have deliberately avoided learning it because of what he perceived as the inherent dangers associated with Greek ways of thinking. Brock elaborates:

To Ephrem, theological definitions are not only potentially dangerous, but they can also be blasphemous. They can be dangerous because, by providing ‘boundaries’, they are likely to have a deadening and fossilizing effect on people’s conception of the subject of enquiry, which is, after all, none other than the human experience of God. Dogmatic ‘definitions’ can moreover, in Ephrem’s eyes, be actually blasphemous when these definitions touch upon some aspect of God’s Being: for by trying to ‘define’ God one is in effect attempting to contain the Uncontainable, to limit the Limitless.²⁰

These convictions lead Ephrem to adopt a ‘poetical approach’ to theology, which stands in marked contrast to the discursive reasoning of both the Greek and Latin traditions.²¹ Ephrem’s voluminous hymns and poetry were regularly performed and praised in his own lifetime and left an indelible impact upon the entire Syriac tradition, earning him the nickname ‘harp of the Spirit’.

Ephrem’s poetical approach should not be misinterpreted as somehow anti- or sub-intellectual. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Ephrem was passionate about guarding the orthodox faith and expended much of his energy denouncing the various heresies of his day. An important concept in Ephrem’s thought has to do with attempts to ‘grasp’ or possess truths that fundamentally exceed human intellect:

A person who seeks after truth with a grudging spirit cannot gain knowledge even if he actually encounters it, for envy has clouded his mind and he does not get any the wiser, even if he grabs at that knowledge.²²

Like Paul, Ephrem clearly viewed arrogance and envy as hindering the type of intellectual discernment that is prompted by the wonder of God’s inexhaustible wisdom. Several passages suggest that Ephrem is more concerned with developing greater *intellectual capacity* for pondering the things of God than merely amassing great amounts of knowledge—which

²⁰ Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 23–24.

²¹ Serafim Seppälä, ‘The Concept of Deification in Greek and Syriac’, *Review of Ecumenical Studies Sibi*, 11/3 (2019), 448.

²² Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Faith*, 17. 1, quoted in Sebastian P. Brock, ‘Theology through Poetry: The Example of St Ephrem’, in *Singer of the Word of God* (Piscataway: Gorgias, 2020), 91–102, here 96.

can easily blur our vision of God. Tightly gripping old knowledge can prevent people from experiencing the full freedom given by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

At the core of Ephrem's thinking lies his nuanced conception of God's mystery (*raza*) as ultimate truth (*shrara*).²³ In stark contrast to modern materialism that prioritises empirical data above all, Ephrem upholds the ancient (Semitic) conviction that all perceptible knowledge is actually a sort of derivative metaphor or 'shadow' of the ultimate cosmic truths. Accordingly, he frequently marvels at the ways that God has chosen to 'clothe' Godself in human language that we can understand—although only with God's help.²⁴

With His Begetter His birth is certain, but to the investigator it is fraught with difficulty; to supernal beings its truth is crystal clear, but to those below, a subject of enquiry and hesitation—yet one which cannot be investigated!²⁵

Anastasios: Divine Indwelling

We know quite little about the life of Anastasios. Like Ephrem, Anastasios never advanced in the church hierarchy, even though it seems likely that he could have become *hegoumenos* (ἡγούμενος) or even bishop if that had been his ultimate desire. Although not widely known in church history, and probably not as erudite as Ephrem, he developed a notable reputation as a writer and his works have survived as a sizeable collection of manuscripts.²⁶

Joseph Munitiz described Anastasios as a 'polemical yet kindly figure' whose thought is suffused by 'fluency and characteristic idiosyncrasy'.²⁷ Indeed, the writings of Anastasios exhibit a conscious departure from several norms of his day and some clever solutions for unprecedented dilemmas faced by Christians.²⁸ Despite his passionate attacks on heretical deviations from the faith, Anastasios was eager to modify unrealistic expectations for common Christians because he knew that their

²³ Brock, 'Introduction', 42.

²⁴ Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 211.

²⁵ *Ephrem the Syrian: Select Poems*, 93.

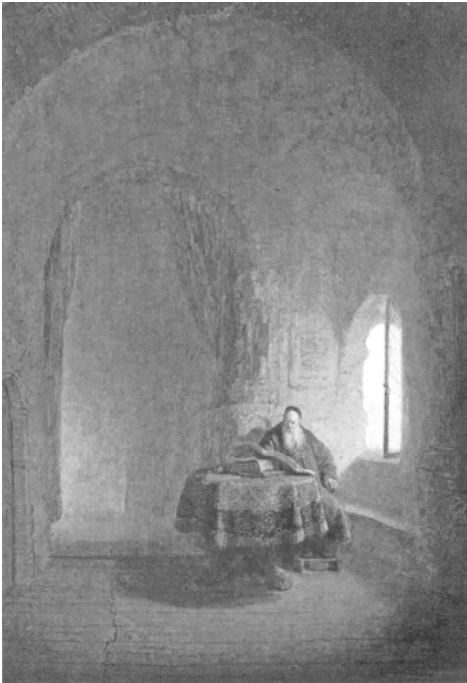
²⁶ Perhaps the two most important are the *Hodegos* ('handbook')—which provides careful discussion of heresies and theology for monks—and the *Questions and Answers*, which addresses sundry concerns from lay Christians of the time. This section mostly draws from the latter.

²⁷ Munitiz, 'Introduction', 9.

²⁸ Anastasios famously made use of illustrations and diagrams to strengthen his arguments with heretics in Alexandria.

motivations were pure. Munitiz accurately highlighted some ‘paternalistic’ tendencies in the responses of Anastasios, but this seems understandable given the silliness of the puzzling questions he was asked throughout his career.²⁹ Anastasios, like Ephrem, often discusses the mystery of God and specifically quotes 1 Corinthians 2 on numerous occasions.³⁰

An important example of his theological adaptability can be seen as access to churches and services decreased because of Arab incursions. He legitimises use of the *skeuophorion* (σκευοφόριον) or pyx (q.64) and insists that actual church buildings are incidental to the activity of God in one’s heart (q.6). When answering a question about dreams, he readily acknowledges the fact that they can be caused by various ‘preoccupations’ or by ‘one’s digestion’ (q.72:1). He finally settles with the following admonition: ‘So any dreams you see that lead you to



St Anastasius, by Rembrandt van Rijn, c.1660

compunction, and improvement, and conversion, and fear of God, these and only these you should cherish’ (q.72:2).³¹

In the course of his creative responses, Anastasios is always careful to indicate when he is departing from the normative views of the church authorities and makes clear when he is giving his own opinion. Perhaps as a result of this, he also distinguishes between normal and ‘more divine’ mysteries (q.6:1), which he seems to think can only be apprehended by some Christians. Regardless, he upholds the honour of living a godly life among ‘worldly things and children’ (q.88) and firmly

²⁹ Munitiz, ‘Introduction’, 16. Questions put to Anastasios concern whether the night comes before day, receiving omens from random Bible passages (*lachimeterion*; λαχμητήριον), eating camel meat, the *ephoud* (a Jewish priestly garment), and even nocturnal emissions.

³⁰ See questions 3, 5, 6, 28, and so on, in Anastasios of Sinai, *Questions and Answers* (subsequent references in the text).

³¹ It is worth noting that Anastasios here describes the soul as ‘rational and gifted with intellect’.

rejects the idea that one can only truly be saved by practising ascetic solitude in the desert.

Anastasios' theological creativity, like Ephrem's, is tempered by keen awareness of the proper boundaries of the intellect. He uses a variety of terms to articulate the type of intellectual activity that crosses the line of what God intends, including 'pry', 'poke', and 'cross-examine' (*ψηλαφάω*) (q.9). Close reading reveals that the intrinsic problem with these approaches is their impure or misguided intentions. He remarks that arrogance is present even when someone is 'completely convinced that he or she is doing something good, not paying attention to the words <of Scripture>' (q.31) and therefore argues the importance of being content with what God has disclosed to us:

All that makes up a Christian and the mysteries which a Christian holds, is faith. But true faith is a simple [*ἀπεριέργως*] assent, since if we start to poke into the words and deeds of Scripture and of God, we are lost and we are drawn into the depths of incredulity. (q.22:1)

Like Paul and Ephrem, Anastasios does not condemn intellectual pursuits but rather argues that 'logical thinking [*λογισμός*] should be humbled' (q.51:1). Indeed, when pressed to provide the most helpful advice to lay Christians, Anastasios asserts the inadequacy of intellectual efforts if separated from the fullness of the faith: 'Therefore make an effort to learn these things in action and by experience, not by simple word which is of no help' (q.3:4).

Ultimately, the creative licence Anastasios affords himself and his readers is built upon the bedrock of *divine indwelling*, which fosters a sense of wonder and guarantees purity of motive. He uses a rich variety of terminology to describe the role of the human in this relationship, including 'tent', 'altar', 'sanctuary', 'organ' and 'God-made temple' (q.6:4).³² He seems content to preserve the mystery of this spiritual reality by speaking alternately of the divine indwelling of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit and sometimes even the 'fullness of the Trinity' (q.6). His interlocutors, however, are perpetually discontented in their pursuit of practical advice, and when asked how one can know 'if Christ has taken up his abode inside one?' (q.2) Anastasios cleverly illustrates the ways it should be just as obvious as a foetus is to a pregnant woman!

³² And compare 1 Corinthians 3:16–7, 6:19.

Most intriguing for an understanding of intellectual discernment is the way that Anastasios reconciles divine indwelling with our ‘intellectual capacities’:

Therefore we learn from these words that by the faith and fine deeds the house of the soul is built up by our *intellectual capacities* [*nous*]; however if the owner of the house, Christ, does not come and live in us, it is clear that he is not pleased by the structure that has been brought into being by us for him. (q.1:2, emphasis added)

Just like Ephrem, Anastasios sees human intellectual endeavours as vital in the process of approaching God but woefully unable to ‘grasp’ God by force.

In the end, Anastasios demonstrates a ‘powerful pastoral preoccupation’. Even though he was tenacious in his use of precise, technical language against heretics in Alexandria, he simultaneously ensured that his advice given to lay Christians remained ‘firmly rooted in the *ordinary language* of ordinary people’. To summarise Anastasios’ motivations as ‘pragmatic’ would not be entirely correct, because he recognises that much of God’s instruction does not make sense to worldly people. Rather, Munitiz astutely underscores how Anastasios ‘prizes discernment, the power to distinguish the movements of the spirit within the soul, the wisdom to separate what is willed by God from what is plotted by the devil’.³³ For Anastasios, intellectual discernment is not so much about acquiring expertise in a particular realm of knowledge as about assessing the value of an intellectual claim within the cosmic trajectories of God: ‘Wherever God dwells and walks about, there *all knowledge is at home*’ (q.3:1, emphasis added).

Brilliance and Humility

It is apparent that both Ephrem and Anastasios are marked simultaneously by intellectual brilliance and humility. Ephrem’s use of poetry and paradox delicately preserves the ‘treasures’ of God’s mysteries in a way that the discursive reasoning of the Greeks never did. Ephrem’s intellectual rigour did not require detailed knowledge of the great rhetoricians but rather a pure, unmitigated wonder at the mysteries of God.³⁴

Anastasios was an imperfect theologian who probably never acted as a ‘key player on the stage of history’, but nevertheless embraced the

³³ Munitiz, ‘Introduction’, 14, 16, 18.

³⁴ *Ephrem the Syrian: Select Poems*, 107, 195, 213.

jumbled concerns of ordinary Christians with all of his intellectual abilities.³⁵ The increasingly difficult realities of Christian life during the time of Anastasios propelled him in his pastoral vocation and gave him boldness to renounce the idealistic expectations of his predecessors—even if it cost him clerical advancement. Like Ephrem, Anastasios cherishes God’s mysteries as the ultimate foil to unhealthy obsessions with theological pedantry and perfectionism.

Elements of Christian Intellectual Discernment

Humility

The first undeniable element of Christian intellectual discernment is that it is *humbling*. The virtue of humility is rightly upheld as a vital foundation for all Christian action; but I am suggesting that a *result* of true discernment is to make its practitioners more humble. How else can we respond when our attempts to ‘plumb the depths’ of Creation make us more cognisant simultaneously of God’s greatness and our own finitude?³⁶ Intellectual achievements—especially within academia—notoriously breed the type of ‘puffed up’ attitude that Paul denounces in the letters considered.³⁷ Christian intellectuals should not merely guard against feelings of pride but should consider how their endeavours might actively humble them in light of God’s wisdom. Key here is a willingness to embrace the type of wonder that continually surprises us and disrupts presuppositions.

***To embrace
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Paradox

Christian intellectual discernment is also deeply *paradoxical*. It is noteworthy that Paul, Ephrem and Anastasios all resort to the language of ‘mystery’ despite their impressive mental dexterity. As I have argued, this type of language is not an escape from the demands of articulating complex ideas. Rather, it supremely expresses the paradox of how one can eternally grow in knowledge of God’s mysteries without ever diminishing them. Strangely, it seems that the more we absorb and process aspects of Creation with Christian discernment, the more we are drawn

³⁵ Munitiz, ‘Introduction’, 10.

³⁶ See Job 11: 7.

³⁷ See 1 Corinthians 4: 6; Colossians 2: 18; 1 Timothy 3: 6.

towards the 'singleness' of the Creator.³⁸ What if our goal as intellectuals was not to attain the greatest answers possible but to experience the greatest sense of wonder possible? More provocatively, what if the greatest possible 'answer' is wonder itself?

Paul's indictment of worldly wisdom as 'foolishness' apart from God should remind Christian thinkers that intellectual 'progress' is always at risk of acting as a wedge between us and God. Again, I quote from Nicholas Austin's perceptive article:

One might actually succeed in measuring up to the ideal one sets oneself, resulting in an insufferable pride in one's own achievement and disdain for those who do not, as exhibited by the Pharisee in the parable (Luke 18:9–14).³⁹

Using metaphors from Paul and Anastasios, I propose that the task of Christian intellectual discernment is less like constructing an elaborate edifice of knowledge and more like building a beautiful, spacious sanctuary in which God's mysteries can be manifested and adored. Even as we struggle to make *cataphatic* observations about God's wonder-ful Creation, we must leave space for the *apophatic* confessions that inevitably result from our best intellectual efforts.

Inexhaustible Mystery

Relatedly, intellectual discernment is evidently *inexhaustible*. This is true at the individual level, but most profoundly observed diachronically. Christian tradition functions like a grand relay race across time so that through God's many servants 'the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places'.⁴⁰ Paul, Ephrem and Anastasios are all indebted to the intellectuals before them and confess the need for others to finish what they have begun.

The fact that one can never arrive at the end of God's mysteries should inspire rather than depress. Indeed, insatiable curiosity about the good and intricate created order forms the very foundation of the modern scientific enterprise. Christians should recognise that intellectual discernment involves a perpetual cycle of enquiry, discovery and wonder.

³⁸ Matthew 6:22.

³⁹ Austin, 'Ignatian Art of Moving Forward', 12

⁴⁰ Ephesians 3:10; see Hebrews 11.

Owing to the inexhaustible nature of this enterprise, it is imperative that we guard against the burnout so prevalent in our day. In fact, a key concern of Christian intellectual activity should be to fortify the type of 'clear conscience' that never loses the ability to marvel at God's mysteries.

Sacrifice and Suffering

It is also clear that intellectual discernment is *sacrificial*. The importance of suffering for Christ is well known but not usually associated with intellectual activities. What might it look like to embrace suffering in the process of intellectual discernment? Could it be that our call to focus on questions of eternal value result in diminished professional progress, as it did for Ephrem and Anastasios? Is it possible that industrious attempts to verbalise God's mysteries to a fractured world could result in personal frustration, depression and even anguish?

The moment of Christ's own anguish in Gethsemane leads me to conclude that suffering involving the intellect is supremely realised in prayer. Holding the full wickedness of our world in tension with the full Goodness of God is certainly one dimension of the 'mourning' mentioned by Jesus.⁴¹ The perennial Christian temptation is to dismiss one of these extremes. If we shield ourselves from the details of the world's utter depravity, we are in danger of domesticating our deep need for God; on the other hand, if, like Peter, we allow our minds to focus only on the waves of chaos around us, it is likely that we will lose the courage to pray at all. To comprehend the afflictions of our neighbours and wrestle to expose them to God's Light without ourselves collapsing in despair requires the utmost intellectual discernment.

Relationship

Penultimately, Christian intellectuals must be continually mindful of the *relational* implications of their work. We have seen how both Ephrem and Anastasios devoted themselves to pastoral care. Whereas much of modern intellectual activity is concerned with disembodied 'truth' that is unentangled by the biases of subjective human communities; Christian intellectual discernment can never dismiss the uncomfortable ways that lived subjectivities impact the global Body of Christ.

⁴¹ Matthew 5:4.

This requires something like what Heraclitus famously called ‘xunesis’ (ξῦνεσις)—knowledge that connects to the real needs of people.⁴² It is significant that, by the first century AD, ξῦνεσις has become σύνεσις, the word noted above in 1 Corinthians 1:19 and is often translated into English as ‘discernment’.⁴³ The examples of Paul, Ephrem and Anastasios suggest that, in the Christian context, the relevance of knowledge is primarily assessed for the ways that it benefits people within the *Missio Dei* of the Divine Economy. Just as God commanded the Israelites not to be ‘tight-fisted’ towards the ‘needy neighbour’ with the blessings God had given them (Deuteronomy 15:7), we must always hold our intellectual abilities and achievements loosely—always ready to lay them aside or appropriate them in service of others.

The Spirit

Finally, Christian intellectual activity must be *Spirit-powered*. If we take seriously the words of Paul, Ephrem and Anastasios, we must agree that Christians are somehow capable of perceiving aspects of reality hidden from those not ‘inhabited’ by God. One of our most vital tasks as intellectuals must be to ‘translate’ these divinely imparted realities through the help of the Holy Spirit into language that will help others more fully experience the Love of God.

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⁴² Patricia Kenig Curd, ‘Knowledge and Unity in Heraclitus’, *The Monist*, 74/4 (1991), 531–549.

⁴³ σύνεσις is also found in Ephesians 3:4. And compare 1 Chronicles 1:10, Job 12:20, and elsewhere in the Septuagint.