High and Low: The Theme of Forbidden Knowledge in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

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HIGH AND LOW:
THE THEME OF FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE
IN THE
SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES*

THE SUBJECT OF THIS ESSAY IS A VERY BROAD ONE AND IT WOULD BE
better perhaps to start with a specific text. In his Epistle to the
Romans xi. 20, St. Paul cautioned those Romans who embraced
Christianity not to despise the Jews. Christ’s message, he implied,
is a universal one. And he concluded the Epistle with the words
μὴ ψηλοφρονεῖ, ἀλλὰ φοβοῦ — translated in the Authorized Version
of the Bible as “be not high-minded, but fear”. In Jerome’s Vulgate
the corresponding passage is given as: “noli altum sapere, sed time”.

Jerome’s Vulgate often appears as a strictly literal translation; and in this case also “altum sapere” is more a reflection into Latin
than a proper translation of the Greek word ψηλοφρονεῖν. But after the fourth century the whole passage in the Latin West
was often misunderstood: “sapere” was taken not as a verb with a
moral meaning (“to be wise”) but as a verb with an intellectual
meaning (“to know”); and the adverbial expression “altum” was
taken as a noun denoting “highness”. “Non enim prodest scire”,
Ambrosius wrote, “sed metuere, quod futurum est; scriptum est
enim, Noli alta sapere . . . (It is better to fear the things to come
than to know them; in fact, it has been written Noli alta sapere . . .)”.

In this way St. Paul’s condemnation of moral pride became a

* Written at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, this paper presents
in a necessarily sketchy way some preliminary results of a wider research still in
progress.

1 The whole passage reads:
Quod si aliqui ex ramis fracti sunt, tu autem, cum oleaster esses, insertus es
in illis et socius radicis et pinguedinis olivae factus es: noli gloriari adversus
ramos. Quod si gloriaris, non tu radicem portas, sed radix te. Dices ergo:
Fracti sunt rami ut ego inserar. Bene, propter incredulitatem fracti sunt;
tu autem fide stas: noli altum sapere, sed time. Si enim Deus naturalibus
ramis non pepercit, ne forte nec tibi parcat.

2 See W. E. Plater and H. J. White, A Grammar of the Vulgate (Oxford,
1926), p. 29.

3 See F. Blass and A. Debrunner, A Greek Grammar of the New Testament
and Other Early Christian Literature, trans. and revised by R. W. Funk
(Cambridge and Chicago, 1961), p. 65. The moral and religious meaning of
ψωνεῖν is emphasized by W. Jaeger, The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers

4 Ambrosius, De fide, v. 17. 209 (Sancti Ambrosii Opera, Pt. 8, ed.
O. Faller, Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum [hereafter C.S.E.L.],
Ixxviii, Vienna, 1962, p. 295); see also ibid., p. 300.
warning against intellectual curiosity. At the beginning of the fifth century Pelagius criticized some unnamed people who, misinterpreting the meaning and context of the passage, said that in Romans xi. 20 the Apostle intended to forbid “the study of wisdom (sapientiae studium)”\(^5\). More than a thousand years later Erasmus, following a remark of the Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla,\(^6\) noted that the target of St. Paul’s words had been a moral vice, not an intellectual one. In his unfinished dialogue *Antibarbari* he wrote that “these words do not condemn erudition, but are designed to restrain us from boasting about our worldly success”. “Paul”, he added, “addressed these words *non altum sapere* to rich people, not to learned men”. Not surprisingly, in his own translation of the New Testament, Erasmus refused to adopt the ambiguous words of the Vulgate and wrote instead, more precisely, “ne efferaris animo, sed times”\(^7\). “What is concerned here”, he explained, “is neither learning nor foolishness, but arrogance and modesty”.\(^8\) We will return later to this defence of learning by Erasmus. In any case, notwithstanding his clear interpretation of the text, the misunderstanding of the Pauline passage persisted.

The analogy between the words of Pelagius and those of Erasmus is striking indeed. Apparently there was a persistent tendency to misunderstand this specific passage. At first sight this is difficult to accept because all medieval and Renaissance commentators rightly interpreted “noli altum sapere” as a warning against spiritual pride. But Romans xi. 20 was followed by two other moral exhortations in similar vein: “I say... to every man... not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think...” (Romans xii. 3); and “Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate” (Romans xii. 16). The keyword in all passages in the Greek text is \(\psi\o\rho\o\nu\varepsilon\i\) (\(\mu\eta\ \upsilon\eta\lambda\omicron\rho\omicron\nu\varepsilon\i\), \(\mu\eta\ \upsilon\epsilon\omicron\rho\omicron\nu\varepsilon\i\), \(\mu\eta\ \tau\alpha\ \upsilon\eta\lambda\omicron\upsilon\varphi\omicron\nu\omicron\upsilon\nu\tau\omicron\varepsilon\nu\varepsilon\i\)),\(^8\) which was translated by Jerome as “sapere” (“noli altum sapere”, “non plus sapere quam oportet sapere”, “non alta sapientes sed humilibus consentientes”). Already in the third century Lactantius, the Christian apologist, had written that “sapere” meant “searching


\(^6\) See Lorenzo Valla, *In Novum Testamentum annotationes ... cum Erasmi Praefatione* (Basle, 1541), pp. 141^v^, 142^v^v. See also, however, Valla’s treatise, *De libero arbitrio*, ed. M. Anfossi (Florence, 1934), pp. 50-2, where the Pauline words are still recalled in an intellectual context — that is, an attack against the lofty speculations of theologians on free will and predestination.

\(^7\) See Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus, *Opera omnia*, 10 vols. (Leiden, 1703-6), x, col. 1726; vi, col. 625.

for the truth". A century later, to Ambrosius, as we have seen, "sapere" was just a synonym of "scire", that is, "to know". It is significant that in Neo-Latin languages the verbs used for knowledge are sapere, savoir, saber — even if in Italian, for instance, the distinction between scienza and sapienza maintains in some way the distinction between intellectual and moral levels. It is not surprising then that the words "non plus sapere quam oportet sapere" (Romans xii. 3) had been interpreted as directed against the intellectual curiosity of heretics about matters of religion. Even commentators such as Smaragdus or Rabanus Maurus, who had rightly interpreted "noli altum sapere" as an equivalent of "do not be proud", eventually connected it some pages later to "non plus sapere quam oportet sapere" with an intellectual meaning. Removed from their proper context, St. Paul's words "noli altum sapere" were quoted for centuries and centuries, by lay as well as ecclesiastical writers, as the standard authority against any attempt to overcome the boundaries of human intellect, as we shall see later, for instance, in De imitatio Christi. At the end of the fifteenth century one of the first Italian translators of the Bible, Nicolò Malermi, could write "non volere sapere le chose alte" — that is, "do not seek to know high things".

So we have a slip — not an individual slip, but a collective or nearly collective one. Certainly, the "slipping" of St. Paul's words from a moral to an intellectual meaning had been aided by linguistic

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11 Smaragdus, Collectio epistolarum et evangeliorum de tempore et de sanctis, Dominica prima post Theophania (P.L., cii, Paris, 1851, cols. 76-7); Rabanus Maurus, Enarrationum in epistolais beati Pauli libri triginta, vii. 12 (P.L., cxi, Paris, 1864, cols. 1532, 1544-46). See also Primasius, Commentaria in epistolais S. Pauli, Epistola ad Romanos, xi; xii (P.L., lxviii, Paris, 1866, cols. 491, 494); Luculentius, In aliquot novi Testamenti partes commentarii, iii (P.L., lixii, Paris, 1849, cols. 813-14); Alulfus, De expositione novi Testamenti, vi. 29 (P.L., lxix, Paris, 1849, col. 1304); Sedulius Scotus, Collectanea in omnes B. Pauli epistolas, i. 11; i. 12 (P.L., cii, Paris, 1864, cols. 105, 111); Bruno the Carthusian, Expositio in epistolais Pauli, Epistola ad Romanos, ixi, 12 (P.L., clii, Paris, 1854, cols. 96, 102); Hugh of Saint Victor, Quaestiones et decisiones in epistolais D. Pauli, In epistolam ad Romanos, q. ccclxxviii (P.L., clixxv, Paris, 1854, cols. 502-3); William abbot of Saint Theodoric prope Remos, Expositio in epistolam ad Romanos, vi. 1; vii. 12 (P.L., clixxx, Paris, 1855, cols. 662, 672); Herveus Burgidolensis, Commentaria in epistolais divi Pauli, Expositio in epistolam ad Romanos, xi; xii (P.L., clixxxi, Paris, 1854, cols. 754, 765-6). All interpreted Rom. xii. 3 as referring to knowledge (illicit curiosity, etc.). Some of them (Luculentius, William of Saint Theodoric, Herveus Burgidolensis) explicitly recalled, in this context, Rom. xi. 20.
12 Biblia vulgare historiata . . ., trans. Nicolò Malermi (Venice, 1507 edn.), p. clixx".
and textual factors. But the fact that the words "noli altum sapere" had been interpreted as a warning against the illicit knowledge of "high things" points also to more profound elements.

Human beings represent reality to themselves in terms of opposites. That is to say, they cut the flow of their perceptions according to tidy, polar categories: light and dark, hot and cold — high and low. The old dictum ascribed to Heraclitus that reality is a struggle of opposites — a dictum which Hegel translated into the language of his own dialectical conception — can also be read in a different (and equally anachronistic) key. A famous biologist once observed that the obsession with polarity has deep biological roots. The human mind, he said, is like a computer working on the basis of a yes-or-no, all-or-nothing logic. Even if modern physics has become sufficiently unanthropomorphic to supersede this kind of logic, human beings still behave and think in a different way. To them, reality — as reflected in language, and subsequently in thought — is not a continuum, but a realm of distinct, primarily polar categories.

These categories, of course, have a cultural or symbolic meaning, as well as a biological one. Anthropologists have begun to elucidate the variable meaning of some of them — the opposition between right and left, for instance. But none of these categories is so universal as the opposition between high and low. It is significant that we say that something is "high" or "superior" — or conversely, "base" or "inferior" — without considering why what we most praise (goodness, strength and so on) must be located "high". Even primates, we are told, are sensitive to the opposition between high and low. But the strong cultural value ascribed to this opposition, in every society, as far as I know, points perhaps to a different factor, specifically human — in fact, the most decisive factor in the history of homo sapiens. The prolonged infancy of man, the exceptional slowness of his physical and intellectual development, is perhaps

responsible for this immediate identification of "high" with strength, goodness and so on. To the powerless human child the overpowering adult is the incarnation of all "values".

This is, of course, pure speculation. But we know for a fact that every civilization located the source of cosmic power — God — in the skies. Moreover, the symbolism of "highness" is deeply connected to secular power — as Indo-European languages still show. And if we return to the passage in the Vulgate with which we started, we can see that the warning against knowledge of "high" things has been referred to various (but intertwined) levels of reality. Cosmic reality: it is forbidden to look into the skies, as well as into the secrets of Nature (arcana naturae). Religious reality: it is forbidden to know the secrets of God (arcana Dei) like predestination, the Trinitarian dogma and so on. Political reality: it is forbidden to know the secrets of power (arcana imperii), that is, the mysteries of politics. In fact, we have here some different aspects of reality, all of them implying a definite hierarchy; different, but intertwined — or, to put it in a more precise way, mutually reinforcing by the means of analogy.

Anthropologists know — perhaps better than historians — the danger of projecting our own categories on to distant cultures. But in this case we can be quite confident, because the recurrence of the Pauline words "noli altum sapere" in different contexts reflects an implicit, unifying assumption: the existence of a separate sphere of "highness" (cosmic, religious, political) which was forbidden to human knowledge.

The ideological meaning of this triple exhortation is quite evident. It tended to maintain the existing social and political hierarchy by condemning subversive political thinkers who tried to penetrate the mysteries of the State. It tended to reinforce the power of the Church (or churches), subtracting traditional dogmas from the intellectual curiosity of heretics. As a side effect of some importance, it tended to discourage independent thinkers who would have dared to question the time-honoured image of the cosmos, which was based, by the way, on the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic assumption of a strong opposition between incorruptible skies and a corruptible sublunar (that is, earthly) world.

This emphasis on the limits of human reason apparently contradicts the nineteenth-century image of the Renaissance as a sharp break from the traditional "medieval" world. In fact, this image was not totally wrong — only over-simplified. It will be useful here to discuss the case of Erasmus. The defence of learning implied in his remark about the correct meaning of St. Paul’s words "noli altum

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“Sapere” was a conscious departure from the tradition in which he had been reared. In the famous tract De imitatione Christi of Thomas à Kempis we can read the following passage: “Do not yourself boast about any art or science, but fear what has been said to you”. Fear (time): and the text continued: “Noli altum sapere, but confess your own ignorance”. Once more, we can see how this passage was relevant to a whole world-view. Should we call it medieval? This is of course a vague, catch-all word. There is no doubt that the Brothers of the Common Life praised monastic virtues, like humility, as against the intellectual pride which they ascribed to the scholastic tradition. However, their early follower, Erasmus, did not identify himself either with monasticism or with scholasticism. In his Anticbarbari, in fact, he rejected both as “barbarisms”. His defence of learning was connected to a different, humanistic tradition. It is true that the theological disputes between Catholic and Protestant following the onset of the Reformation elicited from Erasmus, more and more often, the quotation of an old dictum: “Quae supra nos, ea nihil ad nos (we have not to care about things which are above us)”. He was not returning, of course, to the tradition of monastic intellectual humility. The dictum itself, ascribed to Socrates, expressed a different feeling. With true Socratic irony, Erasmus ambiguously referred to the limits of human knowledge, contrasting the simplicity of Christ’s message with the subtle speculations of theologians of both parties.

This Socratic motto, “quae supra nos, ea nihil ad nos”, is often quoted in emblem-books — those commonplace illustrated manuals read by cultivated European people in the sixteenth and, even more widely, in the seventeenth centuries. If we look at them, we can find a large number of images and mottoes relating to the theme of forbidden knowledge of “high things”. What unifies them is the recurrent quotation — duly misunderstood — of the Pauline words “noli altum sapere”. In a typical blend of Christianity and classical culture, these words were used, for instance, as a caption for the

20 “Noli ergo extolli de ulla arte vel scientia: sed potius time de data tibi notitia... Noli altum sapere (Rom. 11. 20): sed ignorantiam tuam magis fatere”: Thomas à Kempis, De imitatione Christi libri quattuor, editio ad codicem autographum exacta (Rome, 1925), p. 6.
Greek myths of Prometheus and Icarus. Icarus, falling from the sky, and Prometheus, punished for having stolen from the sky the divine fire (see Plates 1 and 2), were seen as symbols of astrologers, of astronomers, of heretical theologians, of philosophers prone to bold speculations, of unnamed political theorists. Sometimes it is possible to disentangle the obscure allusions implied in these emblem-books. Alciati’s *Emblemata* — perhaps the most famous among them, with near one hundred editions in various languages — contains an emblem which depicts Prometheus in chains, an eagle devouring his liver. The motto is the one which we have already seen: “Quae supra nos, ea nihil ad nos (we have not to care about things which are above us)”. The verse commentary reads: “roduntur variis prudentum pectora curis / qui coeli affectant scire deumque vices”, of which a literal translation could be: “the hearts of the learned men who want to investigate the nature of the skies and of gods are gnawed [that is, tormented] by every kind of trouble”. Alciati’s commentary echoed a passage in *De fato*, a philosophical treatise about free will and predestination composed some years earlier by Pietro Pomponazzi, and then circulating in manuscript.

“Prometheus vere est philosophus”, Pomponazzi had written, “qui, dum vult scire Dei archana, perpetuis curis et cogitationibus roditur . . .”, that is “Truly, Prometheus is the philosopher who, as he wants to investigate the secrets of God, is continuously tormented [literally, gnawed] by troubling worries and thoughts”. Pomponazzi’s heroic self-image had become, in Alciati’s emblem, a polemical invective.

Emblem-books, being centred on images, could easily overcome...
linguistic boundaries, even when they were not written in the international language of Latin. But their wide European circulation overcame not only national, but also confessional, boundaries. In fact, they usually appealed to a deeper level of "conventional wisdom", based on unconscious or semi-conscious cultural assumptions, among which was the idea of the analogy of cosmic, religious and political hierarchies — the analogy on which the "noli altum sapere" prohibition was based.

However, at a certain point some of the traditional limits imposed on human knowledge were overcome. We have only to remember the incredible progress made by astronomical science from the beginning of the seventeenth century. Certainly, men like Galileo or Kepler did not hesitate to look at the skies, even exploiting such new artificial devices as the telescope. *Arcana naturae*, the secrets of Nature, began to be unveiled: what then was the impact of these scientific discoveries on the old interrelated prohibitions on knowing *arcana Dei* and *arcana imperii*, the secrets of God and the secrets of power? Recent discussion of these problems has mainly emphasized the relevance of a specific intellectual or religious outlook — Puritanism, for instance — to the progress of scientific thought. We will try to take, however briefly, an alternative route.

"Hath your raising up of the earth into heaven", Loyola asked Copernicus in John Donne's *Ignatius His Conclave*, "brought men to that confidence, that they build new towers or threaten God againe? Or do they out of this motion of the earth conclude, that there is no hell, or deny the punishment of sin?" These were, according to this most perceptive of contemporary minds, two possible effects of the "new science": blasphemous intellectual pride on the one hand, or rejection of such a powerful, cohesive social force as religion, on the other. Putting aside the former reaction for the moment, let us concentrate on the latter.

The possibility of drawing subversive analogies from the "new science" to religious and political matters was not, I suspect, confined to learned circles. We should recall the words of the leader of one unsuccessful lower-class conspiracy against the papal government, Costantino Sacardino. This man, hanged as an atheist in Bologna in 1619, was in the habit of saying: "Only fools believe that hell does exist. Princes want us to believe it, because they want to do as they please. But now, at last, all the common people have opened their eyes (ma... hormai tutta la colombara ha aperto li occhi)."


26 Venice, Archivio di Stato, S. Uffizio, b. 72 ("Costantino Sacardino"). "Colombara" means, literally, dovecote; as a metaphor, the lower classes in society. See also R. Campeggi, *Racconto de gli heretici iconomiasti giustiziati in Bologna a gloria di Dio della B. Vergine et per honore della patria* (Bologna, 1622). I intend to discuss Sacardino's case in a forthcoming article.
In these same years French and Italian intellectual groups known as "libertins érudits" claimed that religion was a lie, albeit a useful one: without it, the masses would have behaved badly, and the whole of society would have fallen apart.\(^{27}\) A man like Sacardino — a professional clown, who was also a practitioner of Paracelsian medicine — explicitly reversed this aristocratic theory. The attitude of the common people — this was his hopeful assumption — had changed. They no longer gazed passively at the great deeds of kings and politicians in the theatre of the world. They had begun to penetrate into the secrets of power — discovering the secret of secrets, the political use of religion.

"Do they", as Donne had asked, "out of this motion of the earth conclude, that there is no hell, or deny the punishment of sin?" In fact, Sacardino did. Of course, there is no evidence that he knew anything about the Copernican system. But I wonder if his consciousness of living in a new era, in which traditional beliefs had been shattered — "hormai tutta la colombara ha aperto li occhi" — was really independent of what was going on in the realm of science.

Sacardino's case is, as far as I know, quite exceptional. Moreover a lower-class revolution, such as that of which he dreamed, would have been, in seventeenth-century Europe, obviously doomed to failure. A successful analogy from the "new science" of nature to the science of society could be related, as it was by Hobbes, only to already existing and powerful realities, such as the absolute states. It is significant that this kind of analogy was labelled "atheistic" — a vague term which could cover not only religious but also political matters. Thus we have here a further proof of what we have already said about the deep interrelation between the three levels of knowledge — cosmic, religious and political. It is useful to remember in this context the invective of Simplicius in Galileo's *Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo*: "This manner of thinking tends to the subversion of all natural philosophy and to the disorder and upsetting of Heaven and Earth and the whole Universe".\(^{28}\) This fear of the subversive implications of the new heliocentric system, which Galileo ascribed to the followers of the old, Aristotelian cosmology, was not a rhetorical exaggeration. In fact it was echoed some years later by Descartes in his *Discours de la méthode*:

... I cannot in any way approve of those turbulent and unrestful spirits who, being called neither by birth nor fortune to the management of public affairs, never fail to have always in their minds some new reforms. And if


I thought that in this treatise there was contained the smallest justification for this folly, I should be very sorry to allow it to be published.28 This cautious remark throws some additional light on Descartes’s decision not to publish his own treatise Le monde after Galileo’s condemnation by the Roman Church. He was highly conscious of the political implications of the new science — even if he was far from supporting them.

The condemnation of the heliocentric system by the Roman Church has been judged either as an act of blind intolerance or of stubborn pedantry. The possibility cannot be excluded, however, that it was dictated also by an obscure fear of the religious and political implications of the new cosmology.30 In the middle of the seventeenth century an Italian Jesuit, Cardinal Sforza Pallavicino, adopted a more flexible attitude towards scientific progress. He too referred to the old analogy between arcana naturae and arcana imperii, the secrets of Nature and the secrets of political power, but sharply opposed the former to the latter. It was possible to predict the behaviour of Nature, because natural laws were few, simple and unbreakable. But to predict the behaviour of kings and princes, was sheer temerity — as it would be to predict God’s inscrutable will.31 In the same vein Virgilio Malvezzi, a nobleman who was also a relative of Sforza Pallavicino, wrote that “whosoever explains natural events by referring them to God, is a poor philosopher [natural philosopher, that is, scientist]; but whoever does not refer to God to explain political events, is a bad Christian”.32 So we have, on the one hand, the realm of science which is, in principle, open to everyone, even to artisans and peasants, because as Sforza Pallavicino remarked “philosophy [again natural philosophy, that is, science] lives in the shops and in the countryside, as well as in books and in academies”. On the other hand, we have the realm of politics, which is forbidden to “private men” who try to penetrate into the secrets of power. In this way the sharp opposition between Nature’s predictability and the unpredictability of politics leads to (or maybe is dictated by) a very different issue — the need to prevent the common people from intervening in political decisions. At the same time, however, the subtle distinction traced by Sforza Pallavicino implied a realistic appraisal of the nature of scientific progress, though he cautioned against the pretension of ignoring the “gates of human knowledge”.33

31 Virgilio Malvezzi, *Davide perseguitato* (Bologna, 1634), p. 3.
This overcoming of the old limits was duly registered in the emblematic literature. During the seventeenth century Icarus and Prometheus became symbols of a powerful intellectual drive towards discovery. In a dramatic shift of values, "boldness", "curiosity", and "intellectual pride" — vices traditionally associated with these myths — were now seen as virtues. John Donne foresaw it: "Hath your raising up of the earth into heaven brought men to that confidence, that they build new towers or threaten God again?" Icarus and Prometheus — like the Titans or the builders of the Tower of Babel — had also been defeated: but their defeat had been a glorious one. In fact, in an emblem-book of the late seventeenth century, Prometheus was no more depicted as a defeated god, chained to the mountain. His hand touching the sun was matched by the proud motto "Nil mortalibus arduum" (See Plate 4) — "nothing is too difficult for human beings". Even Icarus's flight no longer conformed to the new attitudes: in another emblem-book Icarus appears as a winged young man, quietly swimming in the air. (See Plate 5.) The caption "Nil linquere inausum (Dare everything)" related Icarus's flight to Columbus's discovery of a new world.

Daniello Bartoli, the Italian Jesuit, compared Columbus to Icarus, concluding: "without his boldness, we would have neither American spices, nor American mines". The very notions of "risk" and "novelty" were now seen as positive values — appropriate, in fact, to a society increasingly based on commerce. A new culture, centred on the affirmation of new social values, was emerging.

If we return once again to the Pauline words "noli altum sapere", it will be clear why in this period they no longer seemed acceptable. Indeed we can follow almost step by step how this time-honoured motto was at last dropped. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, in a widely read Dutch emblem-book written by a young lawyer, Florentius Schoonhovius, we can find once more the old exhortation "noli altum sapere", in a slightly modified form: "altum sapere periculosum (it is dangerous to know high things)". (See Plate 6.) Once more the motto referred to Icarus. A lengthy

34 On curiosity, see the important book by H. Blumenberg, Der Prozess der theoretischen Neugierde (Frankfurt am Main, 1973).
35 Marcello Marciano, Pompe funebri dell'universo nella morte di Filippo Quarto il Grande re delle Spagne . . . (Naples, 1666), p. 101, and plate facing p. 102; the emblem was dedicated to the Emperor Matthias. The motto echoes Horace (Carmina, i. 3. 37).
37 Daniello Bartoli, Dell'huomo di lettere difeso et emendato (Rome, 1645), pp. 154-6.
commentary by Schoonhovius explained the emblem’s target: the too curious theologians who quarrelled about such divine secrets as predestination, free will, Adam’s fall. How much better it would be, the author exclaimed, if they would leave aside such useless, abstruse discussions, and be satisfied merely with the Bible. In this way, he continued, our prosperous country would not run the risk of being ruined by religious strife.38

What Schoonhovius was referring to was at that time a burning issue. In 1618 religious debates in the Dutch republic were at a turning point. The followers of Calvin’s strict doctrine of predestination were encountering increasing opposition from the milder Arminians. This theological debate had strong political overtones since the Arminians, being a minority, advocated religious toleration. For this reason they were backed by men like Oldenbarnevelt who wanted to challenge the political power of the Calvinist ministers.39 A synod was summoned in Dordrecht to settle the whole issue. At that very moment Schoonhovius decided to publish his emblem-book, as a plea for religious peace.

Both the falling Icarus as a symbol of curious theologians and the motto “noli altum sapere” were circulating widely among these Dutch religious groups. In February 1618 the brother-in-law of the consul of Haarlem wrote a letter bitterly condemning those insane theologians who, like Icarus, miserably fall, having dared to fly too high, towards forbidden targets. Some years earlier Casaubon, the great classical philologist, had written to Grotius, the political writer who was the most prominent Arminian, remarking that it would be useful to Christianity, and above all to Arminians, if some restraint was put on curious theologians who seek (he added, obviously echoing St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, xii. 3) to know more than we should know, “sapientes supra id quod oportet sapere”.40

Schoonhovius’s emblem was therefore striking an already familiar note. But its context was somewhat new. If we look at Schoonhovius’s volume we can see, first of all, facing the first page of text, a portrait of the young author, framed by the words “sapere aude” (see Plate 7); after that, three emblems: “nosce te ipsum (know yourself)”; “sapiens supra fortunam (the wise man cannot be defeated by chance)”; and “altum sapere periculosum”, which we have already seen. The sequence was centred on the theme of knowledge, with evident Stoic overtones. The meaning of the first

38 See Florentius Schoonhovius, Emblemata . . . partim moralia partim etiam civilia (Gouda, 1618; later editions, Leiden, 1626; Amsterdam, 1635-48).
motto, however, strongly contrasted with the last one, "altum sapere periculosum".

"Sapere aude" is taken from Horace's *Epistle to Lollius*. Literally it means "dare to be wise". Horace addresses these words to a fool who hesitates to cross a river because he is waiting for the flowing water to stop. The passage was originally concerned with common sense — not with knowledge. But we can easily surmise that the meaning of Horace's words in Schoonhovius's emblem-book was different. Here too "sapere" slipped from a moral to an intellectual level, under the attraction of the nearby motto "altum sapere periculosum". The result was a somewhat uneasy balance: "it is dangerous to know high things", but "dare to know".

To understand fully the meaning of this last exhortation we have to recall that in this period European intellectuals more and more felt themselves to be part of a cosmopolitan *respublica literatorum*, a commonwealth of intellectuals. In this context their allegiance to fellow intellectuals was more important to them than their religious or political commitment. We could even say that the search for truth was becoming a peculiar religion, a political commitment in itself. But this emphasis on the spirit of research did not concern everyone. "Hic vero libertas aliquam inquirerendi, aut etiam dissentiendi doctis omnino concedenda est (we have to give some freedom of inquiry, and even of dissent, above all to intellectuals)", wrote Conrad Vorstius, the Arminian professor of theology at Leiden, to Casaubon, "otherwise we will look as if we were stopping the slow march of the truth".

So, freedom of inquiry was to be given above all — or should we say only? — to a specific social group: that is, intellectuals. It is possible to say that a new image of intellectuals was then emerging, an image which, for better or worse, is still alive.

"Altum sapere periculosum": the search for truth can have some dangerous social implications — as the Dutch case would prove. In the synod of Dordrecht the Arminians were defeated. One year later, in 1619, the theological victory of Calvinist orthodoxy was matched by a political one. Oldenbarnevelt was put to death; many Arminians — or Remonstrants, as they were called — fled into exile, mainly to France. Schoonhovius, perhaps disillusioned by the religious struggles of his fellow-believers, forsook Calvinism and

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41 Horace, *Epistolarum*, i. 2. 40 ("ad Lollium").

42 This evidence confirms the highly perceptive hypothesis formulated by L. Firpo, "Ancora a proposito di "Sapere aude!"", *Rivista storica italiana*, lxiii (1960), pp. 114-17.

43 See C. Vivanti, "Dalla repubblica cristiana all'Europa dei dotti", in his *Lotta politica e pace religiosa in Francia fra Cinque e Seicento* (Turin, 1963), pp. 325-62.

44 Praestantium ac eruditorum virorum *Epistolarum*, p. 288.
Icare per superos qui raptus est aera, donec
in mare precipitem cera liqua daret.
Nunc ubi cera cadit servens ignis, resuscitat ignis,
exemplo ut doceas dogmata certa tuo.
Astrologus causat quicquam predicere preceps
Nam cadet impostor dum super alta nequit.

1. Andrea Alciati, Emblemata libellus (Paris, 1535), page 57
EMBLEMA CVI.

Quae supra nos, nihil ad nos.

Caucasia eternum pendens in rupe Prometheus
Diripitur sacri praeptis vngue iecur.
Et nollet fecisse hominem figulos g, perosus
Accensam rapto damnat ab igne facem.
Roduntur variis prudentum pectora curis,
Qui cali affectant scire, deumque, vices.

2. Andrea Alciati, Emblemata (Frankfurt a. Main, 1567), page 106
IN ASTROLOGOS.

Icare per superos qui raptus et aëra donce
In mare precipitem cera liquida duxit.
Nunc te cera eadem feruens; resuscitavit ignis,
Exemplo ut doceas dogmata certa tuis.
Astrologus causæt quicquam prædicere precepta,
Nam cadet impostor dum super astra sebit.

3. Andrea Alciati, Emblemata liber (Augsburg, 1531), unnumbered page [xlii]
5. Anselme de Boot, *Symbola varia* (Amsterdam, 1686), page 292
Altum sapere periculosum.

EMBLEMA III.

Icarus et Phaëton nimium dum magna caressunt
Occidit hic flammis, ille peremptus aquis:
Mens insirma hominum cæli perrumpere claustra
Cum studet; in tenebras praecipitata ruit.

6. Florentius Schoonhovius, Emblemata (Gouda, 1618), page 9
7. Florentius Schoonhovius, *Emblemata* (Gouda, 1618), unnumbered page [xii]
8. Anton van Leeuwenhoek, *Epistolae ad Societatem Regiam Anglicam* (Leiden, 1719), title page
became a Catholic. Nor, incidentally, did he produce any more emblem-books. But the diffusion of the new meaning of the Horatian words “sapere aude (dare to know)” continued. Indeed, they were chosen as a personal motto by Gassendi, the French empiricist philosopher connected not only with the “libertins érudits”, but also with the Arminian exiles in Paris.\(^{45}\)

At the beginning of the eighteenth century a book was printed in Holland. Its title page was adorned by a vignette of a man climbing a high mountain. (See Plate 8.) On the top, surrounded by clouds, can be seen a cornucopia. A winged god with a scythe — Father Time — holds the man’s hand, aiding him in his ascent. The motto is “Dum audes, ardua vinces (if you will dare, you will overcome every difficulty)”. The emblem artfully hints at three different mottoes, fusing them into one: “Veritas filia Temporis (Truth is the daughter of Time)”; “altum sapere”, because “ardua” means also “high things”; and “sapere aude”. In fact, we have Father Time; we have height; we have boldness (“Dum audes . . .”, “if you will dare . . .”). But where is “sapere”? One has only to look at the title of the book: *Epistolae ad Societatem Regiam Anglicam* (Letters to the English Royal Society) by Anton van Leeuwenhoek,\(^{46}\) the great Dutch biologist who was the first scientist to use the microscope. So the vignette’s meaning could be translated in this way: the time has come; the secrets of Nature are no longer secrets; the intellectual boldness of scientists will put Nature’s gifts at our feet.

The uneasy balance between “don’t know high things” and “dare to know” had been broken. The eighteenth-century history of this exhortation to overcome the old limits of knowledge has been traced.\(^{47}\) It is highly significant that the Horatian motto was regarded as the very expression of Enlightenment values. “Was ist Aufklärung?” — “What is Enlightenment?” — Kant asked at the end of the century. His own answer was *sapere aude!* — even if he too emphasized in his own way the limits of human knowledge. But this is a different story.

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\(^{45}\) See Firpo, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-17.

\(^{46}\) Anton van Leeuwenhoek, *Epistolae ad Societatem Regiam Anglicam et alios illustres viros . . .* (Leiden, 1719).