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Christian Philosophy and Philosophers: Socialization and the Need for Fresh Approaches

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Abstract: Particularly in the humanities and social sciences, becoming a Christian academic is a process, because it requires one both to be thoroughly socialized to the profession, and to step back and ask what has been screened out by the canon and methods of the field. The third step is creative invention of fresh approaches.

From time to time, people have asked, "How has my work as a priest fits with my work as a university-based professor"? I was a Christian before I was a professor. I was a full professor before I was a priest. In the long run, my short answer became: they feed and empower each other. But getting there was a process.

My settled view is that *Christ transforms culture*, like yeast that gets into a lump of flour. But transforming academic cultures requires Christians who engage those cultures, not only from the outside or superficially, but also from the inside by becoming academics in their chosen fields. There are close analogies between Christian and academic calling. Christians are or ought to be committed to Christ, to growing in the knowledge and love of Christ. Academics are or ought to be committed to Truth, to growing in a knowledge and love of the Truth. The Christian view is that God is Truth. So at a high level of abstraction, these projects ought to come to the same thing.

Becoming an academic begins with a love of your subject, and requires you to become socialized to your profession. Every field has a canon of works that responsible professionals must know. In the philosophical circles in which I moved, the canon included Plato and Aristotle, Descartes to Kant, Russell

and Wittgenstein, Carnap and Quine. Already Aristotle observed: methodology is field-relative. Different methodologies are apt for different subject matters. Approaching ethics with the methods of physics and chemistry is scarcely possible, much less fruitful. Proto-professionals have their work cut out for them. It is necessary to "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" the canon and to master the methods of the field. Really appreciating their significance takes a lot of effort and requires years of living and working with both.

Professionalization carries risks and costs. To become a card-carrying member of the guild, you have to give yourself over to the training or formation in your field. You have in many ways to "go native." But there is also a danger that it will take you over, and that you will become co-opted by it. Seasoned professionals reach maturity when they step back to ask what methods do well (they wouldn't be widely practiced if they weren't somehow fruitful) and what they screen out? When they reflect on whether and how the canon has been skewed (e.g., by leaving out women and African American authors to focus on dead white men)? Having taken stock, leaders are imaginative to invent and bold to pursue fresh approaches that complement and even revolutionize *modus operandi*.

In my day, analytic philosophy was methodologically dogmatic and hostile to religion. Three things helped me to innovate. The first was the Society of Christian Philosophers. Back in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, graduate students were told not to bring God into ethics unless and until they could furnish convincing proofs of the existence of God. There couldn't be seminars on the topic of life after death, because survival--disembodied or otherwise--is unintelligible. Overall, professionals were expected to work within the conceptuality and assumptions laid down by secular philosophers. The problem of evil proved difficult to solve on the value-theory budget recognized by David Hume! By 1978, a number of us had had enough of this. We decided to quit shouldering such burdens of proof, and to establish a "safe zone" within which we could get on with the business of philosophical theology. The Society held and holds adjunct sessions at each of the three annual meetings of the American Philosophical Association, and organized regional conferences where Christian philosophers could try out ideas and receive constructive feed-back. The Society rapidly swelled to the largest

special interest group in the APA. Likewise, our journal, *Faith and Philosophy,* has become the most important English-language venue for philosophy of religion.

The second helpful factor was what I learned in seminary. In the fifties, sixties, and seventies, Anglo-American analytic philosophy had isolated itself from other fields. To do philosophical theology responsibly, a philosopher needs to know as much as the average minister about biblical studies, historical and systematic theology, and psycho-spirituality. Mid-career seminary studies dramatically enriched my conceptual resources. Social anthropology showed how relationship-dynamics in the Bible are evaluated, not by modern moral philosophies, but by the purity and defilement calculus and by the honor code. Getting inside these alternative schemes of evaluation allowed me to discover ways in which they were more apt for conceptualizing what is at stake between us and God. Freud, Jung, and developmental psychology delivered a richer, more complicated picture of human agency, which made standard free-will solutions to the problem of evil seem implausible.

The third transformative influence was pastoral experience. Professionalization builds in and is intended to build in inhibitions. I worked in Hollywood during the AIDS epidemic in the '80's and had to preach to the dying. This is how I learned what I really thought about the problem of evil. In my constructive work, I learn what I believe by preaching it, because in preaching there is a compulsion to say only what you really think is true and an urgency to say as much as you can to meet your congregation's need.

Early on, I became a medievalist because I recognized that in the Middle Ages theology set the syllabus for philosophy. Medieval thinkers were interested in my questions. Analyzing their answers helped me to formulate my own conclusions. I had no problem with teaching historical theology in a university, because of my philosophy of education. In my view, we do not gather in a classroom to agree with ancient authors or with each other, but to understand and appreciate them and to practice methods that give us deeper access to their views. Of course, my own interest in their questions helped me to bring old texts alive for reluctant audiences. I always make it a point to lay out a range of contrasting positions on a topic. The medieval method of questioning and disputing authority makes disagreement a tool of analysis and

an instrument of discovery. I commend it as a wholesome method, not only for philosophical theology but for ecclesial disputes!

Being a Christian philosopher is a distinctive kind of missionary work. The proximate goal is not the personal conversion of die-hard secularists for whom belief in God is not a live option. It is rather to expose and dislodge anti-religious prejudice and to foster understanding. Understanding philosophical problems involves appreciating the costs and benefits of alternative solutions. The theoretical map is not complete without Christian options. The role of the Christian philosopher is to develop Christian approaches in, say, ethics and metaphysics and philosophy of mind with such rigor and detail as to exhibit their coherence, explanatory power, and fruitfulness. The aim is to show that Christian theories are strong enough to be viable competitors in the theoretical market-place. Such work is a form of service to the Truth, and for that very reason is good for professional philosophy.

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