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Creatively Bridging the ‘Interest Gap’: Personal and Professional Explorations

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Abstract: Christians in philosophy need to be creative in bridging the ‘interest gap’ between non-theistic philosophers and the Christian community. Fortunately, the opportunities for bridging that gap are greater now than they have ever been, thanks both to the models of success provided by the founding generation of the Society of Christian Philosophers, and to the resurgence of classical metaphysical questions in the profession as a whole.

I was doomed to be a Christian in philosophy from the start. My parents and grandparents modeled a sincere and well-informed Christian faith, from which I have never found good reason to break. I caught a keen interest in philosophical questions from my early reading of C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer, long before I knew what “philosophy” (at least, as an academic subject) meant. Fortunately, in my first semester as a college student at Michigan State University, my advisor encouraged me to take a course in ancient Greek philosophy (from Thales to Aristotle), and the die was cast.

I have had no regrets. The field of philosophy has been very good to me. After Michigan State, I had the chance to read philosophy and theology at Oxford. Along with excellent tutors in both fields at Oriel College, I enjoyed there my first encounter with Alvin Plantinga, who was delivering the Locke lectures in 1981. Al helped to shake me out of my dogmatic slumber in the grips of neo-Humean empiricist philosophy and awakened me to the fact that there was a living tradition of Christians in philosophy, who could help me stay on track and resist capture by the unexamined philosophical Zeitgeist.

I ended up in graduate school at UCLA, hoping to work with the great Tyler Burge and to take advantage of the Christian sub-culture that had grown up there around Bob and Marilyn Adams. Fortunately, both ambitions were met. While there I was able to develop my interests in philosophical theology and acquire the patina of professionalism required to secure a teaching post. Bob and Marilyn have been inspirational models for me and for many Christian philosophers of my generation. I am grateful to them, and to Alvin Plantinga,

Bill Alston, and the many others who launched the Society of Christian Philosophers in the late 1970's and who, through the excellence of their research, shattered the glass ceiling for those Christians in philosophy who would follow their lead.

I have been teaching for twenty-seven years at the University of Texas at Austin, and I have nothing but gratitude and respect toward my colleagues here. I have been treated with utmost fairness here, despite my many deviant opinions, in matters of culture and politics as well as in religion. When I compare my experiences in academia with colleagues in other fields, I gain an appreciation for the way in which the tradition of openness to ideas has set philosophy apart from many other disciplines, that is, from those that have been captured by narrow ideologies and political programs. Philosophy is an outlier, and I'm very pleased to be a part of it.

The greatest challenge that Christians face in philosophy is that of overcoming what I call "the interest gap." There is very little real hostility toward or bias against Christians in Anglo-American academic philosophy (I won't say there is none), but there is a real gap between those philosophical questions that interest Christians and those that interest non-Christian philosophers, and, to a lesser degree, a gap between those philosophical positions that seem plausible to Christians and those that seem plausible (at least initially) to non-Christians. It is a matter of simple prudence, in graduate school and as an untenured teacher, to find issues and theories that bridge this gap. I generally discourage graduate students from specializing (at least, too narrowly) in philosophy of religion or philosophical theology, or in writing a dissertation on theses that are explicitly theistic. However, even this advice needs to be taken with a grain of salt: the overriding consideration is to choose the topic on which one would be able to do the best work. One of our students at UT, Neil Judisch, for example, wrote a dissertation on free will and was hired by Oklahoma to teach with an AOS in philosophy of religion.

Dualism is an example of the complexities of this task. A few years ago, I would have classified any dualistic view as one unlikely to be taken seriously by non-theistic philosophers. Such views still face a burden of relative implausibility, but they are certainly no longer beyond the pale. I still think the general principle has application: a dissertation on explicitly Christian ethics, or on the metaphysics of the Incarnation, is unlikely to open up job opportunities at non-religious schools.

Although there is broad tolerance for Christian thought in contemporary philosophy, I would warn those students who might have (as I do) leanings toward conservative positions in political and cultural matters to keep those

positions under wraps until one has achieved tenure. The academy remains hostile to conservatism, largely, I believe, because it is so ignorant about the actual views and arguments of conservatives (just as most philosophers were ignorant, in the 1950's and 60's, of the views and arguments of Christian philosophers). Some conservative positions, like opposition to so-called 'same-sex marriages', are often misperceived as reflecting bigotry or animus.

The principal gift of the Christian faith to philosophy is now what it has always been: a great aid to Christians in separating the enduring philosophical wheat from the fashionable and sophisticated chaff. Time and time again, those who relied on their Christian understanding to set boundaries to the range of plausible philosophical positions have avoided time-wasting cul-de-sacs, such as reductive materialism, radical empiricism, positivism, or behaviorism. On the positive side, Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies have endured and have progressed greatly over the last two millennia, largely because of the support and encouragement of Christian philosophers. I recommend that all young Christian philosophers take seriously the value of tradition in philosophy, looking to the 'perennial' philosophy of the Christian scholastics as a fruitful starting-point for their research.

I hope that I have not given the impression that Christians should live in a kind of intellectual bubble or ghetto. Beginning with David Charles at Oxford, and Tyler Burge and David Kaplan at UCLA, my own thinking has been very largely formed and developed by a series of non-Christian teachers and mentors. David Lewis and many of his students have profoundly influenced my own work – because, of course, in philosophy we are often most influenced by those we disagree with. (As Nietzsche said somewhere, this is a reason to choose your "enemies" wisely.)

Over the last thirty years, analytic philosophy as a whole has evolved in a direction that I heartily approve of: away from the dominance of a certain kind of philosophy of language and philosophy of science and toward the renewed dominance of metaphysics and epistemology, with a return to many of the classical questions of ancient and medieval philosophy. This evolution has been the result of the work of both Christians and non-Christians alike. Metaphysics, like politics, can make strange bedfellows. Although I disagree with the many Neo-Humeists like David Lewis and Ted Sider, I value their contributions to the revival of the pursuit of metaphysical truth. The application of reason to the big questions is something that Christians need never fear: as Screwtape put it in C. S. Lewis's wonderful book, to oppose Christian faith with arguments is to fight on the enemy's territory. A metaphysical renaissance cannot help but be a very good thing.

There are two ways to approach the building of an academic career: the way of the hedgehog and that of the fox. The hedgehog selects early on a well-defined research project and then works assiduously until recognized as one of the world's authorities on the subject. Foxes, in contrast, move from topic to topic as their whimsy takes them. I have, for better or worse, always been a fox. The hedgehog strategy is much more likely to be successful -- to win influence and prestige. I wish I could have been more of a hedgehog, but I've simply been unable to maintain the required discipline. My early work was on the liar paradox and its cousins, but after a few years I was sick of the topic and never returned to it. It is lucky for me that philosophy is the sort of field in which it is possible to obtain at least a modest degree of success without a consistent focus, even with a modest degree of talent. There is a set of philosophical skills transferable from one sub-field to another, and a capacious breadth of interest is of great help in sustaining and refreshing one's vocation as a teacher.

I recommend that Christian academics in philosophy participate actively in Christian ministries on campus, especially those that focus on serving graduate students and faculty members. Such involvement can bear much spiritual fruit in one's own life and others. As a Christian academic, one can often feel a fish out of water, both in academia and in a local congregation. A parachurch ministry on campus can fill an important gap. In addition, participation in Christian ministry is quite helpful to those who, like me, are inclined to introversion. I think scholars tend to be introverted at a higher rate than other professions, since extroverts may find the many hours of solitary reading and writing too taxing. However, one's influence as a philosopher depends to a large degree on one's ability to build good personal relationships with colleagues, students, and philosophers at other institutions with common interests so social activities of a variety of kinds (including Christian fellowship) can help overcome certain innate limitations.

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