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# Christian Philosophy without Sociology: Reply to Tedla Woldeyohannes

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**Abstract:** This is a reply to Tedla Woldeyohannes, “On Moser’s Christ-Centered Metaphilosophy.” It draws a distinction between philosophy (particularly, Christian philosophy) and the sociology of philosophy (including the sociology of Christian philosophy), in order to propose that empirical questions about what most contemporary Christian philosophers are or are not doing belong to statistical sociology and not philosophy or Christian philosophy proper. One important lesson is that Christian philosophy itself need not supply, and should not be expected to supply, answers to the statistical sociological questions one might have. Another important lesson is that Christ-Shaped Philosophy calls for certain specific reorientations in philosophy as commonly practiced, even by Christians. The paper identifies three areas for reorientation.

## 1. Sidestepping Statistical Sociology

In “Christ-Shaped Philosophy,” I reintroduced my earlier idea (from “Jesus and Philosophy”) of a familiar, “mere” discussion mode of philosophy, as follows:

Many philosophers ignore or dislike Jesus, because he transcends a familiar, honorific discussion mode, and demands that they do the same. Philosophical discussion becomes advisable and permissible, under the divine love commands, if and only if it honors those commands by compliance with them. Jesus commands love from us toward God and others *beyond* discussion and the acquisition of truth, even philosophical truth. He thereby cleanses the temple of philosophy, and turns over our self-promoting tables of mere philosophical discussion. He pronounces judgment on this longstanding self-made temple, in genuine love for its wayward builders. His corrective judgment purportedly brings us what we truly need to flourish in lasting companionship with God and other humans. We now can see that Jesus bears significantly on philosophy as a discipline. The remaining question for us is volitional: are we *willing* to

participate in the powerful life of God in Christ, in God's unselfish love even toward enemies?

These remarks explicitly acknowledge philosophical discussion that is obedient to God's commands and hence part of the obedience mode. In particular: "Philosophical discussion becomes advisable and permissible, under the divine love commands, if and only if it honors those commands by compliance with them." So, philosophical discussion can comply with, contribute to, and figure in what I call "the obedience mode" of doing philosophy. This much is altogether clear in "Christ-Shaped Philosophy" and is, I submit, undeniably true.

Tedla Woldeyohannes (hereafter "TW") states regarding his own position: "I reject the idea that the discussion mode, in most cases of philosophy done by Christian philosophers, consists only in *mere* discussion without involving any obedience [to God]." His rejection is clear in this regard, but I cannot tell *whose* idea he is rejecting here or what exactly prompts him to reject this idea. The idea being rejected is certainly not mine, because I have no inclination to make sweeping remarks about "most cases of philosophy done by Christian philosophers." Perhaps TW aims to protect the guild of Christian philosophers (as he sees it) in some way, but the relevant sociological claim is far outside, and even foreign to, my own philosophical areas of theorizing.

Perhaps TW's main claim in support of the guild of Christian philosophers is this:

**MC.** It is false that "the discussion mode, in most cases of philosophy done by Christian philosophers, consists only in *mere* discussion without involving any obedience."

MC is a claim of empirical sociology, and not philosophy or philosophical theology. It is an empirical claim about "most cases of philosophy done by Christian philosophers." It is therefore a bold claim that calls for cautious empirical treatment.

The first big question is simply: what exactly does MC mean? In particular, what does its use of the term "most" involve? Is it intended to be a statistical claim, as a familiar use of "most" would entail? If so, we might have the statistical claim that in more than 50% of the cases of philosophy done by Christian philosophers, some obedience [to God] is involved. We also could ask: how much more than 50%? The statistical claim in question *could*, of course, be true, but a second big question arises: how can we proceed to

confirm MC (or to disconfirm MC)? I have no firm evidence base regarding MC, and therefore I stay away from any such statistical claim.

Are we to do a statistical survey of Christians doing philosophy? If so, whom should we include, and whom should we exclude? In addition, should we include past Christians or just present Christians? Should we include nominal Christians as well as genuine Christians? If not, how should we draw the distinction in practice? Should we include only Christians trained as philosophers? If so, to what extent must they be trained? In addition, what should the survey ask, and how can we confirm that the answers to the survey's questions are a reliable indicator of what needs to be confirmed for the sake of MC? Here I have to defer to qualified sociologists, and I recommend that TW do the same if he is inclined to endorse MC.

I can understand TW's eager desire to defend the guild of Christian philosophers (as he sees it), but a responsible inquiry into a complex empirical matter about "most cases of philosophy done by Christian philosophers" will require the aid of qualified sociologists. So, the patience of withholding judgment is an epistemic virtue in this connection. More to the point, I myself have not had, and do not have, a horse in this race, and I don't find the matter particularly illuminating. My own focus, in this series of essays, has been on what is required by Christian philosophy.

In "Doing and Teaching Christian Philosophy: Reply to McFall" (in this series), I offered a distinction between two senses of the phrase "engaged in Christian philosophy," as follows: "One sense, which we may call 'the strict-content sense', requires interacting with philosophy that is explicitly Christian in conceptual content, involving positive claims regarding Jesus Christ, the Spirit of Christ, reconciliation to God in Christ, inward transformation by Christ, and so on. Another sense, which we may call 'the Kingdom-enhancement sense', requires interacting with philosophy (whatever its content) for the purpose of bringing out its contributions (or the lack thereof) for a philosophy that is Christian in content and enhances God's redemptive Kingdom in Christ, under the Good News of God in Christ and its divine love commands." Not being a sociologist, I gladly leave it up to others to decide whether most Christian philosophers are doing or not doing Christian philosophy in either of these senses. This, of course, is no deficiency in my approach to Christian philosophy. Instead, it is an acknowledgment that philosophy is not statistical sociology.

TW offers the following as a challenge.

The trilemma is that either Moser has to concede that (a) *all* of work done by contemporary Christian philosophers can and should count as

work of Christian philosophy; but this would leave his project unjustified or unmotivated since this entails that there is no reason to reorient Christian philosophy, or (b) a small class of work done by contemporary Christian philosophers needs to be reoriented; but this is implausible given the evidence presented in Moser's writings that seems to support that, more plausibly, his call is to reorient a large body of work done by Christian philosophers, or (c) his call is to reorient a large body of work done by contemporary Christian philosophers; but for this to be the case, Moser is invited to provide more compelling reasons why his view of Christian philosophy is more plausible than the view proposed in this paper.

I am highly confident that most philosophy since Socrates does not conform to my aforementioned understanding of "engaged in Christian philosophy," but I am unclear on the intent of this proposed "trilemma." In particular, I am unclear on this remark: "Moser is invited to provide more compelling reasons why his view of Christian philosophy is more plausible than the view proposed in this paper." TW has reiterated my own aforementioned view (from "Christ-Shaped Philosophy") that philosophical discussion can comply with the obedience mode (see the opening quotation of this paper), but this, of course, does not constitute a view at odds with my own. So, his suggested, repeated contrast of "his [Moser's] view of Christian philosophy" and "the view proposed in [TW's] paper" is puzzling indeed. As the opening quotation of the present paper indicates, "Christ-Shaped Philosophy" identifies and promotes what TW calls "an obedient discussion mode" of doing philosophy.

Perhaps TW meant to say only that he endorses MC above but I do not. In that case, we do have a disagreement about whether to endorse MC, but I have offered a good reason (at least for me) to refrain from endorsing MC. I suggest that TW should acknowledge the same good reason, given that he likewise is not a qualified sociologist. He remarks in this connection: "I wholeheartedly agree with Moser's *vision* of Christian philosophy in particular. My disagreement with his conception of Christian philosophy lies in what he thinks should count as Christian philosophy, i.e., the *scope* of work done by contemporary Christian philosophers rather than the *content* of work done by contemporary Christian philosophers." I do not understand his distinction between "vision" and "conception," but I do dissent, for good reason, from his suggestion about scope if he has MC in mind. Even so, I cannot tell what exactly is meant by "scope" here, if MC is not the key point of disagreement. Perhaps he is simply suggesting that he thinks more Christian philosophers are actually in line with my vision of Christian philosophy than I happen to think. I

have not said, however, how many I think are in line with this vision, because I do not have a confirmed view in terms of actual numbers or percentages.

## 2. Whither Reorientation?

I should call attention to a helpful suggestion by Mike McFall to TW, who reports:

I thank Mike McFall for alerting me to be more *specific* about the body of philosophical work done by contemporary Christian philosophers in light of the fact that there are many Christian philosophers who do not do any work on any distinctly Christian philosophy. Probably, one would think that Moser's call to reorient philosophy targets the philosophical works of Christian philosophers that show no relationship, especially directly, to Christianity. But a call to such philosophers, more plausibly, as opposed to their philosophical work, does not seem to be a call to reorient Christian philosophy. The relevant call that such Christian philosophers presumably need is that they should *start working* on distinctly Christian philosophy under the authority of the Lord. I don't have any disagreement with Moser if Moser's call is to challenge such Christian philosophers to directly engage in distinctly Christian philosophy. However, my understanding is that Moser's call is to reorient what is taken to be an extant body of work on Christian philosophy.

Here I suggest a "both-and" response, because I think we can do better on both fronts. Instead of defending the guild of Christian philosophers along the line of MC (a dubious principle at best), I recommend that we redouble our efforts to keep Christian philosophy based in and guided by the Good News (involving personal union with Christ) that is inherent to being a Christian.

My essay "Christ Shaped Philosophy" suggested my recommendation as follows:

As divinely appointed Lord, ... Jesus commands humans to move, for their own good, to an obedience mode of existence relative to divine love commands. He thereby points humans to his perfectly loving Father who ultimately underwrites the divine love commands for humans, for the sake of divine-human fellowship.... Insofar as the discipline of philosophy becomes guided, in terms of its pursuits, by [God's] gift on offer, it becomes kerygma-oriented in virtue of becoming an enabler of the Good News of God in Christ.

A central part of this Good News is the redemptive cross of Christ, where God was “reconciling the world to himself.” This Good News will have to figure centrally in the motive for any philosophy that is genuinely Christian. My endorsement of this point, and the accompanying kerygma-oriented philosophy, does not require that I take a stand on MC or engage in any such sociological claim. We can leave it to qualified sociologists to pursue MC. Instead, my claim is that Christian philosophy must be redemptive in intent and practice, and that therefore philosophy being done by Christians should be reoriented accordingly.

TW seems to hold that no significant reorientation is needed, particularly if he favors MC. Without pretending to do statistical sociology, I have to dissent. I perceive, for instance, a real need in contemporary Christian philosophy for a reorientation from what I call “philosophical theism” (familiar from much natural theology) to what I call “robust Christian theism” (familiar from the disturbing redemptive interventions of the elusive but perfectly loving God and Father of Jesus Christ). This reorientation in Christian philosophy would include at least the following:

1. A reorientation of philosophy away from merely intellectual matters (of, for instance, philosophical truth-acquisition) to self-consciously redemptive and volitional matters (such as personal, volitional union with the crucified and risen Christ and the enhancement of his kingdom, even at one’s own professional expense). (This is one topic of my essay “Christ-Shaped Philosophy” and of my book, *The Severity of God*.)
2. A reorientation of philosophy away from the *primacy* of philosophical arguments (and God as an explanatory postulate based on such arguments, including those of traditional natural theology) to the importance of the spiritual discernment of God’s agapeic self-manifesting disclosures in human lives (and direct human acquaintance and companionship with this elusive personal God who is not the conclusion of an argument). (This is one topic of my essay “Doing and Teaching Christian Philosophy: Reply to McFall” and my forthcoming essay “God without Argument.”)
3. A reorientation of philosophy away from what I call “Corinthian heroism” (“I follow philosopher X,” I follow philosopher Y”), including the seeking of honor and credibility from human philosophers, to *Christ-centered* philosophy that puts the crucified and risen Christ and his love commands front and center, even toward philosophical critics. (This

topic emerged in my “Rejoinder to the Rejoinders of Oppy and Hasker.”)

One might retreat to MC and propose that Christian philosophy has no real need of reorientation in terms of 1–3. I beg to differ. As long as imperfect humans, even imperfect Christian humans, are doing philosophy, there will be room for improvement and even some reorientation along the lines of 1–3. Even Christian philosophers can and, I submit, should admit imperfection with regard to areas 1–3.

We may think of my proposed reorientation of philosophy, including Christian philosophy, as calling for more emphasis and less neglect in the areas of 1–3. We can advocate such reorientation without pretending to do statistical sociology of the sort involved in MC. Instead of trying to defend the guild, we should review our actual, personal standing relative to areas 1–3. We stand only to gain in doing so, especially from the perspective of the one who alone died for us and for whom Christian philosophy is so named. May our philosophy, then, be worthy of him, in spirit and in truth, regardless of our reputations among professional philosophers.

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