

The Challenge for Christian Philosophers

David Brooks writes: “Philosophy and theology are telling us less than they used to....Both fields---philosophy more than theology---have been caught within an internal logic and maybe an insular logic.” This insight should seize the attention of Christian philosophers. Christian philosophers are challenged in three ways. The first challenge is to connect effectively with the culture in which the philosopher lives. The second challenge is to get our priority properly fixed—faithfulness to God which means being thoroughly Christian in thought and life. The third is to be excellent in how we actually do philosophy. This session will examine philosophy’s cultural isolation and develop a response in line with these challenges.

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I. Introduction

- a. David Brook’s insight should seize the attention of Christian theologians and philosophers.
- b. Three areas to which the Christian philosopher must give attention.
- c. Such will require much of him, but without it he becomes just another voice in the mix with nothing distinctive to say.
- d. There is an attempt today to bring philosophy (speculative philosophy) under the domain of science (natural philosophy). Edward O. Wilson
 - i. We are losing the battle as science is dictating what we can and cannot say about reality. Science is determining the rules of the game.
- e. Three major areas that shape Christian view of philosophy:
 - i. The uniqueness of man (ontology)

- ii. A Word from a privileged position (epistemology)
- iii. The Creation narrative (history)
- f. Three challenges for the Christian philosopher, that when understood properly, provide him with proper orientation, professional accountability, and informing context.

II. The philosopher as a member of the church

- a. Christian philosophy begins with theology, the Truth of Christ
- b. Not as a member of an organization, but a member of the community of faith.
- c. Without this, he does his philosophizing in a vacuum.
- d. The challenge is to get our priority properly fixed
- e. “Medieval theologians developed an elaborate and systematic description of the relation of man to God, man to nature, and man to man, and man to his tools. Their theology took as a first and last principle that all knowledge and goodness come from God, and that therefore all human enterprise must be directed toward service to God. Theology, not technology, provided people with authorization for what to do or think.” [Neil Postman, *Technopoly The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 25-6.]
- f. Faithfulness to God and that means to be thoroughly Christian.
 - i. Marcello Pera (President of the Italian Senate) writing of his lament over changes in Christianity especially in Europe where relativism has infiltrated even the church. In fact he writes that in “Christianity I dare say what has changed is our sense of faith in Revelation.”¹

¹ Joseph Ratzinger and Marcello Pera, *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam*. (Foreword by George Weigel. Trans. Michael F. Moore. New York: Basic Books, 2006), 23

- g. What is needed is a robust commitment to Scripture not just for the moral or religious life, but for the intellectual life---life in the culture. It is not just about how to order one's personal life (that of course is important), but to understand how all of life is ordered. It is a view of life that begins with creation and not nature. These are two radically different starting points culminating in very different answers to the big questions of life.
- h. To be a thoroughly Christian philosopher does not mean we quote scripture every time the mouth is opened, in fact, I would suggest that is simply not wise or fruitful. What I mean is that our thinking should be so thoroughly Christian that we naturally see all issues from that perspective.
- i. It is not just that ideas have consequences; it is in particular ideas that are embedded in institutions within society. Proper ideas must be embedded in the life of the church community. As philosophers we are a part of that community.
 - i. "In short, ideas, symbols, ideals, worldviews, and the like are not free-floating and autonomous from lived reality. They are, rather, mediated through things. It is the vast array of cultural artifacts—from omelets, chairs, and snow angels to highway systems, from the Pill to iPods— that finally shape the way we encounter and make sense of the world." [James Davidson Hunter, *To Change the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 28.]
- j. "You cannot ask and think philosophically without allowing the totality of existing things to come into play: God and the world" (Josef Pieper, 97)
 - 1. "By its fidelity to the counterpart of Christ's Truth, Christian philosophizing gains an enrichment of its content. And it must be understood, of course, that not only its Christian character is thereby made stronger and more authentic, but its philosophical character as well (this needs to be repeated over and over because it is not at all obvious!.) [Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, Intro. Roger Scruton. Trans. Gerald Malsbary (South Bend: St Augustine's Press, 1998), 130.]

III. The philosopher as a member of the guild

- a. Must be properly credentialed which means both studies in theology and philosophy. We must not, however, place the focus on gaining legitimacy in the academy as that will not happen just because we have the credentials or because we are good at our craft.
 - i. In many places there is a prejudice against anything Christian and no matter what is done, acceptability or respectability will be denied on other grounds. On the other hand, we do not want our point of vulnerability to be in the area of academic inferiority or intellectual infidelity.
- b. The Creation narrative (that is creation not nature) informs the Christian philosophy on his work.
 - ii. “If one is seriously inquiring into the roots of things (which is what happens in the philosophical act), then one cannot, at one and the same time, reject (for the sake of some kind of ‘methodological purity’) that previously given religious tradition and its teaching, which concerns expressly the very roots of things---even if you no longer accept that teaching.” [Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, Intro. Roger Scruton. Trans. Gerald Malsbary (South Bend: St Augustine’s Press, 1998), 123.]
- b. Gary DeWeese:
 - i. “I think it would be helpful, on a somewhat regular basis, to discuss with Christian colleagues such questions as these: Does this question or problem merit the time and effort to pursue researching it? What is your particular ongoing research interest, and how does it contribute to the task of the Christian philosopher? And when a paper has been drafted, what more congenial place for comments and criticism could be found? But criticism in this context should look not only for the formal validity of the logic and point to overlooked but relevant papers; it should also ask if the draft lies comfortably within the Christian Tradition or if it pushes against the guardrails, does it do so justifiably and respectfully.”
 - ii. “The first theme is this: As Christian philosophers, we must practice in our profession what we claim in our confession.” [*Doing Philosophy as a Christian* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011)]

c. Atheist Marcello Pera

- i. “There is one risk: that the fear of making choices will lead Christians to think that if the burdens of Christianity are too heavy, then it is better to dilute the faith or lower one’s voice rather than risk conflict. But a weak Christian, like a weak thinking, ultimately becomes an acquiescent Christian.” (Without Roots, 32).

IV. The philosopher as a member of society

a. Brooks’ observation:

- i. “Both fields---philosophy more than theology---have been caught within an internal logic and maybe an insular logic.”
- ii. “The first challenge is to connect effectively with the culture in which the philosopher lives.”

b. This requires that we speak holistically or integratively with our philosophy and resist the temptation to be overly specialized in our pursuits. Early Christian philosophers (and philosophers in general) spoke on many cultural matters—ethics, politics, economics and so forth.

c. To use the proper categories of thought to out-think the prevailing secular impulses, to begin with common sense and human intuition, to avoid obsession with minutia, and have a voice of reason in the public square by using the concerns and denials of the present culture as the platform to speak.

d. The Christian philosophy brings a view of reality that answers more of the facts, particularly regarding man.

- i. “Just as it is logically impossible to have practice without theory, so it is impossible to have social and cultural activity in the meaningful sense without some idea of a valued state of being.” (Richard Weaver, *Visions of Order*, 28).

- e. We must have patience as critical thinking is not that common to most
 - i. “Is not the great defect of our education today--a defect traceable through all the disquieting symptoms of trouble that I have mentioned--that although we often succeed in teaching our pupils "subjects," we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think: they learn everything, except the art of learning. How to think about the Bible, culture, and the opposition.” Dorothy Sayers, *The Lost Tools of Learning*, 1947

V. Concluding remarks

- a. Francis Schaeffer:
 - i. “I would repeat, God shuts everyone up to the fact of reality, and everyone has to deal with reality as it is”. It is interesting that C. S. Lewis articulated something of the same orientation when he wrote: “What I like about experience is that it is such an honest thing. You may take any number of wrong turnings; but keep your eyes open and you will not be allowed to go very far before the warning signs appear. You may have deceived yourself, but experience is not trying to deceive you. The universe rings true wherever you fairly test it.” We begin with reality first as in the end it cannot be denied and is common to all and it is that with which we must all deal.
- b. Josef Pieper:
 - i. “But when it is said that someone is a Christian in his philosophy, that cannot only mean that his view of the world is in agreement with Christian teaching. For Christianity is a reality, and not just a teaching! The problem of a Christian philosophy is not only to figure out whether, and in what manner, natural knowledge of the world can be joined in theory to supernatural faith; rather, what it concerns is whether, and in what manner, the philosophizing of someone who roots his thinking in Christian reality can become a truly Christian philosophizing.” [Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, Intro. Roger Scruton. Trans. Gerald Malsbary (South Bend: St Augustine’s Press, 1998), 132.]
- c. Marcello Pera:
 - i. “One should not think of philosophy as a luxury for initiates, to be consumed only within the walls of the university. It is instead a powerful tool for the promotion and spread of ideas and energy, and a vehicle of influential opinions.” (Without Roots, 33-4)