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Christ-shaped Philosophy and Content

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Abstract: This paper examines the negative consequences of relying too heavily upon theoretical content (“content”) as the basis of one’s confidence in the preeminence of Christ in all things. I show the importance of the role of content by briefly considering the initial exchange between Paul Moser and Graham Oppy in this forum. Having motivated the reader by drawing his or her attention to said importance, I proceed to show why an improper understanding of the relationship between Christ and content weakens one’s ability to defend the preeminence of Christ. Two common but mistaken approaches to the relationship between Christ and content suffice in demonstrating this to be the case.

This paper will examine the relationship between the preeminence of Christ and theoretical content (hereafter, shortened to “content”)—the product of intellectual activity in the modern academy. A recent exchange between Paul Moser and Graham Oppy, which includes disputes about ambiguity, will give the reader a sense of the significance of varying understandings of the relationship between Christ and content. Beyond that, I will consider two mistaken but common approaches to the relationship between content and Christ’s preeminence. I will argue that Moser’s “Christ-shaped” philosophy, which advocates a particular approach to the relationship between Christ’s preeminence and content as a way of defending Christ’s preeminence, is preferable to any approach that primarily depends on content itself to do the same. It is important for disciples of Christ to develop a proper understanding of the relationship between Christ and content because it will create opportunities for more productive dialogue between disciples of Christ and non-disciples.

Humanity’s plight and Christ’s priority

To begin on a rather bleak note, I ask the reader to consider the dire existential plight of humanity. Paul Moser has suggested that it is helpful to compare the plight of humanity to being lost in a canyon in the wilderness.¹ The virtue of being in such a predicament, if there is one, is that it tends to focus the mind. The true priorities of

¹ See the “Introduction” of Moser, *The Evidence for God* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), for the source of much of this paragraph and the next.

life come into sharper focus, while at the same time, it is easier to recognize truly trivial pursuits and interests for what they are. With disaster and even death impending, one is forced to make rather abrupt and severe choices about what to do next. The sane response to being in such a predicament is not complicated: one must identify the means of being rescued. As Moser explains, the true nature of the plight of humanity is its alienation from God caused by sin. Humanity is lost, whether it realizes this or not, and appropriate help is desperately needed. Christ's priority is to save humanity; it should be humanity's priority to cooperate fully with this effort.²

Humanity must undergo an inward moral transformation in order to be saved. The disposition to serve oneself must be replaced with a disposition to serve others and Christ. Thus, God intends to affect a change in the human will, and humanity must cooperate with this process. The necessary change of will entails humanity substituting its own priorities with those of Christ's.³ St. Paul's epistles portray the Christian life as one structured in such a way that all activities are carried out with the intention of glorifying God through Christ.⁴ Christ described himself as one who cooperated with his Father's will,⁵ and he expressed kinship with those who did likewise: "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."⁶ Accordingly, in this paper, I have assumed that at least *some* cooperation with its own rescue (and the non-coercive character of Christ's efforts to save humanity⁷) is necessary for humanity's salvation.

It is counter-intuitive to think that cooperation with the will of God would only involve a section of one's life, partitioned apart from the rest; certainly, this was not St. Paul's conception of carrying out the will of God.⁸ Thus, if submitting oneself to the will of God includes every dimension of one's life, then it follows that this includes one's vocation. Accordingly, one should ask what such a cooperative effort might involve for those who labor in the accumulation and dissemination of content—that is, in the modern academy. What could it possibly mean for Christ to shape one's work in philosophy (or history, chemistry, astrophysics, etc.) so that one's work reflects Christ's priority?

To begin to address this question, it will be helpful to first consider two less-

² Cf. Paul K. Moser, "Gethsemane Epistemology," *Philosophia Christi* 14:2 (Winter 2012), 265.

³ Paul K. Moser, "Christ-shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United" (2012), p. 11. This is an online Contribution to the "Christ-Shaped Philosophy Project": <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=118>.

⁴ See, e.g., 1st Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17

⁵ John 5:17, 5:30, 10:37-38

⁶ Matthew 12:50; somewhat relatedly, John 15:8

⁷ The non-coercive character of God's attempt to rescue humanity is a theme stressed throughout *The Evidence for God*.

⁸ St. Paul's all-encompassing conception of doing the will of God can be gathered from, e.g., Colossians 3:17, 23, and Ephesians 6:6.

than-ideal approaches. One approach is exemplified by the tendency of some non-specialists and laymen toward regarding higher learning itself as a threat to their faith. Perhaps the secular orientation of the contemporary academy justifies this suspicion. In any case, the following approach is typical: a topic is pursued as far as possible, followed by an assertion that Christ is somehow still sovereign over what remains. This approach to the relationship between Christ and content, then, involves not a “God of the gaps” but a “God of our remaining ignorance.” A second approach, more common among Christian apologists, theologians and academics, is the inclination to believe that Christ’s priority is to lead his disciples to a state of academic superiority by guiding them to the correct solutions to the remaining mysteries in their respective disciplines. This Christ would be a “God of the academic journals.”

Moser’s “Christ-shaped” philosophy

Perhaps one can narrow the question to one academic field in order to make the task of determining a preferable approach more manageable. Moser has suggested that a “Christ-shaped” philosophy could serve as a model for a Christ-shaped approach to other academic disciplines.⁹ What, then, would an appropriately Christian philosophy look like? What features would distinguish it? Moser’s Christian or Christ-shaped approach to philosophy draws attention to the divine resources available to receptive philosophers as they practice their discipline. According to him, this involves “the love and pursuit of wisdom under the authority of Christ, which calls for an ongoing union with Christ, including one’s belonging to God in Christ.”¹⁰ Moser’s account is intended as a corrective, addressing what he describes as a deficit of attention and concern by Christian philosophers for appropriating the transformative and available power of the Spirit of God into the practice of philosophy.

However, Moser is concerned that preoccupation with intellectual activity can be a “diversionary danger.” For example, he writes: “One such diversion occurs when a philosophy, even a philosophy called ‘Christian,’ ignores the redemptive importance of Gethsemane union with the inward Christ. If attention is directed away from such union, as with most philosophy, one easily can neglect the importance of such union for human redemption.”¹¹ Anything that might make humanity’s rescue/salvation more difficult is surely something to be wary of—perhaps even something to take measures to avoid.

Overall, Moser stresses the importance of the preeminence of Christ in all things: “In making Christ preeminent in all things, even in wisdom and philosophy,

⁹ Moser, “Reply to Oppy” (2012), p. 2. Online at <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=138>

¹⁰ Moser, “Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United,” p. 2

¹¹ Ibid, p. 8

God does not allow the world to know God by its own wisdom.”¹² Thus, he intends to convey by his conception of a Christ-shaped philosophy the fact that human ingenuity plays a diminished role in order to manifest God’s wisdom. Salvation occurs, not through the struggle to *know*, but through the struggle to *obey* as Christ did at Gethsemane.¹³ Philosophy (or any other human endeavor) that is detached from God’s wisdom and power will never be able to bridge the divide between human beings and God and, as mentioned above, may in fact be a distraction from what is most important in life.¹⁴

The exchange between Moser and Oppy

Moser’s conception of a Christ-shaped philosophy is not without criticism. Graham Oppy has formulated a response that accuses Moser of a number of ambiguities. Among them is an ambiguity between the content of a Christ-shaped philosophy and its mode of engagement. He writes: “The expression ‘Christian philosophy’ is also ambiguous. On the one hand, it can be taken to refer to the distinctive content of certain philosophical theories; on the other hand, it can be taken to refer to a distinctive mode of engagement in philosophical discussion (and so to the attitudes—beliefs, desires, intentions, etc.—that are characteristic of that mode of engagement).”¹⁵ Oppy’s concern approximates the following: Christ-shaped philosophy could be reduced to merely the principles or propositions that it upholds. On this reading, for a particular philosophy to be understood as distinctively Christian, it follows that it must be consistent with Christian doctrine. For example, a set of propositions that is not consistent with propositions such as ‘Christ is a created being’ constitutes a Christ-shaped philosophy, while consistency with a set that includes ‘Christ is a created being’ does not. Oppy finds this reading problematic and envisions what similar requirements about content would look like if applied in other academic endeavors. (A Christ-shaped biology would be biological theory that is consistent with Christian doctrine, and so on.)

¹² Ibid, p. 9

¹³ Philippians 2:8; Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; Cf. Moser: “[Moser’s theory of epistemology] contends that the evidence available to humans from a God worthy of worship would not be for mere spectators, but instead would seek to challenge the will of humans to cooperate fully with God’s perfect will. This would result from God’s seeking what is morally and spiritually best for humans,” from ‘Gethsemane Epistemology,’ p. 263

¹⁴ Moser: “A serious problem stems from the frequent divorce of Christian philosophy from the Christian foundation of the inward Christ and Gethsemane union with him,” from ‘Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United,’ p. 9

¹⁵ Graham Oppy, “Moser, Ambiguity, and Christ-Shaped Philosophy” (2012), Online Contribution to “Christ-Shaped Philosophy Project,” p. 1. Accessible at <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=136>.

Responding to Oppy's charge of ambiguity, Moser states: "In offering Christian philosophy as a model for other disciplines, the paper ['Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United'] offers this portrait of *how* Christian theorists conduct themselves as extending to disciplines beyond philosophy. It does not follow, of course, that a Christian doing physics, chemistry, or biology must dissent from the *content* of our best physics, chemistry, or biology. Nowhere does the [aforementioned] paper suggest that the *content* of such scientific disciplines must incorporate Christian doctrine."¹⁶

Oppy's charge of ambiguity extends to a concern about the relationship between Christ and content embedded in Moser's construal of a Christ-shaped philosophy, and he expresses reservation about the possibility that Christian doctrine would be *a priori* deducible from it.¹⁷ Oppy argues, "Moser makes some claims which suggest that he thinks that Christian philosophy must ENTAIL certain kinds of claims (concerning, for example, the 'vital flood of God's agape in Christ' (5))... If I'm studying metric space theory, then I'm studying metric space theory, and claims about the vital flood of God's agape in Christ simply don't enter into the content of my study. (Even if you think that these claims about the vital flood of God's agape in Christ are NECESSARY, you will surely admit that these claims cannot be INFERRED from claims that are proper to mathematics, or physics, or chemistry, or biology. To circumvent worries, we can replace earlier talk of 'entailment' with talk of 'being a priori deducible from'.)"

Essentially, Oppy regards the prospect of Christian doctrine following from a Christ-shaped philosophy "absurd." Indeed, it is. It is difficult to understand how a particular philosophy from which Christian doctrine is *a priori* deducible would be desirable. Moser, of course, does not suggest that specific content should follow from a Christ-shaped philosophy. In fact, the word "doctrine" does not appear in his article at all. "Content" appears only once, and it is in the most explicit statement made in the paper relative to the relationship between a Christ-shaped philosophy and content: "Christian philosophy must be continuous with the content of the Good News of God in Christ."¹⁸

Moser's description of continuity between content and the Good News of God in Christ is insulated from Oppy's accusation of ambiguity in two ways. First, content that is continuous with the Good News of God in Christ is not the same thing as content that is *a priori* deducible from it. This should not require much elaboration, for the two concepts are simply not the same thing. "Not all swans are

¹⁶ Moser, "Reply to Oppy," pp. 1-2.; N.b.: there have been subsequent replies and counter-replies between Moser and Oppy, but I have not included consideration of them in this paper since my intention is not to adjudicate their exchanges.

¹⁷ Oppy, "Moser, Ambiguity, and Christ-Shaped Philosophy," pp. 1-2

¹⁸ Moser, "Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United," p. 10

white” seems perfectly continuous with the Good News of God in Christ. I do not believe it can be *a priori* deduced from it, though, given that it is an empirical claim. Secondly, the Good News of God in Christ is not identical to Christian doctrine. The first is a specific reality: that the kingdom of God is present here and now, and humanity may (possibly) enter into it.¹⁹ The second is a coherent system of propositions. The primary difference is that the first *is* something; the second is *about* something.

There is no basis to deny that Moser would disagree with Oppy with respect to the general importance of content. In fact, Moser would likely agree there is no good reason that Christ would oppose academic work or the life of the mind generally. Although Moser has expressed reservations about intellectual activity as a distraction from redemption in Christ, this should not be construed to mean that he defends the claim that intellectual activity or its resultant content are unimportant or even something evil. After all, Moser is, in his own words, “one who [has spent] most of his life assessing philosophical views, in connection with epistemology and the problems of skepticism.”²⁰

The two mistaken approaches, examined in greater detail

The exchange between Moser and Oppy is useful for understanding why the *role* of content is so important. If one takes Moser’s reply to the accusation of ambiguity to be satisfactory (as I do), then attention can and should be turned toward exploring why, specifically, the role of content is so important. Thus, although I believe Oppy’s accusation ultimately fails, he is right to express concern about the relationship between Christ and content (a concern undoubtedly shared by Moser). In order to undertake an examination of the role of content appropriate to a paper of this size and scope, I will examine in greater detail the two mistaken approaches to Christ’s preeminence in academic matters (which were outlined above) in order to obtain a clearer sense of what they have in common. In doing so, I will also explain why they should each be rejected on the basis of what they have in common.

The first approach is more commonly adopted by non-specialists and laymen. As described, it involves asserting Christ as Lord over cognitive domains that one does not (and perhaps cannot) understand. For example, one might have a relatively adequate grasp of modern science and presently have this body of knowledge coherently reconciled with one’s faith in Christ as Lord. However, despite this present consistency, this same person feels his faith to be threatened by what he perceives as the remorseless advances of science, and he subsequently adopts a defensive posture

¹⁹ Cf. Matthew 4:17: “From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’”

²⁰ Moser, “Reply to Oppy,” p. 2

with respect to additional scientific knowledge. That is, he is reluctant to engage in further scientific inquiry for fear that it may eventually force him to relinquish his religious beliefs. Yet despite his defensive posture, this individual sometimes strikes a public pose of confidence—maintaining that Christ is still preeminent—implying that Christ will be preeminent no matter what science eventually may discover. The problem with this approach is that it asserts the correct final assessment (that Christ is preeminent, including in the domain of the sciences) without an adequate epistemological basis for doing so. As a result, maintaining the pose of public confidence sometimes involves adopting an unfortunately and unnecessarily desperate tone. Upon a closer examination, what is really happening with this approach is that, public pose notwithstanding, the person in question is actually linking Christ’s preeminence to human competency with respect to content—namely, his own. Of course, once his competency reaches its limit, he must replace it with his will. However, fastening Christ’s preeminence to human competency or human willpower is a mistake because his preeminence is independent of both. Indeed, according to traditional Christian doctrine, Christ, who is “very God of very God” is therefore the creator of all things, “visible and invisible.” As such, it follows that he is supremely competent, and therefore preeminent, with respect to knowledge about all created things.²¹ Although the person who adopts the “God of our remaining ignorance” approach is correct in avowing that Christ is indeed preeminent in all things, he does not have an adequate epistemological basis in order to believe truly (though he may indeed *truly believe*) that he actually is so. Avowing the preeminence of Christ on the basis of human competency with respect to content is epistemically improper because Christ’s preeminence is entirely independent of human competency. Likewise, it is also unsatisfactory to avow Christ’s preeminence on the basis of one’s will; however courageous or noble it may be, one’s will is not sufficient evidence. Thus an avowal that ‘Christ is preeminent’ may be true, but without sufficient evidence to support it, the avowal itself lacks justification.

I suggested above that neither Moser nor Oppy disregards the importance of content. Likewise, neither should any of Christ’s disciples, academically inclined or not. The disciple of Christ who is not an academic or a specialist in any significant way should not think that Christ’s preeminence depends upon one’s mastery of content or one’s ability to willfully maintain certain beliefs about Christ’s preeminence. However, upholding the importance of content is not identical to believing that the preeminence of Christ depends upon a mastery of content; mastery and willpower

²¹ Dallas Willard: “The biblical and continuing vision of Jesus was of one who made all created reality and kept it working, literally ‘holding it together’ (Col. 1:17). And today we think people are smart who make light bulbs and computer chips and rockets out of ‘stuff’ already provided! He made ‘the stuff!’” See Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 94.

always have limits. The fact that one who adopts such an approach is prone to viewing academic inquiry as a threat to his faith is an indication of the misguided nature of the approach. It involves proclaiming Christ as Lord even if the content of the best scientific or philosophical theories seem to point in a different direction. This approach is actually a concession—a retreat—in that it tacitly assigns a higher value than it should to the relevant evidence drawn from content. Though this approach ostensibly disregards content, it is in fact replacing a dependence upon content as one's evidence for belief that Christ is preeminent by substituting willpower in its place.

The second considered approach is more common among those disciples of Christ who have some sort of specialized training. Whether or not this is a more “sophisticated” approach is irrelevant; it is not an improvement. According to this approach, a disciple of Christ enthusiastically—or, perhaps, worriedly—pursues academic superiority (or at the very least academic competitiveness). In all cases, the person who adopts this perspective believes that it is the responsibility of Christ's disciples—at least some of them—to be as competent as, or more competent than, the leading figures in a particular field. However, striving for an ultimate mastery of content (as opposed to willfully ignoring it, as observed in the approach involving a “God of our remaining ignorance”) strongly suggests an undue focus upon content. The motivation behind this approach can vary, ranging from a desire to prove one's own academic competency as a disciple of Christ to defending Christ's honor in the public square. These motives may be selfless and honorable; they also may not be. Regardless of motive, the approach involving a “God of the academic journals” is not an improvement over the previous one because, as was the case with it, this approach also appears to link Christ's competency—and thus his preeminence—with that of his disciples.

There are further problems involved with this approach. One is that it is not at all clear who has the standing to adjudicate academic disputes. Whose mastery over the relevant content is superior? It is almost always the case that strong disagreements exist even among the top scholars in any field over which theories are superior. Another problem is the sheer difficulty, and perhaps unlikelihood, of achieving and maintaining academic superiority in any field. Are Christ's modern-day disciples expected by Christ to be superior to scholars who are not his disciples? One must ask, “How can such superiority be conducive to Christ's overarching priority of achieving humanity's deliverance?” It is difficult to see how Christ accomplishes his primary task of reconciling a lost humanity to his Father by mandating that his disciples become academically superior to those who are not his disciples. One need only to imagine the best possible outcome of this approach to understand its deficiency. If the most competent academics and theorists from all over the world were *all* disciples of Christ, would that affect the inward moral change—repentance, manifested by a love

for all, including enemies—that Christ seeks to accomplish with humanity? Of course, it would not.

It is also a mistake to think that God’s kingdom depends solely (or even primarily) on the work of philosophers and other academics. This is in part because the kingdom of God, as St. Paul noted, “is not a matter of talk but of power.”²² The necessary and urgent work of Christ is to convert the human will; converting the mind, though surely important, is secondary. Indeed, it would be comparatively easy for God to change human minds; he could, for example, put on unimaginable displays of power and might such that no skeptic could reasonably deny his existence. This, however, would not be conducive to Christ’s overarching priority, which is to reconcile humanity to his Father. A wing humanity with tremendous displays might *impress* humanity, but such displays would not be especially helpful for *saving* it. Similarly, despite the many good things that Christ’s disciples do as they labor in an academic environment, it is difficult to discern the extent to which they are helping Christ achieve his overarching priority by their academic competency alone.²³

Conclusion: the attractiveness of a Christ-shaped philosophy as an alternative

A Christ-shaped philosophy similar to the one espoused by Moser stands as an attractive alternative to these two considered approaches, which each in their own way depend too heavily on content and one’s mastery of it as a strategy to support Christ’s preeminence. A Christ-shaped philosophy advocates grounding one’s confidence in Christ’s preeminence upon the reality of Christ’s inward, transformative presence in one’s own life, as opposed to grounding it upon specific content. The inward, transformative presence of Christ counts as admissible evidence toward the reality of his preeminence.²⁴ Though such a transformative presence may not be immediately accessible to third-party observation, it does produce the sort of behavior that reflects Christ’s character—the sort of behavior that *is* observable.

A Christ-shaped approach to philosophy makes it easier for one to de-prioritize the quest for an ultimate mastery of content. Admitting to limits of the value of such a mastery may even bestow one with serenity as one realizes that profound philosophical understanding is neither necessary nor sufficient in order to obtain *the* most important thing in life—being reconciled to God through Christ. Indeed, it is

²² 1st Corinthians 4:20

²³ This paragraph and the next both draw heavily from themes expressed throughout *The Evidence for God*.

²⁴ A good statement of the admissibility of the inward, transformative presence of *agapē* love as evidence for the personal God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (as opposed to an Aristotelian “philosopher’s god”) can be found in chapter four of *The Evidence for God*, “Personifying Evidence of God.” Another statement is at Moser, ‘Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United,’ p. 11

through one's experience of an inward moral transformation through the *agapē* love of Christ that one is able to obtain peace through the knowledge that God exists.²⁵ Kierkegaard stated as much this way: "...it is self-renunciation which discovers that God is."²⁶ It is through this confidence in God's existence that one is able to recognize that philosophical and scientific theories may come and go, but the reality of Christ endures beyond them all.

Moser writes: "Gethsemane union with Christ as Lord is no mere correct belief that something about Christ is true. Instead, it calls for volitional cooperation and companionship with Christ, who empowers and guides how we think, not just what we think. (The divine fruit of the Spirit of Christ—love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, and so on – should apply even to Christian thinking and thinkers.) Divine redemption values the inward process of human cooperation and companionship with Christ as much as any objective reality. Christian philosophy should follow suit, under the preeminence of Christ as Lord. It also should acknowledge that communing with and obeying God can awaken one to otherwise neglected realities and evidence of God, as God emerges more clearly as 'Abba, Father' in one's experience."²⁷ A Christ-shaped philosophy—which emphasizes how Christ's followers should engage with their discipline and which regards the importance of content—has strong advantages. It advocates a proper personal and professional relationship to content relative to Christ's preeminence; it also allows disciples of Christ of various levels of academic ability to incorporate this proper relationship between the two in their own lives. This proper relationship, once widely adopted by Christ's disciples, might also benefit non-disciples, as these non-disciples witness disciples who pursue and incorporate knowledge into their own lives while simultaneously exhibiting the selfless character of Christ.

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²⁵ Cf. Romans 5:1; 1st John 2:3, 4:7

²⁶ Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, H. Hong, Trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962, Original work published 1847), p. 333; the quote is from chapter ten: "The Work of Love in Praising Love."

²⁷ Moser, "Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United," p. 9