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Christianity, Philosophy and Public Education: Reflections upon Retirement For all those who would sit in the chair of Philosophy

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Abstract: A Christian philosopher in a secular university raises concerns about First Amendment issues (religion and public life), about the definitions of philosophy and religion and the relation between the two, about the special obligation of a Christian philosopher, and about the dilemma of neutrality inherent in public education. Common ground is not neutral ground; it is the necessary conditions for thought and discourse. The Christian philosopher, as a person of wisdom grounded in the Logos, the Word of God who makes God known, is to preserve intellectual and public life by establishing common ground.

The idea of a Christian philosopher in a secular university raises a set of related concerns. First, there are church and state First Amendment issues (more generally, religion and public life). Second, the definitions of philosophy and religion and their relation to each other. Third, what special obligations are there for a Christian who is a philosopher in public education. (I assume there is no such thing as Christian philosophy or Christian math.) And fourth, is there any resolution to the dilemma inherent in the very notion of public education today.

There is an ever-increasing presumption of a wall of separation between religion and public life. In private life one is free to be religious; in public life one is to be free from religion. It is either not good form or unconstitutional (or both) to expose one's religion in public life. The public realm is either common ground or neutral ground and religion appears to be neither. But common ground and/or neutral ground appear equally elusive. Can philosophy offer help? Can the philosopher who is a Christian offer wisdom?

What are some minimum characteristics of philosophy that lead us to expect help from philosophy? There is public philosophy and philosophy addressed primarily to fellow philosophers (that is, academic philosophy). Public philosophy deals with questions that are of interest to the public at large. These are the questions that moved us at first to love philosophy, the big questions,

the basic, enduring questions, what may be called the classic tradition in philosophy. These are the questions of epistemology—how is knowledge possible? metaphysics—what is real/eternal? and ethics—what ought I to do? And is it still philosophy if we have left our first love, if we do not seek answers to the big questions?

We had wanted (needed) knowledge if at all possible, and if it was not possible, then we faced despair. (Could we, with integrity, be heroes of the Absurd?) We critiqued every answer for a sufficient reason, having outgrown mere authoritarianism. If nothing is clear, if knowledge is not possible, if we don't (can't) even know what knowledge is, have we become mere sophists (if we get paid for teaching) or nihilists (if we don't sell out)? And if knowledge *is* possible, must we be the gadfly (or mid-wife) to our fellow citizens who are complacent in mere opinion (fideism)? And what is our knowledge about if not about basic things, about what is eternal (God, *or not*) and about human nature (man) and about what we ought to do as *human* beings (about good and evil)? If philosophy is not about what is clear to reason about God and man and good and evil, what is it about?

Philosophy engages in critical thinking about basic things, therefore philosophy is not neutral about basic things. Some views will not withstand scrutiny. If philosophy concludes one way or another about what is eternal, is that a *religious* conclusion? If so, is critical thinking in public education therefore unconstitutional? Are we then to avoid critical thinking and merely list opinions? Would that still be philosophy? When Socrates exposed false claims to knowledge, those so exposed struck back. Questioning authority (by reason) was said to “corrupt the youth.” Instead of countering Socrates' reasoning or else acknowledging the conclusions of reason, he was condemned by popular vote, based on widespread prejudice, and executed, not being willing to retract.

If we think out loud (do public philosophy and question illegitimate authority *du jour*) there will be push back. What shall we do? We can deny God (give up his call to think, that is, to be human) or do the expedient thing (leave Athens/the Academy/public life), or, we can seek to dispel popular prejudice (on what is religion and on the wall of separation) while there is still time.

One such popular prejudice concerns the definition of religion. Religious Studies departments are still “working on it.” Clergy are still “working on it.” Philosophy can/should offer help. So I make a modest proposal, without irony, because it is truly modest, not a clever innovation, but merely a reminder. Religion is the belief or set of beliefs we use to give meaning to our experience. Both theists and non-theists give meaning to their experience. All who hold any belief about what is eternal, implicitly or explicitly, hold a belief about the existence (or the non-existence) of God. All who hold beliefs about God, affirma-

tive or negative, using these to interpret experience, are therefore equally religious. Consequently, we can readily admit that all are religious. And since basic beliefs affect all other beliefs, then all of life (public and private) is religious.

This does not mean there is no distinction between public and private life. A further distinction about religion is to be made. Some religions are revealed, based on special revelation (on a sacred text or tradition handed down by testimony), and some religions are natural, based on general revelation (what can be known about God and man and good and evil by all men, everywhere, at all times). All human beings have equal access to general revelation. Equal access to knowledge is a natural requirement for public life. Natural religion belongs in public life; revealed religion belongs in private life. The credibility of this application depends on understanding the boundaries of what is public and private, and the (objective) clarity and comprehensiveness of general revelation.

Public life in America began with the Declaration of Independence, which affirms basic beliefs in epistemology, metaphysics and ethics. “We hold these truths to be self-evident (*epistemology*), that all men are created equal (*metaphysics—about God and man*), that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights (*ethics*) . . .” There is no revealed religion here, only general revelation. The *principle* of beginning with basic beliefs which are clear to all is right; the *claim* that these are the self-evident truths on which all can agree is dubious. The assumptions of Reid’s Common Sense philosophy used in the *Declaration* encounter defeaters by which they lose their *prima facie* warrant. More work is needed, without which the *Declaration* sinks into a mere assertion of *fideism* and is therefore inadequate for public life, even though it is natural and not revealed religion. Social doctrine based on naturalism or spiritual monism are currently equally fideistic and equally inadequate for public life. We need, in place of fideism and skepticism, what is clear to reason, with proofs to show clarity. This is a job for public philosophy. But given the long history of disputes, is there hope to show what is clear about basic things?

It is not enough therefore to avoid revealed religion in public life by appeal to natural religion. It is necessary to avoid fideism in natural religion as well, beginning with any dogmatism in epistemology. Currently (in Post-Modern Academic life) a dogmatic skepticism prevails, as much as dogmatism has prevailed in the past in revealed religion. We face dogmatism in the antinomy of skepticism and fideism. We are at an impasse unless public philosophy can show what is clear to reason as a basis for public life as well as for private life. Public philosophy must use critical thinking to attain knowledge for the benefit of both the individual and society. Discourse in public philosophy must not be hindered by the prejudice that it is establishing a (revealed) religion if it reaches a conclusion in natural religion, or that it is prohibiting anyone in

the free private exercise of religion if it critiques any form of fideistic religion (revealed or natural).

Christian philosophers (as persons of wisdom) are committed in principle to special (redemptive) revelation found in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the written word of God. They understand good and evil in basic ways. They understand the difference and relation between general and special revelation (GR and SR): that if there is no clear GR there can be no (need for) SR (Romans 1:20); that understanding the claims of GR leads to understanding the necessity for and the existence of SR; that SR presupposes clear GR. They understand that the good for a being is according to the nature of that being, and that the good for man, the image of God, a thinking, sentient being, is the knowledge of God gained through self-knowledge, attained by the full exercise of one's powers.

Understanding good and evil motivates by fear and love the Christian philosophers' search for the *Logos*, the word of God in its fullness, revealed in every aspect of life (John 1:1-18). They are willing to prepare themselves through much discussion and historically cumulative insight to glorify God in all that by which he makes himself known, in all his works of creation and providence. They speak prophetically the law of God, deeply structured into human nature (Romans 2:15) to all of life, in church and state and family; in economics and law and psychology. Wherever we go, behold, he is there!

He is there in public education. Wisdom stands in the high places and cries out at the city gates to all, both wise and simple. The university is the life of the mind, enabled through dialogue. It is not the silence of the mind in mysticism or skepticism or fideism. Without the life of reason the university loses its *raison d'être* and fragments into voices muttering from the dust. Without reason as common ground, public education splits into antinomies: if it is public it must be religiously neutral; but if it is education, interpreting life through basic beliefs, it cannot be religiously neutral. The dilemma can be resolved by recognizing that common ground is not neutral ground. The critical use of reason is not and cannot be neutral with respect to meaning and truth.

Since reason as the laws of thought and the test for meaning is common to all (and to which all have equal access), and since the public square (including public education) must be accessible to all, we must abandon the chimera of religious neutrality for the universality of natural religion, accessible to all through reason as common ground. In place of the dilemma we can say: If it is public, it must be rational; if it is not rational, it must be (kept) private. Through reason, legitimate authority is upheld. No one is killed/enslaved/oppresed/loses freedom as a rational being. Only those who use brute force rather than reason are restrained. Philosophy has a role to play

in public life. The Christian who is a philosopher has a double obligation to lead the way.

All human beings are more or less conscious and consistent in holding their basic beliefs. Philosophy, through critical thinking, must lead the way in becoming more conscious and consistent. All the more so must Christian philosophers lead the way as persons of the *Logos*, the word of God in its fullness. Nebuchadnezzar found Daniel ten times wiser than others because he was not taken captive by the worldview of the court astrologers.

All discourse requires common ground, all the more explicitly if it addresses long-standing disputes. If we cannot agree on anything (even that *a* is *a*), how can we begin to think or talk? Common ground is not arbitrary. Philosophy merely points out the necessary conditions which make discourse possible. Reason as the laws of thought makes thought (and therefore discourse) possible. As such, reason is the test for meaning which is necessary for truth (a meaningless utterance is neither true nor false). The laws of thought (identity, non-contradiction and excluded middle) are most basic and authoritative (they cannot be questioned but make questioning possible). Reason, objectively, and commitment to reason, subjectively (as a concern for consistency both logical and existential), are the beginnings of common ground.

Thinking by nature is presuppositional; we think of the less basic in light of the more basic: truth in light of meaning; conclusion in light of premises, etc. If we can agree on the more basic we can agree (settle disputes) on what is less basic. Applied in principle, if any discourse is possible at all, we will hold to the Principle of Clarity as self-evident: that some things are clear; that the basic things are clear; that the basic things (about God and man and good and evil) are clear to reason. Reason, Integrity (concern for consistency), Rational Presuppositionalism (the less basic in light of the more basic) and the Principle of Clarity are elements of common ground, the basis of discourse and public life.

The task of the Christian philosopher then is to make dialogue possible by establishing common ground through which we can find meaning and settle disputes. And, failing that, we can point out that the lack of common ground in the most basic matters is the cause of the death of dialogue. Since dialogue is the source of public life we must live or die together. Let us live together!

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