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Two Wisdoms, Two “Philosophies” A Rejoinder to Moser

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Abstract: It was a mistake to think that Moser’s estimate of professional philosophy is both too high and too low. On the contrary, his estimate of the discipline, as stated in his two papers and his reply to me, is unrelentingly negative. His own practice of the discipline, however, seems to be inconsistent with his recommendations, and I believe we should follow his practice rather than those recommendations

In reading Paul Moser’s paper, “Christ-Shaped Philosophy,” I made an important mistake. I assumed that Moser was using the word ‘philosophy’ as it would be used by most professional philosophers. (Surely not an unreasonable assumption, made with regard to papers that appeared on a website and in a journal that are overwhelmingly patronized by professional philosophers?) The term so used would include as philosophers those who have practiced that profession now and in the recent past, men and women who mostly teach philosophy in colleges and universities, who contribute articles to philosophical journals, attend philosophical meetings, and the like. It would also include persons considered by today’s professional philosophers as our antecedents and forerunners – men such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, and Wittgenstein. So understood, I don’t think the term is especially slippery, though there will be individuals who are marginal and/or controversial. The term as I was understanding it is not inherently evaluative; it is perfectly possible to think that all or most of philosophy so understood is useless, or even a detriment to society. (I suppose, though, that those of us who practice the discipline typically believe, or at least hope, that it can on balance be constructive and beneficial.)

It turns out, however, that I was wrong about Moser’s use of ‘philosophy’. It really has nothing especially to do with philosophy as a profession. In calling Jesus and Paul philosophers he was not, as I supposed, paying an extravagant compliment to the discipline of philosophy. Rather, he appeals to the etymology of ‘philosophy’ as “love of wisdom,” and he was

underscoring the evident fact that both Jesus and Paul loved and pursued wisdom – a spiritual wisdom, however; something which is significantly different from the sort of insight that is prized, and sometimes attained, by philosophers. To see this difference clearly, compare some beloved biblical text – say, the letter to the Philippians – with a philosophical construct such as Kripke’s theory of necessary truth. Both convey genuine wisdom, but surely not the same kind of wisdom. Let me emphasize: there is no clear reason why the spiritual wisdom celebrated by the two Pauls (Moser, and the one from Tarsus) is more the concern of professional philosophers than it is the concern of Christian ministers, or Christian kindergarten teachers, or Christian bricklayers. The challenge to become mature in Christ is a challenge for each and every Christian believer – for professional philosophers not less or more than for others. Moser, however, is not consistent in using ‘philosophy’ in this sense. When he says that Christian *philosophy* has neglected the “unique flood of God’s *agapē* in Christ,” it is clear that ‘philosophy’ has taken back its more accustomed, professional connotation: Moser is saying that the things said and written by *professional Christian philosophers* are lacking in this respect. But if its meaning shifts in this way, the word ‘philosophy’ is indeed becoming slippery, and its becoming so is Moser’s own fault, for failing to be clear and consistent in his use of it.

So there are two sorts of wisdom, and, if you like, two kinds of “philosophy.” No harm in that, so long as we are clear about the distinction between the kinds. Moser, however, tends to conflate them, and I have come to see that this conflation is the key to the entire strategy of his proposal for “Christ-shaped philosophy.” Once we think that there is a single thing, called “wisdom,” which both the Apostle Paul and Saul Kripke were seeking, the question becomes inevitable: Which of them got it right? And for a Christian, at any rate, the answer is obvious: the *true* wisdom, the wisdom we need to seek with all our hearts, is the wisdom of the Cross, the wisdom that is advocated and exemplified by the apostle. (One might say, Saul needs to become Paul, or at least to become a whole lot more like Paul!) The sorts of questions typically raised by philosophers may have their place, but *only* insofar as they serve to advance the Gospel; otherwise, they are at best distractions and often a sinful evasion of the truth about ourselves and our spiritual need that we are so reluctant to face.

In any case, I was mistaken in thinking that Moser’s estimate of philosophy – that is, of professional philosophy – is both too high and too low. On the contrary, his estimate of the discipline, as stated in his two papers and his reply to me, is unrelentingly negative. He really does view philoso-

phical discussion primarily as a distraction from more pressing spiritual concerns. The serious study of the history of philosophy is rejected as a trivial pursuit. Philosophical questions that are not burning issues for the ministry of the Church should not be pursued. Christ passes judgment on the self-made temple of philosophy – and it is Moser who proclaims that judgment.

At this point, I have to say, there is a genuine and emphatic disagreement between us. I acknowledge, to be sure, that the philosophical profession as presently constituted is at best spiritually ambiguous. But I find more good in it, more to applaud and to support, than Moser does.¹ I do find the thought appealing that we today are still wrestling with some of the same issues – substance, universals, time, and change – that occupied Plato and Aristotle. And I don't find this fact to be in conflict with my “ongoing desire for cogent true answers to the relevant questions.” Furthermore, I am heartened by the tremendous increase over the past several decades in the number of Christians who are philosophers, and by the growth of an impressive body of philosophical work that is recognizably Christian. (This has also been noted, with displeasure, by some who regard philosophy as rightfully the province of secularism and disbelief.) I will mention here just three names: Bill Alston, Arthur Holmes, and Phil Quinn, each of whom, in his own way, made immensely valuable contributions both to the philosophical community generally and to the cause of Christian philosophy. (I have decided not to mention living persons; there are a great many of them, and were I to list them I should inevitably omit some that ought to be included.) Moser, in contrast, finds little to applaud in all this; his comments on contemporary Christian philosophy in his two papers are uniformly negative. (In the earlier paper, “Jesus and Philosophy: The Questions We Ask,” he states, “As for philosophers who consistently manifest the obedience mode in their writings, they are few and far between.” The only examples he is able to give, apart from his own website (!), are three theologians – one of them (John Baillie) a theologian of distinctly liberal persuasion.²)

I sincerely hope that the “biographical” remarks in my paper will not be taken as an unacceptable *ad hominem*. I genuinely admire Moser's wide-ranging contributions to the discipline of philosophy, contributions that are well

¹ For another Christian view of the philosophical profession that contrasts with Moser's, see Robert M. Adams, “A Philosophical Autobiography,” in Samuel Newlands and Larry M. Jorgensen, eds., *Metaphysics and the Good: Themes from the Philosophy of Robert Merrihew Adams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 16-32.

² “Jesus and Philosophy: The Questions We Ask,” *Faith and Philosophy* 22:3 (July 2005), p. 283, n. 24.

worthy of our imitation, to the extent that we have the capacity. But when a writer's aggressive and forceful recommendations for the way in which an activity should be pursued come into conflict with his own practice of that same activity, it seems to me that the discrepancy is worthy of notice. In his reply to me he states, "A Christian philosopher may perform various services to others, even to a profession of others, without thereby doing distinctively 'Christian philosophy.' We should not assume that all of life, even the life of a Christian philosopher, must engage in Christian philosophy." This makes it sound as though professional philosophy can be, in effect, one's "day job," a job which is to be supplemented, but need not be replaced, by the activity of distinctively Christian philosophy. If that really is Moser's view, I am grateful for the clarification. But it is hard to reconcile with both the general tone and the specific statements of his earlier papers, in which "Jesus *commands* people to move, for their own good, to an obedience mode of existence relative to divine love commands" (emphasis added). Is this "obedience mode" something required, say, on Tuesday and Friday afternoons, when we are engaging in specifically Christian philosophy, whereas the rest of the time we are free to revert to the more normal "discussion mode"? Is the "cleansing of the temple of philosophy," of which we have read, something that is in effect on some days of the week but not on others? In any case, it is hard to see how one could responsibly agree to edit a journal when the majority of articles published are "dangerous to human freedom and life," as Moser has said that they are. Perhaps, though, he does not really believe this; apparently Socrates (founder of the much-disparaged "discussion mode"!) and Plato are exempted from this negative judgment, in spite of the fact that both philosophized "outside the authority of Christ." (Or are we to baptize them retroactively, perhaps as "anonymous Christians"?) I am inclined to think, however, that Moser's continuing participation as an editor amounts to a grudging recognition, in practice if not in theory, that the secular profession of philosophy does have a role to play and that Christians can legitimately take their place in that profession.

It is apparent that Moser and I disagree profoundly about what is required of us as Christian philosophers. I believe, furthermore, that it would be disastrous for Christian philosophy in the real world, were Christian philosophers generally to be persuaded by his point of view. By abandoning the many aspects of philosophy that are not directly relevant to the life and work of the Church, Christian philosophers would lose the credibility and the influence that have been earned by the hard labors of Alston, Holmes, Quinn, and a host of others. Fortunately, however, there is little chance of this

actually happening. I predict with some confidence that a strong majority of Christian philosophers will reject Moser's proposal as set forth in his two articles, even as we continue to engage with his own valuable and constructive philosophical ideas. There are, indeed, two "wisdoms" and also two "philosophies," and it is important to be clear about the distinctions between them.

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