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Paul Moser's Christian Philosophy

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Abstract: I argue that while Moser does well in preaching the Gospel through his article, much of what he says about Christ-centered philosophy should be resisted. On the one hand, he seems to give philosophy too high a place, by implying that Jesus and Paul would be demeaned if they were not recognized as being philosophers. On the other hand, he has a distressingly low opinion of the sorts of things philosophers actually do. Furthermore, his own practice as a philosopher does not correspond well with what is called for by his account of Christ-shaped philosophy.

Whenever Christians are seriously engaged in philosophical work, the question of "Christian Philosophy" is likely to arise. Is there such a thing, and if there is what is it, and how should it be practiced?[1] Here we will examine the views on this topic expressed by Paul K. Moser, who is Professor and Chair of Philosophy of Loyola University in Chicago. He is Editor of the *American Philosophical Quarterly*, is Co-Editor of the Cambridge University Press book series in Religion, Philosophy, and Society, and has served as General Editor for the Oxford University Press series of Handbooks in Philosophy. His view, stated simply, is that philosophy can be and should be Christian to a maximal degree. In practice, however, it usually isn't, even when done by professing Christians. For more detail, we turn to his paper entitled "Christ-Shaped Philosophy." He writes:

> Following Jesus, the apostle Paul is the most profound advocate of a Christ-shaped philosophy. . . . Paul's Letter to the Colossians offers a striking portrait of Christ-shaped philosophy. To that end, it offers a firm warning: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy

[1] For some other views on the topic, see Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 1:3 (July 1984), pp. 253-71; also the symposium, "More Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 16:2 (April 1999), pp. 147-93, with essays by Eleonore Stump, Peter van Inwagen, Merold Westphal, and Alvin Plantinga.

> . . . and not according to Christ" (Col. 2:8; translations from NRSV). Note the contrast between philosophy and Christ. Philosophy outside the authority of Christ, according to Paul, is dangerous to human freedom and life. The alternative is philosophy under Christ, and this involves a distinctive kind of wisdom. If philosophy is the love and pursuit of wisdom, *Christian* philosophy is 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 (p. 2).

The last sentence, with its reference to union with Christ, points to the importance, for Christ-shaped philosophy, of the philosopher himself or herself being shaped by Christ. And indeed, most of the paper is focused more directly on the philosopher's own union and communion with Christ, than with the actual philosophy as such. I offer a few extracts from Moser's rich and impassioned exposition:

> *[F]aith in God* does not disappoint us [because] we have been flooded in our deepest experience by the presence and power of God's personal *agapē,* courtesy of the Spirit of Christ. Without this experience, one will have a hard time adequately understanding the Good News of God in Christ. An appeal to the testimony of God's Spirit will fall short, cognitively and existentially, if it omits reference to the experienced flood of the Spirit's *agapē*. It then will be too remote from God's actual self-revealed moral character in Christ. Christian philosophy should hallmark this unique vital flood of God's *agapē* in Christ. It is puzzling indeed that instead it has neglected it (p. 4f).

> The Good News . . . calls for the Gethsemane union of all Christians, even today, with the Christ who obediently suffered the Roman cross in ancient times. If we omit this union, the cross of Christ loses its divine redemptive power for today, however attentive and even emotional one's response to it is (p. 7).

> Paul has in mind . . . the tendency of the world's wisdom and philosophy to obscure or divert attention from the reality of "Christ [as] the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24). . . . Aside from the diversionary dangers of philosophy, Paul acknowledges that "among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age" (1 Cor. 2:6). He would add that among the mature we Christians do offer a philosophy, though it is not of this age (p. 8).

> Christian philosophy joins Gethsemane union with a religious epistemology oriented toward the Spirit of God and Christ. Christian philosophy must find knowledge of God, like human redemption, in divine grace rather than human earning (p. 9).

As has been noted, these passages are predominantly concerned with the philosopher's own union with Christ, more than with Christian philosophy as such. Towards the end of his paper, however, Moser addresses the issue of Christian philosophy more directly:

> How, then, is Jesus relevant to philosophy as a discipline? I mention just one important way. Philosophy in its normal mode, without being receptive to authoritative divine love commands, leaves humans in a discussion mode, short of an obedience mode under divine authority. Philosophical questions naturally prompt philosophical questions about philosophical questions, and this launches a regress of higher-order, or at least related, questions, with no end to philosophical discussion. Hence, the questions of philosophy are notoriously perennial (p. 12).

Any philosopher will quickly recognize the essential truth of what is said here. But while many have viewed the perennial nature of philosophical questions as a positive, and indeed endearing, characteristic of the discipline, for Moser's version of Christian philosophy it is an evil that needs to be overcome:

> As divinely appointed Lord . . . Jesus commands humans to move, for their own good, to an obedience mode of existence relative to divine love commands. . . . Accordingly, we need to transcend a normal discussion mode, and thus philosophical discussion itself, to face with sincerity the personal inward Authority who commands what humans need: Faithful obedience and belonging to the perfectly loving Giver of life. 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 (pp. 11-12).

This, then, is one distinctive characteristic of Christian philosophy: it moves us from the "discussion mode" of ordinary philosophy into the

"obedience mode" called for by the divine commands and the divine offer of love. For a more extensive characterization of Christian philosophy, we turn to an earlier essay by Moser entitled "Jesus and Philosophy: On the Questions We Ask."[2] Here again we find the contrast between the discussion mode and the obedience mode, with Christian philosophy to be done in the obedience mode. Furthermore,

> we should think of philosophy in the obedience mode as first and foremost philosophy in the eager service of the church of Jesus. We must reorient philosophy to be used as a spiritual gift designed for ministry within the church of Jesus . . . Philosophers should eagerly serve the church by letting the focuses of philosophy, including its questions, be guided by what is needed to build up the church as a ministry of the Good News of Jesus. As a result, there is no place under the lordship of Jesus for lone-ranger philosophers who choose their questions apart from the needs of the church (pp. 276-77).

Philosophy so conceived, to be sure, will not correspond with the discipline of philosophy as this is commonly understood:

> The reorientation of philosophy under Jesus does not fit with philosophy as practiced in a secular setting, and this is no surprise. The mission of Jesus is, owing to its unrelenting exaltation of the will of God, altogether out of place in a secular perspective (p. 277).

Among other things, this means that certain sorts of questions often pursued by philosophers should be seen as pointless distractions, equivalent to the "endless genealogies" denounced by Paul in 1 Timothy 1:3-6. Among these are certain "interpretive minutia of the history of philosophy"; examples given are questions about the conceptual development of the theory of forms in Plato's dialogues, and questions about multiple theories of primary substance in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. We should also set aside as "not compelling" the medieval dispute over whether several angels can inhabit the same place at the same time (pp. 278f). Moser concludes that "Philosophy . . . is not automatically a friend of Jesus as the Lord of heaven and earth; nor is he automatically a friend of philosophy" (p. 279). Nevertheless, "Jesus relates to Philosophy . . . as the One truly reflected in it, whenever it is done right. So, Jesus is Lord even of

[2] *Faith and Philosophy* 22:3 (July 2005), pp. 261-83. Page references in what follows are to this article.

Philosophy" (p. 281).

Let me begin my response by acknowledging that, in his advocacy of Christian philosophy, Moser is witnessing to the Gospel of Christ. Furthermore, we all need to hear that Gospel, even and perhaps especially those of us who consider that we have already heard it and have accepted God's invitation to become his children. For this witness, then, we are in Paul Moser's debt. Nevertheless, it is my conviction that we will do well to resist much of what he says in his account of Christian philosophy. I shall argue that, paradoxically, his view of philosophy is at the same time too high and too low – but this, of course, needs unpacking.

With regard to my claim that Moser's estimate of philosophy is too high, consider the following question: Why is important for him to describe both Jesus and Paul as philosophers?[3] It seems clear that this description is meant as a way of honoring the Lord and his apostle, a way of affirming the prestige and authority which they have for Christian believers. Now, I certainly agree with Moser that it is a fine thing to be a philosopher, at least to be a *good* philosopher. But it is also a fine thing to be a scientist – a chemist, for instance – or a composer of music, or an attorney, or a stone-mason, providing in each case that the job is done well, in accordance with the highest applicable standards. So why don't we say that Jesus and Paul were also chemists, and composers, and attorneys, and stone-masons? Why don't we honor them in these ways as well? The answer, I suppose, is obvious: We don't say such things about Jesus and Paul because neither of them performed the activities characteristic of those occupations. They did not, so far as we know, perform chemical experiments, or create new pieces of music, or represent clients in a court of law, or build structures out of cut stones. But neither did they perform the sorts of activities characteristic of philosophers, then or now. They did not give public lectures on philosophical topics, nor did they accept pupils for instruction in philosophy, or compose

[3] This question cannot be answered by appealing to Colossians 2:8 and the other New Testament texts cited by Moser. Paul's use of *philosophia* cannot be simply equated with the contemporary discipline of philosophy. (The full description reads, "philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe . . .") The commentator T. K. Abbot remarks that *philosophia* is a "term not occurring elsewhere in the N.T., and no doubt adopted here because it was used by the false teachers themselves." He also states, "St. Paul is not condemning philosophy in general, which, indeed, would be quite beside his purpose" (*The Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians,* International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), pp. 246, 247). A similar view is taken in The Interpreter's Bible and in various more recent commentaries. Nor do Paul's references to "wisdom" in 1 Corinthians imply anything similar to philosophy as we know it. This wisdom – some of it, no doubt, contained in Paul's existing New Testament writings – is for the spiritually mature, not for the philosophically sophisticated.

treatises on philosophical subjects. They did not discuss the writings and opinions of earlier philosophers, nor did they propound novel views on the philosophical topics of their day. They did, to be sure, make assertions concerning some of the matters philosophers often discuss, such as right conduct and the cultivation of virtue. But that no more makes them philosophers, than Jesus' remark about building on foundations of sand or stone makes him an architectural engineer. So why, I ask again, should we call them philosophers?

The answer to this seems to be – at least, this is the most plausible answer I have been able to come up with – that we would be somehow demeaning the Lord and his apostle, were we to deny to them the title of philosopher. We would be refusing them the respect, honor, and authority that is properly due to them, were we to withhold this supreme accolade. If this is what Moser intends, however, I believe that it gives to philosophy more importance, and more prestige, than it properly deserves. We philosophers sometimes have a struggle to maintain our place in the academy, to defend the importance of our subject in the face of disciplines with more immediate practical application, such as Pharmacy and Turfgrass Science. (This is a real discipline, in which one can earn a doctorate!) But surely the way to defend our turf is not by claiming an exaggerated preeminence for philosophy, an inherent superiority over all other branches of human knowledge. And the notion that Jesus, the Lord and Creator of all things, and Paul, his chosen messenger and evangelist, need to have their prestige boosted by conferring on them the title of philosopher – well, what can one say?

In contrast, however, Moser displays a distressingly low opinion of the value of the things philosophers actually do – of the things in which the profession of philosophy largely consists, in the real world. To be sure, philosophers do sometimes continue their discussions long after there is nothing left worth discussing, and pursue at length minutia that are worth at best no more than a footnote. But these are easy targets; such foibles are common in many fields of study, and they are not characteristic of the best philosophical work. But to dismiss philosophical discussion as inherently diversionary, and to do so by placing it in competition with a Christian's obedience to God and to Christ, is another matter. If we put into practice Moser's restriction of acceptable philosophy to what is related to some particular need of the church, most of philosophy as we know it would disappear.[4] His sweeping dismissal of historical

[4] Plantinga recommends that "the Christian philosophical community ought to get on with the philosophical questions of importance to the Christian community" ("Advice to Christian Philosophers," p. 264), but he never suggests that Christian philosophers should address no other questions. Peter van Inwagen trenchantly remarks, "In philosophy's house

minutia would, if accepted, negate the serious study of the history of philosophy.[5] "And a good thing, too," perhaps he would say – but I beg leave to disagree, and I believe a strong majority of Christian philosophers will be on my side about this. Philosophy is not the Gospel of Christ, and is no substitute for the Gospel. But philosophy is a serious, worthwhile intellectual discipline, one whose value and importance is not limited by the constricting boundaries imposed by Moser.

Let me add one more thing: It seems to me that there is a certain disconnect (and I am not the only one to have noticed this) between Moser's advocacy of Christian philosophy and his own philosophical practice. His philosophical activities are prodigious – and, in many ways, highly successful. And they certainly include philosophical work that falls squarely under his rubric of Christian philosophy. But not all of it does, by any means. Consider, for instance, his editorship of the *American Philosophical Quarterly*. What happened, one wonders, when he was approached with regard to taking on that responsibility? We could imagine him responding to the inquiry something like this: "I am honored and flattered by your invitation, and will give it my most serious consideration. I think you should be aware, however, that I regard philosophy as it is usually practiced, and as it has been practiced by most of your contributors, as dangerous to human freedom and life. The endless discussions, which as we know are all too characteristic of our discipline, easily distract philosophers from the need for redemption through Christ. Nor is there any human value in pursuing minutia of historical scholarship which offer no practical benefit. What is needed, instead, is philosophy in the obedience mode, philosophy which will serve the church of Jesus Christ in its mission of evangelism and service to humankind. If I am appointed I will do my utmost to bring about this shift in the thinking of our discipline, and in the contents of the *APQ*. If that is what you are looking for in an editor, I am your man."

Now, I am in no way privy to the actual deliberations which surrounded Moser's appointment, but I should be astonished to learn that anything resembling that fictitious speech was ever delivered. What Moser undertook to do, I believe, and what he has in fact done, is to conduct the editorial affairs of *APQ* according to the highest standards of the discipline of philosophy – the actual, existing, largely secular discipline. Similar remarks would apply to his editorship of the two important book series mentioned above – and rightly so, in

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there are many mansions, and it is possible to wander about its corridors for quite a long while without encountering anything that either affirms or contradicts the Christian faith" ("Some Remarks on Plantinga's Advice," *Faith and Philosophy* 16:2 (April 1999), p. 169).

[5] If Plato's theory of forms, and Aristotle's doctrine of substance, are trivial and not worth investigating, the historian of philosophy had better take up some more serious profession.

my opinion. So given the choice between Moser's vision of Christian philosophy on the one hand, and his actual practice of the discipline on the other, I recommend that we applaud and emulate his practice, and take the vision with more than a grain of salt.

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