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Christian Philosophy and the Confessional Classroom

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Abstract: I offer a defense of Paul Moser's recent work on Christian philosophy while also seeking to better understand it. This involves integrating a previous concept of Moser's with his "Christ-Shaped Philosophy" and then briefly furthering some concerns of Oppy and Hasker. Finally, I explore what Christian philosophy might look like in the classroom.

Paul Moser's work on Christian philosophy, including "Christ-Shaped Philosophy" (CSP), has challenged philosophers and met with some resistance. Yet I believe that Moser is pushing in the right direction. In fact, for the sake of full disclosure, my life, research, and teaching were radically changed after reading Moser's "Jesus and Philosophy: On the Questions We Ask."[1] I have since sought to do as much Christian philosophy as possible, though I have fallen short of the ideal. Nonetheless, I still have some questions about what exactly Moser envisions as Christian philosophy. I begin by giving an overview of what seem to be major themes of Moser's project and continue with issues raised by Graham Oppy and William Hasker. I reject the conclusions of Oppy and Hasker. Yet they seek a better understanding of how demanding Moser's conception of Christian philosophy is, and more clarity at the practical level does seem possible. I then ask what Christian philosophy might look like in an academic philosophy classroom.

I. Christian Philosophy

1. Major Features

There are three distinctive features in CSP – Jesus, Spirit, and inward change. Christian philosophy must include the message of Jesus, and this means at least three things. First, "A Christian philosophy must accommodate the subversive message that the outcast Galilean '*Jesus* is Lord'" (1). Jesus and his message

[1] *Faith and Philosophy* 22:3 (July 2005), pp. 261-83. Hereafter, JP.

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must be addressed explicitly. Second, reference to religion, deism, theism, or even God is not the same as discussing Jesus and his message. Third, when engaging Jesus and his message, there should be methodological constraints, insofar as Christian philosophy is subservient to Jesus: "If Christian philosophy is genuinely Christian, it should accommodate Gethsemane union with Christ" (8).

Christian Philosophy also has a spiritual component: "'Spiritual wisdom,' in Paul's approach, is wisdom intentionally guided and empowered by the Spirit of Christ…No merely theoretical or intellectual wisdom has the power to guide such lives intentionally and thus Paul refers to *spiritual* wisdom, which amount to *Spirit-empowered* and *Spirit-guided* wisdom" (2). Those engaged in Christian philosophy cannot rely only upon intellectual ability. Also, the spiritual component is not completely within our power, as it is Spirit-empowered and Spirit-guided. Yet when the Spirit empowers and guides, then one is obliged to follow.

Inward change is a third component. Moser writes, "Christian philosophy must find knowledge of God, like human redemption, in divine grace rather than in human earning" (9). Divine grace, in contrast to human earning, is a gift. One must have a proper volitional stance toward God rather than seeking Him on our own terms. The inward change requires faith as "the *responsive* commitment of oneself to the God who sends his Spirit with *agapē* and forgiveness for the sake of Gethsemane union with Christ" (5). The object of the wisdom desired is not to be obtained through mere intellectual assent but, rather, seeking, receiving, and submitting to Jesus. Doing so "guides *how* we think, not just *what* we think" (9)

There is another feature that Moser does not emphasize in CSP but does elsewhere – the link between what we invest in and value. Without this, those who read CSP miss an important motivational and justificatory element for engaging in Christian philosophy. Yet those familiar with the concept can be confused when they read CSP and Moser's rejoinders, perceiving a lowering of the bar. Moser writes, "By identifying my eager time and energy commitments, you can tell what I truly care about, even if I claim otherwise," and this is important because "we have limited time and energy resources for pursuing projects. For better or worse, we do not have endless time and energy to pursue all available projects. We must choose how to spend our time and energy in ways that we pursue some projects and exclude others" (JP, 263 and 264). The implication is that "If, as Christians acknowledge, Jesus is Lord, he is Lord of *all* of life, including one's intellectual life. So, if Jesus in Lord, he is Lord of the questions one may pursue…the Lord of all of our time (JP, 266).

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Now that major components of Christian philosophy have been outlined, I will construct a thought-project to help determine whether one is engaged in Christian philosophy. I do not know if Moser would approve, but it seems consistent with his project. Suppose Jesus manifested himself physically, shadowed us at work, and frequently asked: "Can you explain how what you are doing right now is advancing my Kingdom?" If an answer provides Kingdom-expanding evidence, which pertains to Jesus, Spirit, or inward change, then this seems to count as Christian philosophy. Yet if one cannot explain how one's work is Kingdom-oriented (pertaining to Jesus, Spirit, or inward change), then this would not seem to count as Christian philosophy.

If one confessed to not doing Kingdom-oriented work but then tried to explain to Jesus that her work was still valuable, then Jesus might respond, "OK, but then let us not call what you do 'Christian philosophy.'" And it would be unsurprising if Jesus, in trying to engage the philosopher in question, continued, "Let me concede, for the sake of argument, that what you are doing has value. The real question is whether your self-selected projects have *more* value than my projects. So, could you explain how your projects take seriously both the Parable of the Talents and the Great Commission?"

2. Oppy and Hasker

In "Moser, Ambiguity, and Christ-Shaped Philosophy," Oppy asks whether the *content* or *mode of engagement* is distinctive of Christian philosophy. I broaden this question: must all the content of Christian philosophy, when engaged in by a philosopher, have to be Christian? The answer seems to be negative, under certain conditions. For example, Thomas Nagel's writing about his cosmic authority problem is not Christian in content (and Moser uses such examples when doing Christian philosophy). Non-Christian content seems permissible if it is used to further Jesus's message. Yet even though it is not necessary that *all* of the content in Christian philosophy be Christian, it seems that it is necessary that at least *some* of the content must be Christian. The mode of engagement of Christian philosophy, which seeks to spread Jesus's message and transform others, can use non-Christian content to advance Christian goals.

In "Paul Moser's Christian Philosophy," Hasker objects, "It seems to me that there is a certain disconnect…between Moser's advocacy of Christian philosophy and his own philosophy practice" because he is the editor of *American Philosophical Quarterly*. Moser responds, in "A Reply to William Hasker's Objection": "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. In contrast, all of

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Christian life should include faith and obedience toward God and Christ. Christian philosophy promotes such faith and obedience, but it does not itself exhaust those two duties from God" (7).

We should not assume that Christian philosophers must always engage in Christian philosophy, for there is more to life than philosophy. Yet that leaves other questions that, if answered, would help to clarify the demandingness of Christian philosophy. For example, if one is a Christian and a philosopher, then must the Christian philosopher, when doing philosophy, engage only in Christian philosophy? On one hand, it seems that Moser can respond negatively because he writes, "A Christian philosophy [and philosopher?] must accommodate the subversive Christian message" (1), where 'accommodate' might mean "must at least sometimes include." On the other hand, there is Moser's position on the relationship between investment and value: "If, as Christians acknowledge, Jesus is Lord, then he is Lord of *all* of life, including one's intellectual life. So, if Jesus is Lord, he is Lord of the questions one may pursue" (JP, 266). This seems to imply that Christian philosophers, when engaged in philosophy, should only engage questions relevant to Christian philosophy.

If Moser argues that Christian philosophers must only engage in Christian philosophy when engaging in philosophy, then one move against Hasker's objection might be to argue that editing *APQ*, a secular journal, is not doing philosophy. Yet Moser writes, "If, in addition, Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, then he is the Lord of the other days of the week too. He is, in other words, the Lord of *all* of our time, from Sabbath to Sabbath" (JP, 266). Moser might note that he still recognizes Jesus as Lord of his time and that being an editor is a hobby, one that is of great service to the philosophical community. And service to others can accord with faith and obedience to God. But there are deeds that help advance the Good News discipleship of the church and deeds that do not relate to advancing the Good News, and Moser writes, "If nobody has found a way to relate an issue to the church's mission, the issue should be bracketed as extraneous at least until it does relate. An issue is *extraneous* if and only if its answer does not advance the Good News discipleship of the church" (JP, 278). So, it might be asked in the spirit of Hasker and in light of Moser's position on investment and value, "If you are going to invest time and energy in being an editor, why invest in a journal that does not advance the Good News? If investing as such, why not be the editor of a new journal that does advance the Good News – the kind of journal that would promote the very kind of Christian philosophy that you envision? After all, few philosophy journals accept research in Christian philosophy as you

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envision it, many others could serve as editor of *APQ*, and few could successfully serve as editor of such a new journal."

This probing is not meant to attack Moser. Rather, it genuinely seeks to understand his comprehensive vision of Jesus's demandingness of us. Clearly, Jesus is Lord of all our time in both spheres of our life – work (doing philosophy) and non-work (not doing philosophy). Furthermore, faith and obedience toward God and Christ is expected in both spheres of Christian life. So, the question is whether one must do explicitly Kingdom-advancing work in both spheres. If not, then it seems perfectly acceptable for Christian philosophers to not directly engage in Kingdom-expanding work (say, in the philosophy workplace), so long as they are still leading Christian lives when doing so and are doing explicitly Kingdom-oriented work in their other sphere. But this seems to be the *status quo* position that Moser wishes to reorient.

II. The Confessional Classroom

What might Christian philosophy look like in the philosophy classroom? I have explored this elsewhere[2], but I do so here in a different sense because Moser briefly discusses, for the first time, how Christian philosophy pertains to teaching, as opposed to research. Moser writes, "Some philosophers object to bringing Gethsemane union into Christian philosophy on the grounds that we should keep philosophy impartial, and not make it confessional in any way. The philosophy classroom, in this view, is no place for personal confession or redemption. This view is puzzling, however, because it suggests that we should do Christian philosophy without attending to the redemptive *reality* of being Christian in union with Christ" (10).

Two aspects of teaching will be explored, per Oppy's distinction between content and mode of engagement. The content of classroom Christian philosophy seems similar to Christian philosophy research. First, it seems that engagement with Jesus and his message is necessary. Second, it seems permissible to read and discuss non-Christian philosophy, insofar as the intention is to use the non-Christian philosophy to promote Jesus's message.

The mode of engagement in the Christian philosophy classroom is more interesting. *First*, it seems, per Moser's quotation concerning teaching, that the class must at least have a confessional component. That does not mean that students must get into a booth and confess their sins to their professors as some might to priests. Rather, Moser seems concerned with who is really on trial – God or us. Following Kierkegaard's example, we are the ones on stage being judged by God – even though this is at odds with traditional classroom

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[2] "Can Christians Be Philosophy Professors?" *Teaching Philosophy* 35:1 (March 2012).

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conversations where God is on stage and trial. Moser gives an idea of what such questions might look like when he writes, "A Christian philosopher may prompt an inquirer to ask *why* he or she lacks evidence reported by some Christians, such as evidence of the inward flood of *agapē* from God's Spirit. The questions will invite motivational issues about one's desires and intentions with regard to God, such as the question whether I am *willing* to yield reverently with Christ to God in Gethsemane. Have I hardened my heart to God in Christ? Do I welcome the offered inward flood of God's *agapē* in Christ? If not, why not?" (10).

A *second* issue of engagement is disclosure. I suspect that a Christian philosopher may disclose her Christian identity in the Christian philosophy classroom. Given the power of testimony, Moser might also require a Christian to reveal her identity, especially in virtue of obedience to Jesus's parable about the lamp and the light (Mt. 5:14-15). But disclosure may not be prudent in cases when disclosure is likely to cast pearls (Mt. 7:6). Independent justifications for such disclosure also exist: (1) not advocating may increase chances of relativism in students, (2) arguing for a particular concern may help to show that conclusions matter, (3) not sharing one's views can be manipulative, (4) sharing views can demonstrate to students that we respect them, and (5) professors who disclose their views can serve as rational and non-manipulative role models.[3]

Third, if a professor discloses, can she also advocate her position (or must she remain impartial)? And if she advocates, can she do so with the intent of converting students? I suspect that Moser would answer affirmatively to both, given that he explicitly rejects the impartial classroom, given certain constraints. For example, a professor could not use disclosure and advocacy to manipulate students. A professor could not penalize the grades of student who simply disagreed and could not seek to intimidate students. Furthermore, the professor would be required to represent opposing viewpoints fairly. After all, if the professor believes that she possesses the truth, then she need not use unfair methods. Being dogmatic, manipulative, or unfair would only likely backfire and hurt her cause. Furthermore, the professor would have to have humility, recognizing that God ultimately convinces people to accept Him – not humans.

Fourth, who needs to be in obedience mode in the classroom? Minimally, the professor. One could not force students to be in obedience mode for several reasons, including because many will not be Christians and would thus

[3] See Hugh Wilder, "Tolerance and Teaching Philosophy" *Metaphilosophy* 9 (1978); Richard Momeyer, "Teaching as Moral Activity" *Teaching Philosophy* 3:2 (1979); Michael Goldman, "On Moral Relativism" *Teaching Philosophy* 4:1 (1981).

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first need motivation to enter authentically into obedience mode. But perhaps that would be one of the goals of the Christian philosopher in a Christian philosophy classroom.

Many other factors have not been explored here and will not for the sake of space. For example, it may be relevant to know whether a university is public or private and whether Christian or non-Christian. However, if it seems inappropriate to grant Christians access to share their faith with students and engage accordingly, then it may help to examine classroom advocacy of, say, vegetarianism, feminism, liberalism, or conservatism. Advocates in these groups can advocate impermissibly. A vegetarian may, for example, belittle students in class, penalize their grades, and misrepresent the views of her opponents in class. This kind of advocacy is impermissible. However, it is permissible to advocate for vegetarianism, on a liberal model of education, so long as she treats her students fairly, does not manipulate them, and is fair to viewpoints that oppose hers.

The Christian philosopher is ultimately bound by the dictates of God's will, not by constraints of liberal education. Yet it helps to understand that an analogical argument for advocacy exists. But there are disanalogies that give even more weight to the permissibility of advocacy in Christian philosophy, insofar as the stakes of Christian philosophy are high – eternally more significant than any of the other issues raised. This is not to dismiss other ethically-relevant projects as unimportant; it is just that other projects do not promise everlasting life, regardless of which side one is on. Furthermore, Christians would be cruel if they did not advocate for their faith, as it indicates that they do not truly care enough about the salvation of others to dedicate significant portions of their energies to do so, as commanded by Jesus.

Recognizing with complete clarity what Christian philosophy might look like in the philosophy classroom is not easy. Still, I hope to gain more clarity about what it would look like. And so it is helpful to examine the content and mode of engagement of Jesus's teachings when he taught. With regards to content, he only engaged in his Father's will. His mode of engagement was more flexible. Sometimes he performed miracles, sometimes not. Sometimes he spoke to large crowds, sometimes small. Sometimes his tone was gentle, sometimes harsh. Sometimes he gave direct commands, sometimes parables. Sometimes he discussed the past, sometimes the future. Despite lack of precise guidance on every practical issue, as a Christian philosopher may seek, it is helpful to remember that there is an overarching guide for teaching: "We have, the, an indispensable moral and spiritual standard for Christian philosophy, courtesy of Christ who is our wisdom, righteousness, and redemption from God. In him we find both *how* Christian philosophy is to be done (anchored in

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the Gethsemane prayer, 'Abba, Father') and what (better, *whom*) it should regard as preeminent (God's Christ of Gethsemane union)" (10).

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