




AN INVITATION TO CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY


1 WHY PHILOSOPHY MATTERS

On a clear autumn day in 1980, twenty-five miles west of Chicago in Wheaton, Illinois, Charles Malik, a distinguished academic and statesman, rose to the podium to deliver the inaugural address at the dedication of the new Billy Graham Center on the campus of Wheaton College. His announced topic was “The Two Tasks of Evangelism.” What he said must have shocked his audience.

We face two tasks in our evangelism, he told them, “saving the soul and saving the mind”—that is, converting people not only spiritually but intellectually as well—and the church, he warned, is lagging dangerously behind with respect to this second task. We should do well to ponder Malik’s words:





I must be frank with you: the greatest danger confronting American evangelical Christianity is the danger of anti-intellectualism. The mind in its greatest and deepest reaches is not cared for enough. But intellectual nurture cannot take place apart from profound immersion for a period of years in the history of thought and the spirit. People who are in a hurry to get out of the university and start earning money or serving the church or preaching the gospel have no idea of the infinite value of spending years of leisure conversing with the greatest minds and souls of the past, ripening and sharpening and enlarging their powers of thinking. The result is that the arena of creative thinking is vacated and abdicated to the enemy. Who among evangelicals can stand up to the great secular scholars on their own terms of scholarship? Who among evangelical scholars is quoted as a normative source by the greatest secular authorities on history or philosophy or psychology or sociology or politics? Does the evangelical mode of thinking have the slightest chance of becoming the dominant mode in the great universities of Europe and America that stamp our entire civilization with their spirit and ideas? For the sake of greater effectiveness in witnessing to Jesus Christ, as well as for their own sakes, evangelicals cannot afford to keep on living on the periphery of responsible intellectual existence.¹



These words hit like a hammer. The average Christian does not realize that there is an intellectual struggle going on in the universities and scholarly journals and professional societies. Enlightenment naturalism and postmodern anti-realism are arrayed in an unholy alliance against a broadly theistic and specifically Christian worldview.

Christians cannot afford to be indifferent to the outcome of this struggle.

¹Charles Malik, “The Other Side of Evangelism,” *Christianity Today*, November 7, 1980, p. 40. For the original address, see *The Two Tasks* (Wheaton, Ill.: Billy Graham Center, 2000).



For the single most important institution shaping Western culture is the university. It is at the university that our future political leaders, our journalists, our teachers, our business executives, our lawyers, our artists, will be trained. It is at the university that they will formulate or, more likely, simply absorb the worldview that will shape their lives. And since these are the opinion-makers and leaders who shape our culture, the worldview that they imbibe at the university will be the one that shapes our culture. If the Christian worldview can be restored to a place of prominence and respect at the university, it will have a leavening effect throughout society. If we change the university, we change our culture through those who shape culture.

Why is this important? Simply because the gospel is never heard in isolation. It is always heard against the background of the cultural milieu in which one lives. A person raised in a cultural milieu in which Christianity is still seen as an intellectually viable option will display an openness to the gospel that a person who is secularized will not. One may as well tell a secular person to believe in fairies or leprechauns as in Jesus Christ! Or, to give a more realistic illustration, it is like our being approached on the street by a devotee of the Hare Krishna movement, who invites us to believe in Krishna. Such an invitation strikes us as bizarre, freakish, perhaps even amusing. But to a person on the streets of Bombay, such an invitation would, one expects, appear quite reasonable and be serious cause for reflection. Do evangelicals appear any less weird to persons on the streets of Bonn, London or New York than do the devotees of Krishna?

One of the awesome tasks of Christian philosophers is to help turn the contemporary intellectual tide in such a way as to foster a sociocultural milieu in which Christian faith can be regarded as an intellectually credible option for thinking men and women. As the great Princeton theologian J. Gresham Machen explained,

God usually exerts [his regenerative] power in connection with certain prior conditions of the human mind, and it should be ours to create, so far as we can, with the help of God, those favourable conditions for the reception of the gospel. False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervour of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion.²

Since philosophy is foundational to every discipline of the university, philosophy is the most strategic discipline to be influenced for Christ. Malik himself realized and emphasized this:

It will take a different spirit altogether to overcome this great danger of anti-intellectualism. For example, I say this different spirit, so far as philosophy alone—the most important domain for thought and intellect—is concerned, must see the tremendous value of spending an entire year doing nothing but poring intensely over the *Republic* or the *Sophist* of Plato, or two years over the *Metaphysics* or the *Ethics* of Aristotle, or three years over the *City of God* of Augustine.³

²Address delivered on September 20, 1912, at the opening of the 101st session of Princeton Theological Seminary. Reprinted in J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1951), p. 162.

³Malik, "Other Side of Evangelism," p. 40.

Now in one sense it is theology, not philosophy, which is most important domain for thought and intellect. As the medievals rightly saw, theology is the queen of the sciences, to be studied as the crowning discipline only after one has been trained in the other disciplines. Unfortunately, the queen is currently in exile from the Western university. But her handmaid, philosophy, still has a place at court and is thus strategically positioned so as to act on behalf of her queen. The reason that Malik could call philosophy, in the absence of the queen, the most important intellectual domain is because it is the most foundational of the disciplines, since it examines the presuppositions and ramifications of every discipline at the university—including itself! Whether it be philosophy of science, philosophy of education, philosophy of law, philosophy of mathematics, or what have you, every discipline will have an associated field of philosophy foundational to that discipline. The philosophy of these respective disciplines is not theologically neutral. Adoption of presuppositions consonant with or inimical to orthodox Christian theism will have a significant leavening effect throughout that discipline which will, in turn, dispose its practitioners for or against the Christian faith. Christian philosophers, by influencing the philosophy of these various disciplines, can thus help to shape the thinking of the entire university in such a way as to dispose our future generations of leaders to the reception of the gospel.

It is already happening. Over the last forty years a revolution has been occurring in Anglo-American philosophy. Since the late 1960s Christian philosophers have been coming out of the closet and defending the truth of the Christian worldview with philosophically sophisticated arguments in the finest scholarly journals and professional societies. And the face of Anglo-American philosophy has been transformed as a result. In a recent article lamenting “the desecularization of academia that evolved in philosophy departments since the late 1960s,” one atheist philosopher observes that whereas theists in other disciplines tend to compartmentalize their theistic beliefs from their professional work, “in philosophy, it became, almost overnight, ‘academically respectable’ to argue for theism, making philosophy a favored field of entry for the most intelligent and talented theists entering academia today.”⁴ He complains, “Naturalists passively watched as realist versions of theism . . . began to sweep through the philosophical community, until today perhaps one-quarter or one-third of philosophy professors are theists, with most being orthodox Christians.”⁵ He concludes, “God is not ‘dead’ in academia; he returned to life in the late 1960s and is now alive and well in his last academic stronghold, philosophy departments.”⁶

This is the testimony of a prominent atheist philosopher to the change that has transpired before his eyes in Anglo-American philosophy. He is probably exaggerating when he estimates that one-quarter to one-third of American philosophers are theists; but what his estimates do reveal is the perceived impact of Christian philosophers on this field. Like Gideon’s army, a committed minority of activists can have an impact far out of proportion to their numbers. The

⁴Quentin Smith, “The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism,” *Philo* 4, no. 2 (2001): 3.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 4.

principal error he makes is calling philosophy departments God's "last stronghold" at the university. On the contrary, philosophy departments are a beachhead, from which operations can be launched to impact other disciplines at the university for Christ, thereby helping to transform the sociocultural milieu in which we live.

But it is not just those who plan to enter the academy professionally who need to have training in philosophy. Christian philosophy is also an integral part of training for Christian ministry. A model for us here is a man like John Wesley, who was at once a Spirit-filled revivalist and an Oxford-educated scholar. In 1756 Wesley delivered "An Address to the Clergy," which we commend to all future ministers when commencing their seminary studies. In discussing what sort of abilities a minister ought to have, Wesley distinguished between natural gifts and acquired abilities. And it is extremely instructive to look at the abilities that Wesley thought a minister ought to acquire. One of them is a basic grasp of philosophy. He challenged his audience to ask themselves,

Am I a tolerable master of the sciences? Have I gone through the very gate of them, logic? If not, I am not likely to go much farther when I stumble at the threshold. . . . Rather, have not my stupid indolence and laziness made me very ready to believe, what the little wits and pretty gentlemen affirm, "that logic is good for nothing?" It is good for this at least, . . . to make people talk less; by showing them both what is, and what is not, to the point; and how extremely hard it is to prove any thing. Do I understand metaphysics; if not the depths of the Schoolmen, the subtleties of Scotus or Aquinas, yet the first rudiments, the general principles, of that useful science? Have I conquered so much of it, as to clear my apprehension and range my ideas under proper heads; so much as enables me to read with ease and pleasure, as well as profit, Dr. Henry Moore's *Works*, Malbranche's "Search after Truth," and Dr. Clarke's "Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God?"⁷

Wesley's vision of a pastor is remarkable: a gentleman, skilled in the Scriptures and conversant with history, philosophy and the science of his day. How do the pastors graduating from our seminaries compare to this model?

The authors of this book can both testify personally to the immense practicality and even indispensability of philosophical training for Christian ministry. For many years we have each been involved, not just in scholarly work but in speaking evangelistically on university campuses with groups like InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ and the Veritas Forum. Again and again, we have seen the practical value of philosophical studies in reaching students for Christ. From questions dealing with the meaning of life or the basis of moral values to the problem of suffering and evil and the challenge of religious pluralism, students are asking profound philosophical questions that are much more difficult to answer than to pose. They deserve a thoughtful response rather than pat answers or appeals to mystery. The conventional wisdom says, "You can't use arguments to bring people to Christ." This has not

⁷"An Address to the Clergy," delivered February 6, 1756. Reprinted in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3d ed., 7 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1996), 6:217-31.

been our experience. The fact is that there is tremendous interest among unbelieving students in hearing a rational presentation and defense of the gospel, and some will be ready to respond with trust in Christ. To speak frankly, we do not know how one could minister effectively in a public way on our university campuses without training in philosophy.

Finally, it is not just scholars and ministers who will benefit from training in philosophy, but also laypeople who need to be intellectually engaged if our culture is to be effectively reformed. Our churches are unfortunately overpopulated with people whose minds, as Christians, are going to waste. As Malik observed, they may be spiritually regenerate, but their minds have not been converted; they still think like nonbelievers. Despite their Christian commitment, they remain largely empty selves. What is an empty self? An empty self is a person who is passive, sensate, busy and hurried, incapable of developing an interior life. Such a person is inordinately individualistic, infantile and narcissistic.

Imagine now a church filled with such people. What will be the theological understanding, the evangelistic courage, the cultural penetration of such a church? If the interior life does not really matter all that much, why should one spend the time trying to develop an intellectual, spiritually mature life? If someone is basically passive, he will just not make the effort to read, preferring instead to be entertained. If a person is sensate in orientation, then music, magazines filled with pictures, and visual media in general will be more important than mere words on a page or abstract thoughts. If one is hurried and distracted, one will have little patience for theoretical knowledge and too short an attention span to stay with an idea while it is being carefully developed. And if someone is overly individualistic, infantile and narcissistic, what *will* that person read, if he reads at all? Books about Christian celebrities, Christian romance novels imitating the worst that the world has to offer, Christian self-help books filled with slogans, simplistic moralizing, lots of stories and pictures, and inadequate diagnoses of the problems facing the reader. What will *not* be read are books that equip people to develop a well-reasoned, theological understanding of the Christian faith and to assume their role in the broader work of the kingdom of God. Such a church will become impotent to stand against the powerful forces of secularism that threaten to wash away Christian ideas in a flood of thoughtless pluralism and misguided scientism. Such a church will be tempted to measure her success largely in terms of numbers—numbers achieved by cultural accommodation to empty selves. In this way, the church will become her own grave digger; for her means of short-term “success” will turn out in the long run to be the very thing that buries her.

What makes this envisioned scenario so distressing is that we do not have to imagine such a church; rather, this is an apt description of far too many American evangelical churches today. It is no wonder, then, that despite its resurgence, evangelical Christianity has been thus far so limited in its cultural impact. David Wells reflects,

The vast growth in evangelically minded people . . . should by now have revolutionized American culture. With a third of American adults now claiming to have

experienced spiritual rebirth, a powerful countercurrent of morality growing out of a powerful and alternative worldview should have been unleashed in factories, offices, and board rooms, in the media, universities, and professions, from one end of the country to the other. The results should by now be unmistakable. Secular values should be reeling, and those who are their proponents should be very troubled. But as it turns out, all of this swelling of the evangelical ranks has passed unnoticed in the culture. . . . The presence of evangelicals in American culture has barely caused a ripple.⁸

The problem, says Wells, is that while evangelicals have for the most part correct Christian beliefs, for far too many these beliefs lie largely at the periphery of their existence rather than at the center of their identity. At core they are hollow men, empty selves. If we as the church are to engender a current of reform throughout our culture, then we need laypeople who are intellectually engaged with their faith and take their Christian identity to be definitive for their self-conception.

Besides cultural reform, a revival of intellectual engagement is absolutely critical for restoring vibrant, life-transforming apprenticeship under the lordship of Jesus, the Master Teacher. No apprentice will become like his teacher if he does not respect the authority of that teacher to direct the apprentice's life and activities. However, today the authority of the Bible in general, and of Jesus Christ in particular, is widely disregarded. The general attitude, even among many of Christ's own followers, is that while Jesus Christ is holy, powerful and so forth, the worldview he taught and from which he lived is no longer credible for thinking people. As Dallas Willard observes,

The crushing weight of the secular outlook . . . permeates or pressures every thought we have today. Sometimes it even forces those who self-identify as Christian teachers to set aside Jesus' plain statements about the reality and total relevance of the kingdom of God and replace them with philosophical speculations whose only recommendation is their consistency with a "modern" [i.e., contemporary] mindset. The powerful though vague and unsubstantiated presumption is that *something has been found out* that renders a spiritual understanding of reality in the manner of Jesus simply foolish to those who are "in the know."⁹

Willard concludes that in order to restore spiritual vitality to the church, we must recapture a view of Jesus as an intellectually competent person who knew what he was talking about.

For Willard, who is himself a philosopher, this will include revitalizing philosophical reflection in the church. Philosophical reflection is, indeed, a powerful means of kindling the life of the mind in Christian discipleship and in the church. Again, the authors of this book can testify that our worship of God is deeper precisely because of, not in spite of, our philosophical studies. As we reflect philosophically on our various areas of specialization within the field of philosophy, our appreciation of God's truth and awe of his person have become more profound. We look forward to future study because of the deeper appreciation we are sure it will bring of God's person and work. Christian faith is not

⁸David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 293.

⁹Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), p. 92. Cf. pp. 75, 79, 134, 184-85.

an apathetic faith, a brain-dead faith, but a living, inquiring faith. As Anselm put it, ours is a faith that seeks understanding.

These are very exciting times in which to be alive and working in the field of philosophy, where God is doing a fresh work before our eyes. It is our hope and prayer that he will be pleased to use this book to call even more Christian thinkers to this effervescing field and to equip the church and her ministers to serve him and his kingdom even more effectively into the twenty-first century.

2 AN INVITATION TO DIALOGUE

Convinced of the benefit of philosophical training for Christian scholars, ministers and laymen, we offer *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* as an introductory text to the field of philosophy from a Christian point of view. We do not affect, therefore, some pretended neutrality on the issues we discuss. Our text is intentionally Christian and therefore aims to offer, not just a soporific review of positions pro and con, but rather an articulation of what we take to be the most plausible stance a Christian can take on various questions. Of course, we recognize that other stances are permissible for Christian thinkers, and in some cases we ourselves might disagree on the preferred position or leave multiple options open. We welcome critique and dialogue on all the positions we defend. So when we argue for particular positions that we recognize to be matters of controversy, such as anthropological dualism, a tensed theory of time, social trinitarianism or christological monotheism, we intend, not to close, but to open discussion on these matters. We invite our readers to engage our arguments for the positions we defend.

Philosophical Foundations is obviously a large book, covering a wide range of issues in epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of science, ethics and philosophy of religion, as well as basic rules of reasoning. Much of it will be difficult reading for newcomers to the field, so that those who use the book as a text will find it fertile soil for discussions. We do not anticipate, therefore, that students will be expected to plow through the whole book in a single semester. Rather, the professor may choose selectively chapters to assign which mesh best with the questions he finds most interesting or important, leaving aside the rest. Of course, we hope that students' interest will be sufficiently piqued that they will eventually return to the book at some later time to read and wrestle with the unassigned material!

Each chapter includes an exposition of the most important questions raised by the issue under discussion, along with a Christian perspective on the problem, and closes with a condensed summary of the chapter and a list of key terms employed in that chapter. These key terms are printed in **boldface** type when they are first introduced and are defined in the text. Students would do well to add these words to their working vocabulary. A list of suggested further reading for each chapter is included at the back of the book.

We have tried to keep footnotes to a minimum. The suggested further reading will, we trust, adequately point the reader to the literature discussed in each respective chapter.

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