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# How Christians Should Teach Philosophy at Secular Institutions

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**Abstract:** The main responsibility of Christian philosophers at secular schools is to strive for excellence as teachers, scholars, and colleagues. Another is to become personally involved in on-going Christian fellowship. The overall aim is to honor God in all that we do.

The family in which I grew up (my mother, stepfather, and five half-siblings) was nominally Christian, as were the vast majority of Americans in the 1950s. We occasionally went to church, but I could detect no difference that our being Christians (which is what my parents would certainly have called themselves) made in our lives. I decided to become a follower of Jesus as a result of a conversion experience when I was a teenager. A few years later, when I was about to enter college, I remember well a conversation I had with a man in our church whom I respected. He was the father of a friend of mine and an amateur biblical scholar. He said to me, “Steve, whatever you do in college, do not take a philosophy class; that will only make you lose your faith.”

Although I knew little at that point about what philosophy was, I remember thinking that this advice was odd. If Christianity is true—as I definitely believed it was—Christians ought to be able to answer the criticisms that philosophers or anybody else might raise.

I am now nearing the end of a long career as a philosophy professor. When I entered the job market in the 1970s, the discipline of philosophy was heavily dominated by agnostics and atheists (as it still is now). There was a decided bias against religion, religious people, and of course religious philosophers. Although nobody would ever say so publically, there were departments at secular colleges and universities that were just not interested in hiring religious persons.

Nowadays there are many more Christians who are teaching philosophy and doing doctoral work in philosophy than in my day; that is a good thing. But I’ve noticed that many of the graduate students are reluctant to make it clear in their CVs or writing samples that they are people of faith. Although this might

sound like hiding your light under a bushel (Matthew 5:15), I do not criticize Christian job candidates in philosophy for doing so. But for me, when I was on the job market years ago, that was not an option. Right there on my CV it said, “Masters of Divinity, Princeton Theological Seminary,” and accordingly there was a “Reverend” in front of my name (not that I put that title on my CV). So I could not hide my light under a bushel even if I wanted to. Accordingly, I figured that if I secured a philosophy job at all, I would probably end up at a small Christian college or maybe seminary somewhere.

Accordingly, it was something of a surprise to me that I ended up at Claremont McKenna College—a prestigious, secular liberal arts college in Southern California. Except for visiting appointments elsewhere, I have spent my whole career here and it has been a wonderful place for me. The students are excellent, my faculty colleagues all publish and are interesting people to talk to, and the school is generally well run. When I landed here—a Christian in an entirely secular place, with (I soon discovered) very few other believers on the faculty—I made up a few rules for myself. I was determined to do the best job that I could possibly do as a scholar; I was going to strive to be a competent and dedicated teacher; and I was not going to proselytize in class or do anything that could be interpreted as treating Christian students better than other students. On the other hand, I was going to be open about my own views and willing to express them whenever it seemed natural to do so. After all, in all my twelve years of higher education, I don’t think I ever encountered a single professor—in any field at all—who was reluctant to express his or her opinions about things. But I was certainly not going to be loud or pushy about my beliefs either.

What about teaching philosophy? In most of the courses that I have taught, and in most of the units of those courses, I don’t think there would have been any big or noticeable difference between the way I taught and the way any other philosopher would teach. We would have been teaching the same material and trying to inculcate in our students the same interests and skills. But of course there are certain controversial issues—metaphysical dualism, the existence of God, the nature of truth, and several issues in applied ethics—where there would be differences and where students were often interested in hearing my opinion. This was especially true in my Philosophy of Religion course, which I taught virtually every year.

At a secular institution, it is important that this particular class not be (or be perceived as) an apologetics course. It is important that all students face squarely the best arguments that are out there against God and religion. For the students who are Christians—and we have always had a fair number of them in

Claremont—this can sometimes be challenging. But it can also be threatening to students of no faith to encounter the best arguments in favor of God or religion. Challenging people to think carefully and critically about their beliefs is one of the things that we do in philosophy.

One positive aspect of the present scene in American philosophy is that there does not seem to be as much outright hostility to religion as there used to be. When I first came to Claremont McKenna College, I used to get criticisms of religion and Christianity from atheist colleagues. After all, almost every non-religious person in academia has a story to tell about why God does not exist or why Christianity is oppressive. After a few years that seemed to stop, I think in part (if I can say this without sounding too egotistical) because people found out that I could defend myself intellectually.

But there has also been a much broader shift toward a certain tolerance of religion in the American philosophy culture at large. I think this is for two reasons. First, some of the pioneers in the Society of Christian Philosophers—Bill Alston, Alvin Plantinga, Bob and Marilyn Adams, and others, proved that they could do philosophy extraordinarily well. In the light of such luminaries, it is hard to continue to hold that all theists and Christians are irrational, gullible, superstitious, soft-headed, or whatever. (Well, unless you are one of the “New Atheists,” all of whom seem to think along those lines.) The second reason is the great revival of interest in classical issues and questions in metaphysics. They were just starting to come back into the pale when I was in graduate school.

As I say, the vast majority of philosophers are still atheists and agnostics. But in place of the old hostility to religion, what I detect now in most of my non-religious colleagues is a kind of boredom about religious issues and puzzlement over why anybody would be interested in them. But I’ve known a few non-religious colleagues who are occasionally open to asking religious questions. A now-retired friend, an atheist biologist, once told me, “Sometimes, when I am listening to a Bach cantata, I almost believe in God.”

The single most important piece of advice that I can give Christian professors at secular colleges and universities is to become deeply immersed in fellowship with other Christians. This of course means involvement in one’s own home church, but also involvement in Christian groups and movements on campus. For example, for almost as long as I have been here, I have been the faculty advisor to the Claremont Colleges InterVarsity Christian Fellowship group. That has involved little real work other than occasionally giving a talk at one of their meetings.

More importantly, when I came to Claremont, there was no regular Christian faculty group. And so, inspired by a visit from Dr. John Alexander, who was then President of InterVarsity in the United States, a friend and I started such a group. We meet every Friday at 7:00 a.m. for an hour of Bible Study (we trade off leading it) and prayer together. Then we go out together to a local restaurant for breakfast, and are usually back at our offices by 9:00 a.m. That group has been meeting since, I believe, 1977. The membership has naturally changed over the years, but there is a core group that has been together for many years. We have grown old together. We have prayed our way through various crises—tenure decisions, serious illnesses, broken marriages, rebellious children, deaths of spouses, retirements, etc. That group has been a mainstay of my life and work.

We sometimes hear sermons in which it is said that while not all Christians are pastors, all are ministers. I accept the point: all Christians are ministers, whether they are carpenters, secretaries, accountants, housewives, or whatever. My present point is that this is true of Christian professors as well. God has given us both the gifts and the drive necessary to be university professors, and we ought to see our work as Christian ministry.

As I look back over my scholarly research—most of it in either the philosophy of religion or what has come to be called Analytic Theology—I can see a certain theme. Almost all of it has argued, in one way or another, that theism in general and orthodox Christianity in particular, are rational, can be defended against objections, are intellectually viable. Early in my career, I would not have been able to predict that this would be my path. My hope is that in some way it has honored God.

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