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Christ-Shaped Philosophy and Systematic Theology: Paul Moser's Gift to Theologians

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Abstract: Many theologians who are philosophically inclined feel compelled to give some sort of extra-biblical justification for the work done in their discipline. The most common sources of justification today are the arguments of natural theology and those that stem from presuppositional thought. Both of these approaches, however, meet with vociferous criticism from skeptics. In this essay, I discuss the attractiveness and high originality of Paul Moser's religious epistemology, specifically with respect to his providing a means of justifying the task of theologians by providing an evidential argument for the existence of the God of the Bible from the Christian experience of regeneration in Christ. This argument, by being rooted in *both* personal experience and the Bible, avoids the problems that attach to the abstract arguments of natural theology and the non-foundationalist approach of presuppositionalism. Unlike these approaches, it justifies belief in the God that meets us in the Bible by appealing to evidence of this God's work in the lives of Christians. In my view, given its unique strengths, Moser's Christ-shaped epistemology should be of keen interest to theologians.

Since the late 1990s, if not before, Paul Moser has been engaged in a project of articulating a robustly Christ-centered orientation in the philosophy of religion. His essay, "Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United,"¹ continues his efforts to encourage and exemplify philosophizing in this spiritually-committed manner. For Moser, Christian philosophy must be done "in Christ," with respect to its motives, methods, and content. This leads to philosophizing that is irreducibly and indelibly marked by existential engagement with the Spirit of Christ, in such a way that there is no possibility that this philosophy could be conceived in detachment from, or as

¹ Available here: [http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Moser%20\(Christ-Shaped%20Philosophy\).pdf](http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Moser%20(Christ-Shaped%20Philosophy).pdf).

unaffected by, the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. In this essay, I wish to briefly consider what Moser's own project in Christian philosophy might have to contribute to the work of systematic theologians, those persons responsible to the church who attempt to give a coherent, informed, and attractive statement of what Christians believe.

It will be my contention, in the remarks that follow, that Moser's view of Christian philosophy, and particularly his own contributions to a new vision of religious epistemology, is of exceptional usefulness to systematic theologians with respect to their need to provide cognitive justification for engaging in the theological task. This is primarily because Moser, perhaps more successfully than any other contemporary philosopher, has searched out an evidentialist grounding for Christian belief that relies primarily on concepts internal to Christian theology and experience. It is his distinctive use of epistemic resources found within the Christian tradition, and particularly in the thought of the Apostle Paul, that I contend should make his work especially attractive to theologians, particularly those who would like to find an "in-house" or internal justification for theology without failing to meet their cognitive responsibilities. So my aim here is to answer a modified form of the old question "what is the relationship between philosophy and theology?" Here what I seek to ask is "what might be the relationship between Moser's 'Christ-shaped' philosophy and theology?"

It should be stated at the outset that philosophy and theology have always had a difficult to define yet inseparable relationship. Even in those theologians who have been highly critical of philosophy, those fideists who have believed that Athens really has very little to Jerusalem, philosophical assumptions necessarily and inescapably have made themselves felt. One can, for instance, study Karl Barth without reading Kant, but one will likely not understand his theology as well as one might if one does not consider the Neo-Kantian theology that was so prevalent in Germany during his formative years. Philosophy always finds a way into theology somehow. I take it as evident then that one will not and cannot find oneself doing theology in a philosophical vacuum, even if one in vain attempts to avoid metaphysical speculation altogether or naively wishes to simply stick to exegeting the Bible. Second and even third order issues will inevitably impinge on one's reflections from every side, requiring one to address a host of meta-questions that can only be answered in any satisfactory capacity by invoking philosophical models and concepts.

This is not to say, however, that this means that the theologian must resort to alien philosophical tools that have an entirely non-Christian

provenance. While this has often been the practice in the history of theology, particularly with respect to its early and longstanding dependence on Greek philosophy, it is not necessary. The examination of scripture and meditation upon the great Christian narrative of creation, fall, and redemption, can, at least in principle, provide the raw material needed for developing satisfying metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical conceptions that are already within the Christian ambit and are not foreign addenda. This mining of biblical Christianity for philosophically significant resources has not been an overly common practice, but that this is a real possibility is evidenced by the work of thinkers who have found resources in the Christian tradition to inspire and underwrite philosophical and apologetic viewpoints.

One example of this type of biblically or theologically informed work is the history of presuppositionalist thinking in Neo-Calvinist thought, and its later transformation by Plantinga and Wolterstorff into a rigorous means of arguing for the justification of belief in God.² Another example to consider is Bruce Marshall's *Trinity and Truth*, in which a specifically Trinitarian epistemology is developed.³ One of the great attractions of Moser's ongoing project, from a Christian standpoint, is that he too is engaged in work that takes the Bible or expressly theological concepts as a point of departure. As much as any philosopher working today, Moser is interested in the prospects of a "biblical" or "theological" philosophy that turns to Christianity's own conceptual resources in attempting to justify Christian belief and develop Christian philosophical positions.

This is not to say, however, that Moser is not up to something rather unique. In fact, it is my view that the great advantage of Moser's work, over that of thinkers like Plantinga, Wolterstorff, or Marshall, is that Moser is a committed evidentialist. Perspectives that use coherence not merely as a test of truth, but as a non-foundational source of their ostensible truth and validity, always by their very nature run the risk of seeming circular or question-begging. They thus often tend to appear fideistic to the extent that they depart from a foundational ground, whether of a rationalist or evidentialist sort. This apparent question-begging is of course the most frequent cause of criticism leveled at varieties of presuppositionalism, which all in one way or another assert that the cognitive soundness of the Christian worldview can only

² See *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, edited by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983). Also see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³ See Bruce D. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

properly be discerned by those willing to commence thinking within the bounds and structures of a Christian framework.

Moser, because he in his work is chiefly concerned with evidence, does not have this problem. Yet Moser, in seeking a biblical or Christian basis for his evidentialism, is not a typical evidentialist, either. The evidence with which he is concerned is not the kind commonly provided by those who are considered evidentialists, namely the facts used by natural theologians to provide *a posteriori* reasons to assert theism. Moser is not interested in the philosophical theism of natural theologians, a theism about which one can mull over the evidence for or against in a disinterested manner. Rather he seeks evidence for the redemptive, regenerating God of the Bible. The only place to find this evidence is in the experience of redemption and regeneration, which means compelling theistic evidence is in principle not available to disinterested parties.

Hence we can perhaps begin to see his originality. Moser is avoiding the Scylla of presuppositionalism and the Charybdis of natural theology. His evidentialism is rooted not in creation but in scripture, particularly in an epistemology that he sees present in the thought of the Apostle Paul. The evidence of God's existence provided by means of this epistemology is evidence that depends upon the believer's responsiveness to God's gracious love. God self-authenticates through his inviting the believer to volitional union. In this union, the believer is transformed in such a way that he recognizes and experiences the fact that he is dependent upon a loving power that is not his own. The believer knows that without this power, transformation would be impossible. It is Moser's view that without the responsiveness of the believer to this power, there can be nothing significant to mull over concerning theism, because the conditions for receiving evidence of God's reality have not been met.

For the systematic theologian, Moser's biblical way of construing evidence for the reality of God holds great promise as a means to justify the theological task by recourse to the experience of regeneration internal to Christian belief and practice, yet potentially open to anyone, provided a person turns to Christ. The value of this type of justification can be evinced by looking at the most prevalent alternatives. Typically, in the history of theology, theologians in developing their preambles and prolegomena have tended to resort to a couple of well-worn and often unsatisfying strategies in answering to the question of what justifies theology. Some have employed the arguments of natural theology, hoping to convince both believers and non-believers of the sound cognitive basis of Christianity, while others, apparently writing for convinced Christians alone, have dispensed with argument, and simply assigned

the source of belief to the work of the Holy Spirit. Very few have used anything like the biblical and evidentialist argument from regeneration that we see developed in Moser's work.

I am currently aware of only a couple theological precedents that have some similarity to Moser's philosophical proposal, or at least that treat the matter of the evidential value of regeneration at any length. One is the work of the obscure 19th century Erlangen theologian Franz Hermann Reinhold Frank, who in his *System of the Christian Certainty* attempted by transcendental argument to demonstrate that the experience of regeneration required that its conditions lie in the truth of Christianity's claims.⁴ This argument, heavily indebted in Frank's formulation to Kant, is not the same kind of argument from direct experience of divine love that Moser is making, but it nonetheless seems to be mining the same crucial insight that Christianity has evidence for its truth internal to itself.

The other instance is the work of the Southern Baptist theologian E.Y. Mullins, who made the evidential value of Christian experience prominent throughout his work, especially in his systematic theology textbook *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression*.⁵ Mullins for example in his excellent essay "The Testimony of Christian Experience," asserts that "the spiritually regenerated and morally transformed man proves the deity of Christ."⁶ Such a man provides proof according to Mullins because the redeemed man both knows himself to lack this redeeming power and knows that the power is granted to him only when he turns and submits to Christ. Due to the strong correspondence between our seeking volitional union with Christ and Christ then infusing us with his love, Mullins thinks there exists in some sense a spiritual "law" which he calls "the law of the transfiguration of character."⁷ In light of this spiritual regularity, the intellectual difficulties that the Christian otherwise faces are assuaged.

Thus in the history of theology there is some work that seems to possess strong affinities with Moser's reorienting of religious epistemology. Neither of these two theologians however were especially rigorous in expounding their arguments from regeneration, and they certainly fall short when their

⁴ See Franz Hermann Reinhold Frank, *System of the Christian Certainty*, trans. Maurice J. Evans (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1886). This is an incomplete English translation of the two volume German edition *System der Christlichen Gewissheit* (Erlangen: A. Deichert, 1870-1873).

⁵ See E.Y. Mullins, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1917).

⁶ E.Y. Mullins, "The Testimony of Christian Experience," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* Vol. 3 No. 4 (1999): 83. This essay originally appeared in *The Fundamentals*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

expositions are measured against the sophistication of contemporary analytic philosophy. This is why Moser's project is significant and should be of great value and interest to theologians who are or might be appreciative of an argument from regeneration and are interested in seeing it made in the strongest and most cogent possible way. Moser seems to have discovered a way to maintain the advantages of the sort of in-house theology-based apologetic found in presuppositionalism while also resting squarely on the foundational strengths of evidentialist arguments. The argument from regeneration, in Moser's hands, is compelling evidence that Christian faith, by means of the Spirit, is itself capable of making its truth known to receptive persons. Theologians who are loathe to embrace fideism and who have qualms about the effectiveness of natural theology should take note.

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