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Ramified Personalized Natural Theology: A Third Way?

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Abstract: Paul Moser has illuminated the spiritual terrain of Christian philosophy by revealing a stark contrast between the poles of spectator natural theology and Gethsemane epistemology. In this paper, I will first suggest that Moser’s work is most helpfully viewed not as a statement about the sociological habits of Christian philosophers, but as a prophetic call to self-examination and repentance by each and every Christian philosopher. That said, I argue that between spectator natural theology and Gethsemane epistemology there does seem room for an intermediary position: a chastened natural theology which provides a lived dialectic, a “ramified personalized natural theology.” I suggest this not as a critique but as a constructive proposal for rapprochement that attempts to find a worthy place for both natural theology and an evangelistic call to a personal encounter with the living Lord.

1. Spectator Natural Theology vs. Gethsemane Epistemology

Paul Moser has done Christian philosophy a great service: he has pinpointed a serious professional temptation to focus on largely impersonal discussion, for example of various arguments for the existence of God. This can lead both professors and their students into a sort of intellectual pharisaism, which exalts intellectual assent to the external truth claims of the Christian faith without deep, inward conviction of their living reality. Moser charges that the actual practice of Christian philosophers is often divorced from living, obedient discipleship to Christ and the result is that a significant amount of what is called Christian philosophy cannot be described as “the love and pursuit of wisdom under the authority of Christ”.¹ Like Kierkegaard,

¹ Paul K. Moser, “Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United,” p. 2. Available at: <http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Moser%20%28Christ-Shaped%20Philosophy%29.pdf>.

Moser is concerned that Christian philosophical work be rooted in a deep, inner connection with Christ, and one would expect that authentically Christian philosophy would have some tendency to produce effective vehicles through which the Holy Spirit may reach out to non-Christians, provoking repentance, and planting the seeds of faith.

In a recent exchange, Tedla Woldeyohannes argues that Moser's dichotomy between a merely discursive spectator approach and personal obedience to Christ is a false one because there can be obedient discussion.² Moser replied that Woldeyohannes's assertions about what counts as Christian philosophy were too easy on the "guild" of Christian philosophers and would in any case require sociological data which philosophers are not competent to gather.³ In his rejoinder, Woldeyohannes offers the *tu quoque* that if Woldeyohannes' claims about Christian philosophers required sociological data, then so would Moser's.

Well, I think there is a more constructive way of approaching the issue. From the first time I became aware of his work in this area, my conviction was that Moser is functioning not merely as another philosopher but also as a prophet among philosophers. He is not just offering another philosophy—a philosophy about how Christians should do philosophy. Rather, he is an intellectual John the Baptist who is calling his colleagues to self-examination and repentance. Since prophets are typically stoned and unwelcome in their home town, it should surprise no-one that the response to Moser has not always been warm. It seems to me that basic biblical anthropology tells us that all Christians are, as Luther put it, simultaneously saints (saved by grace) and sinners who still wrestle with their sinful nature (Romans 7), and that it goes without saying—and without the need for sociology—that the mind of Christians is always tempted into diversionary pursuits, and to seek praises among men (Matthew 6: 2). Since the life of the Christian is one of daily repentance and sin affects all of our faculties, including our intellect, we know that Christian philosophers will misuse their reason. For example, Christian philosophers may explore scholastic irrelevancies having no tendency to support the body of Christ, and they may accommodate the most foundational Christian teachings to worldly ideas because they wish to seem "up" with the

² Tedla Woldeyohannes, "On Moser's Christ-Centered Metaphilosophy," available at: <http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Woldeyohannes%20%28On%20Mosers%20Christ-Centered%20Metaphilosophy%29.pdf>.

³ Paul K. Moser, "Christian Philosophy Without Sociology: Reply to Tedla Woldeyohannes," available at: <http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Moser%20%28Reply%20to%20TW%29.pdf>.

rest of the academy, especially developments in the sciences and the most fashionable areas of secular philosophical discourse. Given this *a priori* theological foundation, anecdotal evidence is perfectly adequate to provide examples of abuses: that there will be such abuses is certain.

Seen like that, Moser is positioned in the great prophetic stream of people like G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, Harry Blamires, J.P. Moreland and Gene Edward Veith who, in the spirit of Paul's epistle to the Romans, call Christians to offer themselves as living sacrifices to serve their Lord Jesus Christ, and to exhibit minds which are transformed by Christ and not conformed to the patterns of this-worldly thinking (Romans 12: 1-2). Paul goes on to describe the distribution of gifts in the body of Christ, and warns us that we should not think too highly of ourselves, but should rather focus on our proper, assigned role in the body. Since each member is supposed to uphold the whole body, Christian philosophers must ask themselves—and often—the same question all Christians should ask themselves: just how is the work I am doing contributing to Christ's kingdom? Does it have any tendency at all to draw people to the faith and to build up the faithful into more effective disciples? It seems to me that this is a personal call to each Christian philosopher, and one which makes accurate statistics about the behaviors of philosophers irrelevant. Such statistics would only show what philosophers do and say externally, but Moser's call is for inner renewal. If we Christian philosophers "say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1: 8). This applies to philosophers qua philosophers, not merely philosophers as human beings.

Furthermore, Moser is surely right that there are ways of presenting and exploring theistic arguments that encourage one to be a detached, impersonal spectator, ways which create no deep, existential sense of being in the presence of a God worthy of worship. The problem is not merely that many theistic arguments are what Richard Swinburne calls "bare" or "generic" natural theology, which discloses a deity but not the specific personal being revealed in Christ.⁴ Even if this is corrected by employing what Swinburne dubs "ramified natural theology," offering evidences that favor Christianity over rival religions, this need not involve a call to submit one's will to the living Lord.

⁴ Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). See also his "The Probability of the Resurrection of Jesus," a pre-print for the forthcoming special issue of *Philosophia Christi* (Winter 2013) on ramified natural theology, available at: <http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/pc%2015-2%20swinburne%20final%281%29.pdf>.

All Christians, including philosophers, are called to evangelize, and while natural theology may have an apologetic role in preparing a person for the Gospel, by destroying strongholds and counterarguments that encourage people to take comfort in alternative places of refuge (2 Cor. 10: 4-5), this does not make it acceptable to do apologetics instead of evangelism, or to do it without an evangelistic goal. Nowhere in the Great Commission (Matthew 28: 16-20) is there an exemption clause for Christian philosophers! Moser's radical alternative to spectator natural theology is Gethsemane epistemology, which "contends that the evidence available to humans from a God worthy of worship...would seek to challenge the will of humans to cooperate fully with God's perfect will."⁵ This means that "God would not be acknowledged just in the conclusion of a merely propositional argument; otherwise a crucial *de re* factor would be omitted...God's meeting one directly."⁶ The Gospel is not merely good news in the sense that the end of a drought or the collapse of a totalitarian regime is good news—for someone. The Gospel is good news for each one of us personally. And this good news can only be found in the painful discovery of our creatureliness, our deep infection with sin, our utter inability to heal ourselves, and our complete dependence on Christ and his righteousness for our salvation.

So, Moser is right to show the gulf between two poles—impersonal spectator theology and a personal encounter with Christ—and to challenge Christian philosophers with some uncomfortable questions. Just where in the spectrum between these two poles do we spend most of our time living? And just what do our methods of research and teaching encourage other philosophers to center their lives around? It seems to me that whatever one thinks of Moser's overall Christ-shaped project, these are really good questions. They are the kind of questions John the Baptist would raise in the unlikely event he became a philosopher. Maybe he has.

Moser is not promoting a kind of Barthian indifference to evidence as if the only alternative to spectator natural theology is private, personal devotion. Rather, he is concerned about the kind of evidence that is most likely to deeply challenge the natural man's rebellious rejection of the living God. Moser realizes that the natural man is not seeking after God (Rom. 3: 11), but on the contrary is an enemy of God (Rom. 8: 7) who suppresses the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1: 18) because he would prefer to worship himself and the works of his own hands (Rom. 1: 21-23). Knowing more things about

⁵ Paul K. Moser, "Gethsemane Epistemology: Volitional and Evidential," *Philosophia Christi*, 14(2), 2012, 263-274, 263.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 269.

God, of which the natural man is certainly capable (Rom. 1: 20), will do nothing to remedy this situation unless he is shown his creaturely dependence and sin and comes to see his absolute need for Christ.

Still, I think it is worth exploring the territory between the poles of spectator natural theology and Gethsemane epistemology. It seems to me that some approaches to natural theology are more helpful than others, and that, at its best, natural theology can drive someone at least to Gethsemane's garden gate. In the remainder of this paper I will make two main points, and then propose a "third way," a view that is cognizant of the importance of engaging the will, yet all the same is grounded in natural theology. I don't offer this by way of an attempted refutation of anyone's views, including Moser's. Rather, I am putting it on the table for discussion as a means of rapprochement between natural theology and Gethsemane epistemology.

2. Rapprochement?

My first main point is rather simple: people are multi-dimensional and conversion can be complicated and incremental, with one aspect of a person being converted before another. If so, it is unreasonable to expect that a person will always be in a position to be deeply challenged by Christ's Lordship all at once, and so the fact that some natural theology is insufficient to bring a person to a living relationship with Christ does not mean it is of no value in moving that person in the right direction. My second point is that there is an approach to natural theology which overcomes its tendency to be an impersonal, spectator sport: it offers not mere propositions, but a lived dialectic. Recognizing the value of both ramified natural theology (making the case for Christ, not merely a deity) and of being brought to a personal encounter with Christ's claim of Lordship that deeply challenges our rebellious will (Gethsemane epistemology), my proposed rapprochement is "ramified personalized natural theology." This is not a catchy name, but maybe the idea will catch on.

A. Multi-dimensional people.

Flour is quite unpleasant to eat. Yet it is an indispensable element of bread. An apologetic argument may by itself be insufficient to bring someone to an encounter with Christ, the bread of life. Yet, for a particular person, it may be an essential ingredient in a protracted process of conversion, a key log whose release starts a mass of lumber to drift in the right direction. This is because people are multi-dimensional, and while some are converted all at once, like St. Paul, others are converted in a rather complex, asynchronous

fashion with one element awakening before the others. A good example of this is C. S. Lewis, who took the view that human beings have three distinct dimensions relevant to their relationship with God: the imagination, the intellect and the will. While Moser rightly points to the neglect of the will by much Christian philosophy, the other elements can have an important role in a multi-dimensional conversion.

B. The Lewis principle.

Lewis believed that in a sense, the imagination is the most superficial aspect of a person. He describes it as the outer of three concentric circles, with the intellect next and the will at the very core of a person's identity and commitments.⁷ But it is precisely because the imagination is less integral to a person's sense of self that it can be more easily changed, starting a process which may, in the end, alter the intellect and will as well. This is particularly beneficial if the goal is to prepare an unbelieving reader for the Gospel. Lewis found that a major limitation of formal apologetics is that the unbeliever easily recognizes the direction of the argument, and feels the threat to his current life which a new life in Christ implies. Thus the "watchful dragons" of his intellect and will appear to fend off the argument with objections and rejections. But matters are different with the imagination. Here, the unbeliever is not told what to think, but is shown new ways of looking at the world. He will not feel threatened by a fantasy world which he knows to be literally false, and yet may be drawn to identify with the struggles and successes of the protagonists. Seeing the world through their eyes, the reader may discern new, transcendent realities, such as objective good and evil, courage and cowardice, justice and tyranny, selfishness and sacrifice. At the outset, the intellect and will may officially oppose such things, having rationalized some version of moral relativism, but may be disarmed by the discovery of an unmistakably real moral universe. This may help readers to see for the first time what it means to be a sinner before a Holy God, even if they are still very resistant to (and afraid of) a personal encounter with Him.

Indeed, Lewis knew that an indirect and incremental approach had merit, because that was the path of his own conversion. He vividly recounts how, as an officially atheist teenager, he was deeply affected by reading George MacDonald's *Phantastes*:

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Revised Edition (New York: Macmillan, 1982), VI, p. 31.

It is as if I had died in the old country and could never remember how I came alive in the new.... I did not yet know (and I was long in learning) the name of the new quality, the bright shadow, that rested on the travels of Anados. I do now. It was Holiness... Up till now each visitation of Joy had left the common world momentarily a desert... But now I saw the bright shadow coming out of the book into the real world and resting there, transforming all common things and yet itself unchanged. Or more accurately, I saw the common things brought into the bright shadow.... That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer.⁸

The last sentence is what I will call the “Lewis principle”: for many people, conversion is a drawn-out affair like a complex medieval battle, in which God’s relentless pursuit finds victory on one front but stubborn resistance on others, until one day the white flag of universal surrender is displayed.

Imagination does not suffice for Gethsemane, and nor, as Lewis himself realized, does formal apologetics, but it surely does not follow that imagination or formal apologetics cannot be ingredients in a process of salvation by helping to defeat one source of resistance at one time for one person.

C. Arguments in context.

A related point is that while the disembodied arguments of the lecture hall (such as standard ontological, cosmological and even moral arguments) may do little or nothing to engage a person, still they may also be stated by a person who deeply reflects Christ by his ongoing friendship. On those occasions where I have been called to engage in a public debate with an atheist or to give the case for God or the case for Christ, my sense is that the presentation itself is rarely an opportunity to convert anyone. Rather it is means of opening up a conversation and it is the patient, caring, follow-up by campus pastors and Christian students through which God calls people to faith. So arguments are not much good in themselves, perhaps, but they can create a space for the kind of personal relationships that can lead a person to Gethsemane.

That said, it suggests that it is much more helpful, even in giving these arguments, if they can be “personalized,” so that participants feel the existential force of the argument—why it should matter to them, and what it means for them if its conclusion is true. This, surely, is why so many people who are left

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956), 179, 181.

cold by formal arguments for God, are deeply affected by such works as Augustine's *Confessions*, Pascal's *Pensées* and Lewis's *Surprised By Joy*. In these works, through the process of intimate reader identification with the author, one does not merely learn about God: one is forced to live through a deeply searching, existential process that actually draws one to a personal encounter with God. Augustine does not just tell us about his restless heart: he reveals the restless heart in all of us, and we see in our own lives how we have vainly sought out god substitutes, which have never satisfied our deep need for wholeness and holiness. Pascal does not just tell us that humans are both wretched and great and seek to avoid their paradoxical nature as deposed kings through the diversion of trivial pursuits⁹: we find ourselves confessing that this is how we really are. And when Lewis tells us of the bitter-sweet longing of joy, "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction,"¹⁰ he helps to awaken that longing in the reader.

D. A Lived Dialectic.

A prime example of spectator natural theology is the standard Anselmian ontological argument of introductory philosophy classes. Even if some version of the argument is logically faultless, in William James's memorable terms, it "makes no electric connection" with one's nature, "it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all."¹¹ Does that mean, therefore, that the ontological argument is really a waste of time, if the goal is to bring someone to Christ? The answer in part is that we do not know for certain how God may use even the unlikeliest ingredient in His overall recipe of salvation. This is because, as we saw, people are multi-dimensional. But we can also note that the ontological argument need not be presented solely in a spectator fashion. This is why some of us who are trained academic philosophers have the audacity to offer classes on not only the works, but the life of C. S. Lewis. Lewis shows us what it means for an argument to be a lived dialectic.

In 1933, two years after his reconversion to Christianity, Lewis published a stunningly profound account of his ideological and spiritual journeys, after the manner of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In Lewis's work, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, Lewis recounts two major movements of his spiritual life. First, he fell away from the Christian faith in part because he had received a

⁹ See the entries on wretchedness, greatness and diversion in Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Books, 1966).

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 17.

¹¹ William James, "The Will to Believe," in eds. Louis Pojman and Lewis Vaughn, *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*, Eighth Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 140.

doctrinally unsound portrait of Christianity that lurched between harsh legalism and indulgent antinomianism. Second, he was drawn back to the faith through a series of intellectual and spiritual battles that led him in the end to give up his resistance, to admit that God was God, and to acknowledge that Christ was Lord of his life. Much like Augustine's *Confessions*, the drama of Lewis's *Regress* is in his restless evasion of the true God in favor of various, and ultimately unsatisfying, God-substitutes, including sexuality, romanticism, materialism and a vapid spirituality. In an afterword to the third edition of *Regress*, Lewis writes:

It appeared to me therefore that if a man diligently followed this desire, pursuing the false objects until their falsity appeared and then resolutely abandoning them, he must come out at last into the clear knowledge that the human soul was made to enjoy some object that is never fully given...in our present mode of subjective and spatio-temporal experience. This Desire was, in the soul, the Siege Perilous in Arthur's castle—the chair in which only one could sit.... The dialectic of Desire, faithfully followed, would retrieve all mistakes, head you off from all false paths, and force you not to propound, but to live through, a sort of ontological proof. This lived dialectic, and not the merely argued dialectic of my philosophical progress, seemed to have converged on one goal....¹²

Here we see that Lewis's intellectual and spiritual conversion proceeded in tandem. What had first appealed incognito to his imagination as a young atheist began also to make increasing sense intellectually, as he came to see that an impersonal metaphysics, such as materialism or pantheism, could not explain the nature of rational and moral norms (early versions of Lewis's celebrated arguments from reason and morality are present in the *Regress*). But these arguments did not merely commend themselves to Lewis's reason in the abstract. He found that they also agreed with his experience as he lived through a discovery of their credibility. Like Pascal, he came to see that he was wretched, a sinful man who fell far short of the glory of God, and who found himself praying for wholeness and healing. He realized that it made no sense to pray to an impersonal abstraction, like the form of the Good, or an immanent logos, but that he was praying to a person. At some point he

¹² C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism*, Deluxe Illustrated Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981; first edition published 1933), 204-205.

realized that the hole in his being was not merely God-shaped but specifically Christ-shaped, and that the person who had all the time been calling him, was Christ.

There is no doubt that it was the Holy Spirit that called Lewis to faith. But the Spirit uses means. One does not reason oneself into faith, but the Holy Spirit can draw someone along the road to faith through various means including arguments until they encounter Christ. Like Thomas Nagel, Lewis did not want the universe to be like that¹³ and would agree with Moser that the main obstacle to faith is a rebellious will: “fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms.”¹⁴ As an unbeliever, Lewis perceived that the call to Christ was a death threat to the natural man and that his becoming a Christian meant he was “never to be alone; never the master of his own soul, to have no privacy, no corner whereof you could say to the whole universe: This is my own, here I can do as I please.”¹⁵ Still it was through the means of a particular kind of natural theology—a lived dialectic—that Lewis was dragged to the foot of the cross. He still needed to hear, understand and receive the Gospel, but this lived dialectic had succeeded in revealing to him his need for it. No longer was its proclamation like casting pearls among swine.

3. Ramified Personalized Natural Theology.

Let me finish by suggesting a couple of general lessons that may be drawn from the example of C. S. Lewis (and also Augustine and Pascal). Lewis’s example shows how much the natural man would prefer some comforting, but impersonal God-substitute. When he faced the philosophical implausibility of materialism, he merely embraced idealism—the idea that there is something like a mind behind reality—but this did not involve any personal relationship with this mind. He would probably have enjoyed what Christian Smith has called “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,”¹⁶ an unconscious default religious position of American teens who seek refuge in the therapeutic benefits of a God who encourages us to feel good and be good on our own terms, without the crushing diagnosis of sin or the need for a new life in Christ.

If that is the way things are, then natural theology will be more effective if it is ramified, so that it closes off the option of settling for some higher being

¹³ Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 130.

¹⁴ *Mere Christianity*. Revised and Enlarged Edition (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 59.

¹⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, 142.

¹⁶ Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

who is not the Christian God. The natural man is looking for halfway houses, like idealism (Lewis) process theology (Alfred North Whitehead) immanent theology (Thomas Nagel) or Deism (Antony Flew), and our best efforts at bare natural theology may only empower him to settle down in one of these inns on the road to Jerusalem. So at the intellectual level, we need to show why it is God as revealed in Christ that provides the most compelling account of reality. Ramified arguments that target the fulfillment of prophecy, the resurrection and Christocentric solutions to the problem of evil, are all examples of this approach.

Yet, if our goal is evangelism and the salvation of souls, this is not enough. We must also attend to whether the way in which we argue—and live, in our relationships to unbelievers—is liable to make them live through such arguments. The arguments should not only be ramified, but personalized, so that the recipient is drawn into a lived dialectic targeted on Christ. Thus, for example, it is not enough that one sees that Christ is the best solution to the problem of the “moral gap” between the moral law and our performance: one must also be convicted by one’s own sickness and see Christ as the only cure.

A spiritual truth that is easily forgotten by Christian philosophers, obsessed as they are with logical soundness, is that people may be brought closer to Christ by logically bad arguments which nonetheless engage them and create a medium for the Spirit to do His work, and arguments of impeccable logic may still leave a person cold. Of course, philosophical rigor demands good arguments, and bad arguments will more often provide excuses for rejecting the faith, so the ideal must be to provide sound arguments that point specifically to Christ and which also engage individuals at a deep personal level. My contention is that at least some such arguments exist, and that they are found in the writings of people like Augustine, Pascal and Lewis. As a third way between spectator natural theology and Gethsemane epistemology, ramified, personalized natural theology helps to bridge the gap between rational argument and personal encounter with Christ.

Beyond a certain point though, one must remember that all our efforts are inadequate, and that it is only God that grants the increase (1 Cor. 3: 5-7). This should keep us humble. God may draw someone to faith through a poor human performance, while the egotism and pride accompanying a knock-out presentation may give an unbeliever just the excuse he needed to resist the Spirit’s calling. Too much evangelism does not happen because Christians think they have to have the right technique. But there is no such thing. People are saved when God is at work in our efforts, good, bad or indifferent. And while this does not excuse deliberate incompetence, which, to be sure, most

likely will misfire, it should hold us back from idolizing one particular approach as the authentic method of outreach that Christians, including Christian philosophers, should employ.

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