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Is Christ-Shaped Philosophy Really Philosophy?

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Abstract: In this short paper I examine the contours of Paul Moser’s Christ-shaped philosophy in the original paper and the developments in his response to challenges, especially those regarding the narrow scope of his project. In doing so, I argue that the “inward agent-power”, volitional submission, and special epistemological position which Moser requires for Christ-shaped philosophy make his project one which properly belongs to a sub-discipline of systematic theology, rather than academic philosophy. The needfulness or desirability of Moser’s project is not questioned; however, in light of his requirements, I attempt to demonstrate that his call should not be for a reform of Christian philosophers qua philosophers, but rather a call for Christian philosophers (and for all Christians) to contribute to an intellectually rigorous theological endeavor.

Paul Moser has issued a challenge to contemporary Christians, philosophers, and academic philosophers. In his plea for a Christ-Shaped Philosophy, he gives a model for Christian intellectual engagement. He makes the claim: “A Christian philosophy must accommodate the subversive Christian message that the outcast Galilean ‘Jesus is Lord’ (1 Cor. 12:3; see Acts 2:26)”¹ What does it mean, however, to accommodate such a claim? The claim that it is Jesus who is Lord is the claim of a Christian, to be sure; what does it mean for the Christian who is a philosopher, who does philosophy in any respect, or, perhaps, who should be doing philosophy?

The issue is parsing what Christian philosophy is. Tedla Woldeyohannes raises this question, noting that one “...would want to know...how much of the contributions made by Christian philosophers are properly works of *Christian* philosophy.”² There must be a distinction between “philosophy done by a Christian” and Moser’s conception of “Christian philosophy,” for if what is in question is just philosophy done by a Christian, there seems to be an odd relationship to Moser’s definition, for

¹ Paul Moser, “Christ-Shaped Philosophy”, p. 1, an EPS web-based project located here: <http://bit.ly/ChristShapedPhilosophyProject>

² Tedla Woldeyohannes, “On Moser’s Christ-Centered Metaphilosophy”, p. 4, available online: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=131>

though a philosopher may be in such a state that he or she affirms the Christian message, the content of this philosophy may not be as Moser desires.³ Simply “doing philosophy and being a Christian” does not entail any special accommodation of the claim that Jesus is Lord. This is true both in an epistemic sense, in regard to acknowledging the truth-claims of Christianity, as well as in regard to the changed person of the Christian made new in Christ.

If, however, as Moser suggests, for “Christian” to properly apply to philosophy, then it needs to be a certain *type* of philosophy, namely that done in unity with the will of God and guided by Christ, i.e., that sort of philosophy which is only able to be done by an obedient Christian. This ties in with Moser’s prior assertions regarding the Gethsemane union. Insofar as this specific *type* of philosophy grows out of one’s nature as Christian, the sort of intellectual rigor demanded seems also to be demanded of Christians *qua* Christian, not merely the subset of Christians who happen to be philosophers.

Moser writes of the Gethsemane union as “...*intentional guidance with power*”⁴ and notes that “...Gethsemane becomes a repeated context where the risen Christ invites, encourages, and empowers one to yield into reconciliation and reverent companionship with God as one’s ongoing ‘Abba, Father.’”⁵ This Gethsemane union is enabling, giving access to options for action which are available only to those who are in said union, by virtue of the power provided. The Gethsemane context is also clearly a privileged epistemic standpoint for those involved in Christ-Shaped Philosophy, for the very practice of Christ-Shaped Philosophy requires the self-authenticating revelation of God. Insofar as the self-authenticating revelation enables the yielding, obedient will of the practitioner of Christ-Shaped Philosophy, the *apprehensive faith*⁶ *acceptance of God’s revelation is a prerequisite for Christ-Shaped Philosophy*. This apprehensive faith enables not only the privileged epistemic position which allows the Christian to practice Christ-Shaped Philosophy, but also in the “guidance with power” provides the ability to practice Christ-Shaped Philosophy, an option not open to one outside of union with Christ. This latter is an important aspect, it seems, for it prevents Christ-Shaped Philosophy from being available as a thought-

³ As Graham Oppy has noted in his article “Moser, Ambiguity, and Christ-Shaped Philosophy”, available online:

<http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=136&mode=detail>

⁴ Moser, “Christ-Shaped Philosophy”, p. 7

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ i.e. *fides apprehensiva*

experiment, limiting its practice to those who are being formed themselves into a Christ-shape.⁷

Those who are being formed, however, are all who are apprehenders in faith of God's self-verifying revelation. In this case, it is every Christian *qua* Christian who should be a practitioner of Christ-Shaped Philosophy. If Christ-Shaped Philosophy is a certain manner of carrying out an *academic* discipline, it would then seem that each Christian is called to be an academic philosopher. Insofar as the Gethsemane union is a union of intentional guidance and power in the life of each Christian, the self-reflection which is characteristic of being human must be guided by this Gethsemane union and overflow of *agape* love. This reflection is, by virtue of our previous definitions, Christ-Shaped Philosophy.

Philosophy as an academic discipline and Christ-Shaped Philosophy do not seem, then, to be the same thing. Oppy has claimed that Christ-Shaped Philosophy "...is more properly classified as *dogmatic theology*."⁸ This is not quite correct, but it seems to be close. Historically, philosophy and theology have had a close relationship. As the *ancilla theologiae*, philosophy served as a propaedeutic and aided the expression of theology. Philosophy was seen most famously by Martin Luther indeed as in opposition to theology when attempting to replace the truths of faith,⁹ but as a helpful aid to theological thought when used by the enlightened reason of the believer.¹⁰ At the time in which philosophical faculties began to gain independence from their preparatory role and justify their own existence, Gisbertus Voetius argued for philosophy as a support for theology and as a methodological framework for dogmatics.¹¹ Friedrich Schleiermacher placed "philosophical theology" at the foundation of his understanding of theological study.¹² These are a far cry from modern academic philosophy – for the relationship between theology and philosophy is not necessarily one between two academic faculties.

In the fourfold division of theology, represented still today at many European universities, one has 1) New Testament, 2) Old Testament, 3) practical theology, and 4) systematic theology. Further subdividing systematic theology results in 4a) dogmatics, 4b) ethics, in some cases 4c) the study of religion or missiology, and, perhaps surprisingly, 4d) philosophy.

⁷ For the continuous aspect of this assertion, cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1-2

⁸ Oppy, "Moser, Ambiguity, and Christ-Shaped Philosophy", p. 9

⁹ Cf. e.g. WA 39 I, 175 and WA 19, 207 (=D. *Martin Luthers Werke*, 120 Volumes, 1883-2009; known as the "Weimarer Ausgabe")

¹⁰ Cf. e.g. WA 6, 599 and WA 7, 833

¹¹ Cf. Gisbertus Voetius, *Assertiones theologicae de praeiudiciis verae religionis* in: *Thersites beauntimorumenos*, Utrecht 1635, p. 347

¹² Cf. e.g. his *Kurze Darstellung des Theologischen Studiums*

Some Roman Catholic faculties have their own chair of philosophy as a part of the theological faculty, parallel to the philosophical faculty. The “philosophy” is understood specifically Christian-ly, and is also sometimes referred to as “philosophy of religion” (not to be confused with the like-named area of analytic philosophy!) or “philosophy of the Christian religion.” To what end is this capacity then duplicated, when a university has multiple parallel structures for philosophy? To what end especially when, as in universities with more than one confession represented, “philosophy” is a matter of three faculties which may not often interact with one another?¹³

Philosophy done as a subdiscipline of theology is necessarily different than philosophy as an academic discipline. It begins not only with a certain set of presuppositions, but also in a privileged epistemic position.¹⁴ This is philosophy done while taking into account the revealed truths of Christianity – a task only possible if one is in the epistemic position to acknowledge those as true, and possible only when one has been (by faith) empowered to confess their truth – and thus, only properly possible as one for whom Jesus is, indeed, Lord. The self-authenticating aspect of Moser’s “Gethsemane epistemology”¹⁵ is that of a specific epistemic position; the union of the Christian with Christ is a specific manner of existence. The philosopher who, in this position, engages in Christ-Shaped Philosophy is actually doing *theology*, insofar as philosophy done in this manner is the *ancilla theologiae*, but is doing philosophy as such (though not as an independent academic discipline) rather than in its propaedeutic function. This makes a distinction between “philosophy” and “philosophy” in terms of both context and aim – those same factors which Moser identifies in his call to Christ-Shaped Philosophy. Insofar as one desires to do philosophy in 1) a “Gethsemane” context and 2) in service of the church, one desires to do *theology*.

The importance of context and aim is also evident when we look at a specific example: is “natural theology” “philosophy as philosophy” or “philosophy as theology?” Insofar as natural theology is done a1) by a non-Christian, b1) as an exercise in natural reason, or c1) with apologetics as its aim, it is emphatically *not* theology, as either the practitioner or the hearer

¹³ For example, the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, which has a philosophical faculty as well as professors for philosophy in both the Protestant and Roman Catholic faculties.

¹⁴ And traditionally, with a significant depth and breadth of theological as well as philosophical knowledge.

¹⁵ cf. Paul Moser, “Gethsemane Epistemology, Pneumatic Evidence, and Divine Agape?: Reply to Aaron Preston” pp. 3ff. available online: <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=200&mode=detail>

does not require faith.¹⁶ Insofar as natural theology is done a2) by a Christian, b2) as an exercise in enlightened reason, or c2) with irenics as its aim, it is theology, for these contexts and aims require apprehensive faith and become a matter of thinking about the Lord one already knows.¹⁷

This “philosophy as theology” is an important factor also when one regards the Gethsemane-union-reflection nature of Christ-Shaped Philosophy, recalling that this characteristic reflection is a matter of being human. Reflection on the truths of faith is a part of the existence of the Christian; this reflection is the source of the assertion that every Christian is a theologian.¹⁸ The call to Christ-Shaped Philosophy is a call to every believer to engage in intellectually rigorous reflection on the faith, growing out of the believer’s union with Christ.

We have then identified two alternative forms of “philosophy” aside from the academic discipline with its own justification to existence: 1) a propaedeutic for thinking in any field, and 2) philosophy as a part of theology. It seems to me that Moser’s call to Christ-Shaped Philosophy is a call to perform the latter which unfortunately conflates it with philosophy as an academic discipline.

Moser’s call to reform is a timely one, for both theologians¹⁹ and philosophers.²⁰ It is a call to a philosophically grounded theology. This is not, in another sense of the term, a “philosophical theology” engaged in speculation apart from faith and tradition, but an acknowledgement of the interdependence of theology and philosophical reflection for those in the faith. Let Moser’s call for reform ring to philosophers: Come, and do theology with, in, and for the church, as well as practicing your academic discipline. Let it ring as well to theologians: Come, and forget not the ministerial use of reason and the need for analytic rigor. Let it be call to both, to deepen the theological understanding of the philosopher and the philosophical understanding of the theologian. But let it impugn neither theology nor philosophy by conflating the two.

¹⁶ And, in my opinion, the result is always something other than the Christian God. Cf. my “The End and Purpose of Ramified Natural Theology” available online here: <http://blog.epsociety.org/2013/12/is-ramified-natural-theology-at-odds.html>

¹⁷ I leave aside for this paper the situation of evangelistic use within the framework of proclamation, noting only my position that the creation of faith remains divine action independent of any preparatory work of natural reason.

¹⁸ Cf. Martin Luther: *Omnes dicimur Theologi, ut omnes Christiani* (We call all theologians, as we call all Christians) WA 41, Pg. 11 (Sermon on Psalm 5:17, January 1535. Translation mine)

¹⁹ In both the professional and all-Christian sense.

²⁰ In all senses of the word.

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