

Institute for Christian Learning  
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**THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION  
IN ADVENTIST HIGHER EDUCATION**

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### **Introduction:**

There can often be found, in Seventh-day Adventist circles, a certain reluctance to involve students in the study of philosophy or anything that smacks of it. And there is a corresponding reluctance to teach them the discipline of philosophical reflection. In the United States (at least), and in many other places in the world (I suspect), this situation pertains. Many people are flatly opposed to the teaching of philosophy, claiming it is detrimental to faith structures, and therefore wrong. And where philosophy classes are taught, there can be found a wide-spread, lurking suspicion of the practice.

As far as I can tell, this opposition to the teaching of philosophy is driven by a number of factors. First, there are some verses in the Bible that, taken at first glance, seem to indicate that it is wrong to mix Christian thought and philosophy. A second line of opposing thought comes from those who know of some statements made by Ellen G. White, which at first glance appear to advise against the use of philosophy. A third line of opposition comes from people who insist that faith and reason are inherent opponents, that reason destroys faith, that faith has no need for reason, while a fourth source of opposition to philosophy comes from those who rail against intellectual endeavor of any kind, preferring to argue that a simple, unreasoned faith is purest and best. Today, it is not at all uncommon to encounter people who seem to prefer ignorance to informed belief, and who are proud of it.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, an opposite situation also prevails. In the current climate, there are certain branches of philosophy that offer the Christian community some potentially very useful tools that could well produce significant evangelistic dialog. By evangelistic dialog, I do not

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting here the observation of R. C. Sproul, the well-known evangelical leader in the United States, that ours is the most anti-intellectual period in the whole history of the Christian Church. (Cited from Moreland and Craig, p. 12)

have in mind the common doctrinal discussions we so often refer to as evangelism which, by the way, are routinely ignored by educated people these days. Rather, I have in mind substantial dialog about world-views, those very basic ideas of reality by which all humans order life itself. Dialog at this level is absolutely essential to any significant Christian advancement. The reason for this is that the great trends of history are driven by ideas. The world runs by ideas that become accepted and popularized and taken to be accurate descriptors of reality. As Christians, we must understand this very clearly. But a significant attending truth is that while these governing ideas are widely accepted, they are not always examined. Sometimes their movement among people is deliberate; often it is merely a drift, and a semi-conscious one at that. People absorb them without careful examination. Whatever the process, ours is a time of a great clashing between world-views, the predominant one of yesterday giving ground to a new one most frequently called secularism. Christians are faced with the reality that in significant portions of the world we are fast losing our place at the table of ideas, and we seem to be without recourse to amend, let alone reverse the situation.

In this paper, I will argue that things need not remain this way, not if we wake up some rather simple yet significant points. First, ideas are constructs that are fair-game for discussion, dialog, argument, even opposition. Sometimes people act as if once an idea is in place, it cannot be challenged. This is not true. It is possible for ideas to be opposed, and even dismantled and discredited. Second, such discussions are best carried out by people who know how to find their way in a credible manner around the world of ideas. This is simply a consequence of the current fascination with experts. We give experts far more credibility even though their record is not always sterling.<sup>2</sup> Third, more than anything else, philosophy is the discipline to which the

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<sup>2</sup>I might cite here, tongue in cheek, my favorite definition of an expert: An expert is an ordinary person away from home!

world of ideas is most attached, and philosophers those who are trained to be the best in the discipline. Taken together, these points would seem to indicate that if the Christian community were able to produce Christian philosophers who can do legitimate battle in the world of ideas, it is quite possible they would get enough of a hearing to affect the prevailing world-view. And, if they were to end up not being able to affect the prevailing world-view itself, they could at least create some belief space that could be regarded by believers as intellectually credible.<sup>3</sup>

So the matter at hand is now laid out before us. This paper will address the great challenge facing the Christian world today in the form of opposing and hostile ideas. It will then move to a discussion of how the study of philosophy might help us, and it will come finally to some suggestions about what kind of philosophy ought to be preferred. This paper is going to argue that some forms of philosophy should be taught in Seventh-day Adventist schools, that there is a positive role the study of philosophy can play in Adventist higher education, that philosophical reflection can be valuable, and that a good, working knowledge of some branches of philosophy is a real necessity if we want to speak to and influence the world around us. At present, philosophy, rightly understood and used, is an indispensable tool to paradigm-changing evangelistic discussion, the kind that can bring about reconsideration of and adjustment to world-views, the precise thing that must happen if Christian ideas and world-view are ever again to have significant play in the western intellectual world.

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<sup>3</sup>This matter of credible space for belief is no small thing and can have a very significant impact on believers. When they see belief as credible, they are much more likely to become settled in their beliefs and to sustain them a lot longer.

### The Great Challenge:

One of the most sobering and disturbing realizations that can come to a Christian arrives in conscious thought as the result of some time spent pondering how much ground the Christian world-view has lost to things like scientism and secularism in the last two and a half centuries.

If one goes back more than 200 years, the world that was, was very different from the one that is.

I do not have technologies in mind here, but ideologies.

Many recent writers have noted that Christianity and its world-view are in decline now.

This fact is so obvious and there is so much information on this subject that this paper will limit itself to a few strategic quotations to set the scene.

The first quotation is by Dr. James Sire in which he reflects on how things used to be not all that long ago when the Christian world-view reigned supreme in the western world.<sup>4</sup> Sire

says:

In the Western world, up to the end of the seventeenth century, the theistic world-view was clearly dominant. Intellectual squabbles . . . were mostly family squabbles . . . but all these parties subscribed to the same set of basic presuppositions. The triune personal God of the Bible existed; he had revealed himself to us and could be known; the universe was his creation; human beings were his special creation.<sup>5</sup>

Sire says further:

Christianity had so penetrated the Western world that, whether people believed in Christ or acted as Christians should, they all lived in a context of ideas influenced and informed by the Christian faith. Even those who rejected the faith often lived in the fear of hellfire or the pangs of purgatory. Bad people may have rejected Christian goodness, but they knew themselves to be bad by basically Christian standards. . . . The theistic presuppositions which lay behind their values came with their mother's milk.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Sire's comments are focused on the western world, but the problem is now global as western education has been exported far and wide and is now a much sought-after mode of learning.

<sup>5</sup>James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 21.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 22.

The situation Sire describes no longer prevails. As Lesslie Newbigen so eloquently noted in the first chapter of his book, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, there is now a new, single predominant force loose in the world that is captivating all peoples seemingly in all places. We know it as secularism. Secularism's power and attraction are obvious and pervasive, and its spread has been especially virulent since the 1960's. If the comments by Sire were descriptive of the past, the comment of Dwight Ozard is accurately descriptive of the present:

The greatest mission field we face is not in some faraway land. The strange and foreign culture . . . is not across the ocean. It's barely across the street. The culture most lost to the gospel is our own--our children and neighbors. It's a culture that can't say two sentences without referencing a TV show or a pop song, and that can't remember what it was like to have to *get up* to change channels. It is a culture more likely to have a body part pierced than it is to know why Sara laughed.<sup>7</sup>

David Wells, another writer who has weighed in on this subject, speaks of the “extraordinary changes that modernity has wrought in our world.”<sup>8</sup> Speaking specifically of the intersection between the world and the church, and of the intermediaries--theologians, pastors (I would add evangelists)--who bridge between them, Wells says that the “intersection is now sundered and these worlds are not only disengaging from one another but even breaking down within themselves.”<sup>9</sup> Particularly disturbing is Wells' observation that though evangelistic methods are winning people to Christ and Christianity, and though the numbers of Christians is on the rise, neither the members nor the evangelistic methods are significantly influencing the prevailing world-view. Wells observes that “the presence of evangelicals in American culture has barely caused a ripple.”<sup>10</sup> And this is in spite of the fact those being referred to are the very ones who make great claims to being “born again.”

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<sup>7</sup>Dwight Ozard, “The Last Great Missions Frontier,” *Prism Magazine*, July/August 1996, 5.

<sup>8</sup>David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 6.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 293.

In thinking about all of this, I have encountered no more sobering or challenging a question than the one posed by Charles Malik back in 1980. Malik's question, in a very concise manner, raises the quintessential and most pressing issue:

“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?”<sup>11</sup>

Malik's question must be regarded as most pertinent because he brings in the matter of the university. These great universities of Europe and America have been the thought engines of the developed and developing world for a long time now. They have an enormous influence on the planet for, as Moreland and Craig have so precisely noted:

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 world-view 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.*”  
(*Emphasis mine*).<sup>12</sup>

It is easy to understand, then, that the world-views espoused and advanced in them readily come to be the prevailing ones. If the Christian world-view is absent from these institutions (and it is), then the challenge facing Christians is large, for the Christian view of things will get no exposure, or, even worse, adverse and unfair exposure if things are left as they are. It will be difficult to advance against such odds. Who can forget Dallas Willard's description of things as they currently are:

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<sup>11</sup>Charles 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).

<sup>12</sup>J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 2.

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.”<sup>13</sup>

If Christians want to be heard, it seems to me, they will have to find a way to once again influence, even counter, the secularist ideas that are so easily accepted as viable. Unless and until Christians can find a way to get a hearing, Christian ideas will continue to vanish from the leading places of current thought even though many who oppose them have never really studied or investigated them.

It seems to me that the standard response of Christians to this problem is simply to try evangelizing all the harder using the traditional means of evangelism. Certainly, these methods reach some people, but they do not reach thought leaders, at least not in the western world. It is time for another strategy to be tried.

Moreland and Craig, in their recent book titled *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, make a suggestion that I think warrants a lot of attention. I think it needs careful im-plementation. They suggest it is time to use philosophical methodologies in this struggle. The reasons for this are several. They point out that philosophy is still well-respected in academia, secular academia included. They point out that theology and philosophy are closely related and can be used in each others' causes. They further point out that philosophy does not have to overcome any hurdles before its practitioners can be heard. Because of this, people – Christians included – who do credible work in philosophy are likely to be heard and their effect on prevailing ideas may be huge. Because of this, Moreland and Craig make an urgent call for the Christian community to produce some good philosophers who can take their place in the world of ideas where they can be heard. Moreland's and Craig's assessment and call

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<sup>13</sup>Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1998), p. 92.

are reason enough for us to look seriously at philosophy and to overcome whatever fears we may have of it. Here is sufficient reason for us to work to understand the role and function philosophy may have, and to look at the discipline for apologetic and polemical possibilities.<sup>14</sup>

Since Adventist higher education was originally cast, and continues to be cast, in the liberal arts mode, Adventist campuses should be places where philosophy and philosophical reflection can be taught with good effect. We work to teach analysis and reflection, criticism, and synthesis and distillation of thought in a number of disciplines. It ought not to be a difficult thing to add philosophical endeavor as well. We ought not to be afraid of this, rightfully approached.

#### The Possible Solution:

One of the people who has begun to think about the possible value of philosophy and who has also worked to make a contribution toward the goal of giving it a place in Christian circles, is Frederika Oosterhoff. In her recent book titled *Ideas Have a History*, she makes two key points that provide an entry-point toward understanding what philosophical reflection can do.

The first point she makes is that we need to understand current times and how they came to be. Understanding the times, according to Oosterhoff, involves tracing “the origin and development of selected ideas” with an attempt to “explain them with reference to the historical period wherein they arose.”<sup>15</sup> Here is a foundational point. If Christians do not understand how

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<sup>14</sup> In making this suggestion, I am aware that this issue was once the subject of major discussion in a much earlier era in Christianity, resulting in the formative works of Aquinas and others. It is widely known that, sadly, Aquinas tried to systematize Christian theology using pagan constructs. While that strategy worked well in terms of systematizing, it also led to a whole system of thought that has not much reference to the truths of the Bible.

<sup>15</sup> Frederika Oosterhoff, *Ideas Have a History*, (New York: University Press of America, 2001), p. ix.

we all got to be where we are, then we will not be in a very good position to understand current ways of thinking, nor will we be in a good position to propose effective change. We risk speaking from ignorance, which may be cute or quaint, but seldom effective. Speaking from ignorance is something that very quickly and entirely discredits speakers today. We also risk proposing strategies and ideas that are hit-and-miss as they are without the understanding of historical context.

The second point Oosterhoff makes is that we have to learn “how to detect the philosophical underpinnings of today’s mentality, and so find the intellectual means to evaluate and challenge it.”<sup>16</sup> This observation by Oosterhoff is very important to understand. Two pertinent observations need to be drawn from it. First (and this is the second part of her opinion) is that, in the world of ideas, there are no unassailable positions or ideas. In other words, all ideological positions can be evaluated and challenged, or accepted, or rejected. We must learn not to be afraid of ideas. All ideas may be evaluated and challenged. The second observation Oosterhoff makes has to do with what she calls “philosophical underpinnings.” This point is of greater significance than the other and needs considerable investigation and explanation.

Oosterhoff’s observation about philosophical underpinnings is her way of stating that every assembly of opinion (these may be charitably called ideologies) has certain starting points, assumptions, if you will, that it establishes as starting points. Human knowledge cannot begin without assumptions of some kind. These underpinnings become the foundation stones on which the ideological house gets built. These underpinnings are almost never stated; nevertheless, they are there and they have a dramatic effect on the way the particular ideology is built. So, ferreting out the presuppositions a person puts under their ideological house, and testing them,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

evaluating them, critiquing them, is key to evaluating any thought construct, and it is vital to the discussion of any truth claims.

What Oosterhoff is arguing, then, is that if Christians understand how we all got to be where we are, and we understand the philosophical underpinnings of the prevailing world-view, there is a good chance that opposing views can be challenged in a credible manner, or at least rendered less persuasive. I heartily agree with Oosterhoff's opinion here.

To be frank, though, I am a bit dubious about the prospects of Christians embracing Oosterhoff's suggestions on a large scale. The problem is that, in the strictest sense, this kind of work is best understood as "pre-evangelistic" work. It is un-glamorous, often tedious, it is highly cognitive, and it shows few immediate results. It involves careful thought toward creating credible presuppositional structures and floating them out into the world of ideas. Challenging though it might be, the doing of this work is essential since, as Dallas Willard has observed, the basic problem now is that "entrance into the (Christian) life (in some lands) is currently obstructed by clouds of well-intentioned misinformation."<sup>17</sup> If the Christian world-view is to appear credible again, someone has to do the hard work of bringing those barriers down, or at least showing that the barriers are not as formidable as people might think.<sup>18</sup>

I am thoroughly intrigued by the observation of Elton Trueblood that this kind of work is the particular domain of intellectual inquiry. Trueblood observes in an amazingly transparent and insightful statement that:

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<sup>17</sup>Willard, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup>In this connection it is very interesting to note the work of Donald Soper who for years has continued his "soap box" advocacy to London's secular people in open-air meetings. His mission in these forums is pre-evangelistic and apologetic; that is, to advocate and explain the Christian faith as a "redemptive approach to life as a whole,"....as relevant good news which is intellectually worth considering.

The value of intellectual inquiry lies not in its ability to tell us what we ought to do, but rather in its ability to surmount the barriers that hinder our doing. The careful study of the philosophy of religion is helpful, not because in most instances it brings men to God, but because it fulfils the humbler role of removing barriers to requisite commitment.<sup>19</sup>

Bringing down the barriers that prevent people from approaching Christianity is the work of intellectual inquiry and reflection.<sup>20</sup> In current times, intellectual endeavor of this kind offers what may be the best apologetic instruments, philosophy being arguably the sharpest. Here is the justification for the use of philosophy and philosophical reflection on Christian campuses.

Thus far in this paper, we have described an adverse situation facing Christianity, and we have endeavored to create a justification for the place of philosophy in Christian higher education in order to help remediate the situation. It now comes time to ask, “What branches of philosophy are likely to be best?” Given the limited resources Christian institutions have, and given the crush caused by limited student credit hours available in most academic programs, it seems this question needs careful thought so as to maximize resources and also spare the student’s time. So, to the question.

Building off Oosterhoff’s observations cited above, I would like to argue that Christian schools would do best to focus on two aspects of philosophy primarily. First, let them create classes that help students understand current times by exposing them to the historical flow of great ideas, and second, let them create classes that expose students to the basics of epistemology.

The first category of classes suggested here are those that would survey the flow of major influential ideologies from ancient times until now. I think Oosterhoff’s recent book referred to

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<sup>19</sup>Elton Trueblood, *The Validity of Christian Mission* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 45.

<sup>20</sup>To be sure, philosophical reflection can play a significant role in the formation of minds, but here we focus on its ability to bring barriers down.

earlier is one example of a book that would make an excellent textbook for classes like this. The goal would be to acquaint students with the great thinkers and their ideas, but to do it in a context of history so students gain an historical perspective. The result of such classes would not be the production of credible philosophers per se, but it would make a start at filling in the contextual gaps, informing students of how we are where we are. Such classes should result in a good residual knowledge of the flow of human thought across the centuries. And they should result in developing in students the ability to critique ideas that come their way, to hold them at bay while their truth-claims are evaluated.

This suggestion stands in contrast to some trends and practices I have seen in current use. Sometimes philosophy is taught by exposing students to primary information, the various writings of the various philosophers' across a wide spectrum. Let me be clear. I do not think this is a poor practice per se, for it is an important part of education to expose students to original sources of all kinds. But I do want to argue that such a procedure should not be the student's first exposure to philosophy. Anyone who has read the philosophers knows that, in spite of their professed wisdom, many of them have ended up propounding confusing, anti-theistic, anti-Christian material. A great many have gone off into nihilism and skepticism. A significant number of them do not have good answers to life's big questions. These are reasons enough not to introduce students to philosophy by exposing them to a host of primary documents. Too many college students are not well suited to tangle with those kinds of writings. Surely, in more advanced programs, the wide reading of the philosophers is necessary, but not at the introductory level. Too many students end up having their whole belief systems challenged for no good reason especially in the United States where the ability to hold ideas outside belief systems for critical examination seems to be quite weak. I see the role of the Christian teacher here to be

vital, guiding and selecting what should be read, helping introduce students to the great thinkers without creating critical challenges to faith.

So, the first suggestion this paper makes is that Adventist institutions of higher learning develop one or more classes that give students an understanding of the flow of the big ideas of history. This process will help accomplish the first goal of enabling an understanding of the times.

The second suggestion to be made is that Adventist colleges begin to develop classes that deal with what is known in theology and philosophy as epistemology. Epistemology may be loosely defined as the study of the theory of knowledge. Robert A. Harris defines epistemology as “the study and nature of knowledge.”<sup>21</sup> Oosterhoff has a more precise and expansive definition:

The term epistemology...refers to the system of thought that for any given society answers the questions as to what can be known, how and why it can be known, and how certain human knowledge is.<sup>22</sup>

Epistemology deals with questions like, “How can you know something?”; “What kinds of knowledge are there?”; “What can be known?”; and, “Where does knowledge come from?”

At first glance, it seems like this kind of endeavor would be quite abstract and obtuse and have very little benefit for students today. Actually, the exact opposite is true because the subject matter of epistemology lies at the base of all human knowledge constructs and world-views. In other words, epistemology is where all systems of human thought begin. By assembling various presuppositions (underpinnings), putting faith in them, and then using them to evaluate and process various data, collections of knowledge called subject matter are created.

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<sup>21</sup>Robert A. Harris, *The Integration of Faith and Learning* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2004), p. 40.

<sup>22</sup>Frederika Oosterhoff, *Ideas Have a History*, p. xiii.

From subject matter, world-views are assembled by way of which people make sense of life. All this means epistemology is entirely basic, and therefore, strategic.

There are several things about epistemologies that are important to understand. First, epistemologies are created by selecting and then grouping possible presuppositions in different ways. There are only a limited number of possible presuppositions available to humans. But these possible presuppositions may be put together in various combinations. The presuppositional possibilities available constitute what might wryly be called a primeval epistemological soup. From this soup different combinations may be drawn producing different kinds of ideological life. The selection of presuppositions is, of course, the privilege of the thinker doing the work. And these presuppositions, though seldom stated, inform the whole thought system even though the person doing the thinking may be unaware of epistemology at all. Oosterhoff is correct in noting that, “these theories (of knowledge) have impact on people’s beliefs even if the people themselves are not aware that such things as theories of knowledge exist.”<sup>23</sup>

One observation that should be made from the fact that epistemes consist of assemblies of presuppositions is that discussion of these presuppositions and the process by which particular presuppositions were selected is absolutely fair game in philosophical endeavor. “What presuppositions did you pick? and, “Why did you pick them?” are fair and vital questions. They are often also very strategic questions for exposing a presupposition and demonstrating that it has been poorly selected, or that it has been chosen not because of the good evidence but because of some previous ideological commitment. This fact has tremendous strategic value. The experience of Jay Wood is very informative. Says Wood:

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<sup>23</sup> Oosterhoff, p. xiii.

As I continued in my philosophical studies, I learned....that behind many objections to religious beliefs is an epistemological viewpoint detailing, among other things, what requirements a person must satisfy in order to have knowledge about anything, what steps must be taken to avoid accusations of intellectual wrongdoing, and what conditions must be satisfied before I could be said to have had a genuine experience of God. Rather than scurry to meet each objection to religious belief on its own terms, I learned that it is sometimes more fruitful to ask questions about the epistemological viewpoint motivating the objections.<sup>24</sup>

Here, almost by intuition, Wood stumbled onto a good strategy. The domain of philosophical underpinnings can be a very fruitful domain when it comes to meeting challenges for uncovering the presuppositions of contending thought systems. It might be the means of defusing contention or even discrediting a whole thought system.

A second important truth about epistemologies is that they are never neutral. Oosterhoff observes that:

...epistemologies are not religiously neutral – although that has often been assumed, even among Christians – but reflect a society’s beliefs about God and man and the universe, and therefore also about the nature and ultimate source of truth.<sup>25</sup>

Moreland and Craig continue in this line of thought:

“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.”<sup>26</sup>

Recognizing that epistemologies are never neutral is very important. Those who create ideologies, for reasons that are seldom stated, opt for one set of presuppositions over all others effectively biasing their epistemology toward or away from something, making it non-neutral.

Because epistemologies are basic to all assemblies of knowledge, the biases they have infuse the

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<sup>24</sup>W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology* (Downers Grove: Ill, InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 12.

<sup>25</sup>Oosterhoff, p. xiv.

<sup>26</sup>J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, InterVarsity Press, 2003, p.3.

whole system of thought they under-gird. So the discovery of whatever the epistemological bias might be is vital to the evaluation of the truth claims of any knowledge system and world-view.

It is worth pausing here to observe that we are now positioned so we can understand clearly a key ingredient in critical thinking. It is precisely the development of the ability to go behind the stated ideas to discern the epistemes under-girding them. Jay Wood observes that “Seeing certain information as evidence, and weighting it in the way one does, requires that we interpret the information in accordance with a set of background beliefs.”<sup>27</sup> And, Harris points out, “in order for you to understand what claims to knowledge are being made, you must have some idea of ‘where they are coming from,’ so to speak. What is the underlying episteme behind the information you are being presented with?”<sup>28</sup> Being able to ferret these things out is one of the things that enables critical thinking. Those who develop it become able expositors and apologists (or foes).

Another thing to keep in mind when dealing with epistemologies is that on very few occasions can the presuppositions upon which they are built be called proofs. Presuppositions are, by definition, not that substantial. They are basically assumptions, reasonably established, one can hope. They come from various places. I am intrigued by the observation of Arthur Holmes who says:

We need not proceed deductively from universal and necessary truths, from either axioms or scientifically demonstrable propositions, so I prefer not to call the starting point ‘presuppositions.’ Rather we start with a confession of faith, with an admixture of beliefs and attitudes and values. Good and sufficient reason may be given for what we believe, but ours is still a confessional stance and from the perspective of this confession we look at life.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology* (Downers Grove: Ill, InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 24.

<sup>28</sup>Harris, p. 41.

<sup>29</sup>Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1975), p. 59.

Holmes is a Christian, and he speaks here of beginning a Christian episteme with some kind of confessional stance, but what he says cannot be limited to Christian knowledge only. All knowledge constructs begin in essentially the same way, with belief placed in presuppositions that rest on evidence that does not amount to anything like proof. Jay Wood notes, “Family, friends and social institutions such as the church contribute mightily toward shaping the framework within which our development takes place.”<sup>30</sup> These frameworks we adopt almost automatically, often because they are given to us by people we trust, who have formative roles in our lives, but our adoption of them must not be confused with proof. There is an element of “faith” or “belief” in all epistemologies. The reason for this is that presuppositions are often beyond proving.

The implications of this eventuality are important. One notable implication is that no humanly constructed ideology has the right to arrogance over another for they all begin in the frail context of human understanding. It is, therefore, very unbecoming of one who subscribes to one particular construct to refuse to engage in discussion of any other. This means Christianity simply cannot be rightfully dismissed from the school of ideas. Epistemologists know that it is very unfair to do so.

Another important implication is one already discussed, that presuppositions and the reasons for adopting them are all open for discussion.

Although the material just reviewed may be seen by some to be a bit abstract, it needs to be understood as a field of thought and study that can yield great benefit for Christians, especially in the field of apologetics. I like Wood’s opinion that epistemological questions and concerns should be seen in “career terms” and as “concerns of a lifetime” because they deal with

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<sup>30</sup> Wood, p. 20.

processes of belief formation, and maintenance and revision of beliefs.<sup>31</sup> It is in precisely these areas that Christianity has to make more headway if it is to be deemed credible again.

The second suggestion this paper makes, then, is that Adventist colleges and universities begin to offer classes in epistemology. This practice would help in the development of philosophers who can contend in the world of ideas, but more than that, they would help students become wise in the ways of doing battle on the field of presuppositions. It would enable them to hold their own in the world of ideas and to offer challenge to ideas that compete with Christian ones. Understanding the rudiments of epistemology would help them pick apart ideas inimical and hostile to Christianity and by so doing, create room for credulity of Christian beliefs. Students would be able to contend for the faith in a new way, and they would find themselves more comfortable with the beliefs they themselves have adopted.

What remains unfinished now is the remainder of Moreland's and Craig's suggestion that the Christian community work to produce credible philosophers who can hold their own in the world of ideas. That is a great and necessary work that, I fear, goes well beyond the scope of this paper, and may even go beyond what Adventist higher education sees as its work. But it is a work that could (and should) grow out of the modest suggestions in this paper. Taking the suggestions of this paper would make for a good start.

Before closing, it would be well to catch a vision of what might be. Of particular interest to me are the comments of Ellen White about the effects of such an education as seen in the life of John Wycliffe. Here in beautiful form is a description of what once was, and what might be again.

Wycliffe received a liberal education, and with him the fear of the Lord was the beginning of wisdom. He was noted at college for his fervent piety as well as for

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<sup>31</sup> Wood, p. 26.

his remarkable talents and sound scholarship. In his thirst for knowledge he sought to become acquainted with every branch of learning. He was educated in the scholastic philosophy, in the canons of the church, and in the civil law, especially that of his own country. In his after labors the value of this early training was apparent. A thorough acquaintance with the speculative philosophy of his time enabled him to expose its errors; and by his study of national and ecclesiastical law he was prepared to engage in the great struggle for civil and religious liberty. While he could wield the weapons drawn from the word of God, he had acquired the intellectual discipline of the schools, and he understood the tactics of the schoolmen. The power of his genius and the extent and thoroughness of his knowledge commanded the respect of both friends and foes. His adherents saw with satisfaction that their champion stood foremost among the leading minds of the nation; and his enemies were prevented from casting contempt upon the cause of reform by exposing the ignorance or weakness of its supporter.<sup>32</sup>

#### Summary:

This paper has looked at the current situation of Christianity, particularly as it faces a virulent and growing secular world-view. It has argued that the use of philosophy would be a good possible tool to be used to diminish secularism, and it has argued that philosophy and philosophical reflection should have a place in the curriculums of Adventist higher education. Several suggestions as to what kinds of philosophy ought to be preferred have also been made, particularly classes that survey the history of thought and classes that teach epistemology should be offered. The paper has also tried to cast a vision of what might be. What becomes of these suggestions, of course, remains to be seen, but one can hope something of good effect will develop somewhere in some Adventist institution of higher learning.

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<sup>32</sup>Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950), p. 80.

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