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**BUILDING A CHRISTIAN WORLD VIEW:  
A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF PHILOSOPHY**

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Abstract

A Christian's approach to philosophy need not be governed by an attitude of surrender or panic or apathy. He must bring to his task a Christian worldview and apply its priorities and particulars to the understanding of philosophic issues.

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### PHILOSOPHY AND THE CHRISTIAN: THE HESITATION

"See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy" (Colossians 2:8). The Pauline counsel to the Colossians has come handy to many Christians, particularly to Seventh-day Adventists, in harboring a hesitation toward the study of philosophy. When Tertullian cried, "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?" or when Ellen White admonished that "Satan uses philosophy to ensnare souls"<sup>1</sup>, perhaps they had sound grounds for such antipathy toward philosophy.

Paul himself alludes to a significant reason. In his time Greek apologists and philosophic adherents were posing a real threat to the Christ event, and the apostle had to issue a spiritual warning and a theological ultimatum to the Colossian church: Christ is non-negotiable. "For in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fulness of life in Him, who is the head of all rule and authority" (Colossians 2:9).

When the early church faced the Greek world, it was not simply an encounter between an old and a new system. It was a confrontation between two kingdoms, between two worldviews. Observe the contrasts between the two: The Greek system was governed by a dualistic ontology with mind that is good and matter that is evil; an epistemology of rationalism in a continual encounter with the world of ideas or things; and an ethic originating from rationalistic harmony in nature. The Christian proclamation, on the other hand, knew nothing of the kind. It rejected dualistic schema and affirmed the monistic nature and the essential goodness of God's creation. Its anthropology defined that man is a holistic being, and that there is nothing evil per se in the body, and that evil is to be understood as an interlude brought about by the creature's wilful

rebellion against the Creator. The Christian ontology is thus a theocentric one. The gospels also proclaimed an epistemology of revelation: God hath spoken (Hebrews 1:1). Further, there was the affirmation of an ethic that was rooted in a divine given, expressible through relationships governed by love.

Thus the basic premises, claims, projections, and demands of the Greek world and the early Church were antagonistic to each other. Some Christian leaders like Justin Martyr attempted to find a mean between the two in order to erect bridges of understanding and beachheads for evangelism and church growth; while others like Tertullian drew the battle lines clear and sharp, at least for a while. But the battle was already lost by the beginning of the third century. The theological controversies that rocked the Church during those formative centuries were largely due to philosophic onslaught on Christian faith and heritage.

It was Augustine (d. 430 A.D.) who finally reconciled the conflict between the two worlds and gave a philosophic mould to the Christian faith. While Augustine was familiar with the claims of the Greek world, the entry of Jesus in his life forced him to see the inadequacy of the Greek cosmos. He saw that the world was not simply mind and matter, ideas and perceptions. The world is a warm place, with compassion and love, passion and prejudice, so that it is not something to be thought of only in the language of mathematics and logic, design and physics, analysis and synthesis, but also in terms of people, purposes, relationships,—and above all, in terms of God who had come in flesh. The godless metaphysics of Plato cannot meet the human quest, and Augustine turned to the Absolute who incarnated Himself in Bethlehem. The hinge of history turned there, and Augustine invited the world to come and taste the new cosmos.

Philosophers call it the Augustinian synthesis. Reason, Augustine said, by its own dynamic can reach an understanding of the ultimate reality. Unfortunately reason has its limitations imposed by the very nature of mind and time.

Try as it may, it can reach so far and no further. Between the so far and the ultimate reality, there is a vast gulf. Here is where, Augustine went on to say, the Christian proclamation comes to complement philosophy: God, the Absolute Reality, has chosen to self-disclose, and by a leap of faith, man can understand the nature of reality and comprehend its relationship to him.

The truce between philosophy and theology arranged by Augustine became a full-fledged peace under Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274 A.D.). What Augustine did to Platonic idealism, Aquinas did to Aristotelian realism. The theological edifice of Aquinas depended so much on Aristotelian worldview that medieval scholasticism made little difference between theology and philosophy. In the process, it was the Biblical imperative that suffered and eventually eclipsed. God's revelation took a back seat to human reason.

It was left to the Reformation to undo the damage done to the gospel. Hence the call to sola Scriptura. Since then, Christian education, except perhaps in the Catholic tradition, has always been wary of philosophy.

Reluctance to teach philosophy in a Christian college is thus understandable. But to avoid philosophy is not the answer to the problem. It is the contention of this paper that philosophy can be taught in a Christian college and that it can be accomplished by (1) understanding the nature and function of philosophy, and (2) developing a Christian worldview to facilitate a point of departure both to study and critique philosophy or any other discipline.

## II

**PHILOSOPHY: WHAT IT DOES**

To question is philosopher's occupation as well as his tool. Whenever the world around presents an opportunity, the philosopher asserts his right to probe, prod, doubt, analyze, and seek. But the right to ask questions is not for the pleasure of asking in itself, but to arrive at meaning and coherence.

Morris notes:

The philosopher's job is to ask the kinds of questions that are relevant to the subject under study, the kinds of questions we really want to get answered rather than merely muse over, the kinds of questions whose answers make a real difference in how we live and work.<sup>2</sup>

**Philosophy Asks Questions**

All philosophy is concerned with basically three questions: What is real? What is true? What is good? The first concerns with ontology and metaphysics, the study of reality and existence. What constitutes reality? Is the existence of man real? Does the tree that you see make up part of reality? Or is there something that transcends man or tree that constitutes reality? Does the idea of man-ness or tree-ness take precedence in the understanding of reality? Schaeffer remarks: "Nothing that is worth calling a philosophy can sidestep the question of the fact that things do exist and that they exist in their present form and complexity."<sup>3</sup> It is the job of the philosopher to understand the form and unravel the complexity.

The second area of interest for philosophy is epistemology. How do we know? How do we know that something is true? How do we know that something is not true? Is what is true always true? What are the conditions and limitations

of knowledge? Is man alone responsible for the creation, certification, and verification of truth? Is truth relative or absolute, objective or subjective, related to or independent of experience? How is truth to be known--by sense perception? intuition? authority? experiment? revelation? logic? How can knowledge be verified--by repeatability? coherence? utility?

The third area of concern for philosophy is the question axiology. Axiology has to do with ethics and aesthetics. Ethics relates to the question of what is good.

The central question in all ethical situation is: what should I do? The question may include a prior question or two: what may I do?--i.e., what are the possibilities open?--or what can I do?--i.e., how many alternative courses of action am I capable of?

The issue of conduct raises a corollary: what shall define the appropriateness of conduct? Is there a norm? Is it objective, subjective, relative, absolute? What is the source of that norm--tradition, social mores, current practices, situation, religion, authority? In what sense can we speak of adultery, honesty, murder, forgery, lying, racial bigotry, sexual preference, fairness? How are these to be defined, to be understood, to be administered in day-to-day existence?

Is ethics relative? Is valuing a conditional process? Must means and ends be subject to tests of correspondence and consistency?

In addition to such ethical questions, philosophy also raises issues on aesthetics. What is beauty? Is beauty really in the eyes of the beholder? Could it lie in the object itself? What makes a piece of art enjoyable--its magnificent colors, its social message, its call to inner reflection, its projection of a supreme ideal or person? Who would better the concept of beauty--Picasso or Da Vinci? Can ugly be not-yet-understood beauty?

### Philosophy Answers Questions

Philosophy's attempt to answer the questions it raises is governed by the point of departure it chooses to adopt. The point of departure varies with each philosophy and its worldview. Once the philosopher has defined his worldview, he begins to build his system which would directly or indirectly answer the basic questions raised earlier. Consider, for example, the school of philosophy known as Idealism.

Idealism owes its origin to Plato. Plato's worldview is made up of pure ideas. He would say: "Everything we see in our experience--trees, chairs, books, circles, men--is only a limited and imperfect expression of an underlying idea. Every tree we see is different, but there is an Idea of treeness which they all share."<sup>5</sup> To Plato, the idea of tree-ness is real, while the tree is only a shadow of the real; the idea of man-ness is real, while man is only a reflection of the idea. And so on. Behind all these ideas, there must be an Infinite, Absolute Idea. That Universal Mind is what constitutes reality.

Thus Plato's metaphysics is primarily one of mind. His epistemology is also one in which truth is grasped by mind alone. Sense perception, experience, utility are all secondary, and truth exists in spite of all these. As Butts states:

True knowledge comes only from the spiritual world of eternal and changeless ideas, and this knowledge is innate in the immortal soul, which has dwelt in the spiritual world before being incased in the mortal body. Knowledge is thus acquired, not by sense experience, but by a process of reminiscence, by which the intellect remembers what it knew before its association with an imperfect body. To remember perfectly, the intellect must rigorously close the windows of the intellect, so that it may look upon and contemplate eternal truth.<sup>6</sup>

Because Plato's worldview was one of Absolute, Eternal, Preexistent Mind, he could talk about an eternal soul, and in fact, his epistemology presupposes the "preexistence of the mind itself."<sup>7</sup> Out of such a worldview also comes his conclusion that body is temporary and evil, whereas the soul is eternal and good.

The idealist's ethics is also the reflection of the Absolute Ideal. To an idealist, "values and ethics are absolute. The good, the true, and the beautiful do not change fundamentally from generation to generation, or from society to society. In their essence they remain constant. They are not man-made but are part of the very nature of the universe."<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, evil is looked upon by the idealist as "incomplete good rather than a positive thing in itself." Evil is thus a result of disorganization and lack of system still present in the universe.<sup>9</sup>

Such are the positions of an idealist. Another philosophic system would arrive at different conclusions because it would look at the issues from a different worldview. A Realist, for example, has a worldview based on sense perception, and to him reality consists of a world of matter; epistemology is a matter of interpretation of sensory data; and ethics is conformity to the laws of nature. An existentialist, on the other hand, conceives his world as one in which the problem of existence dominates; so the question of essence or reality does not interest him. So philosophy is how one looks at the great questions of life from where it stands.

What, then, shall we learn from how philosophy is done?

1. There is nothing to fear from philosophy itself. Socrates once said that the first function of philosophy is to be intellectual conscience for society. The Christian has a right and a duty, and in fact, is better qualified, to be that conscience. Priestler's remarks are appropriate:

Philosophy seeks to discover proper questions and to strive for appropriate answers about the world and man's relationship to it, formulating the finds and hypotheses into logically consistent and comprehensive structures of thought. Claims about the past, present, and future, the actual and the ideal, the real and possible, all come within the purview of its search. The philosopher, striving to be an interpreter of the meaning of reality in human existence, analyzes, evaluates, and synthesizes his reflections in the construction of a synoptic view of the range of expressible human experiences. The educator faces the ever-persisting problem of selectivity of ideas and descriptions that are deemed by him

to be true and worthy of his commitment. Therefore, any valid theory and practice of Christian education must take into account philosophy as well as other disciplines that deal significantly with the human scene.

2. In studying philosophy, we must first of all discover its point of departure. "Philosophy . . . means a man's worldview."<sup>11</sup> Once this worldview is identified, the methodology and conclusions can be the object of the Christian's study and scrutiny without any fear to his commitment or his own worldview.

3. Any study of philosophy must not be content with the above two tasks alone. It must also move toward the development of a Christian worldview, which will provide a ground to stand and look at answers provided by philosophy or other disciplines.

To this last point, we now turn our attention.

## III

**BUILDING A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW**

In dealing with philosophy the Christian must avoid the twin dangers of capitulation and indifference. In the first, he feels obliged to surrender to the philosophic onslaught and is compelled to reinterpret or reject his faith-claims. Such surrender may destroy his commitment. In the second, he exists as if he is afraid of critical questions. Such panic may render his faith-witness ineffective. Instead the Christian has a responsibility to effectively deal with the questions that philosophy raises and suggest critiques and alternatives.

Schaeffer's call is therefore timely:

Christianity has the opportunity . . . to speak clearly of the fact that its answer has the very thing that modern man has despaired of--the unity of thought. It provides a unified answer for the whole of life. It is true that man will have to renounce his rationalism, but then, on the basis of what can be discussed, he has the possibility of recovering his rationality.<sup>12</sup>

How does that happen? From where does unity come to the Christian in process of thinking? The answer must be sought in constructing a worldview that is uniquely Christian.

**What Is A Worldview?**

Everyone has a worldview, whether he is conscious of it or not. A philosopher, a politician, a theologian, a novelist, a teacher, a preacher--each one has a way of looking at the world around him, and from that perspective operates his profession and performs his functions. Each one has his presuppositions, and these govern the way he looks at the basic makeup of his worldview. Holmes defines worldview in terms of four-fold needs: "the need to unify thought and life; the need to define the good life and find hope and meaning in life; the need to guide thought; the need to guide action."<sup>13</sup>

Jean Paul Sartre, the existentialist philosopher, once remarked that the basic question philosophy has to answer is the one of existence. Something is here, rather than nothing is here. If something is, and if that something is here, the questions that arise are many: What is this something? How did it happen to be? What is its meaning? How is it supposed to relate? Will it always be here? Was it here always? Sire comments:

Here is where worldviews begin to diverge. Some people assume (with or without thinking about it) that the only basic substance that exists is matter. For them everything is ultimately one thing. Others agree that everything is ultimately one thing, but assume that that one thing is Spirit or Soul or some such non-material substance.<sup>14</sup>

For a Christian, however, the construction of a worldview flows out of his faith-commitment, and I suggest certain basic affirmations of such a worldview. These affirmations are holistic in nature, universal in scope, non-negotiable in commitment, and biblical in origin.

### **Components of A Christian Worldview**

1. God is the ultimate reality. "In the beginning God. . ." (Genesis 1:1). There lies the Christian's point of departure for any activity he seeks to engage in. Because God is I AM. Without Him nothing is. "In Him we live, move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). In the Christian perspective God is the center and reference point for all formulations.

What kind of God is He? He is not a distant, impersonal, absolute force or idea or mind. He is a person who acts, creates, self-discloses, relates, loves, judges. Brunner remarks:

If God the creator is, then the gloomy idea of fate and fatality which lies like a spell over the ancient as well as the modern world, loses its basis. It is not a fate, an impersonal, abstract determining power, not a law, not a something which is above everything that is and happens, but He, the creator spirit, the creator person.<sup>15</sup>

This God-Person is what constitutes ultimate reality. He is the cause and designer of creation, and His activities have structure, purpose, and order.

He is at the apex.

The strength of the Christian system--the acid test of it--is that everything fits under the apex of the existent, infinite, personal God, and it is the only system in the world where this is true. No other system has an apex under which everything fits. . . . Without losing his own integrity, the Christian can see everything fitting into place beneath the Christian apex of the existence of the infinite-personal God.<sup>16</sup>

2. God has revealed Himself. God, the ultimate reality, because of His personhood, also has chosen to reveal Himself. Truth is thus known because the One who is Truth has revealed it so. The Christian worldview accepts that God has revealed Himself in nature. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands" (Psalm 19:1, NIV).. The believing mind thus discerns the workings of God in the beauty and mystery of nature, albeit that revelation is somewhat imperfect and marred by the presence of evil.

The Christian also accepts the Bible as a means of God's self-disclosure. And the Bible becomes an epistemological cornerstone for the Christian worldview. This means that

{← no interpretation of ultimate significance can be made without biblical revelation. Lacking the perspective it gives us, the things of the world are disconnected objects only, the events of the world are mere unrelated coincidences, and life is only a frustrating attempt to derive ultimate significance from insignificant trivialities.<sup>17</sup>

Accepting God's Word as an epistemological source, however, does not mean that the Bible is a divine encyclopaedia, but it does mean that it addresses life's great issues: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? What is the meaning of history? What happens at death? How does God relate to me? How am I to relate to others, to the world at large? Bible has something to say on these questions, and a Christian worldview must take these into account. Holmes comments: "In Scriptures God is in direct touch with men, and they seek personal communion with Him. . . . In its immense variety it has a hundred ways of informing us of the character of both God and men and of interpreting the acts of God to men."<sup>18</sup>

3. God created man in His own image. The biblical worldview asserts that man is neither a cosmic accident nor an evolutionary paradigm; nor is he "a machine in the sense that he is a complex system behaving in lawful ways."<sup>19</sup> Man is the direct result of God's will and purpose. The image of God motif so central to God's creative act is the most powerful expression of the dignity and the uniqueness of man. It bestows upon man a kinship with God and makes him a participant in the creative activity of God.

Schaeffer's point is noteworthy:

Every man is made in the image of God; therefore, no man in his imagination is confined to his own body. Going out in our imagination, we can change something of the form of the universe as a result of our thought world--in our painting, in our poetry, or as an engineer, or a gardener. Is that not wonderful? It is not just a matter of photography. . . click, click, click. I am there, and I am able to impose the results of my imagination on the external world.<sup>20</sup>

4. Sin has marred God's creation. The problem of evil is critical to the construction of a Christian worldview. Pain and death stare us from every side. Are they here because of an irreconcilable dualism? The biblical answer is No. The Bible posits that sin is an interlude in God's order, consequent upon the creature's assertion to be independent of God's design and will. The assertion--not limited to the long ago--is in fact a quest on the part of the creature to make himself god. Wherever self asserts to be what it cannot be, the domain of evil reigns. Such defiance against God's will cut man off from close and personal fellowship with God, leading to alienation. Alienation from God is at the root of distortion of perceptions, relationships, and values. As a result man stands in a chaotic, confused, and hopeless dilemma.

5. God has taken the initiative to restore man through the redemptive activity of Christ. To the Christian worldview Christ is the ultimate revelation of reality, truth, and ethic. He is the way, the truth, and the life. The incarnation of God in the person of Jesus adds new dimensions to the way Christian can

look at life and the world: (a) Both ontology and epistemology become Christocentric. The reality of God becomes immediate and incarnational--that is, Christ has identified Himself with the human situation in order that God may be known and experienced here and personally; and, further truth is able to interface the transcendence of knowing with the immanence of relating. (b) Redemptive experience makes it possible for man to have a transformed mind which can look at life and its environment from a perspective of holistic conformity with God's original plan. (c) Ethical and aesthetic activities of the transformed man come under the redemptive and incarnational perspective. The former demands a lifestyle of love, as expressed in the Decalogue, the basis of God's character and function. The latter expects the Christian to extend incarnational identification in all his endeavors--that is to say, the reality of God and His care will permeate all human activities, situations, and relationships. (d) God's redemptive activity also creates a community that owes absolute allegiance to His calling, carries out His mission, lives out His purposes, and awaits the ultimate restoration. The community of faith thus becomes, without assuming arrogance, both a catalyst for a theistic worldview in a materialistic or humanistic environment, and an assurance of certainty in an atmosphere of fluidity.

6. God will bring about ultimate restoration. The Christian worldview looks at the present as an interim, and that it is not without hope or destiny. God's ontology calls for ultimate restoration: "Behold I create new heavens and a new earth" (Isaiah 65:17). The Christian perspective is thus eschatological. He is in this world, and yet he looks forward to a new cosmos. That hope of ultimate restoration gives a Christian both direction and purpose. The anticipation commands the Christian worldview to look beyond the present, to press for optimism in the midst of the opposite, to never despair when answers are not readily available here and now, and to cherish that the doors of learning would never close.

7. From creation to restoration, history is linear. The cyclic concept of history is alien to the biblical worldview. The Bible looks at history as linear, meaningful, purposive, and directional, moving toward its inevitable climax. Further, history is dominated by a conflict of the kingdoms--the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the evil one--, and this conflict provides the vantage point from which a Christian can look at questions of ontology, epistemology and axiology. Viewed thus, history's varied events--confusing and chaotic, evil prospering and righteous suffering--will take on a new meaning. The inevitable thrust of such a position is that history will soon reach its teleological end: universal acknowledgment of God's will and sovereignty and establishment of His kingdom.

With these basic affirmations, a Christian can construct his worldview. Out of that perspective, he can examine the claims of philosophy or any other discipline, and apply a distinctively Christian mind to the great issues.

## IV

## CONCLUSION

Even though Christian hesitation toward the study of philosophy is understandable from a historical point of view, it is neither desirable nor necessary. Philosophy has much to offer in the development of an open mind and a critical faculty, both essential in the understanding of our reason to be. Delineation of a Christian worldview and employing its priorities and particulars in the understanding of philosophic issues provide the necessary framework for the study of philosophy. Inevitably four conclusions on the Christian approach to philosophy emerge:

1. The Christian must develop and be certain of his worldview. He needs to have not only a theoretic certitude but also a faith-commitment to that worldview. Such a commitment need not be a source of either embarrassment or apology. All men work on the basis of a commitment, be it an atheist, a philosopher, or a politician.
2. In the study of philosophy, the Christian will identify the worldview from which a particular school of thought carries out its task. Once the perspective is identified, the methodology and the conclusions involved can be looked at as relevant only within the context of that point of view. There will be no need to feel threatened or panicky.
3. Intellectual pursuit is never passive and critical review is not necessarily erosive of spiritual and moral values. We have a Christian ethic, a Christian calling, a Christian profession, a Christian responsibility--and also a Christian mind. Why should we not put the Christian mind to optimum work? To think Christianly means that "we locate each field of inquiry within a Christian understanding of life

as a whole, and that we interpret what we know in that larger context."<sup>21</sup>

4. Finally, a Christian in his study of philosophy or any other discipline must ever be conscious of the lordship and the sovereignty of Christ. He is the ultimate point of reference. As Van Til points out:

There is only one absolutely true explanation of every fact and of every group of facts in the universe. God has this absolutely true explanation of every fact. Accordingly, the various hypotheses that are to be relevant to the explanation of phenomena must be consistent with this fundamental presupposition. God is the presupposition of the relevancy of any hypothesis.<sup>22</sup>

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