Truth Journal

Advice to Christian Philosophers

(With a special preface for Christian thinkers from different disciplines)

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Preface.

In the paper that follows I write from the perspective of a philosopher, and of course I have detailed knowledge of (at best) only my own field. I am convinced, however, that many other disciplines resemble philosophy with respect to things I say below. (It will be up to the practitioners of those other disciplines to see whether or not I am right.)

First, it isn't just in philosophy that we Christians are heavily influenced by the practice and procedures of our non-Christian peers. (Indeed, given the cantankerousness of philosophers and the rampant disagreement in philosophy it is probably easier to be a maverick there than in most other disciplines.) The same holds for nearly any important contemporary intellectual discipline: history, literary and artistic criticism, musicology, and the sciences, both social and natural. In all of these areas there are ways of proceeding, pervasive assumptions about the nature of the discipline (for example, assumptions about the nature of science and its place in our intellectual economy), assumptions about how the discipline should be carried on and what a valuable or worthwhile contribution is like and so on; we imbibe these assumptions, if not with our mother's milk, at any rate in learning to pursue our disciplines. In all these areas we learn how to pursue our disciplines under the direction and influence of our peers.

But in many cases these assumptions and presumptions do not easily mesh with a Christian or theistic way of looking at the world. This is obvious in many areas: in literary criticism and film theory, where creative anti-realism (see below) runs riot; in sociology and psychology and the other human sciences; in history; and even in a good deal of contemporary (liberal) theology. It is less obvious but nonetheless present in the so-called natural sciences. The Australian philosopher J. J. C. Smart once remarked that an argument useful (from his naturalistic point of view) for convincing believers in human freedom of the error of their ways is to point out that contemporary mechanistic biology seems to leave no room for human free will: how, for example, could such a thing have developed in the evolutionary course of things? Even in physics and mathematics, those austere bastions of pure reason, similar questions arise. These questions have to do with the content of these sciences and the way in which they have developed. They also have to do with the way in which (as they are ordinarily taught and practiced) these disciplines are artificially separated from questions concerning the nature of the objects they study-a separation determined, not by what is most natural to the subject matter in question, but by a broadly positivist conception of the nature of knowledge and the nature of human intellectual activity.

And thirdly, here, as in philosophy, Christians must display autonomy and integrality. If contemporary mechanistic biology really has no place for human freedom, then something other than contemporary mechanistic biology is called for; and the Christian community must develop it. If contemporary psychology is fundamentally naturalist, then it is up to Christian psychologists to develop an alternative that fits well with Christian supernaturalism-one that takes its start from such scientifically seminal truths as that God has created humankind in his own image.

Of course I do not presume to tell Christian practitioners of other disciplines how properly to pursue those disciplines as Christians. (I have enough and to spare in trying to discern how to pursue my own discipline properly.) But I deeply believe that the pattern displayed in philosophy is also to be found in nearly every area of serious intellectual endeavor. In each of these areas the fundamental and often unexpressed presuppositions that govern and direct the discipline are not religiously neutral; they are often antithetic to a Christian perspective. In these areas, then, as in philosophy, it is up to Christians who practice the relevant discipline to develop the right Christian alternatives.

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