

The Christian and Philosophy: An Assessment and Recommendations

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Introduction

Philosophy is generally an old discipline and yet young in some senses. It is old in the sense that it has been around in one form or the other for myriads of centuries, long before Christ walked the face of the earth. Some of the Philosophers of the distant past were little regarded by some in their day and age while they lived but have come to be venerated in these latter days because they seem to have charted the course for abstract, broad thinking in relating to the world and their immediate environment; seeking answers for the “why,” “what” or “how” things existed. They probed, queried, the logical consistency, reasonableness of things, prying into the very nature of things or why mortals did things the way they did. Never satisfied with assumptions, these philosophers delved into areas that the general populace either, assumed or did not give quality time to deeply pondering over why things were. Philosophers investigated areas such as the origin and purpose of life, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, Physics and to some extent, offered subjectively (i.e. as they thought best, given their logical thinking framework) sound advice on how to best live or think. Names like Socrates, Plato or Aristotle among others come to mind. Later legends would include Thomas Aquinas, Calvin, the Puritans and in relatively recent times, the venerable Alvin Plantinga.

However, this area of study or discipline is relatively new to some quarters such as the Evangelical fraternity, because many saints have tended to shun any association with or allusion to Philosophy, considering it a vain pursuit, without any value, aim or purpose in the grand scheme of things, as God laid them (Plantinga n.d [“Christian Philosophy at the end of the 20th Century”]). To this day¹, far fewer Evangelicals have taken up the challenge to develop what it takes so as to intelligently interface the contemporary world. Their sole apparatus has been the Bible that apparently breeds a disconnect between the worldly mind and the heavenly saint. Sadly, many of these well-meaning Christians have been ill-prepared. To bridge this gap, a number of Christian Philosophers have been

¹ Although the numbers may have swelled over the years, as Plantinga rightly predicted. We now have the likes of Lane Craig, John Frame and many, many others, not to men

raised that include Alvin Plantinga, whose writings and advice to Christians in relation to apologetics are most helpful. Other 20th and 21st century contemporary lights include Drs Norman L. Geisler, Montgomery, Lane W. Craig, Ronald Nash and Greg Bahnsen (1948-1995), among others. In this paper, we basically explore how Evangelicalism has fared over time in this noble task of Philosophy.

Philosophy defined

Briefly and simply defined, Philosophy is the way of thinking using logic and arguments that are coherently and inherently consistent, leading to a sound conclusion. Although variously defined today, Philosophy basically has to do with thinking, reasoning, logically testing premises among others. It is often categorised into at least three categories namely *Epistemology*, *Metaphysics*, *Logic* and/or *Ethics*, though some sources add further categories but these are foundational (Poythress 2014; Poe & Davis 2000).

Why Philosophy for Christians

Christians need to know as many approaches as possible to be able to propagate the truth including philosophical means. This is partly because of the increasing complexity of the world's audiences. Although human beings remain essentially the same at their core, the exponential growth, explosion of both technological advances and information makes humans appear more complex. Many of them will have most probably deeply drunk in this or that humanistic philosophy, before they encounter authentic biblical world view, there is urgent need to not only equip but impress on Christians to take the cultural wars far more seriously than many presently do. This war has progressively raged hotter in these spiritually degenerate days.

Types and Approaches to Philosophy

Philosophies or *philosophizing* (i.e. doing philosophy) take place in various ways. Its approaches vary but need to be known, for readers' good. Though we may not touch on all extant approaches, in this section, however, we attempt to highlight some common approaches encased in the major two: Augustinian and Thomist Methods:

Augustinianian – This approach was advanced by Augustine of Hippo. He used arguments, philosophical in a sense but pointed to Christ. Unlike the Thomist approach, the Augustinian approach does not distinguish between sources. It summons any and every source to advance its arguments though largely based on faith trusting that the word was from God. This approach, may further be said to be of *Platonic* source rather than the *Aristolian* route. Plato held that humans

are born with some inert knowledge from which they are able to interpret the world around. This view also believed in the existence of the metaphysical world and that reality was premised in both spiritual and physical spheres (Poe & Davis 2000: 16-33). Often, presuppositional apologists, like Plantinga or Nash draw from Augustine who himself, drew from Plato.

Thomist – This has two branches, Science and Theology. Science has to do with facts, reason and what we observe around us in the natural world. This knowledge points to the existence of God. Reason is here used as primary means to convince. Theology has to do with accepting as true by faith and in a sense, presuppositional based on what God has said in His word. This approach was advanced and followed by Thomas Aquinas who tried to use different types of approaches, including Greek Philosophical means (i.e. of *Aristotle*) mixing with the word of God (Poe & Davis 2000). Thomas himself drew his method from Aristotle whose belief departed from his mentor, Plato in that he argued that only the physical tangible reality is what really existed. Anything else was imaginary and never existed. Thus, people need to focus on what the sense could encounter while ignoring everything else. By that token, Aristotle posited that human beings at birth were a blank slate that acquired knowledge as it grew or matured. In his world, humans were essentially good but what made them good or bad was the environment around that rubbed on to them in the course of duty, growth or interactions with elements or people around. He laid ground for naturalism and rationalism (Poe & Davis 2000). Christian people therefore draw from either stream (i.e. Evidential or Presuppositional) as they do their Theologizing or even apologetics. Evidential apologists, like Craig or Ross, are heirs of Aristotle of old. Admittedly, there are other approaches which include epistemological, numbers and properties but for now, we delve a bit deeper into the types of philosophical approaches:

Philosophical Theology

This approach uses a philosophical approach to analyse and understand Christian truth. Thus we have systematic theologies or doctrines derived from the word of God. This, according to authorities like, Plantinga, is currently thriving and generally doing well (Moreland 2020; Plantinga n.d). Many solid Theologians & Seminaries worth their salt, argue that Systematic Theology (ST) is the very marrow of quality theologizing. Thus, ST can safely be categorized as Philosophical in nature, probably because the *Summa Theologica* emanated from Aquinas' hand?

Apologetics

Apologetics or *Apologia* has to do with defending a given position, in this case, the Christian faith from, largely, people outside the Christian faith that may be genuinely enquiring, sceptical or out rightly opposed. In this case, apologists are ready and able to give some level of reasoned information to a listening audience

or during an orchestrated discussion. Apologetics also aims at introducing the Christian faith to the world by stating facts. At least two aspects immediately can then be synthesized from these propositions:

Negative apologetics: This focuses on the defence of the Christian faith against the attacks of those from outside the faith. The Christian apologist needs to be well versed with what they talk about as well as what their opponents stand for.

Positive apologetics: Positive apologetics focuses more on the positive declaration and setting forth of the truth for people to know and appreciate what the Christian faith. It both establishes the faith of and offers information to would be listeners or readers.

The Christian Church could do with more seasoned apologists than it presently has. These two approaches are doing relatively well, according to Plantinga, but the ensuing two approaches need some strengthening and propping up:

Christian Philosophical criticism

This method basically works on the presupposition that there is evil on the one hand and good on the other. It is dualistic in that it summons all the available arguments to prove that God exists while refuting others recognising that there is a battle for souls at all times. Philosophers of every hue come across claiming all sorts of things such as 1. God does not exist, 2. There is no purpose to life and existence and 3. Humans are the centre of everything. Below are some of the areas tackled under this head:

Perennial naturalism

This is/was advanced by Bertrand Russell and others that reject any divine fiat, special creation or even the special unique nature of the human. Humans are considered part of the entire universe with nothing particularly special about them since hewn from the same material in common ancestry. They are part and parcel, furniture of a purposeless random world. This view has naturalistic pantheistic attributes but seek to state that man is as much part of everything as anything else. Christians need to be especially careful with Naturalism because it has a very corrupting effect and taken as the contemporary "*Orthodoxy*" by some philosophers. It is presently very aggressive and will not stop at anything to make its presence felt.

Creative antirealism

This is the view advanced by Immanuel Kant and others which states that the world only *becomes* as we perceive it. We define the world and then that is what it eventually turns out to be, whether it be the universe, space, human beings, perceptions and all. Humans create the world and its structures unlike what is

commonly believed or held. The agenda of the world is dependent on what man, the centre of the universe, dictates. Sadly, this view has subtly sneaked its way into Christian theology unawares!

Relativism

The world has veered into the post modern era. Things that were once considered precise, definite, structured or static in the modern empirical era have now given way to relativism in the post modern epoch. This thought system has taken the world by storm and the Christian does well to note and accordingly appropriately position themselves.

Christians must thus be sufficiently equipped to handle all attacks from this wave, arising from relativism. Freud and Marx have thrown in their poison and only an adequately prepared person can ably handle them, deflect or effectively refute their deleteriously toxic, all pervasive teachings.

Positive Christian Philosophy

This is an undertaking that the Christian faith develops through projects. These projects could be in writing, talking, discussing or appropriately setting forth the Christian truth. This calls for Christian focus coupled with deep relentless scholarship because if saints improve, then the worldly mind may retreat or be more circumspect before attacking or making unsubstantiated or unwarranted attacks. In a sense, this approach rests on Cultural criticism where questions asked before coming to a conclusion. Poe and Davis (2000) or Gary V Smith (1977) come in handy at this juncture. By that token, theistic arguments are then advanced.

How the Philosophical enterprise is faring

As earlier hinted at, according to Alvin Plantinga, this Christian philosophical enterprise is generally doing well, contingent on the aspects one is focussing on. While Philosophical Theology and Apologetics are generally thriving, Christian Philosophical Criticism and Positive Christian Philosophy still need propping up and strengthening. There are many potential new projects and areas of enquiry (not captured here) that still need to be explored and worked upon. This can be done with more focus and devotion on the saints' part.

Weaknesses in prior Christian approaches

For some reason, most Christians are generally very weak in Philosophical approaches partly because of the back ground (hind socialization) orientation where Philosophy is perceived as vain, waste of time or plain unhelpful. The

extant approaches, are equally weak needing modification, realigning and strengthening. The ontological, epistemological, cosmological approaches still need further refining, development and strengthen them. It may further be added that approaches (methods), not necessarily, the principles need revisiting. For instance, the postmodern mind processes or interprets information differently from the modern. Delivery approach potentially puts off one while captivating the other. Though hearts both remain fallen in Adam, they differ in world views or perceptions. One example will do. In the mid 1950s, homosexuality was clearly perceived unnatural but not so now, in some naturalistic materialist individualistic contexts. God may/may not be the primary reference point depending into which era ones' lot falls. Thus, Christians need to know which and how to use appropriate grids. What effectively worked well and won battles yesterday may not necessarily be the ultimate panacea for today or tomorrow. In all these suggestions, we do not for a moment advocate for rank pragmatism, flouting biblical principle or even abandoning time tested methods, no! We none the less need to read the times and appropriately apply our selves.

What still needs to be done

Evidently, more projects need to be explored and developed despite limited funding, for instance. There is need to open up, yea, expose the mind of the saints by training or information availability so that Christians can willingly and confidently take on Philosophy as a Profession. In that way, they will then confidently and intelligently, winsomely, wisely and effectively interface with the world around them as well as point some lost soul to the saviour. Furthermore, having discovered the wonders and beauties of Philosophy, then Christians can advance to develop and work out many projects deep into the future.

The Future of Christian Philosophy

The future of Christian Philosophical thinking and development is potentially bright if only the saints intentionally devote dedicated efforts or energy in the right direction. Much has admittedly already been done, in some contexts, but much, much more still needs to be done. There is need to develop and build the upon many projects. The immediately past statements largely apply to some developed contexts but places like Africa, Zambia in particular have hardly began, let alone even thought about it! Two or more reasons could account for this lag: first, very few even know that there cultural worldview wars being waged! Second, the very social structure abhors conflict, candid confrontations such as calling our error or it's proponents by name. Third, some cultures suffer from chief kind of collective responses to issues. If the perceived chief deplores debate, there and then the enquiry or probing ceases forthwith. Fourth, no one wants to rock the boat with perceived needless polemics because relationships are more important than truth. We observed some of this during the New

Calvinism controversy in Zambia between 2018 and 2020. Fifth, without a reading enquiring mind, people have no clue what is going on nor are they interested. Indifference carries the day. Christians need mindset change towards a biblical world view, buttressed by principles like the regulative. Away from cultural challenges, Christians in general, need not fear condescending opposing views because they have a right to think outside the norm and explore it without fear of favour. They have a right to an alternate opinion conflicting with secular humanistic world views as they equally deserve to be heard by the world for no one has the monopoly of truth or approach.

What others have said about evangelicals and philosophy

Much has been said or written about this matter. The obvious sources we could refer to I use Alvin Plantinga, JP Moreland and others who have dedicated their lives and times to defend the Christian faith. They may not all use a uniform approach but their collective goal is to glorify Christ by presenting a reasonable case. Reading John Frame, selected parts of Lane Craig & Hugh Ross, Fesko, Van Til, Bahnsen and Poythress among others, would enrich ones' grasp of burning extant issues. For instance, the issues now could revolve around the Church and social action, liberation theology among others. While the battles rage on in one direction, others are busy eroding or cutting down the once for all established dogmas. Still others push for a pragmatic methods overlooking all biblical principle! These valiant men and women consistently urge Christians to enter the ring by life, writing and practice. One hopes many more soon sign up lest this delicate stream dries up. It could be worse where this kind of apologetic thinking or projects has hardly began. We tend to fear for Africa that absorbs about everything from the West without meticulously filtering through.

We need to mention that there is equally a growing discontent with modern methods or so called 'sacred cows' dogmas needing review, deconstruction or reinterpretation. Higher criticism or any liberal Theology project like Jesus Seminar continuously ambush the Christian faith at every turn. These men and women, armed with armies of well funded scholars consistently pour out toxic stuff against the Bible, especially the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

Lessons learnt from this consideration

Several take home lessons immediately come to the fore though we highlight only a few for our consideration and application:

First, the Christian Church needs to intentionally arise to the occasion, casting of slumber.

Second, individual Christians need to make much of personal growth, sanctification and maturity in the faith. Without research, we expect no growth.

Third, Christians need to be socially intelligent, able to detect and respond to the issues of the day with a view to respond.

Fourth, spiritual warfare takes many forms or approaches. One of them is intellectual waged not only in the walls of University but now, with information explosion, everywhere. Movements like the New Age have invaded many a mind unawares.

Fifth, Philosophy is so important because it not only structures or thought processes but is powerful 'hand maid' to Systematic Theology. JP Moreland (2020) lamented at how philosophy had been avoided, despised or relegated to the terraces and yet it holds great potential to turn our fortunes, under God. We tend to agree with him on this score.

Sixth, Schools and Seminaries need to teach Philosophy as a course or integrated with other courses like Apologetics. We have noted with concern, that many Christian Schools have omitted philosophy altogether, in the pious name of heeding the apostle Pauls' warning to beware of Philosophy in Colossians 2:8. But have we carefully analysed the context and exactly to what Paul referred to? Dr Norman Geisler has written a very revealing, thoughtful and engaging paper on that injunction to which we strongly urge readers to refer to We could tease out more lessons and applications but we rest our case here. We need to hurry onto our concluding remarks.

Conclusion

Having briefly introduced Philosophy and how it relates to the Christian, we hope this makes more sense and will encourage many more to take up the challenge to explore this relatively "new" and yet old, area of study. The more saints we have in this arena, the better because that is one of the ways to influence the world. Christians must be more aggressive, independent, free to explore new avenues and never allow the world intimidate them. They have a right to hold a position although not everyone would agree with all their assertions but beware of creepy popular philosophies that are skin deep. They must not spend all their time defending but leave room to develop frameworks and new ways of advancing truth rather than being merely reactionary. Small beginnings are key but lead to bigger things eventually. Philosophy and presuppositions are not religiously neutral, hence the need to be properly armed for battle.

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