

The Benefit of Having a Worthy Opponent

How the Theology of Seventeenth-Century Puritans Can Be Complemented by the Nineteenth-Century German Thought Known as the Mercersburg Theology

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CHAPTER TEN (Cont.)

Why Bother with Philosophy?

Much of what Rauch and Nevin explained carried within it a sense of tension with the brand of Reformation theology developed by the Puritans. It used forms and concepts that seemed to be out of step with them but in the end proved to be inside the bounds of orthodoxy just as much as Puritanism was. So, the question might be asked, why bother with philosophy? Why not stick with the Bible alone?

First, it must be understood that while the Puritans were masters at digesting and applying all of Scripture, they too made use of philosophy. In their quest to grasp natural theology, they studied logic, science, philosophy and the classics, believing that those fields of study worked hand-in-hand with the study of Scripture. The Puritan Charles Chauncy noted that the Bible quoted pagan authors favorably and that all truth comes from God. Since many excellent, divine, moral truths were found in Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch and Seneca, their writings were not wholly to be condemned. Thomas Manton declared that human learning should not be automatically despised.¹ Owen borrowed from Aristotelian epistemology.² In his work on mortification of sin he quoted Aristotle in analyzing three types of life – vegetative, sensitive and rational/intelligent to make an argument that sounds similar to Rauch.³

Nevin offered a brief defense of the use of philosophy in “A Plea for Philosophy.” There he noted that some contend that all philosophical pursuits are vain and empty and amount to unhelpful speculation. After all, doesn’t the Bible offer these words of caution – “let no man spoil you through philosophy”? A glance back at the history of thought connected to Origen, Aristotelian theology or the

¹ David Murray, “The Puritan Passion for Philosophy and Science.” Accessed from “The Aquila Report.” Written December 8, 2017. <https://www.theaquilareport.com/puritan-passion-philosophy-science/>

² Kapic, “Communion,” 47.

³ Owen, “Mortification,” 122.

rationalistic and pantheistic German systems will reveal grave errors spawned by philosophy.⁴

But apart from such sweeping condemnatory generalizations, Nevin counters that philosophy is a part of the very fundamental makeup of life as it is the endeavor to know ourselves and the world. “Philosophy is the form, simply, in which all Science is required at last to become complete,” “the science of science itself,” “the form in which science comes to master its own nature, in the way of conscious self-apprehension and self-possession.”⁵

Since humans were formed to engage science as a constituent of our own being, engaging philosophy then as the completion of science would be expected. Nevin goes so far as to claim that philosophy is “the perfection of our intelligence itself, the necessary summit of self-consciousness, toward which all lines of knowledge struggle from the start, and in which only they are made to reach at last their ultimate and full sense.”⁶ Humans bear responsibility to exercise supremacy over matter, but there is a moral component to that responsibility which is more than working magic-like wonders from science. One cannot say that Christianity has nothing to do with politics, fine arts, sciences, social life, etc. It must unite to each so as to “transfigure them fully into its own image.” “Christianity claims to be the proper rightful magistracy of man’s entire nature, the power to which all belongs, and by which all requires to be occupied and ruled.”⁷

Christianity becomes humanity’s self-consciousness but as such it is not dependent on philosophy for its existence. There is no thinking process in humanity which could discover true religion. Philosophy’s job is not to create truth but to clarify. By philosophy Christianity conquers the world’s life and works itself into the world’s consciousness. Unphilosophical Christianity can save souls but not conquer the world.⁸

Yes, there are dangers that philosophy poses for Christianity, but the absence of philosophy also introduces danger. “Religion cannot be made so practical as to stand in no relation whatever to intelligence and thought.”⁹ In this way philosophy serves as a useful medium to apprehend the Bible and connect it with the life of the world. “The greatest slaves of theory, commonly, are just those who profess to have none.”¹⁰ Nevin’s appreciation of philosophy was far from blind adherence. He borrowed critically and selectively from it, realizing in his own day

⁴ John Williamson Nevin, *Human Freedom, and a Plea for Philosophy, 2 Essays* (Originally Published in the *American Review*) (Mercersburg, PA: P. A. Rice, “Journal Office,” 1850), 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 35, 38.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

much of it amounted to materialism and infidelity. Any philosophy which claims to have powers to reach the supernatural or spiritual, errs in its pretensions and succeeds only in destroying the supernatural by attempting to reduce it to its own sphere. On his own, man cannot grasp beyond the world of sense into the world of spirit.¹¹

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¹¹ Ibid., 43-44.