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# Traits of Christian Philosophers<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper describes the vocation of a Christian philosopher in terms of the central elements of the Christian gospel. What are the implications of the following eight features of New Testament teaching on doing philosophy as a Christian? The incarnation, Christ's life of service, His suffering and sacrifice on the cross, His resurrection, ascension, cosmic authority, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and a coming judgment. This paper embodies my own modest efforts at offering some additional advice for Christian philosophers.

“He who marries the spirit of the age will soon become a widower.”  
– Dean William R. Inge

**O**n the basis of Christ's incarnation, life and ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, cosmic authority, gift of the Holy Spirit, and a coming judgment, we are able to identify eight Christ-like traits of Christian philosophy, Christian philosophers and the Christian philosophical vocation. The Christian philosophic vocation is based on the rather simple truths of the New Testament; sadly, they are often overlooked by robust Christian philosophers. Regardless, this is my own advice to Christian philosophers.

*First*, since the eternal Son of God and the second person of the Trinity became flesh and dwelt among us, we have to rethink the nature, content, and practice of philosophy. Isn't Christian philosophy, biblical or Christian faith seeking philosophic understanding? Philosophy provides the questions and the categories, but biblical faith and divine revelation supply the primary content. Indeed, the earthly visitation of ultimate reality and true being in the person and work of Jesus Christ changes everything ... philosophy included.

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<sup>1</sup> The content of this paper is taken largely (though not *verbatim*) from David K. Naugle *Philosophy: A Student's Guide* (Wheaton: Crossway 2012).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized the implications of Jesus' coming on the discipline of philosophy and promulgated a "Christological Redescription of Philosophy" as a result.<sup>2</sup> For Bonhoeffer, Christian philosophy (*christliche Philosophie*) was "a kind of theological thinking which is grounded in the primacy of revelation and shaped by receptivity to otherness..."<sup>3</sup> What philosophy is and what philosophy does has to be rethought in light of canonical Trinitarian theism, that is, a biblical worldview.

*Second*, the Christian philosophical vocation is characterized by lives and ministries of service. Christian philosophers are servants, first and foremost, of the content they teach, in their research, and among and for their student charges. Thus, the lives and service of Christian philosophers can take many forms: extensive reading, in-depth research, rigorous writing, publication, public witness, hearty teaching, faithful mentoring, robust collegiality, and so forth.

In his life and ministry, Jesus was "the man for others," to use a Bonhoefferism once again. Christian philosophers, in their multifaceted lives and ministries of service, should be the same: *Christian philosophers for others*. This will undermine the self-service and self-promotion that so often constitute the aspirations of professional philosophers.

Indeed, Christian philosophers have a different purpose, namely to imitate Jesus Christ in his life of ministry and service. For "though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant ..." (Phil. 2:6-7a). Christian philosophers should be similarly kenotic and service-oriented.

*Third*, the Christian philosophical vocation is *cruciform in nature*. A calling to philosophy in Christ not only means serving others, but entails suffering and sacrifice on their behalf. Christians are to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Jesus (Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). The monks portrayed in the French independent film "Of Gods and Men" ("Des hommes et des dieux"), though not philosophers, are an outstanding example.

Nevertheless, no less is required of Christian philosophers. To clarify, self-denial, personal crucifixion, and Christ-following doesn't mean the elimination or destruction of ourselves as such. Our "structure" as persons made as the image and likeness of God is very good. It does, however, mean immolating the sin that deforms us. It does mean killing off the ungodly, selfish

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Marsh, *Reclaiming Bonhoeffer: The Promise of His Theology* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), chapter three.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

misdirection of our lives. It means losing our sinful selves in order to find our true ones in order that we might live and serve in newness of life. Christian philosophers are not exceptions to this requirement.

What, then, might cruciform philosophy or cruciform philosophers look like? It probably means disciplined work and rigorous study. It probably means taking a stand for truth, goodness or morality, and beauty. It probably means being a thoughtful public disciple of Jesus. It probably means doing philosophy on behalf of the church. It probably means choosing neglected research topics. It probably means basing philosophical work on counter-cultural assumptions. It probably means a genuine concern for classroom excellence. It probably means loving and forgiving colleagues, even recalcitrant ones. It probably means genuine concern for students. It probably means studying theology in-depth. It may mean inglorious institutional affiliation. It surely means following a Jesus “who humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8).

*Fourth*, the Christian philosophic vocation is enlivened with *the power of Christ’s resurrection*. Sin turned the world into a “cosmic cemetery,” according to theologian Alexander Schmemmann,<sup>4</sup> and some philosophers and philosophy departments exude that exact atmosphere.

However, Christ trampled down death by his own death and defeated it thoroughly by his resurrection. His triumph inaugurated the kingdom of God and installed eternal life. The tomb is empty. Christian philosophers share in his victory. Fashionable philosophical pessimism, cynicism and despair must give way to a genuine hope, born of Christ’s conquest over all the malignant forces in the world. A genuine joy and power, shorn clean of sentimentalism, ought to characterize the life and labors of Christian philosophers.

*Fifth*, the Christian philosophic vocation is encased *in the intercessory prayers of Christ*. Jesus’ ascension to God’s right hand means many things biblically and theologically, but one of the most important is the role he assumed as advocate for his people. He ever lives to pray for the saints, including his thinkers. We need each others’ prayers, to be sure, but it’s even more than encouraging and comforting to know that “we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1). Jesus was crucified. He rose from the dead. He abides at God’s right hand. He now regularly intercedes for us (Rom. 8:34; cf. Heb. 7:25). Christian philosophers ought to be delighted to know and take advantage of the fact that the ascended Christ supports their academic callings

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1963, 1995), p. 100.

and work in his prayers.

*Sixth*, the Christian philosophic vocation acknowledges and is subservient to *the cosmic rule and authority of Christ* over all things, philosophy included. In ascending to the right hand of God, Christ assumed all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18; Acts 2:34-36). Though there are many kings and many lords, Christ is *King* of kings and *Lord* of lords (Rev. 19:16). One day, at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:11). Christian philosophers ought to recognize and submit to this reality now in all aspects of their lives and thought.

*Seventh*, the Christian philosophic vocation is endowed with *the Pentecostal power of the Holy Spirit*. Two of the central mistakes of the human race, regardless of the age or time period, have been the radical quest for autonomy and an unfounded reliance on themselves. Of course, if we seek to live independently of God, we have nothing left to rely upon except our own resources. This quest for total self-sufficiency best explains the rise of humanism, rationalism, and empiricism in recent centuries. On the other hand, Christ-followers or genuine disciples of Jesus, including those of the philosophic clan, have been given the gifts of the guidance and strength, the comfort and courage, and the grace and truth born of the Holy Spirit.

Christ promised upon his departure that he would not leave his disciples as orphans, but would come to them in the person of the Holy Spirit (John 14-16). He fulfilled this promise on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). The Spirit of God has been present in the body of Christ ever since, fulfilling multiple tasks, including the philosophically significant ones of helping disciples recall Christ's instructions and teaching and guiding in regard to the truth. This pneumatological benefaction is certainly a blessing for Christian thinkers and undoubtedly it gives them a philosophical edge.

*Eighth* and finally, practitioners of a Christian philosophic vocation will one day be *judged* for their fidelity or infidelity to the way in which they conducted their callings as Christian philosophers. Summing up many biblical texts (e.g., 2 Cor. 5:10), the Nicene Creed states forthrightly that Jesus will come again "in glory to judge the living and the dead." Of course, those serious about honoring Christ in philosophy will desire sincerely to affirm the following along with Paul:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day.

(2 Tim. 4:7-8a)

On this examination day, you'll want to be able to hold your head up high and look him in the eye because you sang his song on the shores of Babylon.<sup>5</sup>

### Conclusion

If you are a Christian philosopher, what is your fundamental sense of the philosophic vocation? How much of your understanding and practice comes from the discipline itself (and its peer pressure) or from the socialization process incurred in graduate school? How much comes from biblical faith and from discipleship to Christ Jesus?

With Jesus Christ at the center, philosophy itself becomes iridescent and philosophers themselves become lovers. Etymologically, the term philosophy is a combination of the Greek words for love (*philia*) and wisdom (*sophia*). It means, of course, the “love of wisdom.” However, as Augustine noted, not all who are philosophers are lovers of the true wisdom. God is the true wisdom. Therefore, a true philosopher is a lover of God.<sup>6</sup> How about you? In the end, this is what it means to affirm that Jesus Christ is Lord of philosophy.

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<sup>5</sup> Inspired by Switchfoot, “Where I Belong” from the cd *Vice Verses*, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Colin Brown, *Christianity and Western Thought: A History of Philosophers, Ideas & Movements*, vol. 1, From the Ancient World to the Age of Enlightenment (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 98.