

PHILOSOPHY AND CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

A ROAD TO DESPAIR OR A HIGHWAY TO UNDERSTANDING?

See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy” (Colossians 2:8, RSV).¹ Paul’s counsel has caused many Christians, including Seventh-day

Adventists, to harbor an unnatural fear of philosophy. When a second-century theologian cried, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”² or when the Adventist founder Ellen White admonished against wandering “in the mazes of philosophy,”³ they may have wanted to convey a note of caution to emerging movements in church history. Paul himself alludes to a significant reason for this concern. In his time, Greek apologists and philosophic adherents were posing a real threat to the growth of Christianity. The apostle had to issue a spiritual and theological warning to the Colossian church: Christ is non-negotiable. “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness of life in him, who is the head of all rule

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and authority” (Colossians 2:9).

While Christian education must be grounded and rooted in a Christocentric commitment, it must not fail to recognize that it operates in a world whose philosophic commitment and academic pursuits may be at variance with a Christian perspective. In the face of such variance, the Christian school does not have the luxury of hiding like an ostrich; indeed, it has an obligation to its students, its constituency, and its pursuit of the highest possible outcomes in the learning process to prepare the student to face the subtle as well as the obvious issues philosophy raises in everyday life and learning.

Is it possible to fulfill such an obligation? I believe it is if we (1) dispense with some traditional myths about philosophy, (2) understand the nature and function of philosophy, and (3) develop a plausible Christian worldview within which to pursue this intellectual journey.

BY JOHN M. FOWLER



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den for ages, and who can solve the most difficult problems for minds that believe in Him.”⁵

Thus, there is a link between reason and faith—both are gifts from God, and both are to be exercised in Christian education. The Scriptures mandate that we develop our minds—indeed, growth in knowledge is part of the sanctification process (2 Peter 1:5-7). Since Christian faith demands the transformation of the mind (Romans 12:2); it therefore does not abrogate mind or reason, but transforms it so that the human mind functions with the assistance of divine enlightenment. This is a task only faith can reach out and grasp.

The second myth that some Christians cherish is that intellectual growth undermines Christian faith. But, in fact, an educated Christian can be a better informed and effectively communicative person. While most of Jesus’ disciples were uneducated (showing that God can use anyone He chooses), men like Moses, Daniel, and Paul illustrate the power of educated persons who submit themselves to the demands of faith. To be sanctified does not mean to be stupid. Again Ellen White writes: “Ignorance will not increase the humility or spirituality of any professed follower of Christ. The truths of the divine word can be best appreciated by an intellectual Christian. Christ can be best glorified by those who serve Him intelligently. The great object of education is to enable us to use the powers which God has given us in such a manner as will best represent the religion of the Bible and promote the glory of God.”⁶

Get Rid of the Myths

Among the traditional myths some Christians have developed about philosophy, one is that faith and reason are incompatible. But both faith and reason are God’s gifts to human beings, and any perceived incompatibility between the two is not grounded in biblical revelation. “Come now, let us reason together,” invites the Creator (Isaiah 1:18), and the same God also describes faith in Him as fundamental to our relationship with Him (Hebrews 11:6; Romans 1:17).

Christian faith underscores that when God created humans in His image (Genesis 1:16), He shared with them His creativity, which of course implies a rational capacity. Human rea-

soning may often be faulty or marred, but that does not mean it has no role in Christian life. Indeed, even the faith life of a Christian must be lived, explained, and shared in a world that is tuned to using tools built by reason. Part of Christian education’s task is to develop rational capacity to the maximum. Wrote Ellen White: “All who engage in the acquisition of knowledge should strive to reach the highest round of the ladder. Let students advance as fast and as far as they can; let the field of their study be as broad as their powers can compass.”⁴ This lofty goal, however, comes with a caveat: “But let them make God their wisdom, clinging to Him who is infinite in knowledge, who can reveal secrets hid-



A third myth is the perception that there is a distinction between the sacred and the secular, and that we should live that distinction. A deeper understanding of the Christian faith demands that while we live in the secular, we must never give up the sacred; indeed, we must mediate the sacred to secular people, so they can better understand, appreciate, and grasp the dynamics and the sense of fulfillment found in the sacred. God is a God of both the altar and the laboratory, and the Christian must not be apologetic about the former or enamored by the latter.

We must not dichotomize the sacred and the secular to the extent that we restrict religion to the heart and to the Sabbath, and education to the mind and to the rest of the week. The hidden danger of the secular is to think and live as though God does not exist. It is the mandate of faith to face that danger in its own territory and overcome its wiles. To do that, faith needs

to maintain its God-given ability to reason at its sharpest focus. We live in the world, but we are not part of it. The world is both our home and our mission.

The integral relationship between faith and reason is well summarized by Ellen White: "Knowledge is power, but it is a power for good only when united with true piety. It must be vitalized by the Spirit of God in order to serve the noblest purposes. The closer our connection with God, the more fully can we comprehend the value of true science; for the attributes of God, as seen in His created works, can be best appreciated by him who has a knowledge of the Creator of all things, the Author of all truth."⁷

Understand What Philosophy Does

To question is philosophy's occupa-

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tion as well as its tool. Philosophy seizes every opportunity to probe, prod, doubt, analyze, and seek. The goal of its questions is 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."⁸

All philosophy is concerned with three basic questions: What is real? What is true? What is good? The first relates to ontology and metaphysics, the study of reality and existence. What constitutes reality? Is human ex-

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istence real? Does the tree that we see make up part of reality? Or does the idea of tree-ness or human-ness take precedence in the understanding of reality? As Schaeffer says, "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."⁹

The second area of interest in philosophy is epistemology. How do we know that something is true or not true? Is what is true always true? What are the conditions and limitations of knowledge? Are we as humans responsible for the creation, certification, and verification of truth? Is truth relative or absolute?

The third area of concern to philosophy is ethics. What is good? What defines appropriate conduct? Is there a norm for behavior? Is it objective, subjective, relative or absolute, universal or particular? What is the source of that norm—tradition, social mores, current practices, the will of the ruling power, situation, religion? Is valuing a conditional process?

Philosophy's answer to these questions depends on the worldview that one adopts. For example, if you were a follower of Plato, yours would be a worldview of idealism—a belief that reality consists of the world of ideas. Using that assumption, an idealist would define what constitutes reality, truth, and ethics. But if your worldview is that of a materialist, an evolutionist, or existentialist, your perception of reality and truth will be quite different.

So how should a Christian relate to philosophy? First, it is always an advantage for a Christian to understand the complexities of various philosophies—their views, their methodology,

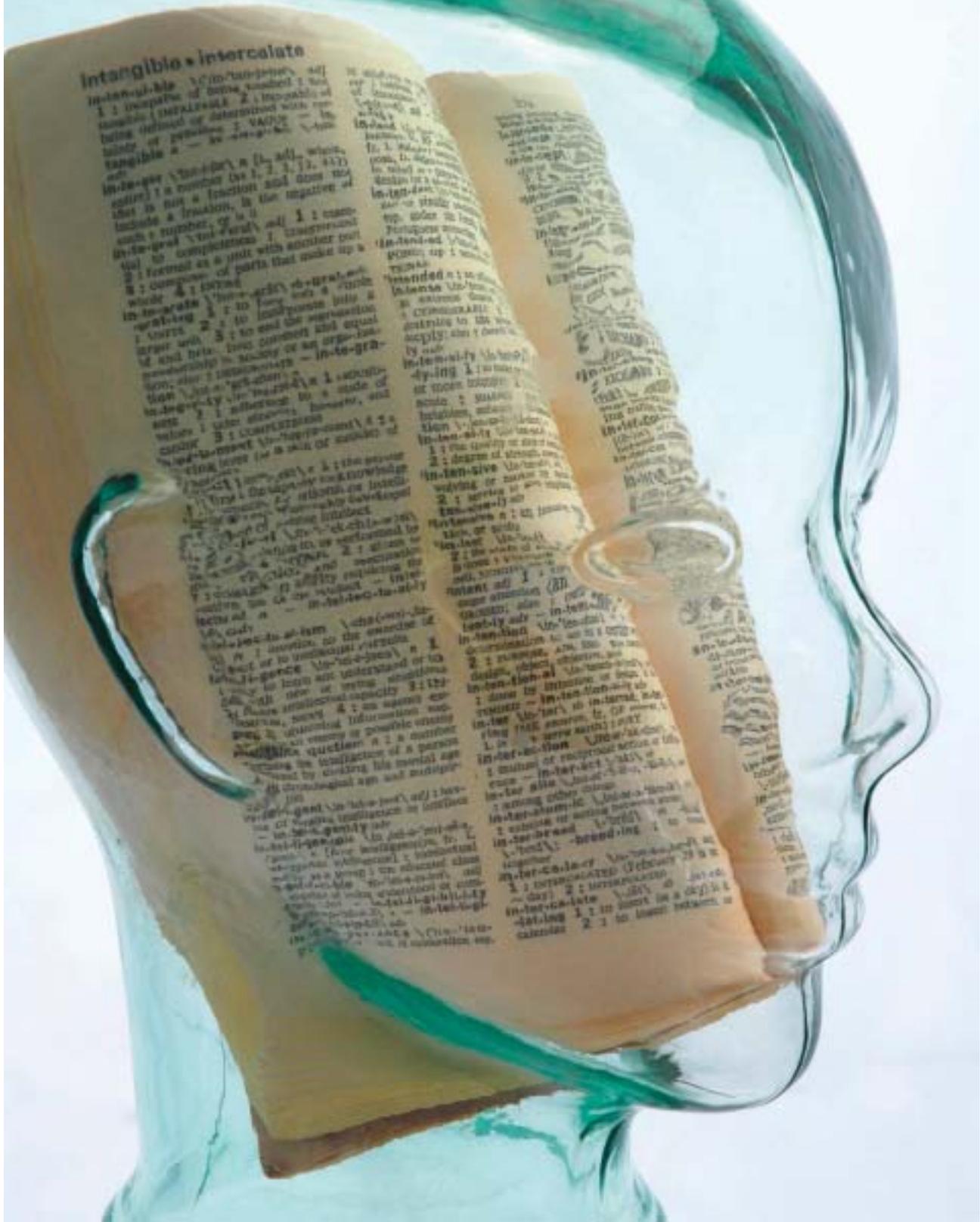


their conclusions, and their challenge to Christian intellectual and faith life. Mars' Hill, Paul found, was not an impediment but a propeller to a better understanding and proclamation of faith (see Acts 17:22-34; cf. 1 Corinthians 2:1-7). Second, a Christian must develop a worldview that will provide an adequate ground on which to stand, and to carry on a meaningful dialogue with and witness to the secular world.

Building a Christian Worldview

In dealing with philosophy, Chris-

tian educators must avoid the twin dangers of capitulation and indifference. On the one hand, they may be tempted to surrender to the philosophic onslaught and feel compelled to reinterpret or reject their faith claims. On the other, they may hide from asking or facing critical questions. While surrender may destroy one's faith commitment, panic renders one's faith-witness ineffective. Instead, the Christian has a responsibility to deal effectively with the questions philosophy raises and to provide credible answers from



the perspective of a Christian worldview. Schaeffer puts it bluntly: “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 to 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.”¹⁰

While philosophers find their unity of thought in their chosen point of departure—mind, matter, existence, materialism, language, class, etc.—where do we go to develop a Christian worldview? Without pretending to be either

exclusive or exhaustive, let me suggest three basic faith affirmations we can use. These affirmations are wholistic in nature, universal in scope, biblical in origin, and non-negotiable in commitment.

1. God is the ultimate reality. “In the beginning God. . .” (Genesis 1:1). Therein lies the Christian’s foundation

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for a worldview. Because God is, I am. Without Him, nothing is. ““In Him we live and move and have our being”” (Acts 17:28). To the Christian, God as a Person is what constitutes the ultimate reality. He is the cause and designer of creation. His activities have structure, purpose, and order. As Schaeffer says, “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 the place beneath the Christian apex of the existence of the infinite-personal God.”¹¹

2. We know because He has revealed. A second dimension of a Christian worldview is that human knowledge is based on God’s revelation in nature and in Scripture. Hence, we study nature and its flow in history and experience within the context of God’s creation of, and action in, nature. The believing mind discerns the workings of God in the beauty and mystery of nature, praising one and probing the other. The Christian also accepts the Bible as an epistemological cornerstone for his or her 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.”¹²

Accepting God’s Word as an epistemological source does not mean that we view the Bible as a sort of divine

encyclopedia. It does mean, however, that we believe 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 is my role in society? The Bible has something to say on these and other crucial questions of existence and destiny, and thus a Christian worldview—and Christian education—must take into account what it says, even as they encounter the positions of other systems.

3. God relates to human beings.

The Christian worldview accepts an anthropology that recognizes a close kinship between God and humans. The kinship can be summarized in three major assertions:

(a) God created human beings in His own image (Genesis 1:26, 27), and thus, they are not a result of some cosmic accident or the apex of some evolutionary paradigm, limited and controlled by a complex system of mechanical laws. Kinship with God makes it possible for humans to function creatively, relate meaningfully, and be held accountable for their actions.

(b) Because of this kinship, the Christian sees evil as the result of a rupture in the God-human relationship, called sin in the Bible. Sin—alienation from God—is at the root of distorted perceptions, relationships, and values. This, asserts the Christian worldview, explains the chaotic, confused, and hopeless situation that warps life into an existential dilemma.

(c) Because of God-human kinship, the Godhead has not left humans without hope. The Christian worldview is both redemptive and surgical. It is redemptive because God has saved humanity from sin and reconciled them to Himself through the cross of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:19). It is surgical in that it looks forward to an end-time when sin and its results will be completely wiped away, preparing the way for the creation of “new heavens and a

new earth” (Isaiah 65:17). Both aspects of restoration are rooted in the life and death of Christ. Thus, to know Him and to relate to Him become central to both Christian living and Christian learning. Without Him, there can be no Christian worldview.

Conclusion

With such basic affirmations, working within a faith-asserting worldview, Christian education can function without compromising faith or sacrificing intellectual integrity. Our teaching will, then, become wholistic, God-centered, redemptive, and service-oriented. It will become a joyous pursuit in which faith and reason embrace each other, as the worshiping heart and the inquiring mind are integrated and at peace with each other.

Given that, philosophy need not be a road to despair but a highway to better understanding. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. All biblical references are from the Revised Standard Version.
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4. _____, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1943), p. 394.
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8. Van Cleve Morris, *Philosophy and the American School* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 19.
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