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Scholarship and Character as a Christian Academic

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Abstract: I discuss examples of how a Christian in philosophy can embrace positions within the discipline but also provide a unique and more cogent grounding for those positions. More specifically, I argue that the best way of accounting for a conception of human rights based on fundamental interests can be grounded in God's trinitarian nature. A Christian philosopher, depending on her audience, can be explicit about this ultimate grounding or she may instead produce a work of what C.S. Lewis called latent Christianity, in which the theological underpinnings exist in her mind, but are not made explicit in her argumentation. I will also discuss an example of how the fact that, as Gould puts it, "Christ is the source and telos of all things, including all truths that can be discovered," can inform Christian scholarship, related to the dual nature of the Christian virtue of humility. Finally, I briefly examine the importance of a robust Christian character for the Christian academic.

Christian scholars inhabit two communities: the community of Christians and the community of scholars."¹ This fact about Christian scholars can be a difficult fact to navigate. As Gould points out in his essay, there are contradictory or conflicting beliefs, practices, and assumptions with respect to these two communities. In this short paper, I will illustrate and discuss two of the ways in which a Christian scholar can navigate these communities, as a way of working toward shalom for all of creation. More specifically, I will discuss examples of how a Christian in philosophy can embrace assumptions within that academic discipline but also provide a unique and more cogent grounding for those assumptions. I will also discuss an example of how the fact that, as Gould puts it, "Christ is the source and telos of all things, including all truths

¹ Paul Gould, "An Essay on Academic Disciplines, Faithfulness, and the Christian Scholar," p. 1. Available here: http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/file/Gould_Essay-on-academic-disciplines-faithfulness.pdf

that can be discovered,”² can inform Christian scholarship. Finally, I briefly examine the importance of a robust Christian character for the Christian academic.

A Trinitarian Foundation for Human Rights

One way in which theology relates to philosophy has to do with the foundation of human rights. Many argue that theism is required for such rights to have a sound foundation, grounded in the claim that human beings, as image-bearers of God, possess inherent dignity and worth which justifies the claim that they have rights. I agree, but there is more to be said here. In philosophical discussions of human rights, there are two general conceptions of such rights: *choice* and *interests*. On a choice conception of human rights, rights are ultimately justified by the value of human autonomy. Human rights, on this view, are grounded in our capacity to choose, and protect our freedom to do so. On an interest-based conception of human rights, the justification of such rights is that they are necessary to protect our fundamental interests. These interests are crucial for our welfare, and the corresponding rights either help to protect or promote the satisfaction of these interests.

I have argued that there are defeasible parental rights, which can be justified on an interests-based theory of human rights.³ Among the fundamental interests that human beings have are participating in close relationships with others, engaging in relationships and projects that yield meaning and satisfaction in life, and experiencing psychological well-being. All of these fundamental interests can be satisfied in the parent-child relationship, in a unique way for both parents and children. Given that the family provides a distinct and significant context for the satisfaction of these fundamental interests, it is plausible that there are parental rights that emerge from these interests. It is here that Christian theology is relevant. The triune God is a relational being. We, as creatures made in His image, are also relational. Given these facts, we have a particularly Christian justification not only for an interests-based conception of rights more generally, but for a particular form of parental rights in particular. Our fundamental interests are deeply connected to our status as God’s creatures who reflect His nature, and this can provide a

² Ibid., p. 12.

³ Michael W. Austin, *Conceptions of Parenthood* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), chapter 4.

robust theological justification for a contemporary theory of rights along with applications of that theory, as I've briefly detailed here.

In one context, a Christian philosopher may explicitly discuss such theological foundations. But in another she may simply employ the interests-based conception of human rights without discussing its theological underpinnings. In this way, the Christian justification is implicit, rather than explicit. This form of engagement exemplifies what C.S. Lewis called latent Christianity:

What we want is not more little books about Christianity, but more little books by Christians on other subjects—with their Christianity latent. You can see this most easily if you look at it the other way around. Our Faith is not very likely to be shaken by any book on Hinduism. But if whenever we read an elementary book on Geology, Botany, Politics, or Astronomy, we found that its implications were Hindu, that would shake us. It is not the books written in direct defense of Materialism that make the modern man a materialist; it is the materialistic assumptions in all the other books. In the same way, it is not books on Christianity that will really trouble him. But he would be troubled if, whenever he wanted a cheap popular introduction to some science, the best work on the market was always by a Christian.”⁴

While Lewis is focused above on popular-level writing, Christian scholars should think through how this might apply in their scholarly works. What sort of latent Christian views about human nature, society, and the kingdom of God might be relevant to questions in economics, political theory, or kinesiology, to name a few examples? If we are unable to find a latent Christian assumption related to the guiding principles in our discipline or our own particular work in that discipline, then perhaps we should shift gears and examine the truth of those assumptions.

Christology and Duality

Next, I will consider an example of how the fact that “Christ is the source and telos of all things, including all truths that can be discovered,”⁵ can

⁴ C.S. Lewis, “Christian Apologetics,” *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 93.

⁵ Gould, p. 12.

inform Christian scholarship. In my own recent work on the Christian virtue of humility, I argue that both of the following are true of the humble person:

- (1) The humble person believes that he ought to have a *prima facie* preference for the satisfaction of the interests of others over the satisfaction of his own interests.
- (2) The humble person will not conceive of human beings in a hierarchical manner in light of their equal inherent dignity and worth as image-bearers of God.

At first glance, (1) and (2) seem to be contradictory, as the humble person believes that she is generally to prefer the interests of others over her own but also refuses to view people in a hierarchical manner. One thing to say here is that there is not a contradiction, because she can view all as equal before God while yet preferring that others interests be satisfied over her own.

But there is a type of duality present. She inhabits a particular perspective in her role as a follower of Christ in which she prefers others while also recognizing that from God's perspective she is just as important as they, and her interests are just as important as theirs. The upshot with respect to humility is that we are not to believe that other's interests matter more than ours to God, who is impartial, but rather we are to believe that the interests of others are to matter more to us than our own as we make choices and act, all else being equal.

This dual nature of humility is to be expected, given the Christological approach of my account of humility. As Mark Noll points out in his call for scholarship grounded in Christology, the fact that "some important results of scholarship will have a dual or doubled character would seem to flow naturally from the realities summarized by the Chalcedonian Definition."⁶ According to this definition, Christ is a single person with both a human and a divine nature. With this in mind, Noll points out that if everything exists from, in, and for Christ, then given his dual nature we should expect that some form of duality would surface as we explore other aspects of reality. And insofar as my analysis of humility is based upon the humility of Christ as it is exemplified in the gospels and Philippians 2:1-11, and is therefore deeply Christological, we should expect such a result in this context. This is an example of how the fact

⁶ Mark A. Noll, *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), p. 45.

that Christ is the source and telos of all is relevant for a particular inquiry into the virtue of humility. In other disciplines there will be interesting and distinct implications of the Christological nature of reality. This should motivate the Christian scholar in his work, as he is discovering more about Christ as he discovers more about his world.

The Christian Scholar as Teacher

The foregoing focuses on Christian scholarship. In closing, I'd like to focus on how the Christian scholar as teacher can exhibit "Christ-likeness in moral character."⁷ This is a crucial aspect of being a missional professor. There are many students in today's college classrooms who are very difficult to love. Some are disrespectful. Others are disinterested. Many try the patience of the professor and other students. It is here that the fruits of the Spirit are so important for the Christian academic. We can produce top-notch scholarship in our discipline, but if we treat our students, colleagues, administration, and staff poorly, we are failing at our primary missional tasks of loving God and our neighbor as ourselves. We may also want to take up an intentional focus on those in our classrooms who are outcasts of some sort. It is easy to focus our attention on the engaged or engaging student, but if we are to follow in the steps of Christ we'll go out of our way to give attention to those who are socially immature, for example.

A Christian academic, who is seeking to bring about shalom in God's creation, will not only engage in implicit and explicit Christian scholarship, but will also seek to exemplify the fruits of the Spirit and a robust Christian character as he loves others in his sphere of influence, especially those who are unloved or appear to be unlovable.

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⁷ Gould, p. 17.