

“The Role of Philosophy at a Contemporary Christian University”
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Joy in the Truth: The Catholic University in the New Millennium
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1. Preliminary remarks

- Any university that is true to its mission should have a strong philosophy program, because philosophy is such a foundational discipline. Its inquiries are relevant to all other disciplines and to culture in general. It possesses the capacity to discern essences and principles and to gain a comprehension of the whole.
- Therefore a Christian university, as a university, should have a strong philosophy program.
- The meaning of “strong” in “strong philosophy program” includes [1] scholars making important contributions in the field; [2] philosophy faculty members being a force and influence on campus with colleagues in other fields, especially in efforts to unify and integrate higher learning, foster ethical reflection, and so on; [3] philosophy courses playing a significant role in the general curriculum, and so on.
- Christian universities (at least ones I know well, namely, Catholic ones) in fact are well placed in some of these regards to influence other universities positively. Catholic universities have tended to keep required philosophy courses in the undergraduate curriculum and have seen philosophy as a resource for integrating education and a partner in disciplinary work. In contrast, many secular universities have abandoned philosophy requirements entirely or nearly and have accepted philosophy as one discipline among many without a unique foundational character [see *Fides et ratio* 47 on the reduced role of contemporary philosophy].
- BUT a philosophy department at a Christian university should not just make a particular contribution to the life and mission of the university as such but to the university as a Christian university with a Christian mission and identity. What does this mean?

2. What it means to be a philosophy department recognizable as Christian: *some main points*

- The specific answer depends on the nature of the institution and its traditions (Protestant or Catholic; sponsored by a religious community; affiliation with the larger church). For example, the School of Philosophy at The Catholic University of America is an ecclesiastical faculty in a pontifical university. The status and responsibilities of this relationship to the Holy See affects what it means for the School to play its role and for its future prospects.
- BUT there are common features of a recognizably Christian philosophy department playing a decisive role in its own university and ready to influence higher learning generally (it is hoped).
- A primary responsibility of a Christian philosophy department is to have an explicit, developed, and shared “take” on the relation of faith and reason adequate to Christian truth and the Christian outlook. This take would include the following features: [1] the truths revealed in faith and the truths attained by natural reason and experience are in ultimate harmony, whatever the apparent inconsistencies (on harmony rather than competition, see *Fides et ratio* 17); [2] faith plays a positive and constructive role with respect to philosophy; *Fides et ratio* 76 speaks of “a philosophical speculation conceived in dynamic union with faith”; the role of faith is accepted as (1) a critical one (some findings and some approaches are not helpful for reaching truth; see *Fides et ratio* 50, 53) and (2) a suggestive one (revealed truths as spurs to metaphysical inquiry, e.g.; see *Fides et ratio* 51, 76); [3] philosophy has a unique and positive role to play in relation to theology; [4] reason and philosophy, as the highest use of natural reason and experience, nevertheless, have their own autonomy and operate according to their own proper methods. Philosophy has an integrity of its own and it is neither smothered by faith nor substitutes for it.

- Thomas Pruffer: “Philosophy is perennial, but it is also ephemeral. It is constantly in danger of being absorbed into and confused with something not itself, and thus of being destroyed. This defense against destruction is constant reflection on, and re-affirmation of the specificity of philosophy” [*Christian Philosophy in the College and Seminary*, ed. George McLean (The Catholic University of America Press, 1966), p. 58]. A Christian philosophy department must define itself in relation to faith and theology so that it is not subsumed by faith and becomes an *ersatz* theology nor gives up the critical and positive relation to faith and theology and ceased to be Christian in some recognizable sense. Philosophy is not (1) *doxa*, unexamined opinion, or ordinary experience; (2) theology; or (3) science and history in the modern senses of those fields. Reflection of the nature of philosophy in a Christian setting is particularly useful for reflection on the specificity of philosophy itself.
- One implication. Any philosophy done in a Christian philosophy department is philosophy, that is, to the extent it is any good, it commands the respect and even the adherence of non-believers on the basis of its philosophical credentials. Thus the labels “Christian philosophy” or “Christian philosophy department” should be used with care, in the sense that one would not need to be a Christian to embrace the philosophy practiced in the department (see *Fides et ratio* 76).
- At the same time, a Christian philosophy department has to be recognizable as Christian not just for a take on faith and reason, which opens up the logical space for genuine philosophy, but for the way it actually philosophizes. In fact, Christian universities have a responsibility to their churches and to culture generally to be alive in recognizably Christian ways.

Some notes on philosophy in relation to theology:

- Theology provides the ultimate explanations and the ultimate integration of all learning and truth in the Truth that is God. Philosophy serves theology in this enterprise but cannot match it, despite its formidable capacity for the integrated view of the whole based on natural reason and experience.
- BUT philosophy does provide ultimate explanations and integrations of learning from its standpoint of natural reason and experience that has worth of its own, just as philosophy as an integrity of its own, theology notwithstanding. It would be a mistake to fly to theology too readily in Christian intellectual life, despite theology’s grasp of the whole by the light of revealed truth. This is so for a number of reasons.
- [1] Natural knowing is good in itself. “The human person is by nature a philosopher” [*Fides et ratio* 64].
- [2] Philosophy can unite believers and non-believers who exercise reason together.
- [3] A strong and full practice of philosophy in contradistinction to theology nicely highlights what faith gives and how grace perfects nature.

For the relation of theology and philosophy see *Fides et ratio* 5, 15, 20, 24, 53, 64, 73, 75, 77

3. What it means to be a philosophy department recognizable as Christian: *the primacy of philosophy as activity*

- In the past Catholic philosophy departments were known through the first half of the last century for a common method, the scholastic method of philosophizing. The common method of scholasticism disappeared some time ago. No other common method is on the horizon. This lack has made it difficult to know what is distinctively Catholic about many Catholic philosophy departments.
- In this regard, it is important to emphasize, as *Fides et ratio* does [see, e.g., *Fides et ratio* 4], the primacy of philosophy as an activity that issues in schools, approaches, and traditions. Philosophical activity, insofar as it is alive, transcends the approaches, schools, and traditions into which it solidifies.
- Thus a Christian philosophy department can be identifiably so by its philosophical activity insofar as it carries on certain inquiries and engages philosophically in the defense of certain positions. What are some of these?

4. What it means to be a philosophy department recognizable as Christian: *distinctive features and positions*

NB: The following list includes philosophical positions to be articulated and defended in a Christian philosophy program. They are stated in a way that leaves wide latitude for what is actually held and defended in detail, but they are present because of the fact that the truths known in Christian revelation do exclude certain answers. It is important to note that (1) these exclusions are actually few in number though highly significant, since they touch on central issues; (2) that philosophies that are decidedly anti-Christian in their outlook and findings may nevertheless contain parts that are philosophically sound even from a Christian outlook; (3) that no philosophical views are ever excluded from exploration, discussion, or generous interpretation in a Christian philosophy department; and so on.

- Preserving, articulating, and exploring the traditions of Christian philosophical thought as a living heritage (hence the importance of seeing philosophy primarily as an activity, which can be engaged in with thinkers of the past; hence also the importance of accepting an historicism that stigmatizes earlier thought for being earlier; in Christian philosophy departments the view that the past cannot be present can be countered). The preservation of this heritage as a living force for the future is a key intellectual and cultural responsibility of Christian philosophy departments, not as a matter of history but as a matter of philosophy.
- Philosophizing with Thomas Aquinas a “master of thought” whose contributions are of “incomparable value” [*Fides et ratio* 43, 57].
- Philosophizing with the great texts of all the historical periods of philosophy [*Fides et ratio* xx speaks of “an organic connection” with the entire history of philosophy].
- Articulating and defending an account of truth adequate to Christian recognitions of the human drive for truth, the attainability of truth, the objective character of truth, the modes of truth adequate to the varieties and forms of human knowledge and action, and the relationship between truths revealed only by faith and those attained by natural reason and experience; this account of truth includes confronting the Enlightenment view of truth that sees “the only authoritative source of truth” in “scientific method as it is practiced in the various scientific disciplines” [Robert Sokolowski, “Graduate Education and Catholic Identity at The Catholic University of America; see, e.g., *Fides et ratio* 5, 8, 30, 33, 55, 61, 69]. The very name of this conference, “Joy in the Truth,” presents a Christian conviction (but not an exclusively Christian one; see the ancient Greek philosophers on the pleasure of contemplation) that truth is a joy (I know people who don’t even like to see photographs of themselves).
- Articulating and defending non-reductionist accounts with respect to form, teleology, the nature of the human person, and so on.
- A commitment to metaphysics as a central philosophical discipline [*Fides et ratio* 5, 61, 83].
- A commitment to a philosophical anthropology that is not merely naturalist or physicalist in character that respects human freedom, moral accountability, and a supernatural destiny.
- A commitment to ethical inquiry reaching positions consistent with the dignity of human life and the goodness of nature and human nature.
- A commitment to the comprehensive and integrative viewpoint that philosophy as a discipline founded on natural reason and experience is uniquely capable of attaining [see *Fides et ratio* 81 on the sapiential character of philosophy].

5. Gathering the philosophers

- Making this happen means gathering philosophers who voluntarily have committed to these features and positions that are recognizably Christian and who philosophize in this way.
- Making this happen means that Christian philosophy departments offer such philosophizing to those to want it, so it may continue and thrive.