

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest challenges facing apologists for God's existence and for the gospel of Jesus among the highly educated are criticisms leveled against it by contemporary philosophy. While this is truer on some campuses than on others—for one reason or another some campuses seem more aggressively secular than others—the academic community seems to hold many critical underlying assumptions and presuppositions that are antithetical to Christianity.

Some of these presuppositions are either taught directly as an order of business in classrooms, such as in some history classes or classes that teach New Testament criticism, or they are held implicitly as a part of methodology in such disciplines as psychology and sociology. In the former cases, skepticism of supernaturalism or some form of logical positivist base is explicitly taught. In the latter cases, it is subtler; what does the philosophical heavy lifting is the requirement to practice methodological naturalism. However benign sounding that is, what the students take away from years of working with that, intended or not, is the conclusion that the success of science makes theology at best irrelevant. At worst, it is thought that the success of science provides a powerful apologetic for metaphysical naturalism.

Serious Christians cannot ignore the power and the subtleness of this two-pronged attack—explicit and implicit criticism of crucial ideas that support the theistic Christian position. The attack often comes with new students are entering higher learning and in a most vulnerable intellectual position. The oppositional points are made by highly accomplished professors, some of whom seem to enjoy the skewed playing field in their favor. The problem is this: can Christians develop a systematic apologetic that can effectively speak to some of the questions raised by contemporary philosophy, and one that could provide succor for Christians at the university; and, perhaps, be used to persuade the academic community to change its basic presuppositions that are antagonistic to Christian doctrine? Could a well-constructed argument that shows that the success of science does not provide support for metaphysical naturalism be persuasive? Given the consensus for naturalism and empiricism in academe these may not be easy tasks.

This problem of developing a philosophical apologetic relates both to the non-Christian community and to the believing community. Scripture says, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception according to the tradition of men."¹ On the other hand, it admonishes with these words: ". . . always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account

¹Colossians 2:8. This and all subsequent Bible references are taken from the New American Standard Version.

for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence."² Christians are commanded to answer questions and at the same time to not be "taken in" by non-Christian philosophy. Furthermore, Christians are reminded by the Scriptures to destroy every speculation and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God.³ Since this is exactly the issue involved, it is necessary that Christians speak to it as a matter of obedience to the One who loves them and to Whom they love. Truth is at stake here and one cannot ignore it or want to sidestep the issues.

Although historical Christianity cannot be reduced simply to a philosophy, it can be argued that it does "contain" a philosophy, i.e., a way of looking at the world in total, a ground of values and norms. Historically, Christians have sought to better conceive and articulate a Christian philosophy of religion that coheres with a sound exegesis of Scripture. If a credible position could be presented as true to reasonable people, under the direction and influence of the Holy Spirit, would not it honor God? Did Jesus not say to love the Lord our God with all the heart, soul, and mind?⁴ Since Christians are commanded to preach a body of truth (the gospel) and to defend it (part of the task of apologetics) as true, then would not the Holy Spirit honor this if Christians were faithful in both aspects of this

²II Peter 3:15.

³II Corinthians 10:5.

⁴Matthew 22:37

stewardship?

Along the same line of reasoning, it is becoming increasingly important to observe that non-Christian philosophy (typically metaphysical naturalistic philosophy) dominates empirical academic research.⁵ As a result, as education spreads there will be an increasing number of people with whom Christians cannot easily communicate their faith without identifying and dealing with their presuppositions as an order of business.

For example, after hearing a talk on "The Case for the Resurrection," one person did not believe the gospel because, as he said, he did not believe there was a God in the first place. To talk about God's Son and God raising people from the dead simply did not make sense to him. For some people this could be a "smoke screen" to avoid the issue of sin in their own lives; however, the question they raise is a legitimate one. The resurrection of Jesus and the concept of God's Word presuppose a God who can perform miracles, speak a Word, or have a Son. Unless there are good answers that speak to these issues, one can find that the usual way of doing apologetics, that of presenting evidence in support of Christ's claims, is profoundly undercut.

⁵The domination is often maintained until directly pushed. Often, when that happens they typically retreat into a pragmatic approach to science. However, the ambiance is that many scientists talk as if the deliverances of science are true in the metaphysical sense and not merely in an instrumental sense. See C.S. Lewis' comment on this state of affairs in his 1947 book *Miracles*, p.

Another example of a philosophic objection occurred when speaking to a faculty member. In the conversation, I mentioned the word “God” and the professor promptly asked what was meant by the term “God.” This led to a brief definition of the God of the Bible, but he pressed further to know something about His nature and attributes. He would not allow his questions to be put off. Finally, it became clear that the professor could not understand the concept of transcendent Being he could not touch, feel, or in some way verify through his senses. For this man, there was no use in discussing such a concept; for him God-talk was meaningless. Again, this question cannot be answered by appealing to bare historical facts about the resurrection, because this professor would say that such facts would merely prove that someone rose from the dead, but that would not necessarily prove the existence of God.

Beyond evangelistic purposes where cultural and philosophic apologetics are typically deployed, there remains the cultivation of the faith of the believer. Some Christians are plagued by doubts about their faith. Clark Pinnock once said, “. . . wouldn't it be hard to continue to trust the Lord as you grow and still have the sneaking suspicion that He may not be there at all?”⁶ While some doubting is merely the result of one's emotional temperament (as in obsessive doubting), and

⁶Lecture notes from Clark Pinnock's Cultural Apologetics course, Institute of Biblical Studies, 1973.

much can be attributed to our human nature (sin),⁷ some doubting is legitimate if there is not sufficient justification to believe a particular idea that is critical to Christian theistic belief. (I Corinthians 15:14). Christians are not to believe everything; they are to test the spirits.⁸ An appeal to the subjective religious experience gives no objective verification; well-done cultural and philosophic apologetics can. In addition to helping the believer with doubts, cultural apologetics also can help the Christian who is seeking an advanced degree in a secular university by equipping her with sound reasons for her faith and by enabling her to discern the non-Christian presuppositions that she is likely to encounter there.

Now it should be understood that merely having the right answers would not be sufficient alone to bring non-believers to Christ or to equip believers to share their faith. The ministry of the Spirit is also needed to bring men to faith *in* God and to equip believers. The power of prayer and the sovereign will of God come into play also. However, stewardship of the mysteries of God requires that one sharpen her apologetic tools.⁹ If there are persuasive answers to provide a basis to believe *that* God exists, it must be done. In addition, one needs to understand the

⁷James 1:6-8.

⁸I John 4:1.

⁹II Timothy 2:15.

principles of persuasion and to know when and how to skillfully deploy the various tools of apologetics. There are times to stop giving apologetics and call for commitment. All of this should be done with complete reliance on the Holy Spirit. Thus, apologetics in the evangelistic sense is a set of tools that an apologist can use, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as she seeks to lead people to faith in Christ.

The stakes are high for they involve the hearts and minds of humanity, but there is hope. Anti-intellectualism, part of the intellectual inheritance of many evangelicals, will not do—even if it is understandable how some Christians have come to hold that position. What is needed is a sharpening of theoretical and practical apologetic tools and a popularizing of a sound method of presentation and defense. Does it seem likely that a God who commands Christians to think¹⁰ and give a defense would leave them without tools and adequate resources? Not really. The best approach would be to understand the essence of the non-theist arguments and formulate, or reformulate, both a negative criticism of their view and construct a positive case for our own view.

Dr. Norman Geisler, professor of systematic theology at Dallas Theological Seminary, has done just this. It is the hypothesis of this research that Geisler's

¹⁰Matthew 22:37 and Isaiah 1:18.

apologetic approach will produce both a successful negative criticism of the non-theistic positions and a successful positive case for the theistic position, in particular, Christian theism. Furthermore, Geisler's apologetic will speak effectively to two crucial questions of modern philosophy--the meaningfulness (that is, the meaning of religious language) and the truthfulness of theistic assertions. Geisler's apologetic will then be condensed into a classroom lecture on the truthfulness of theistic assertions which, when presented, will be found to be an effective persuasive tool.

The objective of this research will be to compose an exposition of some of the issues in contemporary philosophy with particular attention to the questions of the meaningfulness and truthfulness of theistic assertions. It will evaluate whether or not Geisler's philosophic apologetic can adequately answer the questions raised by secular and Christian philosophers and whether Geisler can produce a positive case for theism—Christian theism in particular. Some practical applications of this research would include articles that could be published in journals and magazines (such as *Collegiate Challenge*), and this research could lead to the construction of a short, on-the-field course in apologetics for campus directors and staff with special emphasis on the "how-to's". Finally, I will compose a classroom lecture

that will use Geisler's apologetic method and include a pilot study on its effectiveness as a persuasive tool among college students.