

## IS THERE A CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY?

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See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. -- Paul

### Introduction

Our attention in this paper will be centered on the world view which roots itself in the assumption that truth, in the final and complete sense, can only be attained if a special revelation from God be granted. It is the conviction of the Christian realistic philosophy that human experience as a whole can be understood only if the existence of a God who has disclosed Himself to us be admitted. Our concern, then, is with the philosophy, not according to human tradition, but according to Christ.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to point out that there are those who reject the suggestion that there is a Christian realistic philosophy. Opposition comes from at least two sources. First, there are some who view religion of any type as superstition which had its beginnings in magic, myths, and legends of ages long past. Religion is to be regarded as an evidence of cultural lag. If it is to be of any value at all, it must be naturalized, or at least rationalized, in the light of modern scientific and philosophical theory. While there are some, particularly those of the idealistic tradition who do give religion a place of value and importance in human experience, yet, here also the revelational aspect so essential to Christian realism is either completely overlooked or openly rejected. All religions must be tested by empirical categories varying with the interest of the investigator before their teachings are to be accepted as even tentatively true. Such empirical investigation leaves no place at all for the authority of revelation as adhered to be Christian thinkers.

Secondly, there are those who live and move within the framework of the revelational approach to truth who would deny to the Christian world view the name of philosophy. Christianity is not a philosophy, but rather, a way of life based, not on human reason and speculation, but on faith in the supernatural. Philosophy is rationalistic; Christianity is nonrationalistic. Philosophy is man-made, speculative; Christianity is God-given, dogmatic. Hence, Christianity must not be contaminated with the foul epithet, philosophy.

Most of us would be agreed that if "philosophy" is to be defined in terms of empirical and rationalistic systems exclusively, then Christianity is not a philosophy. The Christian realistic faith is founded, not on human speculation, but on divine disclosure. On the other hand, if "philosophy" be understood to mean a world view or a way of life, as it has been used throughout this work, and as it is most generally understood today, then Christianity is a philosophy. If philosophy is, as Matthew Arnold suggested, the attempt to see life steadily and to see it whole, or as others have suggested, to give a coherent account of all of one's experience, then certainly there is a Christian philosophy. The basic question of human experience is not philosophy versus no philosophy, but good philosophy versus bad philosophy. Everyone has a philosophy of life, a world view, no

matter what form it may happen to take. Our problem is not to get rid of philosophy, but to find the right philosophy, and, having found it, to present it to others with a conviction that grows out of the knowledge that one has found the truth.

It is the Christian realistic contention that only if the revelational postulate be granted is it possible to construct a fully integrated philosophy. At the same time it must be pointed out that idealists and naturalists make certain claims for their respective systems and are endeavoring to demonstrate their claims to others, also. Let it be clearly understood that our present task is not one of attempting to demonstrate that Christian realism is a more coherent world view than that which other thinkers may have to offer. Our purpose is rather to state as concisely as possible what the Christian realistic philosophy is. Converts from one world view to another are seldom made by demonstrating that one's own particular philosophy is more coherent than all others.<sup>1</sup> There is no world view which is coherent *per se*. Each philosopher sees his own view as coherent because it accords with the assumptions which he believes to be most significant. If he did not believe this, he would be living in an incoherent world--a world in which no one can live for very long. What we are attempting to say is that coherence itself is always relative. It always depends upon a system of assumptions which are adhered to be faith or conviction rather than by rational demonstration. Christian realism is the most coherent world view, we believe, if the assumption of special revelation be granted; it is not the most coherent philosophy if the fact of special revelation be denied, as in the case of empirically rooted views such as idealism or naturalism. Our task, then, is not to argue that Christian realism is the most coherent view *per se*, and that therefore thinkers who are perfectly rational ought logically to accept it, but to present the claims of this world view as generally held by Christian realists themselves.

### Revelation

We have tried to point out that Christian realistic philosophy begins with the conviction or postulate of special revelation--that not only does God exist but that we know of His existence because He has made Himself known to us. The heart of revelation is to be found in Christ, the Word Who became flesh, while the record of God's disclosure is to be found in the written Word--the Hebrew-Christian Scriptures. If this postulate be rejected, there is no basis for speaking of a Christian philosophy. If human experience by itself be the standard of all attainable truth, then one's choice of world views would be limited to some type of idealism or naturalism. On the other hand, if God has spoken in a unique manner, there is certainly a place for another type of world view. Such a world view seeks to understand all experience, and to integrate all the facts of existence, in the light of, and in relation to, the Word which God has spoken to man.

Christian philosophy begins, then, with the assertion of a positive, supernatural, and authoritative message.<sup>2</sup> This message is never to be thought of as a human achievement but always as a divine gift. It is a Word which comes to man from an order beyond the world of natural experience. It is a Word directed toward the whole man, to his emotions, his intellect, his will, not to any one aspect of personality. More will be said on this point a little later.

This world view does not claim that all areas of truth are fully and completely dealt with in the Word which God has given. There are areas of knowledge which have been left for man to investigate and to develop by himself, but this world view does claim that all areas of human experience

are to be understood rightly only in the light of the Word of God. In other words, Christian philosophy, taken as a whole, is that system of thought (or world view) which results from man thinking under the influence of the Spirit which God has given, which recognizes as authoritative the Word He has spoken, and which finds at its very heart, Christ, the Word who became flesh.

If objection be raised to this point of beginning, it can only be pointed out that all philosophical systems begin with postulates of some kind, so that there is no evident reason for rejecting the hypothesis that a world view may be built on a supernatural postulate. Such a view insists that human experience cannot be known fully and completely from the inside, that is, by human means alone. Rather, it can only be understood in the light of what the Creator has to say in His Word. Rational and empirical philosophies assume that a complete and sufficient world view can be constructed by human speculation alone, while Christian realistic philosophy insists that an over-all view can be constructed only in the light of the plan and purpose of the Creator as it is set forth in His Word. While all truth is God's truth, its true significance is evident only in the light of special revelation.

Lest misunderstanding arise, a further word perhaps needs to be said concerning science and philosophy in a general sense. The Christian realistic thinker does not reject or deny the great constructive work of the various sciences. True philosophy must recognize and accept without question all scientific truth. We shall ever be in debt to the faithful work of the great scientists, many of whom live and move within the Christian framework, for their contribution to human knowledge, and to the betterment of mankind. All truth is God's truth and the scientists have been instrumental in making much of that truth known. However, this does not mean that the Christian realist, or any other thinker, has to accept all the claims of the various sciences as truth. Indeed, the true scientist is among the last to claim finality for many of his suggestions. Furthermore, the rapidity with which scientific theory has been changing in recent years should cause one to be extremely cautious before accepting as final many claims to scientific truth. Nevertheless, there is a great body of scientific knowledge, which, if not absolute in all respects, is tentatively correct, as well as being very useful and convenient in everyday experience. While a scientist may not be able to measure many of God's laws exactly, he can measure them with enough exactness to provide many things we prize highly.

Philosophers of both the past and present have no doubt been able to make many discoveries which may be referred to as true. The Christian realist does not mean to deny this fact either, but he does insist that the true meaning and purpose of scientific and philosophical discovery can only be seen in relation to the Truth which God has spoken concerning man's nature and his eternal destiny.

The Christian realist has a very definite reason for his insistence on the primacy of revelation in the attainment of truth. This is to be found in its teaching that man's natural reason is subject to certain limitations. Man as he is today is not man as he once was, nor man as he may become. Man in his natural state is fallen, sinful. He is living in a state of rebellion against his Creator so that he is unable to receive or to understand by natural means the Word which His Creator has spoken. Because of his alienation from his Creator, man has no true conception of the meaning and purpose of his existence. It is of no value to say, as Dr. Carnell does, that "the Bible defends the primacy of reason as the faculty through which all options must clear,"<sup>3</sup> since the natural man is in no position to under-

stand what the Biblical option is. Man is not self-sufficient, according to the Christian realistic philosophy, so that it is no use to present him with options as if he were. Revelation, it is true, was given to man for his edification, but the authority of this revelation is made known supernaturally, not naturally. It is God in the Person of the Spirit who changes the Christian view from a dead option into a living reality. The message which flows forth from the patriarchs, from the prophets, and finally from Jesus Christ is the ultimate ground, content, and standard of truth, but, in the last analysis, this message is self-authenticating. The assumption of revelation always means something beyond the validating domain of natural categories. To prove revelation would be to prove that there is no revelation. To experience revelation or the supernatural is quite another matter, and to experience we shall now direct our attention.

### Experience

Every world view is, in a very real sense, experiential. One can never know anything or about anything which does not enter into his conscious life. The Christian world view begins with a vital experience. It is an experience which is a matter of deepest conviction, never something arbitrary which one considers in an abstract fashion. The Christian way of life begins with the firm belief in the reality and truth of the Christian revelation. Moreover, this experience carries with it the conviction that it is not grounded in the natural order, but that in it God Himself is working through His Spirit. While the validity of this experience has been questioned by philosophers who live and move outside the Christian framework, the Christian realist believes that the actual inner working of the Spirit is present, and that it is basic to the Christian way of life. Mr. Casserley has said rightly that "the Christian must necessarily believe, and with passion, that his acknowledgment of the revelation of God in Christ is infinitely the most profound of his experiences, one which must touch his philosophy as vitally and imperiously as it touches all the other strands of his complex existence."<sup>4</sup> If the aim of a philosophy is to give a coherent account of experience as a whole, it is quite obvious that the Christian realist must take into account his experience of God in Christ. To leave it out would be to be most incoherent from his point of view.<sup>5</sup> The place of reason or intellect in the Christian philosophy becomes one, in part certainly, of setting forth the evidence for the validity of the basic experience; this matter will be taken up in more detail shortly. At this point we may insist, at least, that the reality of the initial experience of God in Christ through His illuminating Spirit is the foundation stone of the Christian world view. It is the Christian conviction that the great themes of life, of existence, of the eternal destiny of man, can be properly considered only when the essential Christian postulate is granted. "The Gospel," says Mr. Casserley, "provides that knowledge of ultimate truth which men have sought through philosophy in vain, inevitably in vain, because it is essential to the very nature of God that He cannot be discovered by the searching and probing of human minds, that He can only be known if He first takes the initiative and reveals Himself."<sup>6</sup>

From the Christian perspective the crisis of our day is seen as the outgrowth of anti-Christian philosophies. As science and philosophy are brought more and more to the service of atheistic and materialistic philosophies, our modern culture moves closer and closer to annihilation. There is much truth in the statement, attributed to Albert Einstein, who, when asked about possible weapons for a third world war, replied that he didn't know the answer to that question; but, he added, he was much more certain of the weapons to be used in a fourth world war, -- bows and arrows. From our perspective, a return to the Christian realistic philosophy seems absolutely essential for the survival of our present culture.

## Faith and Reason

The most perplexing problem of the Christian realistic philosophy is, without doubt, the proper understanding of the relation of faith and reason. Probably most of us will agree that after two millenniums of debate by the great minds of ages past a final, satisfactory solution has not been achieved. It is by no means our intention to suggest that success has now been reached. Such presumption has no place in true Christianity. We would proceed over rather familiar ground and simply remind ourselves once more of the general approach to the problem within the New Testament itself.

The problem of faith-reason is fairly evident. If we tend too much to faith and exclude the rational faculty, we are always in danger of religious fanaticism. If we stress too much the rational faculty to the exclusion of faith, we veer in the direction of rationalism. The problem for the Christian is to steer a fair course between Scylla and Charybdis, lest he find himself either worshipping at the shrine of fanaticism or bowing low before the goddess of reason. Let us look at each of these alternatives in turn before coming to what seems to be the Biblical way of bringing them together.

1. Reason to the Exclusion of Faith tending to Rationalism. The problem is stated in this fashion because it is in this way that it is generally conceived. There seems to be a misunderstanding at this point. In actual practice reason can never be divorced from faith, Immanuel Kant to the contrary notwithstanding. In practice, the man of science is a man of faith just as much as the man of religion. Scientists have faith in their own ability to arrive at cognitive judgments, they have faith in those with whom they work, they have faith in the truth of the discoveries of the past, and they have faith in the orderliness of the world with which they work, and so on.

It ought also to be observed that reason and rationalism are not identical terms by any means. By reason is meant man's intellectual faculty, a part or function of personality, which may be used for countless purposes. By rationalism (in religion) is meant the doctrine that human reason, unaided by divine revelation, is the adequate and sole guide to all attainable religious truth (Am. Col. Dict.) Rationalism is not the result of reason proceeding without faith, but rather, reason proceeding without the acceptance or the category of special revelation. Rationalism is not the result of the rejection of faith at all, but of the rejection of the possibility of a divine disclosure. It is simply the assertion that the intellectual ability of man himself is competent to arrive at all conclusions and to solve all problems which may relate to human existence. It follows that rationalism is subjective, for the individual is the authority, and there are about as many rationalistic systems as there are rationalists themselves.

The case of the rationalist against revelation can hardly be called a fair one. He does not endeavor to make a fair examination of the claims of revelation at all, but begins by setting up categories which would preclude its possibility. Furthermore, he ignores completely the experience of those who have experienced the reality which his own experience denies. His argument is far more emotional than rational, although the rationalist would hardly be expected to admit that.

2. Faith to the Exclusion of Reason tending to Fanaticism. Deep indeed are the pitfalls into which the religious man may fall if he neglects the function of the rational faculty. It seems, from a study of history, that

man's excesses have been mainly in this direction. Two general emphases may be observed, although the difference between them is a matter of degree, not of kind.

There is, first of all, fanaticism itself. The various forms which it assumes in our contemporary religious world are too well known to warrant detailed attention at this moment.<sup>7</sup>

The more subtle form is to be found in the nonrationalism so prevalent in contemporary theology. It presents faith as an escape from psychological tension, -- as a drowning man going down for the third time grasping after a straw, -- which is not at all the Biblical picture of the faith category. It is small wonder that a contemporary theologian remarked that if a first century Christian were to delve into some of the contemporary works in Biblical theology, so-called, he would not recognize this modern psychological conception of faith at all. The quiet trust of the New Testament has been replaced by the tension concept of our age. While it is claimed that God actually speaks in the faith-experience, the rejection of any objective revelation, and the denial of any possible external verification of the experience, leaves this world view in the position of an inescapable subjectivism. Man's rational faculty can offer no aid at all in the matter of religious experience. It would seem that the proponents of this type of Christian philosophy are saved from the extremes of fanaticism only by the vestigial remnants, consciously or unconsciously, of the rationalism against which it is in revolt. In this respect it might better be labeled an anti-rational world view rather than a revival of the Biblical world view as is so ardently claimed.

3. Faith-and-Reason. It is our conviction that in the New Testament faith and Reason are not separated but always related in proper order. The emphasis is on the primacy of the faith-experience, but never to the exclusion of the rational faculty. Some well-known references will make this point quite clear. Peter states the case quite simply when he says, "always be prepared to make a defence to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you . . ." (I Peter 3:15). John reminds us that we must not "believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world . . ." (I John 4:1). Paul likewise gives us the same advice when he tells us to "test everything; hold fast what is good . . ." (I Thess. 5:21). Many other references might be cited.

The Biblical pattern for the defence of the faith is well illustrated in the book of Acts. The apostles preached a message which arose out of their personal experience with Christ. Invariably the question arose, What evidence have you to show that your so-called experience is more than fanaticism? In each case they pointed to the fact of the living Lord. The resurrection was presented as the supreme evidence for the hope that was within them. We are not saying that men were saved because they were confronted with the resurrection, but that after they had come into a new relationship with God in Christ, the resurrection was presented as unanswerable evidence for the validity of their experience. Paul's great statement of the significance of the resurrection of Christ for the Christian world view must not be forgotten in this connection (I Cor. 15).

An incident from the life of our Savior may also be mentioned here as a case in point. It will be remembered that John the Baptist, while a prisoner, heard about the works of Jesus (Matt. 11:2-6). In spite of all that he had heard he seemed to have doubts as to whether Jesus was really the Messiah, so he sent disciples to ask of Him personally. Now, according to the teaching of some of our contemporary theologians, the evidence of

such doubt was little short of mortal sin. Yet, Jesus did not chide John for his unfaithfulness. Instead he pointed to the evidence, -- the mighty deeds of healing which were so clearly visible to all. We may be assured that John the Baptist was confirmed in his faith by the evidence presented to him.

### The Conversion Experience

We turn at last to that experience which is of first importance--the initial experience of man with the Spirit of God. While many Christians would agree that faith and reason are not to be divorced in the life of the Christian, they would definitely have doubts about the initial experience. Surely here is a place where the intellectual faculty plays no part.<sup>8</sup> Because human reason, apart from the work of the Spirit, is unable to bring man into a proper relation with God, may it not be inferred that reason plays no part in the act at all? The soundness of such a line of argument may be questioned. Because some professing Christians fail to provide a proper place for the work of the Spirit, attributing everything to man's intellect, this is hardly sound ground for swinging all the way to the other extreme and for insisting that reason plays no part at all.

An examination of the New Testament will show, we believe, that the challenge of the gospel is always to the whole personality, not to one aspect of it. Consider, for example, the "heart" of man. The term is used to mean not just the emotional side of life, but the rational and volitional as well, in other words, the whole personality. There is always some knowledge content present in a true religious judgment just as there is in a scientific judgment. Man cannot put his trust, in any real sense, in an object about which he knows nothing. B. B. Warfield writes that "it is not necessary for his act of faith that all the grounds of this conviction should be drawn into full consciousness and given the explicit assent of his understanding, though it is necessary for his faith that sufficient ground for his conviction be actively present and working in his spirit."<sup>9</sup> Faith always has some knowledge content.

Psychologically speaking, this is exactly as it should be. All three major aspects of personality are involved in every decision. Personality itself is not divided into separate compartments, as some of the older psychologies suggested, but is one indissoluble unit within which may be found certain aspects or emphases. The self acts in thirsting or desiring but it does not insist that all desires be attained. Man lives beyond the animal level of desire because there are other aspects to his personality. In human personality, the rational or intellectual faculty goes to work evaluating the desires. Finally the self is found willing or acting or choosing in the light of its rationalized desires. Thus feeling, intellect, and will are all involved and all work together in every experience of life. True action comes only after the alternatives of life have been weighed in some manner. We believe that the whole personality is involved in reaching the decision to embrace the Christian world view just as truly as it is involved in the other decisions of life. Augustine has well said that not all who believe reason, but he who reasons believes, for he believes in reasoning and reasons in believing. The Christian realistic philosophy builds upon the proper relating of believing and reasoning, of faith and intellect.

1. Our approach to the subject of Christian philosophy differs somewhat from that of certain other Christian thinkers. We object to what may be called the approach from natural theology. An example of this approach may be found in L. S. Keyser, The Philosophy of Christianity (Burlington, Iowa: The Lutheran Literary Board, 1928), where he says, "Moreover, we are not merely assuming out of hand, in the a priori fashion, a personal God as the First Cause. For having previously studied the cosmos, having regarded it as a whole and in many of its minutiae, we are practically driven to the conclusion that it must be the product of Intelligence; and, as far as we know anything, we know that intelligence can be predicted only of personal beings. Therefore, our assumption of a personal God is based upon a previous a posteriori investigation of many data . . . Now, having found good inductive reason for believing in a personal, all-wise, all-powerful and eternal God, we can try out this hypothesis deductively, to see whether it will explain the physical cosmos as we know it . . ." (28, et al). It seems hardly necessary to point out that empirical philosophers do not claim to find proof of a wise omnipotent, eternal God in nature; indeed, most empiricists have great difficulty finding any God at all. It is our contention that the God of Christian philosophy is the God who has disclosed Himself to us, and it is at that point that Christian philosophy must begin.

We object also to the coherence approach advocated by such Christian thinkers as E. J. Carnell, An Introduction To Christian Apologetics (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1948); also his A Philosophy of the Christian Religion (W. B. Eerdmans, 1952). Although Dr. Carnell has many fine things to say in both these volumes, his apparent basic assumption that Christianity can be shown to be the most rational or coherent world view must be questioned. Christianity would appear as most incoherent to one who rejects special revelation; nor can rational argumentation convince one of the truth of revelation. Instead of saying in the Preface to the latter volume, "Christianity is a coherent religion," he ought to have said, "Christianity is a coherent religion for the Christian." Furthermore, it should be added that he (the Christian) did not embrace Christianity because he found it to be the most coherent of all of life's competing options. The same general point of view is to be found in a recent book by G.H. Clark, The Christian View of Men and Things (W. B. Eerdmans, 1952). While Dr. Clark recognizes the weakness of coherence to aid in the choice between seemingly self-consistent yet incompatible world views yet he too seems to become a victim of the coherence fallacy when he says that "if one system can provide plausible solutions to many problems while another leaves too many questions unanswered, if one system tends less to skepticism and gives more meaning to life, if one world view is consistent while others are self-contradictory, who can deny us, since we must choose, the right to choose the most promising first principle?" (34). But how is this principle to be put into operation? One person says that naturalism offers the best solution to a particular set of problems; another insists that idealism alone deals with them adequately; while a third says that the Christian world view alone does the job. Who is to decide which system tends most or least to skepticism, the naturalist, the idealist, or the Christian? Who is to determine which view is consistent and which is self-contradictory? Sidney Hook? Edgar Sheffield Brightman? Or Gordon H. Clark? The significance of specific data is always relative to some world view.

2. I am indebted to Professor Stob's article, "The Word of God and Philosophy," in The Word of God and the Reformed Faith (Baker Book House, 1943) for some of the suggestions here.



3. Edward J. Carnell, A Philosophy of the Christian Religion, 183.
4. J. V. Langmead Casserley, The Christian in Philosophy (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 13.

It is at this point that coherence may have some special value. While it would be impossible to demonstrate that the Christian world view is the most coherent possible per se, it may be quite possible to show that the claims of the Christian philosophy are no more illogical than those of some contending world views. Its value would be more negative than positive or confirmatory. James Orr, for example, points out that the modern mind has rejected revelation and at the same time substitutes for it something hardly less fantastic. The modern man "goes back to the primitive state of things, and there, in that little speck of jelly at the first dawn of life, -- in that humble drop of protoplasmic matter buried in some oozy slime, -- he bids us believe that there lies wrapped up, only waiting for development, the promise and potency of the whole subsequent evolution of life. In that first germ-cell there lies enfolded -- latent -- not only the whole wealth of vegetable existence, not only the long procession of future races and species of lower and higher animals, with their bodily powers and mental instincts, but, in addition, the later possibilities of humanity; all that has now come to light in human development -- the wealth of genius, the riches of civilization, the powers of intellect, imagination, and heart, the treasures of human love and goodness, of poetry and art -- the genius of Dante, of Shakespeare, of Milton -- the spiritual greatness and holiness of Christ Himself; -- all, in a word, that has ever come out of man is supposed by the evolutionist to have been potentially present from the first in that primitive speck of protoplasm." The Christian View of God and the World (W. B. Eerdmans, 1948 reprint), 216.

6. Casserley, op. cit., 21.
7. The following accounts are examples of fanaticism in religion. Stuart, Va. (Sept. 4, 1949, Chicago Tribune). The report was that Mrs. B., mother of three children, has been discharged from the local hospital where she had been brought after she chopped off her left hand at the wrist, explaining, "The Lord told me to do it . . ." Her husband told the authorities that it happened after his wife had been reading the Bible for two days . . . Palmer Rapids, Ont. (Sept. 18, 1948, Chicago Tribune). The account reports the evidence submitted to the coroner's jury inquiring into the death of Violet G. It was told that she walked into the Madawaska River on August 22 because she was called by the "Holy Spirit." Her death took place at the height of a religious service at her farm home. They said she walked into the river after "receiving the blessing" at 4 A.M., at the end of seven hours of "praising the Lord." Her sister Viola who saw Violet go to her death in the moonlight, said she went for a boat to help her, but "I was pushed back by the Spirit."
8. For a very pertinent discussion of this problem, and one to which I am indebted, see J. W. Wenham, "The Place of Intellect in the Christian Faith," Jour. Trans. of Vict. Inst., LXXVII (1945), 1-18.
9. B.B. Warfield, "Apologetics," The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, I, 237.