

# Theology Matters

A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family, and Ministry

Vol 21 No 1 • Jan/Feb 2015

*Editor's note: We apologize for the absence of last year's September/October and November/December issues. Events beyond our control threw us off our publication schedule. In September the Rev. Sue Cyre retired as planned after 20 years of faithful service at the helm of Theology Matters. Unfortunately, her successor was unable to continue the work, due to unforeseen circumstances. The board of directors has designated me, Alan Wisdom, as interim editor while it resumes the search for a permanent editor and executive director. We are committed to carrying forward Theology Matters' mission of strengthening the church in the areas of doctrine, apologetics, and Christian worldview. In this issue we present two articles related to apologetics. William Dembski and Jay Richards discuss the importance of preparing Christians, especially seminary students, to defend their faith against the challenges that inevitably come. Steven Smith provides an example of apologetics in practice, as he addresses the question of whether morality can have a firm foundation apart from the biblical God.*

## Is God Irrelevant? by Steven D. Smith

In a small, posthumous book called *Religion Without God*,<sup>1</sup> the late Ronald Dworkin argues that morality does not need God. Though not himself a theist, in this book Dworkin does not argue against God's existence. The argument, rather, is that whether or not there is a God, He (or She, or It) is neither necessary nor even helpful in grounding or explaining moral goods and obligations.

Dworkin's position is hardly novel. As Mark Movsesian observes in a perceptive review,<sup>2</sup> the bottom-line argument goes back at least to Plato's *Euthyphro*. Dworkin himself thinks his conclusion follows closely and naturally from "Hume's principle"—namely, David Hume's famous claim that "ought" statements cannot be derived from factual or "is" statements<sup>3</sup> (including, presumably, statements that "It is a fact that God commands such and such"). (26-28) Philosophers have developed arguments essentially similar to Dworkin's but in more methodical and rigorous fashion.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this impressive pedigree, my own view is that this recurring argument for God's irrelevance reflects a misunderstanding of the way religious believers think God relates to "moral" principles and obligations. Dworkin's is thus another in a series of (quite possibly good faith) misconstructions of religion emanating from non-believers.<sup>5</sup> Because these misconstructions are then imported into discussions about the role of religion in public life and public discourse, it seems worth attempting to offer a more faithful account of "how God matters" from a theistic perspective. Of course not all theists share a uniform understanding of how God matters to morality—far from it. Nonetheless, I will try in this essay to offer an alternative account that I believe coheres with a great deal of what has been said and

### Table of Contents

Is God Irrelevant? .....	p. 1
Reclaiming Theological Education .....	p. 9

believed in the biblical tradition about God and about what we today call “morality,” and that illuminates the deficiencies in Dworkin’s account of morality and religion.

One caveat: like Dworkin’s book, this essay assumes, albeit only for purposes of argument, that some version of traditional theism is true. For those who find this possibility implausible, disagreeable,<sup>6</sup> or even inconceivable, the ensuing account of morality is likely to seem alien or unattractive. The essay’s goal, however, is not to persuade anyone of the truth of theism, but rather to consider how, for those who hold theistic beliefs, God is related to what we typically call morality.

### **The Independence of Goodness**

The basic question propounded in the *Euthyphro*, and to which Dworkin’s argument can be traced, could be put like this: Is something good because God approves or commands it? Or is it the other way around: does God approve or command things—actions, or rules of conduct, or personal characteristics—because they are good? Plato’s dialogue, though characteristically leaving the issue in suspense or aporia, seems calculated to suggest that the latter view is more tenable; and in any case most readers likely lean to that position. Murder and rape are not bad because God forbids them; rather, God forbids them because they are bad. Thus, goodness somehow exists independent of God. Indeed, the claim that “God is good” seems to presuppose as much; if goodness were identical with rather than independent of God, the claim would dissolve into an empty tautology.

But if goodness is independent of God, then it seems we do not need God in order to have, or to make judgments about, goodness—including goodness in actions, and in character (and also in laws and public policies). A good deed is good without regard to whether God approves it; a good person is good without reference to what God has commanded. In sum, morality, which concerns itself with good actions and good character, does not depend on God.

Even on this view, of course, God might still serve a useful role as an epistemic authority. Although God does not make things good, in other words, as an omniscient being God presumably would know what is (independently) good better than we fallible mortals do, and we might thus be well-advised to respect divine instructions as reliable indicators of the good. For the present, though, I think we need not pursue this possibility. That is because although most religious believers probably do accept God as an epistemic authority, they also think God is considerably more than that: God is not just some sort of counselor or

consultant whose moral advice we can confidently depend on.

Dworkin sometimes seems to suppose that what we can call the Euthyphro argument (supported in his presentation, as noted, by Hume’s objection to deriving *oughts* from *ises*) subverts or refutes the traditional religious believer’s understanding of the relation of God to morality. (22) This is an odd supposition, though, because it seems likely that most believers would readily agree that the statement “God is good” is not an empty tautology, and that God does not make actions or qualities good or bad by sheer fiat. A few believers—like William of Ockham, maybe—have held the sort of view that Dworkin apparently ascribes to traditional theists, but these have been the exceptional cases.

But if God does not make deeds or qualities good by approval or decree, then what exactly *is* the relation between God and morality? Why wouldn’t it follow, as Dworkin and company suppose, that God is irrelevant to morality (except, conceivably, in the peripheral supporting role of epistemic authority)?

### **How Should I Live?**

We can hardly hope to get clear about the relation of God to morality without saying something about what sort of thing “morality” is, and so we need to make a brief foray into the forbidding territory of metaethics. But contemporary work in metaethics is as likely to confound as to clarify; indeed, as Michael Smith has remarked, “if one thing becomes clear by reading what philosophers writing in meta-ethics today have to say, it is surely that enormous gulfs exist between them, gulfs so wide that we must wonder whether they are talking about a common subject matter.”<sup>7</sup> So let us try to sidestep some pitfalls and philosophical controversies, at least initially, by suggesting that we do not start out in life, most of us anyway, with a belief in some ethereal body of duties or prohibitions or Platonic forms or virtues called “morality” that we are somehow obligated to respect. What happens, rather, is that in going about our lives on a day-to-day, down-to-earth way we find ourselves up against a very practical, existential, inescapable question: *How should I live?*

You get out of bed, and you have to do *something* (because even going back to bed would be doing something), but should you first put on your clothes, or take a shower, or eat breakfast, or what? These trivial choices quickly issue into larger ones. Should you stay at home, or go to work? What work? After work, should you go home and watch TV, or go to visit your lonely but insufferably fussy grandmother? What about tomorrow? Next week? Next year? How should you—and how should I—live?

There is no getting around the question. And the most obviously cogent responses to that question have what is sometimes called a “subjective” quality. You and I—surely subjects, not mere objects—find that we have particular needs and desires. This is an observable fact. It is an observable fact as well that actions that fulfill these needs and desires bring satisfaction—satisfaction that we may call “pleasure,” or “contentment,” or maybe “happiness.” Pleasure and happiness are thus “good” (or, to use Dworkin’s preferred term, of “value”) in the very immediate sense that we in fact desire them, seek them, find them satisfying or fulfilling. They are thus directly relevant to the question “How should I live?” So if you get out of bed and ask, “How should I live?” (or, more likely, “What should I do now?”), I *could* respond with “the Bible says ...” or “Confucius taught ...” or “Kant’s analysis indicates ....” And then you might cogently reply, “So what? I don’t care about the Bible or Confucius or Kant. Can’t you please speak to *me*, about *my* question?” But if I respond, “You are hungry, so you should eat something; you’ll feel better,” I will at least have said something that is responsive to your question.

Could it be that *any* cogent response to the “How should I live?” question will be subjective in this sense—will appeal, in other words, to subjective needs and desires that we subjects in fact experience? Before disdainfully dismissing this suggestion, we should notice that subjective answers need not be as simple, or as simple-minded, as my examples thus far might suggest. On the contrary, subjective responses can take account of the many complexities of life. Let us notice three such familiar complexities.

First, even for a single individual, some desires and satisfactions can compete with others, thereby requiring the denial or deferral of some desires in order to satisfy other desires. You desire and would gain pleasure from eating the lemon pie, maybe, but you also know that this pleasure would be more than offset by the discomfort of feeling less healthy tomorrow.

Second, desires and satisfactions need not be—and at least for most human beings *are not*—limited to the physical gratification variety. You may desire and enjoy the taste of lemon pie, but you also desire and enjoy the satisfaction that comes with mastering the violin or the game of golf. And some powerful needs and desires arise from the fact that we are social animals. So you desire and enjoy the love and respect of your peers. And you want your loved ones to be happy: when they are miserable, *you* are miserable. Consequently, a subjective response to the question “How should I live?” need not dissolve down into narrowly self-directed hedonism; indeed, any such reduction would be implausible—

*empirically* implausible. That is just not how (most) people are constituted.

Third, subjective satisfactions are not all of the same kind, or all on the same level, so to speak: the physical gratification that comes from eating a piece of lemon pie is not the same as the aesthetic satisfaction that comes from hearing a Mozart symphony, or the intellectual satisfaction to be derived from a thoughtful, well-written book. And we value some forms of satisfaction more than others. We may say, for example, that “happiness” is more to be valued than mere “pleasure.” Having become familiar with these judgments, we are capable of imagining the possibility that there are kinds or levels of fulfillment that we have not yet experienced. Thus, a friend tells me that although I do not currently enjoy listening to Wagner or Puccini, if I will cultivate my aesthetic sensibilities I will be able to experience a level of musical enjoyment from opera that my current regimen of bluegrass music cannot deliver. I’m dubious; still, it is *possible* that he is right. His claim is something that I can at least understand.

These complexities lead to situations in which it makes complete sense to say, “You *want* to do X, but you shouldn’t; you *should* do Y.” Although doing X would provide some gratification, the “should” conveys the judgment that X is on balance inadvisable because it would prevent the realization of other, greater satisfactions. Such judgments are perfectly familiar, and they can account for statements that make use of the language of “should” or “ought,” and that set the “should” or “ought” in opposition to some other observation that we may convey with the vocabulary of “want.”

In reflecting on the choices that confront us, we might find it helpful to distinguish these more complex “should” judgments from other statements that comment on the more direct and simple satisfaction of immediate wants. If so, we might distinguish the complex judgments by employing an adjective like, say, ... “moral.” Why not? And, collecting such judgments, we might describe the collection as “morality.” Or we might reserve that term for some subset of the more complex judgments—those dealing with sexual matters, maybe, or those addressing our social nature and our relations to other people. The term can be—and is—used in various ways. But the important point is that this sort of account offers an explanation of the kinds of statements and judgments that we associate with “morality” without invoking anything ethereal or ontologically mysterious; it is grounded in our experienced (or experienceable) wants and needs and satisfactions *as subjects*. Morality is “subjective” *in this sense*.

Some accounts of morality do of course take this form; they are typically described as “utilitarian” or “consequentialist,” and they have been developed by theorists with great sophistication. Such accounts would seem to support Dworkin’s overall conclusion because, at least as we have sketched them thus far, they appear to make no reference to God. On the contrary, morality seems to be a purely human and even self-centered affair.

Dworkin himself would likely forswear the support of this sort of account, however, because, like many other thinkers, he finds a purely subjectivist account of morality inadequate. So before getting back to the question of God’s relation to morality, we need to push on a bit farther and notice the major objection to the subjectivist kind of account.

### **The Metaethical Dilemma: “Subjective” versus “Objective” Morality**

Statements about subjective needs and desires are responsive to the question “How should I live?” And as we have seen, it is possible to understand “morality” basically as a category covering some subset of such statements. Critics object, however, that this sort of utilitarian or consequentialist account does not faithfully capture what we understand “morality” to be.

But why not? One familiar objection observes that subjectivist accounts essentially make “morality” into a matter of self-interest—of extended or enlightened self-interest, perhaps, but still of self-interest—while we commonly think of “morality” as concerned with our obligations to other people. But this objection does not in itself seem decisive, so long as we understand that we are social beings whose needs and desires are in fact often other-directed. David Hume gave an extended account of a whole range of moral virtues in subjectivist terms by emphasizing that we are inherently social beings who feel “sympathy” toward our fellow humans.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the more incisive objection asserts that subjectivist accounts make morality *contingent*, whereas we usually understand moral principles and duties to be more *categorical*. The proposition that “slavery is wrong” is true, we think, and it is and was true for all people at all times regardless of what they believed, just as it was always true that the earth is and was round even when many people thought it was flat. Nor did the truth of the proposition that “slavery is wrong” rest on some toting up and balancing out of the various pleasures (of masters, for example) and pains (of slaves) that the institution produced.

Critics of utilitarian ethics have developed standard examples to illustrate the point. What if some petty

despot tells you, and means it, that he is going to execute ten innocent men unless you yourself will murder one of them. Even though the murder being urged upon you would seem to maximize human welfare, some will still consider it wrong.<sup>9</sup> Or what if we could know, maybe through brain scanning techniques, that a rapist would get more pleasure from his deed than the pain that would be inflicted on the victim? The rape would still be wrong.<sup>10</sup> These examples are calculated to show that *moral* goodness and badness are not mere matters of calculating effects on human happiness. Or so goes the objection. Human wants and needs are simply too contingent to support the more categorical duties and prohibitions that we ascribe to morality.

The objection is sometimes made with the use of Kant’s distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives.<sup>11</sup> A hypothetical imperative says, “If you want A, you should do B.” Anyone can escape that sort of instrumentalist injunction either by denying the “if” premise (“Well, I don’t care about A”) or by denying the connection between premise and conclusion (“I do want A, but I think I can have it without doing B”). A *moral* duty should not be so easily defeasible; it should be categorical in nature. It should obligate regardless of what a particular person may happen to want.

The point is sometimes secured by imagining an unsavory character whom we might call “the pure egoist.” By hypothesis, the egoist lacks the sort of “sympathy” or “fellow feeling” that Hume relied on; he reports, sincerely, that he gains genuine satisfaction from taking whatever he wants and using people in any way he can so as to get more wealth, power, or physical gratification. And he is clever enough to know how to do such things with only a negligible risk of being caught or punished. Other less selfish people might feel remorse for such conduct, of course, or they might lament the lack of deep and genuine friendships that this sort of life precludes—but not the egoist: he doesn’t care. So unless we cheat by sneaking in some non-subjective moral duty to act for the benefit of others, then it seems that on subjectivist premises the egoist *ought to* steal, exploit, and abuse whenever he can profitably do so.

This conclusion seems unacceptable, though, even scandalous, and this and related embarrassments lead some thinkers to reject subjectivist accounts of morality in favor of more “objective” or “realist” understandings. Dworkin is very much in this vein. He asserts “the full independence of value”—meaning independence from subjective desires and judgments. (18) And he emphatically rejects the idea that “value judgments are in the end only subjective.” On the contrary, “[o]ur felt conviction that cruelty is wrong is a conviction that

cruelty is *really* wrong; we cannot have that conviction without thinking that it is objectively true.” (20, emphasis added) In moving to an “objective” or “realist” version of morality, Dworkin has plenty of distinguished company (among both secular and religious thinkers).

But objectivist accounts of morality encounter their own familiar embarrassments. Here we may notice two especially serious ones. The first problem is ontological in nature; it is what J. L. Mackie famously described as the problem of “queerness,” or what contemporary philosophers more often describe with a term like “spooky.” It is easy enough to *say*, that is, that morality is “objective” or “real”: but what kind of “object” is it? Once we detach it from subjective human wants, needs, desires (or from something like divine commands), what sort of “reality” is there left for morality to be? Some sort of weird ethical ether floating around in the air? Surely not. But what then? As Mackie put it, “[i]f there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe.”<sup>12</sup>

Philosophers inclined to moral realism have sometimes tried to deal with this difficulty by saying that morality “supervenes” upon natural facts without being quite identical to those facts,<sup>13</sup> or that morality is a “non-natural” reality or property.<sup>14</sup> Dworkin himself scoffs at some of these proposals: he does not think purely naturalistic accounts (such as those of the supervenience theorists) are adequate (6), he denies that morality is part of “the fabric of the universe,”<sup>15</sup> and he mocks the idea that there is some sort of moral substance (such as particles that we might describe as “morons”).<sup>16</sup> But although it is all well and good to say that morality *isn't* any of those “spooky” things, we are still left to wonder exactly what morality *is*.

A second problem that afflicts objectivist accounts of morality might be called the problem of motivation. Suppose that a moral realist can articulate an adequate account of the ontological status of “morality.” Maybe morality is some sort of ethereal reality that, though “non-natural” or spooky, can nonetheless be rendered intelligible. Or maybe morality is after all constituted by the “morons”—the special moral particles—that Dworkin mocks. Contrary to all expectations, maybe, such particles are discovered in some new version of a particle accelerator radically enhanced to detect “non-natural” realities, and those particles can be shown to bombard some actions (compassionate ones, maybe) in heavier doses than they touch other actions. So morality is “objective” and “real” after all, and we have even figured out what sort of objective reality it is. But now the question is: why should anyone care? Since by hypothesis morality has been detached from people’s

subjective needs and desires, what difference should it make to them, or to us—us subjects—that some objective “morality” purports to command or prohibit such-and-such? Why should we let some impersonal and ontologically spooky entity boss us around? Why should we even care what *it* thinks?—especially since, being impersonal, it *doesn't* think, and doesn't even know when we have violated its injunctions.

We might put this point in another way. If we say that moral obligations or prohibitions are “objective” and are not grounded in people’s subjective needs and desires, then there could in principle be situations in which we could say, “Doing X will make you (or us, or society, or everybody, or whomever we think the relevant population is) happier, but it would be wrong. Doing Y will leave you (or us) less happy and prosperous, but it would be the right thing to do.” In this situation, why on earth—or, for that matter, in heaven—should anyone ever choose moral but less happy Y over immoral but happier X?

These two problems—of ontological status, and of motivation—tend to converge. That is because defenders of “objective morality” are prone to say that the reason someone should perform a morally indicated action, regardless of his or her subjective desires, is that the action possesses the property of “have-to-be-doneness,” or something of that sort. But that property seems exquisitely “queer,” as Mackie put it, or “spooky.” To be sure, our ontological inventories typically have room for properties of various sorts: hot and cold, light and heavy, swift and slow, radiant and dark. But “have-to-be-doneness”? Seriously? And even if we do postulate such a spooky property, it is not clear that the problem of motivation is thereby solved. Okay, so I omitted to do some action that possessed “have-to-be-doneness” as a property. If you and I and everyone else are happier for my omission, then once again: why should anybody care?

In sum, our efforts to explain what sort of thing morality is seem to lead us up to a dilemma. We started without presupposing anything about the nature of “morality” but instead with a very practical and inescapable question: How should I live? One kind of answer to that question is “subjective” in the sense that it appeals to subjective needs and desires that people in fact have. This kind of subjective answer, we saw, can provide an account of the kinds of complex “ought” statements that we typically associate with morality, and it has the immense advantages of being responsive to the initial and driving question—How should I live?—and of not positing any sorts of realities beyond the ones we encounter every day: human beings, their experienced needs and desires, the satisfaction they obtain when these needs and desires are fulfilled. But the “oughts”

generated by subjective accounts seem to be contingent and defeasible, not categorical in the way we typically think moral “oughts” are. This difficulty may push us to suppose that morality must be something “objective” or “real,” not grounded in and reducible to human needs and desires. But then it becomes very difficult to say just what sort of reality “morality” is, or why we should care about it.

### **How God Helps (and *Doesn't* Help)**

Which brings us back to the question of God’s relation to morality. One possible position at this point would connect morality to God’s commands. This position would have the advantage of making moral duties “objective” at least in the sense that they would be independent of *human* needs and desires. A divine command account might also explain in what sense morality is real: it is real in the same sense that the President’s executive orders are real. (All this assumes, of course, that God is real: if there is no God, then on this account it would seem to follow that, as Dostoyevsky’s character Ivan says, “everything is permitted.”<sup>17</sup>) Dworkin seems to suppose that this is the account of morality that theists are committed to. But as discussed above, this “divine command” account runs squarely into the Euthyphro problem. Nor does it seem to be the view that most believers in the Judeo-Christian tradition have taken.

So we should consider another possibility: perhaps God supports morality not by making it “objective” but rather by sustaining and extending its “subjective” quality in a way that eliminates the apparent contingency and thereby deflects the objections made against subjectivist accounts. Recall that a central objection asserts that subjectivist accounts leave morality too contingent. Morality seems to consist of “if/then” propositions (“If you want X, then do Y”) that can be defeated either by denying the “if” condition or by doubting the instrumentalist connection between X and Y. But perhaps God’s function is to reinforce both the conditional and the connection so that the imperative is no longer contingent in an objectionable sense.

There is a common version of this response, however, that will again lead us astray. The common version understands the religious position to be distinctive in supposing that God enforces moral duties or prohibitions by promises of rewards for compliance and of punishments for deviation. To “Thou shalt not commit adultery” God adds: “And if thou dost, thou shalt burn in hell; but if thou refrainest and keepest thyself chaste, thou shalt be rewarded with a celestial mansion.” However plausible or implausible this account of God’s function may be, though, this sort of supplementation is no help with the metaethical problem we have been considering. That is because, in

this view, it is still not God who makes adultery bad or wrong, chastity good or right. God enforces the rule or, if you like, incentivizes us to comply with the rule. But the goodness of chastity, or honesty, or compassion is still independent of God. And we still have the problem of accounting for that goodness in subjectivist or objectivist terms—with the embarrassments that attend each of those strategies.

It is more helpful, I would suggest, to think of God as supporting and fulfilling the subjectivist account in a different and less peripheral way. Despite vast variations in doctrine and theology, in the Western religious traditions the following beliefs are widely (though not universally) accepted. First, God created the universe. Second, God created the universe for a purpose, and with a design for achieving that purpose. Third, God’s purpose for the universe is a supremely and inclusively good purpose—good in the sense that it involves the achievement of the blessedness of God’s creatures.

This framework of beliefs about life and the universe is vastly different from a secular framework, which does not accept any of these propositions, and which instead views life largely as a fortunate (or perhaps unfortunate) accident without any encompassing purpose or plan. Moreover, the religious framework operates to remove the otherwise debilitating contingencies of the subjectivist accounts of morality.

As we have noticed, on non-theistic assumptions the subjectivist account seems contingent because a critic might (sincerely) deny either the “if” conditional (“If you want X, do Y”) or the instrumentalist connection between X and Y. To the first sort of denier—i.e., to someone who denies the conditional by asserting that “I don’t care about being happy”—the theistic position suggests that the denial, however sincere, is mistaken.<sup>18</sup> Someone might *say*, or even *think*, that she doesn’t want to be happy. But the theistic view responds that there is a kind of happiness or fulfillment that she may not have experienced but that she is capable of experiencing; and if she does experience it, she will find it to be supremely satisfying.

Of course, this sort of counsel is common enough even in non-religious contexts. Parents plead with wayward children that they will regret the condition to which their actions seem to be leading them. On the positive side, I have already mentioned the friend who assures me that if I will just work at it, I will come to enjoy the aesthetic satisfactions of opera. Often these sorts of predictions are correct. But in a non-religious context, such counsel is always vulnerable to the rebuttal: “Who are you to tell me what I want? Don’t I know myself—and know what I like and don’t like—better than you

do?” In a theistic context, by contrast, the counsel is validated by the fact that by hypothesis it proceeds from the One who created everything, and who knows the creatures (including the denier) better than they know themselves, and who also completely understands the overall design and purpose. Thus, the religious prediction that “If you do X, you’ll experience a kind of joy that you’ll find supremely satisfying” is not like the prediction of pundits, even learned and astute ones, forecasting the outcome of an election, or a game. The pundits are at most fallible epistemic authorities. But the religious counsel is more like a prediction about the outcome of a novel when the prediction is given *by the author*. The author is not merely an epistemic authority; she is the one who has constructed the world of the novel (or is in the process of constructing it), and who knows how it works because she is the one who made or is making it.

For a similar reason, the theistic response to the second kind of denier—namely, the person who admits that she desires the postulated goal (such as happiness) but who doubts that behaving in ways ordained as moral is the best way to achieve that goal—is reinforced by the premise of a design or plan governing life and the universe. Just as the designer of a program or system knows what sorts of procedures will lead to what sorts of results within the system, God, as the supreme designer, knows what actions will lead to what sorts of consequences.

A further point is crucial. The usual Christian or Jewish responses to both sorts of deniers maintain that there are levels of satisfaction or fulfillment, and that part of the function of living in ways deemed virtuous or “moral” is to form persons’ character so that they are capable of experiencing such higher fulfillment. Again, there are plenty of mundane analogies. Once again, a friend thinks I can experience greater aesthetic satisfaction from opera—but only if I cultivate my currently undeveloped or unrefined musical sensibilities. I should go to this evening’s lecture and to tomorrow’s performance not because I will immediately enjoy them, but because these exercises will help me develop so that I can experience the joys of opera at some time in the future. Or the literature professor explains that there is more beauty and insight in Shakespeare than in a TV sitcom—but this is accessible only to those who have learned to understand Elizabethan English and who work to appreciate the literary devices and themes that Shakespeare employed. Or perhaps there is a kind of fulfillment in fidelity to spouse and children that the man who limits himself to a series of more casual sexual encounters cannot grasp; but that fulfillment requires effort and the cultivation of character. The shallow hedonist thrown into the midst of family life will find that life dull and suffocating.

Religious interpretations of morality typically make central this idea of levels of fulfillment and the associated commitment to the cultivation of character (or reception of grace) so as to be able to experience such higher satisfactions. Some levels of satisfaction may be thought to exceed the capabilities of most people in this present world. “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.”<sup>19</sup> And the ultimate fulfillment is thought to inhere in a loving relationship with God himself, at least for those who make themselves or are made capable of such a relationship. Thus, the first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What is the chief end of man?” and the answer is: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, *and to enjoy him forever.*”<sup>20</sup> The Catholic catechism elaborates:

Desire for true happiness frees man from his immoderate attachment to the goods of this world so that he can find his fulfillment in the vision and beatitude of God. “The promise [of seeing God] surpasses all beatitude.... Whoever sees God has obtained all the goods of which he can conceive.”<sup>21</sup>

In this understanding, God stands to goodness not as a Commander handing out orders, but rather as a Friend whom it is a supreme joy to be with. Countless Christian hymns celebrate this idea. “Jesus, Lover of My Soul.” “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring.”

Thus, to the egoist who insists, sincerely, “I genuinely enjoy the power, wealth, and physical gratification that I gain from cheating, stealing, and exploiting, and despite all your moralizing I can attest that this enjoyment is not offset by any feelings of remorse or aloneness,” the theistic response is *not* “Maybe so, but you still shouldn’t do those things because they are (objectively) wrong.” Neither is the response: “You may be happy *for now*, but just wait: God will punish you.” Or if those responses are sometimes given, they should be understood as shorthands for or adolescent-accessible versions of a more full account. And that more full account would go like this: “You may in fact enjoy the gains of your behavior. But these are shallow and ephemeral pleasures. And there are higher levels of satisfaction—of joy—that you may not now experience, but that you *can* experience if you develop your character by living in a more virtuous or exalted way. If you do that, you will come to understand that those satisfactions are far more fulfilling than the petty gratifications that occupy you at present.”

The egoist might not believe this response, of course; he might dismiss it as “pie in the sky” nonsense. Nothing

in this essay precludes that sort of dismissal: once again, the essay has not attempted to show that the theistic position is *true*. And if the theist is wrong “on the facts,” so to speak, his account of morality will be irreparably damaged; that is because in a subjectivist account, questions of “value” cannot be neatly detached from questions of “fact” in the way Dworkin supposes. (22-25)

For purposes of this essay, the important point is only that the theistic position does not try to avoid the objections to subjectivist morality, as Dworkin and others seem to suppose, by positing an “objective” morality, binding on us whether we like it or not, that somehow derives from God’s commands. Rather, the theistic position is profoundly subjectivist in character; it is super-subjectivist, or a sort of super-ideal utilitarianism, if you like. Theism removes the contingencies from the subjectivist account by making the goods to be sought and the ways of obtaining those goods parts of (*a personal*) God’s design and thus built into human nature and existence. Perhaps both the “if” and the “then” in moral imperatives are still *logically* contingent—we can imagine that things could be otherwise—but they are not contingent *in fact*. So they are no more and no less contingent than, say, the law of gravity. And God figures in this scheme not mainly as Commander but rather as Creator, Designer, and Sustainer, and, ultimately, consummate Friend. “[I]n thy presence is fullness of joy,” says the Psalm; “at thy right hand are pleasures for evermore.”<sup>22</sup> “I am come,” Jesus says, “that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”<sup>23</sup>

### **The Great Divide**

Dworkin argues that not only morality but also religion can get along without God. In itself, that claim is hardly provocative. “Religion” can be and is defined in a variety of ways, and it is a commonplace that some “religions” are non-theistic. Our previous discussion, however, raises doubts about Dworkin’s way of dividing religion from non-religion.

Defining religion in terms of two commitments—to the objective meaningfulness or value of human life and to the sublimity of nature (10)—Dworkin suggests that he and traditional theists are allies, in opposition to people (like Richard Dawkins) who think that the only kinds of value are “subjective” in character. (5-6, 12-13, 41-43) But this essay has argued that theists in the Christian and Jewish traditions need not and typically do not reject a subjectivist conception of value, but rather embrace and extend that conception by believing in a divine design and purpose culminating in goods that may be transcendent but are still profoundly “subjective” in character.

So then what *is* the salient philosophical and cultural divide that separates the “religious” from the “non-religious”? I would suggest that rather than using “objective value” to draw the line of demarcation, we would do better to take a suggestion from Plato. In the *Laws*, a character described as the Athenian and seemingly a spokesperson for Plato himself sketches two fundamentally different views of the world. The more common view is propagated by “experts—as our young people regard them—who teach that ‘fire and water, earth and air [are] ... the first of all substances’ and that ‘soul ... was derived from them, at a later stage.’” Thus, the universe and everything in it comes about by “neither intelligent planning, nor a deity, nor art, but ... by nature and chance.” The other view, favored by the Athenian, holds that “soul” is “born long before all physical things, and is the chief cause of all their alterations and transformations.”<sup>24</sup>

In the Jewish and Christian traditions, what Plato describes abstractly as “soul” becomes a transcendent Person, whose essence is Love. Thus, life and the universe are the creation of, and are governed by, a mindful and loving Person. The personal—the subjective—is primary; the objective is secondary and derivative. And the whole is suffused with purpose, and love. Dworkin, it seems, largely sides with the first view described by Plato. To be sure, he criticizes and rejects the prevailing “naturalism” exemplified by thinkers like Dawkins, and he speaks of “transcendental” value, of “sublimity” in the universe, of the “numinous,” and even of “supernatural” realities. (6, 10, 12-13, 42) But these departures from naturalism, it seems, apply only to matters of “value.” In what we might call his basic cosmology, Dworkin gives no indication that he is not pretty much in agreement with Dawkins. In Dworkin’s “religion without God,” there is evidently no designer and hence no mindful design; rather the universe somehow came into existence without the exertion of any active mind or person, and in its unguided unfolding it has somehow thrown up or evolved a variety of things, including persons, and also including something that is real though ontologically elusive called “value.” This cosmological picture seems closer to Dawkins than to Aquinas, Maimonides, or the Bible.

The great divide, in sum, at least in Western patterns of thought, is not between people who believe in “objective” value and those who merely accept “subjective” value. The divide, rather, is between those who think that the universe, including the world of humanity, is the product of a loving and intelligent author or designer who created it according to a plan and for a good purpose, on the one hand, and on the other those who reject the belief in any guiding intelligence and any encompassing and mindful plan. That is a difference with profound implications for most



of the great issues of life (including, almost certainly, issues implicating law and politics). And although cooperation and dialogue are surely to be encouraged, as Dworkin proposes, it would seem that in relation to that divide, the company to which Dworkin belongs or belonged must still converse with more traditional theists from opposite sides of the chasm.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God* (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Movsesian, *Religion without God*, <http://clrforum.org/2013/10/31/religion-without-god/>.

<sup>3</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, vol. III, pt. I, sec. 1, at pp. 469-70 (L. A. Selby-Bigge ed. 2d ed. 1978).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., David O. Brink, *The Autonomy of Ethics*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* 149 (Michael Martin ed. 2007); Michael S. Moore, *Good Without God*, in *Natural Law, Liberalism and Morality* 221 (Robert P. George ed. 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Waldron observes that “[s]ecular theorists often assume that they know what a religious argument is like: they present it as a crude prescription from God, backed up with threat of hellfire, derived from general or particular revelation. . . . With this image in mind, they think it obvious that religious argument should be excluded from public life.” Waldron pronounces this description a “travesty.” Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality* 20 (2002).

<sup>6</sup> For example, Thomas Nagel, to whom Dworkin’s book appears to be dedicated, candidly acknowledges: “It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope that I’m right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.” Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* 130 (1997).

<sup>7</sup> Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* 3 (1994).

<sup>8</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, in *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* 167, 212-84 (L. A. Selby-Bigge ed. 3d ed. 1975).

---

<sup>9</sup> The example is discussed in Bernard Williams, *A Critique of Utilitarianism*, in J. J. C. Smart & Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* 77, 98-99 (1973).

<sup>10</sup> See David Lyons, *Ethics and the Rule of Law* 34 (1984).

<sup>11</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* 82-84 (H. J. Paton tr. 1947).

<sup>12</sup> J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* 38-42 (1977).

<sup>13</sup> See Michael Moore, *Moral Reality Revisited*, 90 *Mich. L. Rev.* 2424, 2442, 2450 (1992).

<sup>14</sup> G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* 6-21 (1903).

<sup>15</sup> See Ronald Dworkin, *Objectivity and Truth: You’d Better Believe It*, 25 *Phil. & Pub. Affairs* 87, 99, 105 (1996).

<sup>16</sup> See Ronald Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs* 32, 36 (2011).

<sup>17</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* 817 (Amber R. MacAndrews tr. 1984).

<sup>18</sup> Christians may explain such mistakes in part by invoking distortions in our nature sometimes associated with “the Fall.”

<sup>19</sup> I Corinthians 2:9.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.reformed.org/documents/WSC.html> (emphasis added).

<sup>21</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2548, p. 610 (1994).

<sup>22</sup> Psalm 16:11.

<sup>23</sup> John 10:10.

<sup>24</sup> Plato, *The Laws* 889b-892c, in *Plato, Complete Works* 1318, 1546-49 (John M Cooper ed., Trevor J. Saunders tr. 1997).

---

*This article is reprinted with permission from Boston University Law Review, July 2014. Steven D. Smith is Warren Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of San Diego.*

## Reclaiming Theological Education by William A. Dembski and Jay W. Richards

In 1943 Christian apologetics was still a required course at Princeton Theological Seminary. In 1944 apologetics was no longer offered even as an elective. Except for sporadic references to it, apologetics ceased to be part of the seminary curriculum. Princeton was not alone in abandoning apologetics. Indeed, a person would be

hard-pressed to find a denominational seminary that includes it today. For post-Enlightenment liberalism the very idea of rational argument on behalf of the Christian faith is offensive.

And yet, throughout Scripture, Christians are enjoined to defend the faith through rational argument. Thus Peter urged, “Always be ready to make your defense [apologia] to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:15). Paul understood his own ministry as constituting a “defense [apologia] and confirmation [bebaiosis] of the gospel” (Phil 1:7). The Greek *apologia* denotes a legal defense, and *bebaiosis* means “verification” or “proof.”

### The Demise of Apologetics

Rational argument used to be regarded as an ally of the Christian faith, but this changed 200 years ago during the Enlightenment. The father of liberal theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher, epitomized this change when he remarked, “We entirely renounce all attempts to prove the truth or necessity of Christianity; and we presuppose, on the contrary, that all Christians ... have already the inward certainty that their religion cannot take any other form than this.” Karl Barth continued this negative attitude toward apologetics into our own day (cf. his *Church Dogmatics* 1/1).

Are Schleiermacher and Barth right? Throughout the book of Acts we find that Paul does not merely *proclaim* the gospel, hoping to score a conversion here and there. Instead he actively *persuades* people of the truth of the gospel, striving to convince both the hearts and the minds of his listeners. Indeed, it is instructive to trace the Greek *peitho*, the verb that means to persuade, through the book of Acts. Active persuasion, and not bald assertion, characterize Paul’s ministry.

The failure of the mainline denominations to take Christian apologetics seriously is at least in part responsible for the steady decline of these denominations, not only in size but also in vision. At stake in apologetics is the question whether Christianity is true—objectively true. “Objective truth” is a dirty word these days. It is chic to relativize, contextualize, and politicize the truth of the gospel. On the other hand, it is terribly gauche to cramp our free-swinging academic style by giving credence to objective truths, which by their nature are obligatory across the board and thus not subject to our control.

Lay people with the good fortune not to have been educated out of their good senses want to know whether the fundamental claims of Christianity are objectively true. A Christ who is merely a social or political or ethical construction does not interest them—and rightly so. Miguel de Unamuno’s definition of belief in God is too thin a soup on which to nourish a vibrant Christian faith: “To believe in God is to long for His existence, and, further, it is to act as if He existed.” To desire that God exists and to act as though God existed express but

a vague hope. Does God actually exist? And more to the point, who is this God? And how can we know anything about this God? These are questions people need answered if their faith is to be sustained and strengthened.

By jettisoning apologetics from their seminary curricula, the mainline denominations have undermined the training of their ministers. Errors and confusions taught at seminary propagate not only up the denominational hierarchy but also down to the grassroots. Lay people these days scratch their heads at the theological disarray of their denominations. They are amazed because what was unthinkable only a few years back is now considered normal. What with Union Seminary in New York holding a voodoo chapel service, Harvard Divinity School offering a theology class in which students are taught that the Virgin Mary was raped by God, and Princeton Theological Seminary’s gay-lesbian caucus stuffing the campus mailboxes with a flier showing two men in the Garden of Eden and with a caption reading “God created Adam and Steve,” it is hardly surprising when today’s pastors are more confused than their congregations.

In response to this theological malaise, a group of students at Princeton Theological Seminary, organized as the Charles Hodge Society, decided to offer a weekly seminar on Christian apologetics known as the Princeton Apologetics Seminar. These seminars began in the spring of 1995 and continued through 2011. Semester themes for the seminar included the authority of Scripture, Christian missions, and Christianity’s cultured despisers. The essays in the book *Unapologetic Apologetics* (IVP, 2001) are largely taken from that seminar. The book includes those essays for two reasons: (1) to strengthen the faith of seminarians and other Christians who struggle with the theological disarray of our times, and (2) to provide an example of what a student group can do on a seminary campus to combat false and destructive ideas.

Besides starting an apologetics seminar, the Charles Hodge Society also reinstated the *Princeton Theological Review*, a journal founded by Charles Hodge but disbanded by the seminary in the 1920s. *The Princeton Theological Review* has published many of the papers presented at the Princeton Apologetics Seminar.

In adopting Charles Hodge’s name, the Charles Hodge Society wished to recognize his towering presence in the early history of Princeton Theological Seminary. Charles Hodge was the premier American theologian in the nineteenth century. Unlike today, when theology is considered a second-class discipline readily ignored by the cultural movers and shakers, scientists and

statesmen alike eagerly awaited Hodge's wisdom on everything from slavery to Darwinism. The Charles Hodge Society wished to recognize his outstanding role in stimulating the intellectual and spiritual life of the seminary and of our nation.

### **Fundamentalism and Accommodationism**

Martin Luther once noted that "we can get along without burgomasters, princes, and noblemen, but we can't do without schools, for they must rule the world." If we take seriously that Christianity embodies humanity's chief truth—that God was in Christ Jesus reconciling the world to himself—then the most important school of all is the seminary. The seminaries teach our ministers who in turn teach their congregations about Jesus Christ. Whether they do so faithfully and truthfully depends on the training they receive at seminary.

The Roman statesman Seneca observed, "If you want a man to keep his head when crisis comes, you must give him some training before it comes." Seminary breeds many a crisis of faith. It is common for young men and women who are enthusiastic about serving God to go to seminary, lose their heads, and turn away from the truth of Christianity. Since Christian symbols are easily reinterpreted within secular categories, often a form of Christianity remains. But once seminarians come to view orthodox Christianity as simplistic, biblicist, or morally deficient—as is regularly taught at the mainline seminaries—loss of faith is inevitable. Students need to be equipped to handle the assaults on heart and mind that they encounter at seminary. For this reason apologetics is indispensable in the education of Christian ministers and in turn must be taught to members and youth in local congregations.

What will it take to reinvigorate Christian apologetics and thereby help reclaim theological education? We need to cultivate a certain attitude. Our work as Christian apologists must be of the highest quality and rigor to deserve the respect of the secular academic community. Yet at the same time we must view any respect we actually receive from this community as inconsequential. Our attitude must combine two competing ideas: the desire to produce work worthy of respect and a repudiation of any desire for actual acceptance or respectability.

Why is this attitude so important? To transform mainline seminaries in particular and the secular academic world in general, the Christian apologist must steer clear of two obstacles. One obstacle is fundamentalism, which assumes all conceptual problems facing Christianity are easily resolved. The other obstacle is accommodation to the prevailing secular ideologies, which gives up so much ground as to

lose any robust Christian witness. Fundamentalism prevents us from doing the quality work that's needed to deserve the respect of the secular world. On the other hand, accommodationism is so caught up in gaining the respect of the secular academic world that it loses its integrity as a Christian witness.

Consider an analogy. In earlier centuries actors were classified with thieves, prostitutes, and pimps—the scum of society. Actors, and entertainers generally, make their living by pleasing an audience. As a result they are easily tempted to prostitute their art to the all-too-often debased tastes of their audiences. This temptation is so strong that many entertainers succumb, with the result that the profession has traditionally been viewed as scandalous.

The temptation to prostitute ourselves, which is so evident in the entertainment industry, is equally a danger to Christian scholars. There is only one way for Christians to resist this temptation and that is to accept fully the offense of the gospel. Christian apologetics must never be divorced from the offense of the gospel. The secular academy sets ground rules that doom Christianity from the start. For Christian apologists to play by these rules, whether in the name of ecumenism or pluralism, is to capitulate the faith.

That said, our response as Christian apologists must not be to stick our heads in the sand and mechanically repeat a creed. We are to engage the secular world, reproving, rebuking, and exhorting it, pointing to the truth of Christianity and producing strong arguments and valid criticisms that show where secularism has missed the mark.

Will we be appreciated? Hardly. The Pharisees of our day—those who know themselves to occupy the moral high ground—reside preeminently in the academic world. The Pharisees killed Jesus and are just as ready to destroy our Christian witness if we permit it. Nevertheless, this is our calling as Christian apologists, to bear witness to the truth, even to the point of death (be it the death of our bodies or the death of our careers). The church has a name for this—martyrdom. The early church considered martyrdom the highest Christian calling. Martyrdom was counted an honor and privilege, a way of sharing in Christ's sufferings and living out the Christian life in its most logical and complete form.

Christian apologetics that's worthy of the name is a call to martyrdom—perhaps not a martyrdom where we spill our blood but a martyrdom where we witness to the truth without being concerned about our careers, political correctness, the current fashion, or toeing the party line. We are not called to please the world; we are

called to proclaim the truth within whatever context and conventions we find ourselves.

### **Quietism, Imperialism, and Engagement**

There is another set of twin obstacles that the Christian apologist must avoid—quietism and imperialism. Quietism is the view that the proper response of the Christian toward the world is to wait things out. According to quietism this world is a bad place, in fact so bad a place that our best strategy is to sidestep the world as much as possible. Quietism tries to make it through life unscathed. This approach to the Christian life is a great temptation in our day. Feeling beleaguered by so many hostile forces in our society, we like nothing better than to retreat into a fortress. But this is precisely what the Christian may not do. Christian scholarship has no place in a ghetto.

We have Jesus' own example in this matter. Consider how Jesus began his ministry: "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news'" (Mk 1:14-15). Jesus insists that people change the way they think and act. To a generation that regards religion as a harmless backwater having no real cognitive claims, this is the height of presumption. Jesus, never slow to place demands on people, enunciates here his two primary demands: repentance and faith.

It is important that we understand precisely what Jesus is demanding here. The repentance of which Jesus speaks denotes a fundamental reorientation of the human person and contains a strong cognitive element. Indeed the very word for repentance in the Greek New Testament refers primarily to cognition and has embedded in it the Greek word for mind. Repentance signifies a thoroughgoing change in mental outlook or perspective. Now there is only one way to change one's perspective and that is to move to a new vantage from which to see previously hidden things. The changed perspective that Jesus requires comes from believing the good news—the gospel. Through faith in the good news we reorient ourselves to see things as God means us to see them. This is the good news that God has loved the world and sent Christ to redeem it. The repentance and faith of which Jesus speaks are thus inseparable.

But what gave Jesus the right to demand of his listeners repentance and faith? Even if we grant that quietism is not a valid Christian attitude, imperialism certainly does not fare any better. How can Jesus command us to repent and believe? Isn't this the height of presumption? Religion is, after all, a personal and private affair, isn't it? What business then does Jesus have imposing his views on others? How can Jesus be so insensitive? How

dare he be so judgmental as to find fault with how other people are living their lives?

Of course, these criticisms are utterly bogus. Jesus had every right to express his views forthrightly, to find fault where there was fault, and to demand change where justice was flouted. Unlike the crusaders of the Middle Ages, Jesus was not putting the sword to anyone's neck. He was straightforwardly speaking the truth. It is disingenuous to call this imperialism. Imperialism is always a matter of coercion, not a matter of discomfort. The deeper a lie is entrenched, the greater the discomfort when the truth finally unmasks it. The Pharisees did not like it when Jesus unmasked their hypocrisy. They did not like it when he showed them that God's purposes for humanity were greater than their narrow, self-righteous parochialism.

Our proper response in approaching the world is therefore neither quietism nor imperialism but engagement. This was Jesus' own attitude. God is reconciling the world to himself through Christ. As Christians we are the body of Christ and thus the instruments through which God reconciles the world. We have a unique calling. Insofar as Christ is reconciling the world today, it is through the lives of his people, the Christians who constitute his church. Our proper response therefore is one of engagement, to engage the world with the truth of Christ.

As we engage the world, we need to recognize how very high are the stakes. Not only does Christianity claim to possess humanity's ultimate truth, but it also claims that this truth is so urgent that a person ignores it at his or her peril. At the heart of Christianity is the overwhelming truth that in Christ God has invaded space and time, making it possible for humanity to take part in the divine life. The opportunity to take part in the divine life is regarded by Scripture and the church tradition as good news—indeed, the best there is. But Christianity also has a dark side: those who refuse to embrace this truth face separation from that divine life.

We need to remember that this is a fallen world. This is not the world God originally created. The world of Genesis 1 was, as the author of Genesis puts it, "very good." But the world that came into being after Adam's transgression is a different world. To be sure, there is continuity with the original creation. And it is this continuity that ensures God's love for this present, fallen world. But the present world is a different world from the original one. It is a world in which love and hatred, right and wrong, and good and evil coexist and commingle. It is also a world in which humans must decide their allegiances. There is in the end no straddling of fences. Jesus says that we are either for him or against him. This truth is the dark side of the

gospel. For those who receive it, the gospel is the best news imaginable. For those who reject it, the gospel signifies sorrow and loss. The apostle Paul put it this way: “We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life” (2 Cor 2:15-16).

An urgency attaches to the Christian message. People’s lives are in the balance. Not every story will have a happy ending. Everything is not going to turn out all right in the end. Only where God’s grace is manifested will things turn out all right. But where God’s grace is spurned, things will not turn out all right. There is a move afoot these days in theological circles to embrace a position known as universalism—that in the end everyone will be saved. This is the teaching neither of Scripture nor of church tradition. There is no universal safety net. Our feel-good pop psychologies urge us to think it more befitting of God to save everyone. Reality, however, is not ultimately determined by what we think fitting. Certainly we should be comforted in knowing that the God who decides human destinies is rich in love and mercy. But we must never neglect the holiness and justice of God.

Because the truth of Christ is humanity’s chief truth, the truth of Christ is at once glorious and urgent. It follows that Christians have a mandate to declare the truth of Christ. This mandate consists of bringing every aspect of life under the influence of this truth. In an age of unbridled freedom and licentiousness, this no doubt will smack of elitism and intrusiveness. But in fact, unifying every aspect of life around the truth of Christ is the only hope humanity has to find true freedom and fulfillment. In the epistle to the Colossians, Paul writes that all things were created by and for Christ. To be united with Christ is therefore to fulfill a person’s true purpose, whereas to be separated from Christ is to lose his or her way.

### **Rooting Out False Ideas**

If we now grant that unifying every aspect of life around this truth of Christ is the ideal that ought to guide every Christian scholar, the question remains: How do we get there? Let us begin by acknowledging how far we actually are from attaining this ideal. Consider the words of J. Gresham Machen, a well-known Princeton theologian who was active early in the twentieth century:

False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the Gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless

force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion.

These words have come true in our own day with a vengeance. Anything that hints at a Christian worldview is routinely discarded within our secular society.

Indeed, we have permitted the collective thought of the world to be controlled by ideas that prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything but a harmless delusion. It needs to be emphasized that we, the Christians, the church of Jesus Christ, have done this. Christianity has never held any illusions about the extent of evil and deception of which a lost humanity is capable. But if evil and deception prosper, part of the blame must inevitably be laid at the feet of those who can help prevent it.

Christians are called to be salt and light in the world, and in this way to stem and overthrow false ideas. Unfortunately, we have not exercised our power as salt and light nearly enough. Through self-absorption, inattention, and bad theology we have failed to act as salt and light. We have been careless. We have let false ideas prosper without challenge. False ideas have to be rooted out for faith to recover. That is not to say that Christians ought to form vigilante groups, get up an index of proscribed books as in the old days, and condemn everything that strikes them as the least bit threatening. The inquisitorial method cannot fulfill God’s redemptive purposes for the world.

Nonetheless, we are not to leave false ideas unchecked. False ideas must be rooted out, and to do so requires seeing them for what they are. Since Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, humans have known good and evil—the tree delivered what it promised. Indeed, we know good and evil not just abstractly but from experience—all of us have experienced good and evil in our lives. But to understand good and evil, to discern good and not confuse it with evil, this is a different matter entirely. This sort of knowledge eluded our first parents and, but for the grace of God, continues to elude us. Discerning between good and evil is a far different matter from simply having experienced them.

Now false ideas become a problem precisely when we lack such discernment. A false idea is harmless enough if we recognize it as such, if we understand its origin and history, if we untangle its partial truths, if we appreciate why the false idea seems plausible to its adherents, if we understand it better than its original proponents. Once we thoroughly understand a false idea, we need no longer be intimidated by it. Only then

can we properly assess its place in the grand scheme of things and so bring it under the authority of Christ.

False ideas that undermine the Christian faith need to be exposed for what they are before they can lose their sting. Unfortunately, we have grown sloppy in exposing false ideas. We have refused to expend the necessary effort to bring the false ideas of our age under the authority of Christ. In the history of Christianity this is a recent development. From the sixth century up to the Enlightenment it is safe to say that the West was thoroughly imbued with Christian ideals and that western intellectual elites were overwhelmingly Christian. False ideas that undermined the very foundations of the Christian faith (e.g., denying the resurrection or the Trinity) were swiftly challenged and uprooted. Since the Enlightenment, however, we have not so much lacked the means to combat false ideas as the will and clarity.

The will and clarity to combat false ideas comes from taking Jesus' promise to his disciples seriously: "I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict" (Lk 21:15). What is noteworthy about this promise is how perfectly it was fulfilled in the life of Jesus. Jesus was never at a loss for words. He always saw through the traps of his opponents; he had an uncanny ability for avoiding pitfalls. If this promise was fulfilled in Jesus' life, why should contemporary Christians expect less for themselves? The false ideas that undermine our faith today are no more insidious than the traps and snares that beset Jesus. Why should we not expect the same success in dealing with them that Jesus experienced? The threat that false ideas present is simply too great to be ignored. Jesus did not ignore them but addressed them squarely. How can we demand less of ourselves?

The remedy must be appropriate to the disease. Demons have to be cast out. Infections have to be drained. Cancers have to be surgically removed. And false ideas have to be analyzed, evaluated, and refuted. Just as the word of God's truth is good seed that generates new life in Christ, so false ideas are bad seeds which, if allowed to grow, yield bitter fruit. The only way to get rid of seeds once planted is to dig them up. Recovery of faith is the art of cultivation. Weeding is as much a part of gardening as are planting and nurturing. False ideas need to be weeded out. This requires work, patience, and diligence. Above all, it requires a willingness to listen and inquire into ideas that oppose the faith. We must grasp what the world is saying even better than it does itself. Only in this way will Christ's authority over the life of the mind be reestablished and the doors of faith reopened.

What is the goal of all our intellectual exertions as Christian apologists? Certainly our goal is not to make a name for ourselves. Nor is it simply to glorify God with our minds by probing the wonders of God's creation. The goal is rather to restore a simplicity of faith to a generation that has grown cold and cynical. As Jesus put it, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 18:3).

The great fault of secularism—and there's plenty of secularism at our seminaries—is that it actively hinders us from coming to such a simplicity of faith. By simplicity of faith we mean a belief in the unqualified goodness, wisdom, and trustworthiness of God—that God always has our best interests at heart, that God knows exactly what he is doing, that God is actively involved and interested in our lives and that in spite of circumstances God is always worthy of our praise, gratitude, and adoration.

The goal of Christian apologetics is to clear the way for a simple, child-like faith. Indeed, once our doctrines of God and salvation become so encrusted with qualifications, nuances, and doubts that we can no longer run to God as a loving father, we're probably better closing up shop. This is not to say that there's no room for sophistication in theology. But the goal of all such sophistication must again be to restore us to the simplicity of the faith.

### **Quarantine Versus Inoculation**

The tendency among evangelical Christians has been to (1) retreat, not simply from the world but also from those portions of the church that have assimilated "worldly" standards and ideas, and (2) build fortresses. This strategy has its own logic: false ideas tend to corrupt and whoever engages such ideas risks corruption. Ideological purity, however, has its own risks. A quarantine maintains safety only as long as one can prevent exposure. Preventing exposure may be possible when combating physical toxins. But when the toxins are false ideas, isolation is difficult to maintain.

The proper model for handling exposure to false ideas is not quarantine but inoculation. Inoculation exposes a person to a disease, but in measured doses so that the destructive effects of the disease are mitigated. The person inoculated against a disease ceases to be at risk, even when exposed to it. The inoculated individual is immune. Similarly, the student who has been inoculated against false ideas is far less likely to succumb to them than the student who has been cloistered from them. Precisely because they have already been exposed to falsehood, inoculated students become convincing critics of falsehood and defenders of truth. For this

reason, Christian apologetics needs to stress inoculation.

The mainline and liberal seminaries can be a dangerous place for a student's faith. Those who surrender their faith at seminary typically lack adequate exposure to the false ideas they encounter, as well as the critical thinking skills for analyzing those ideas. For students who were previously "quarantined," a liberal seminary education can constitute overexposure and result in infection. Take, for instance, students whose undergraduate education was at a Bible college. Such students will arrive at seminary with extensive knowledge of the Bible's content, yet may know little about mainstream biblical studies. So when they arrive at seminary and learn of, say, the documentary hypothesis (i.e., that the first five books of the Bible were not written by Moses but rather are a patchwork of different source traditions closer to the time of the Babylonian exile in 587 B.C.), they lack the tools for evaluating it.

At a mainline seminary, students will hear neither a thorough defense nor a thorough critique of the documentary hypothesis. In all likelihood professors will present a brief sketch of the hypothesis and thereafter simply presuppose it. This is not necessarily because seminary professors seek to indoctrinate students. In most cases professors teach what they think is correct, and because of time constraints, avoid treating alternative theories. Consequently, students either reflexively reject what they hear without benefit of cogent argument or surrender to it wholesale since everyone around them seems to assume its truth. More insidiously, young seminarians may suspect that their former "fundamentalist" teachers and pastors intentionally kept them in the dark about this "newfound knowledge." This suspicion can have devastating effects.

What's the solution? Students must be exposed to the documentary hypothesis so that not only its claims and presuppositions are presented as fairly as possible (e.g., the role of philosophical naturalism in its formation and defense) but also the reasons for and against it. This approach inoculates students against the destructive power of false ideas while at the same time enabling them to appropriate elements of truth that the idea may contain. Ideally, this should be the task of any good Christian education. Thankfully, there are still Christian institutions that aspire to such a balanced and intentional educational philosophy.

### **Puncturing the Myth of Invincibility**

But what about mainline or liberal seminaries where this educational philosophy is lacking? Should students

simply avoid such places altogether? Is it better to go to an evangelical seminary than risk spiritual meltdown? Certainly, some seminaries are so hostile to the Christian faith that it is impossible to acquire a sound education there. Nonetheless, to abandon the large, influential, and well-endowed institutions because they are in trouble makes poor strategic sense. The unstated assumption here is that when a seminary's leadership becomes subverted, all hope is lost—time to pack up and move out. This assumption even comes with its own proof text: "Therefore come out from among them and be separate" (2 Cor 6:17).

Although this text is important for maintaining the integrity of the church, it remains equally important that the church act as salt and light in difficult situations. Yes, the mainline and liberal seminaries are in a tight spot. But that is hardly a reason for abandoning them. Even if their leadership is corrupt, what is to prevent reform and renewal coming from the bottom up—from the students themselves?

The leftist students and campus agitators of the 1960s have become the tenured faculty, political leaders, and opinion-makers of the 21st century. Similarly, the theological left has successfully employed an incrementalist strategy of gradually displacing orthodox Christianity and replacing it with liberal Christianity. So why isn't the ideological converse possible? Why should evangelical students be incapable of similar aspirations? Our own experience at Princeton Theological Seminary made it clear that evangelical students are the key to renewing the mainline seminaries and churches.

What we are urging, then, is an intentional activism by evangelical students directed at the mainline seminaries both to renew and to reclaim these institutions. What should evangelical students do? Some activities are obvious and essential: They should seek like-minded students for spiritual and psychological support, maintain a vigilant prayer life, read Scripture, participate in the sacraments, and worship God. But there's more: Evangelical students need to take up the mantle of public apologist.

But isn't this presumptuous? How can we expect mere students to defend ideas publicly when their professors, who enjoy more education and experience, are daily dismissing those very ideas? Is this not sending sheep to the slaughter? Not at all. We speak from experience when we say that the heterodoxy of the mainline seminaries is far from invincible. Fashion tends to rule the day and is easily upset by students bold enough to challenge it.

The Rev. Randy Otto is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Alan Wisdom is Interim Editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 8 people, clergy and lay, women and men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the church's witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian worldview. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it. Please donate today to this vital ministry. We can be contacted at [aewisdom@verizon.net](mailto:aewisdom@verizon.net), 703-300-5223, or [www.theologymatters.com](http://www.theologymatters.com).

Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry  
P.O. Box 3940  
Fredericksburg, VA 22402-3940

NON-PROFIT  
ORGANIZATION  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
AUTOMATED  
MAILING  
SYSTEM

**Change Service Requested**

Students at today's mainline seminaries are more conservative than their faculties (at least at the beginning of their studies). This contrasts with the situation in the 1960s, in which students were much more liberal and radical than their professors. There are now far more students from evangelical congregations than from liberal ones that attend seminary. In contrast, liberal Christianity has great difficulty regenerating itself. Hardly anyone converts from agnosticism to liberal Christianity. Many liberal Christians started out as evangelicals. Indeed, liberal Christianity is parasitic. To survive it must recruit evangelical Christians. What's more, the key recruiting ground is the theological seminary.

What we are proposing, then, is to exploit the theological disparity between students and faculty at mainline seminaries through focused and intentional student activism. To succeed, such activism requires that a few committed seminary students be willing to risk their status, security, and popularity. Additionally, it requires the help and encouragement from faithful people in the pews—this includes spiritual, emotional, and financial support.

Standing up for Christian orthodoxy at a mainline seminary is a quick way to lose friends and alienate people. Members of the Charles Hodge Society were threatened with two lawsuits for their work on the *Princeton Theological Review*, threatened with physical violence, accused of racism and sexism, denied funding that other campus groups readily received, had posted signs destroyed and removed, and were explicitly informed by faculty that membership in the Charles Hodge Society jeopardized their academic advancement. Nonetheless, we also met with approval and encouragement from some faculty and administrators, from lay people in the churches who

heard of our efforts, and from fellow students who saw us as giving them a voice.

In retrospect our hardships were minor—even trivial—and do not merit comparison with the sufferings of Christians throughout history and in many parts of the world today. Nonetheless, we mention them because students at other institutions who want to take a similar stand need to do so with their eyes open. Although every institution is unique, the response we received at Princeton Theological Seminary is likely to be typical. There is a price to be paid. But there are also rewards to be reaped. The liberal Christianity of the mainline seminaries is not invincible. But it is up to seminary students to puncture that myth of inevitability.

*Taken from Unapologetic Apologetics, edited by William A. Dembski and Jay W. Richards. Copyright (c) 2001 by William A. Dembski & Jay Wesley Richards. Used by permission of InterVarsity Press, P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515, USA, [www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com). William A. Dembski is Senior Fellow at the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture. Jay W. Richards is Assistant Research Professor in the School of Business and Economics at the Catholic University of America.*

**Donate now to this important ministry:**

**Theology Matters**  
**P.O. Box 3940**  
**Fredericksburg, VA 22402**

**or donate on our website**  
**[www.theologymatters.com](http://www.theologymatters.com)**

(Your gifts are tax deductible)