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### Combating Theological Ignorance

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The logo for Pittsburg State University, featuring the letters 'PSU' in a stylized, bold font above the words 'Pittsburg State University' in a serif typeface.

## COMBATING THEOLOGICAL IGNORANCE

Donald Wayne Viney

After a one-year hiatus caused by temporary reductions in the budgets of both the History and Social Science departments, The Practice of History and Social Science has returned.

We hope you missed us.

This issue begins with an excellent article on incorporating religion into the curriculum while respecting the separation of church and state. As Viney suggests, we have lost a lot through what Professor Donald Wayne Viney terms theological ignorance. Viney is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Pittsburg State University and has published a book on the theologian, Charles Hartshorne.

Next, George Kissel, a teacher at Baxter Springs High School, offers a discussion of one method of organizing classroom debates. His article nicely combines enthusiasm with practical advice.

Finally, Thomas McDonnell, formerly of PSU's Social Science department and now Assistant Professor of Social Work at Avila College, provides a brief lesson dealing with marital violence.

Two great strengths of American democracy are the political separation of church and state and the attempt to provide all with an education up to secondary levels. However, the result of combining these strengths is a weakness. Students are, for the most part, deprived of a theological education. What little theological training they receive will likely be by way of indoctrination through their church, or worse, through the ministry of the television evangelists, a source not known for its theological sophistication. As a consequence, teachers wishing to treat theological topics--say, in English and humanities courses--are faced with the challenge of combating a virtual cultural inheritance, viz, theological ignorance. In the Spring 1986 issue of this journal I discussed creation-science as a product of theological ignorance and indicated some source materials for eliminating its confusions. This article continues the discussion by suggesting some conceptual tools and pedagogic techniques for combating theological ignorance. For convenience I treat the subject under three headings: knowing one's Bible, knowing philosophy/theology and knowing God.

KNOWING ONE'S BIBLE. A place to begin is to encourage students to study their own religious heritage by reading its sacred writings. A surprising number of students have not read a Bible, or if they have, they skipped parts that seemed irrelevant or boring. This fact may have a simple explanation. Attempting to read a Bible from beginning to end invites failure. As Frederick Buechner notes, lengthy genealogies filled with unpronounceable names (the pronunciation marks merely augment most readers' confusion) erect

formidable barriers to even the most enthusiastic reader. Nevertheless, with time, patience, and some guidance and encouragement from teachers, students may discover that the parts that they skipped before are the least boring and least irrelevant.

Before continuing, perhaps something should be said about Bibles as we have them today. One of the interesting characteristics of Bibles is that they do not all have the same number of books. Catholic Bibles such as The New American Bible and the Jerusalem Bible have 73 books. Most Bibles used in Protestant churches have only 66 books. The 7 books that account for this discrepancy are called the Deuterocanonical, or second canon books. They include Baruch, Judith, 1st and 2nd Maccabees, Sirach, Tobit, and Wisdom. In addition to these books, the second canon contains additions to the books of Daniel and Esther. What Protestants call the Apocrypha is essentially the second canon plus a short piece called the Prayer of Manasseh. None of the books of the Apocrypha are part of the New Testament.

Drawing attention to the differences among Bibles emphasizes that there is no such thing as the Bible, considered as a canonical source acceptable to all Christians. This fact is unimportant as far as Christian doctrine is concerned. Significant doctrinal differences between Catholics and Protestants are not rooted in the second canon (although the Catholic argument for purgatory is partly justified by an appeal to Maccabees). Nevertheless, students who are made aware of these facts may come to see that Bibles have histories because they were written and compiled by human beings. This is true whether or not one accepts that scripture is divinely inspired.

Students could be motivated to read their Bibles by being asked to compile a list of scriptural passages on which sermons are rarely preached and then quizzed as

to why these passages are ignored. For instance, homilies on Deuteronomy 23:13-14 are hard to find.

And thou shalt have a paddle upon thy weapon; and it shall be, when thou wilt ease thyself abroad, thou shalt dig therewith, and shalt turn back and cover that which cometh from thee: For the Lord thy God walketh in the midst of thy camp. . . .

The topic of waste disposal hardly seems edifying enough for Sunday morning. As hygienically sound as this practice was, I doubt that even Billy Sunday could have made the image of God, with an Israelite soldier's indiscretion on the divine sole, sufficiently elevating for inclusion in a sermon.

Other examples of scriptures regularly ignored in sermons include: Genesis 38:9-10, where God slays Onan for "spitting [his seed] on the ground" and thus refusing to impregnate his dead brother's wife; Exodus 21:22, where the penalty for causing a miscarriage is some monetary compensation to the woman's husband; Leviticus 12:2-5, where a woman is "unclean" for one week after giving birth to a boy and "unclean" for two weeks after giving birth to a girl; Leviticus 27:1-7, where females are, on the average, worth two-thirds as much as males, as measured in shekels of silver; Numbers 31:15-18, where Moses is upset with his soldiers for sparing the lives of the women of the enemy--Moses commands that only virgins are to be saved; Deuteronomy 23:1, where anyone who has been "wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off," is barred from community worship; Deuteronomy 25:11, where, if a woman's husband is in a fight with another man, she is prohibited from grabbing his opponent "by the secrets," on penalty of the amputation of her hand; Judges 1:6, where Judah and his army overtake Adonibezek and cut off his thumbs and big toes; Judges 1:19, where the Lord helped Judah defeat

his enemies, but was stopped by the valley dwellers because they had ironplated chariots; I Kings 14:10 and 16:11, where God's anger against Jeroboam and Baasha results in killing those that "pisseth against the wall" (KJV); Proverbs 26:4-5, where contradictory advice is given in adjacent verses.

Each of the verses I have cited (and many others I have not cited) raise important questions---questions whose relevance is not confined to scriptural exegesis. However, the chief value of this exercise for combating theological ignorance is to disabuse students of prevalent misconceptions about scripture. To put the matter crudely, the idea that Bibles have a ready-made theology, and that anyone with a lick of sense and a little help from the Holy Ghost could read them and find the "true" meaning, is difficult to support. One may acknowledge that all scripture is inspired by God (II Timothy 3:16); but it is up to women and men (a) to decide which scriptures qualify as God-inspired (cf. the Deuterocanonical books) and (b) to develop an interpretive framework in terms of which difficult passages are understood. This is not a counsel to skepticism but a call to reasoned judgment.

An example of the process of interpretation is Jesus' commentary on the Mosaic law in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17-48). Jesus expands the law to include things not covered by the literal meanings of the words. Thus, comes the refrain, repeated six times, "You have heard the commandment. . . But I tell you. . . Jesus' respect for his own scriptures did not prevent him from interpreting them so as to discern the divine spirit amidst the human writing. An interesting exercise would be to ask what Jesus would have thought about the things written about him, including the New Testament.

Any critical scrutiny of scripture may be met with charges that one is confusing youthful minds by "questioning the word of God." Such an allegation is a classic non sequitur. It is precisely the theologians who raise the kinds of questions I have been discussing. Moreover, students who know what is in their Bibles, and who learn the difference between a naive literalism and an informed scriptural hermeneutics, are in a better position to judge for themselves concerning truth. Saint Paul's injunction to "test everything and hold fast to what is good" (I Thessalonians 5:21) is a reminder that Christian faith is not supposed to be blind. There is a profound difference between taking the Bible literally and taking it seriously.

KNOWING PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY. Many fundamentalists claim that the forces of "secular humanism" are infiltrating the schools, casting doubt on all things pertaining to religion and morals. Were these claims true, one would think that the best remedy would be to give students more theological training, not less. Indeed, the easy refutations of religious belief that one occasionally finds in the literature---e.g. religion is an emotional crutch; religion is an opiate; religion is a human projection---look less than convincing when matched against theologically sophisticated views. As Charles Hartshorne said in 1937, "The case against theism is not so conventionally and flatteringly simple."<sup>4</sup> The situation has not changed. It is no secret among philosophers and theologians that theology and philosophy of religion are as vital as they have ever been. Last summer (1986) I heard an atheist, familiar with current literature in philosophy, lament that theists have a virtual monopoly on the best and most creative minds. It would be going too far to say that this person's opinion is shared by the majority of atheists. However, it is an informed and honest assessment of the contemporary scene. It is a crime

against our students to deprive them of the theological genius at hand. Why offer them stones when there is bread?

Suspicion of philosophy and theology is often born of vague familiarities with the disciplines and with buzz words like existentialism, positivism, or demythologization, which, in the popular imagination, are believed somehow to lead to atheism and skepticism. A little education puts the lie to these misconceptions. For example, of those philosophers who could reasonably be classified as existentialists, Beauvoir, Camus, Nietzsche, and Sartre were clearly atheists. However, Berdyaev, Buber, Bultmann, Kierkegaard, Lequier, Jaspers, Marcel, and Tillich were just as clearly theistic or sympathetic to theism. Being an existentialist no more commits one to atheism than being a U.S. citizen commits one to being a Republican.

The case of positivism is also instructive. It provides a kind of philosophical parallel to the fable of the king's new clothes. The first philosophers to use the word to describe their own views were three 19th century thinkers, Saint-Simon and Comte (both atheists) and Schelling (a theist). In the 20th century the word came to be associated with the logical positivists, a decidedly antitheistic clique. The classic statement of logical positivism was A. J. Ayer's Language, Truth and Logic (1936, revised edition, 1946). Wielding the dreaded verifiability criterion of meaning, Ayer attempted to sterilize philosophy of religious, metaphysical and ethical claims to factual significance. It did not take long for someone to suggest that there was as much (if not more) reason to doubt the truth of the verifiability criterion as to doubt the meaningfulness of metaphysical statements. Indeed, when applied to itself, the verifiability criterion was found to be

meaningless! Alvin Plantinga sums up a complex story succinctly.

The fact is that no one has succeeded in stating a version of the verifiability criterion that is even remotely plausible; and by now the project is beginning to look unhelpful.

In my view Plantinga is too generous. Let us say rather that the king was never wearing any clothes.

As a final example, let us take the concept of demythologization. Rudolf Bultmann introduced the word in "The New Testament and Mythology" to signal his view that the kerygma, the Christian proclamation of salvation, is not tied to world-views we know to be false. According to Bultmann,

To de-mythologize is to deny that the message of Scripture and of the Church is bound to an ancient world-view which is obsolete.

The world-view to which Bultmann refers is that of the Biblical writers. It is a world-view in which disease and mental illness are often ascribed to the agency of demons (Mark 1:26, passim); where slavery is an acceptable institution (Ephesians 6:5); where heaven is literally above and hell literally below the earth (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:10-11; I Peter 3:19); and in which the end of the world was believed to be imminent (Revelation 22:7, 12, 20; I Thessalonians 4:15f). Bultmann rightly saw that if Christianity is to have a place in the lives of intelligent women and men, it must be possible to discard the New Testament world-view while retaining its message of hope and salvation.

Some have argued that Bultmann was too accommodating to modernity and too quick to jettison certain New

Testament ideas. However, this is beside the point I wish to stress. For the issue is not whether or not to demythologize, but to what extent demythologization should be carried out. To bind Christianity too closely to the world-view of its founders is to inaugurate the death of the religion. Far from representing a threat to Christianity, Bultmann's project is necessary to the vitality of Christian belief.

The importance of these examples is that they show that philosophy and theology are dynamic disciplines, each capable of keeping its own house where theism is concerned. For students just learning these disciplines, our examples have a further relevance. First, they demonstrate that there are always options for the intelligent inquirer. One's mind cannot be coerced by logic alone. Second, one may assuage the anxiety of students (and parents) fearful of being brainwashed by a "godless" intelligensia. Besides the persons already mentioned, one could cite professional organizations such as the American Academy of Religion, the Society of Christian Philosophers, or the Center for Process Studies, which are friendly to religious claims. Finally, the examples provide role models for the eager student. Speaking from personal experience, I can witness to the excitement I felt upon discovering that there were people--an entire history of them--who approached the issues of philosophy and religion in a systematic, rational, and sympathetic manner.

Students should also be familiarized with reliable reference guides. These are indispensable tools in knowing philosophy and theology. There are numerous sources available to accommodate inquiring minds. Among my favorites are the following: William L. Reese's Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion (Humanities Press, 1980) provides concise, readable, and accurate summaries of important concepts and

persons in the philosophical and religious traditions of both East and West; Vergilius Ferm's (ed.) The Encyclopedia of Religion (Popular Books, 1955) is a relatively old work that has not lost its usefulness; Paul Edwards' (ed.) The Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Macmillan, 1967) provides adequate and brief coverage of the field; Father Copleston's nine volume A History of Philosophy (Image Books, 1962-77) faithfully reports the ideas of major Western philosophers from the Greeks to the present; finally, Dagobert Runes' Pictorial History of Philosophy (Bramhall House, 1959) is a delightful collection of illustrations, paintings, daguerreotypes and other miscellanea.

KNOWING GOD. One of my students once asked me, "Dr. Viney, do you believe in God, and if so, what do you think he's like?" Badgering the young man, I said, "Yes, I believe in God. And I believe that everything that is, exists within God, as if in a womb. To paraphrase the Stoics and St. Paul, I believe that God is she in whom we live, move, and have our being." Taking the bait, my questioner exclaimed, "SHE?" "You don't think God is a man, do you?" was my retort. Unfortunately, the point of my humor was lost on the student. Very serious, he explained that God, being a spirit, is without sexual identity.

Two morals can be gleaned from this exchange. First, the language used to speak about God reveals the ways in which one thinks of God. Second, the reality of God--if such a being is real--is not the same as the concepts employed to think about God. These distinctions may seem elementary. However, they are often conflated. The results are confusion, or worse, theological obfuscation.

Theologians have generally been attentive to the problem of religious language. They have understood that language is not a neutral vehicle for conveying

information. The literal meanings of words are clothed in emotional subtleties that vary from one context to another. It is precisely amidst these subtleties that the power and the danger of religious language lies. For instance, the Bible is often referred to as the "word" of God. Now, words can be written, spoken, or signed (as in the American sign language). What manner of word is the word of God supposed to be? Is it conveyed by written symbols? heard by physical ears? signed by some mysterious gesticulation of events in nature? These are hard questions which can too easily be ignored by attending only to a superficial treatment (or no treatment at all) of the concept of "word." Is "hearing" the "word" of God no more problematic than listening to one's neighbor talk about the weather? Yes? Or no? If we attend only to the literal meaning of words, then the answer to this question is no. However, since the answer to the question is yes, it is to the non-literal—the metaphorical, the allegorical, the mythical—dimensions of language that we must turn to "hear" the "word" of God. Should one expect less from a God whose creation includes so marvelous a thing as language?

A brief look at New Testament language confirms this hypothesis. Three Greek words are relevant to discussing the "word" of God. First, there is logos, which, for the writer of John's gospel, is the theological identity of Jesus. Biblically, it is Jesus who is the word of God (John 1:1,4). The metaphor suggested in John's language is that, just as the spoken word expresses the thought, so Jesus is the expression of the divine thought. Second, is graphē, referring to the sacred writings, which, for the most of the contemporaries of Jesus, was the Old Testament (or as Jesus says in Luke 24:44, the Law, Prophets and Psalms). Thus, II Timothy 3:16 says that every graphē is God-inspired. However, as if to warn against excessive literalism, Paul writes that the graphē

kills, whereas the spirit gives life (II Corinthians 3:6); and Jesus chides the Pharisees for searching the graphē to find him, and refusing to come to him directly (John 5:39-40). Finally, there is the rhēma referring not so much to the written word as to what is said. It can also mean "thing," "matter," "event," or "happening." In the temptation in the wilderness, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3, saying that one lives by every rhēma that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). Or again, it is the rhēma that the daughters and sons of God are to hear (John 8:47). The metaphor implicit in this use of language is "rich—to "hear" or to "live by" every "thing," "matter," "event," or "happening" that is divine. These examples should serve as a reminder that strictly literal readings of scripture are apt to forfeit its deeper treasures. This is true whether or not one believes in God.

Focusing on language about God is important for theological understanding. Equally necessary is an awareness of the concepts of God. The concepts of God are the vehicles that believers and nonbelievers use to make their way in the theological universe. If one believes in God, then one must have some idea, some concept, of the object of one's faith. If one believes that God does not exist, then again, one must have some idea of what one is denying. This point is illustrated in a story about the great historian of ideas, Arthur Lovejoy. Lovejoy was asked if he believed in God. He replied that to his knowledge there are at least nine historically significant meanings that have been assigned to the word "God"; after explaining these meanings, Professor Lovejoy asked which meaning the questioner had in mind. Lovejoy was not being facetious or pretentious. He was simply calling attention to the need for clarification in the concept of God.



At a minimum, theological education should encourage reflection on the concept of God. The Bible and the news media, two sources readily available to students, are virtual cornucopias of food for theological thought. For instance, in a verse quoted above, it is implied that God could be stopped by iron-plated chariots (Judges 1:19). Did the person who originally wrote this story have a clear conception of divine power? Another example: it was recently reported that popular religious leader and presidential hopeful claimed to have diverted Hurricane Gloria last year through prayer. Is the God who allegedly listened to this politician the same one who looked on as hundreds died in the Salvadoran earthquake? And then there is the evangelist who believes that he has physically wrestled with the devil and was held hostage by God. This is definitely food for theological thought: the devil as Hulk Hogan; God as a terrorist.

Another springboard for discussion of theological topics is bumper stickers. Some announce the driver's religious commitments: "My God is alive, sorry about yours"; others invite other drivers to announce their commitments: "Honk if you love Jesus." (One sticker I saw repeated, "Honk if you are Jesus.") Some suggest that the occupant is specially guarded against harm: "God is my co-pilot"; others provide useful safety tips: "Warning, in case of rapture this car will be unoccupied." (Other drivers need not worry about such vehicles if the co-pilot is doing his job.) Some enjoin us to read the Bible: "John 3:16"; others announce theological method: "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." (This is a sticker whose ecumenical value has yet to be fully appreciated---the sticker is equally at home on the bumper of Jimmy Swagart's Timousine or on that of the Ayatollah Khomeini.)

It may be argued that these kinds of critical questions or cynical observations do more to instill skepticism than to inspire faith. However, this is to miss the point of theological education. The goal is neither the destruction nor the promotion of religious belief. The goal is theological sophistication---an awareness and appreciation of different perspectives in theology. This is a worthy project whether or not one believes in God. Moreover, a good case can be made that a dose of levity now and then is an effective and non-threatening way to introduce new or controversial ideas. Humor has a way of disarming one's prejudices and putting one's shortcomings in a different perspective. Trueblood argues convincingly that humor was one of Jesus' most important pedagogical techniques. We can do no better.

There is a fear that critical reflection on the foundations of one's beliefs will lead to abandoning those beliefs. A young man once asked me why it is that people who go to college lose their faith. My reply was that one must be careful to distinguish the loss of faith and the growth of faith. Growth and maturation are no less the rule of life than the rule of faith. When she was four years old, my daughter believed that God was a bearded man living in the clouds. My hope for her is that one day she will have a more refined view of God. Ideally, this will not be the result of "learning" what is the correct view of God, but of her own sustained and uncoerced reflection on ultimate questions. To reason as an adult, says Paul, is to "give up childish ways" (1 Corinthians 13:11). From the standpoint of faith, what better way to love God with all of one's mind than to struggle honestly with the problems of one's religion and remove the idols from one's intellectual altars? In the words of Simone Weil, ". . . one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth."<sup>14</sup>

\* \* \* \*

Teachers brave enough to broach these issues may find themselves caught between Scylla and Charrydis, accused by some of teaching religion in public schools and condemned by others of apostasy. Nevertheless, to take education seriously is to acknowledge, first, the importance of passing along our cultural inheritance to the young, and second, the teacher's role in stimulating fresh thought. Education is not indoctrination, and learning to think is not reciting a catechism. All true education carries the proviso that students may reject received opinions. For those who have chosen the vocation of educator, there is only one thing more gratifying than to see a student's face light up with understanding, and that is to watch the birth of a new idea.

NOTES

- 1 Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking, A Theological ABC (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 6f.
- 2 A character in Woody Allen's "Hannah and Her Sisters" remarks, "If Jesus were to return today and hear what people say about him, he couldn't stop throwing up."
- 3 Henry Morris, ed., Scientific Creationism, general edition (California: Creation Life Publishers, 1974), 111. See also Time (October 27, 1986), 94.
- 4 Charles Hartshorne, Beyond Humanism (Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1975, reprint), 93.
- 5 Most self-respecting existentialists deny the label. However, as Frederick Copleston notes, existentialism is a protantbeau label. Texts in existentialism cover the thought of persons I have named.

6 Some graffiti at my alma mater read, "Metaphysics is a lot of hot Ayer." Ayer was more prosaic, "All metaphysical assertions are nonsensical." Language, Truth and Logic (New York: Dover, 1952), 41.

7 Alvin Plantinga, God and Other Minds (New York and London: Cornell University Press, 1967), 167.

8 Hans Werner Bartsch, ed., Kerygma and Myth (New York: Harper, 1961), 1-44.

9 Rudolf Bultmann, Jesus Christ and Mythology (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1958), 36.

10 Interestingly John's gospel contains no accounts of exorcisms.

11 Charles Hartshorne, "Recollections of Famous Philosophers and Other Important Persons," Southern Journal of Philosophy (Spring, 1970), 75.

12 Time (September 29, 1986), 30; Time (March 2, 1987), 57.

13 David Elton Trueblood, The Humor of Christ (New York: Harper & Row, 1964). Just as Bultmann advocated demythologization of the Bible, I advocate its desobrietization. Desobrietization is the project of reading the Bible with an eye toward divesting it of its excessive sobriety and finding the humor that is there. I take this project seriously.

14 Simone Weil, Waiting for God (New York: Harper, 1951), 69.