

PHILOSOPHY AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION: A CALL TO PHILOSOPHY AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION



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INTRODUCTION

What does Athens have to do with the Ascent of Mount Carmel? What does Thomas Aquinas have to teach Thomas Merton? What does epistemology have to do with experience of God? Judging by the number of contemporary philosophers who offer substantial treatments of spiritual formation, the apparent answer is: quite a lot. Of course, Dallas Willard's writings loom large in this category, but in addition to Willard there are a number of contemporary philosophers who have contributed a fair amount to discussions of Christian formation. For instance, Fred Aquino (Abilene Christian University), John Coe (Biola University), Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung (Calvin College), John Hare (Yale University), Christian Miller (Wake Forest University), Paul Moser (University of Chicago, Loyola), Robert C. Roberts (Baylor University), and James K. A. Smith (Calvin College), amongst others, have published book and article-length discussions of spiritual formation. These contemporary philosophers are in good company with other philosophically oriented thinkers in the Western tradition who have substantially engaged Christian spirituality. For instance, Clement of Alexandria's *Paedagogus*, Augustine's *Confessions*, "Part II" of Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity*, Jonathan Edward's *Charity and Its Fruits*, and Thomas Kelly's *A Testament of Devotion*.¹

It might be thought that philosophers are simply intellectually meddling folk who often wind up pontificating on topics, which in actual fact have little connection with the discipline of philosophy. But it is clear from a careful reading of contemporary and historical writing by philosophers on formation that there are many important interconnections. What follows is a brief delineation of some of these areas of interconnectedness as

¹ These classics can be found in several contemporary editions.

well as a discussion of several concerns about bringing philosophy into dialogue with formation. The essay will close by pointing to a few topics in Christian formation that especially deserve philosophical attention.

AREAS OF INTERCONNECTEDNESS

There are several branches of philosophy that are germane to matters in spiritual formation. Perhaps the most obvious is virtue ethics. While ethics in general is relevant, virtue ethics in particular closely relates to Christian formation. Virtue theory addresses the nature of virtue and vice—understood as deeply ingrained dispositions to act in good and bad ways—as well as the means to cultivate virtue and escape vice. This lands virtue theorists into detailed discussions of the process of habituation, the embodied nature of virtue formation, the weakness of will, formative practices, the imitation of exemplars, the underlying psychology of particular virtues, and so on. As with any area of study, some of the research and writing on virtue ethics seems to confound rather than clarify, but there is much writing within virtue ethics that is helpful in better conceptualizing the processes of inner character change that Jesus addressed in his teachings (e.g., Matt. 23). Indeed, many have thought that Jesus' ethical teaching is a form of virtue ethics or, at the least, fits well with a virtue-orientation to ethics.² Some recent and profitable examples of applying virtue theory to Christian formation are R. Douglas Geivett and Mike Austin's edited book *Being Good: Christian Virtues for Everyday Life*, Robert C. Robert's *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues*, and Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung's *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and their Remedies*.³

A second area of interconnectedness is religious epistemology. Again, there is a sense in which epistemology in general is relevant to spiritual formation, but *religious* epistemology is the subfield of epistemology that treats the nature of religious experience, belief, and knowledge. While contemporary religious epistemology largely focuses on the rationality of belief in God (are we justified/warranted in believing that God exists?), religious epistemology also includes treatment of how best to understand what it means to know and experience God, approaches and conditions for a deeper understanding of God, the nature of religious faith, religious belief-formation, and so on. One important distinction in religious epistemology

² See, for instance, Michael G. Lawler and Todd A. Salzman, "Virtue Ethics: Natural and Christian," *Theological Studies* 74 (2013): 442–473.

³ R. Douglas Geivett and Mike Austin, ed., *Being Good: Christian Virtues for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); Robert C. Robert, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); and Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and their Remedies* (Ada, MI: Brazos, 2009).

that is relevant to issues of formation is the distinction between propositional knowledge about God and personal knowledge of God.⁴ The philosopher Eleonore Stump has recently developed the role personal knowledge of God plays in addressing the problem of evil.⁵ Another recent contribution to religious epistemology that includes substantive engagement with matters of spiritual formation is Paul Moser's three-volumes: *The Elusive God*, *The Evidence for God*, and *The Severity of God* in which Moser re-frames religious epistemology in light of the experiential availability of the redemptive power of God in Christ.⁶ Moser emphasizes this theme in the "response" essay that follows and thereby provides a wonderful example of the clarity and depth philosophy can bring to important issues in formation.

A third area of domain overlap when it comes to matters of philosophy and formation is philosophical anthropology. Since formation is concerned with personal change, one's understanding of human nature is always playing some role in discussions of spiritual formation. Frequently utilized biblical terms for the human person, such as: heart, mind, will, soul, spirit, body, and flesh, can be correctly interpreted but nevertheless ensconced within a limited view of the person that results in a distorted understanding of how formation occurs.

For instance, understanding what it is to be transformed by the renewing of one's *mind* (Rom. 12:2) is hugely dependent not simply on what Paul meant in his use of the term "mind" (*nous*) in this context but crucially on the broader view of the person in which that interpretation of *nous* finds its place. In this case, one might interpret renewing of the *mind* as a reorientation of the contents of the human mind, but think of those contents as consisting primarily of propositional beliefs. The result of this anthropological assumption is a view of spiritual renewal that will have a strong emphasis on coming to believe the right sorts of propositions. This is where a more carefully developed philosophical anthropology can come into play, aiding in interpreting biblical anthropological terms within a broader conceptualization of the person (in this case, the mind) that distinguishes between beliefs, thoughts, affections, desires, as well as other propositional attitudes

⁴ See, for example, Brandon L. Rickabaugh, "Eternal Life as Knowledge of God: An Epistemology of Knowledge by Acquaintance and Spiritual Formation," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 6, no. 2 (2013): 204–228.

⁵ Stump refers to personal knowledge as "second-person" knowledge as opposed to first-person and third-person knowledge. Second-person knowledge is the experience of the exchange between two persons—of their interpersonal relationship. See Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶ Paul K. Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); *The Evidence for God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); *The Severity of God: Religion and Philosophy Reconceived* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

(doubt, denial, wish, expectation, degrees of confidence, etc.). Moreover, philosophical reflection on human anthropology can be helpful in addressing how such a renewal of the mind involves the body, desires, cultural context, the emotions, etc.

A recent example of the significance of philosophical anthropology in developing a view of Christian formation is James K. A. Smith's trilogy *Desiring the Kingdom*, *Imagining the Kingdom*, and the forthcoming *Embodying the Kingdom*.⁷ Smith reconsiders formation in Christ on the basis of the anthropological claim that humans are at bottom desiring things and not merely thinking things. As Smith makes clear in his books, this shift in anthropology has far-reaching implications for Christian formation and education. But the degree to which Smith's anthropological claim is accurate is a question not simply for biblical scholars but also for philosophers and, for that matter, psychologists.⁸

The last area of interconnection that will be mentioned is a sub-discipline of philosophy that is referred to as philosophical theology or, more recently, analytic theology.⁹ For our purposes distinguishing philosophical and analytic theology is unnecessary as the upshot of both is an emphasis on bringing philosophical tools to bear on theological topics. In this manner, the areas of overlap considered above (viz., virtue ethics, religious epistemology, and philosophical anthropology) are examples of philosophical theology. That is, when one brings the distinctions, conceptualizations, and mental rigor of certain areas of philosophical discourse to bear on a theological topic, one is doing philosophical theology.

That philosophical theology is a sub-discipline of philosophy is due to the fact that philosophy is largely a second-order discipline. Philosophy brings its distinct methodology to a first-order subject matter that is, more

⁷ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009); *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013); and *Embodying the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming at time of press).

⁸ One might think that Scripture should answer these sorts of anthropological questions without the involvement of philosophy or psychology. One problem with this view is that biblical anthropological terms are already embedded in a view of human nature that is operative within the historical context of the biblical author in question. This historically presupposed, background understanding of human nature is not itself inspired by God even if the God-inspired biblical language is best interpreted within that historical-cultural framework. In other words, biblical exegeses need to interpret Scripture within the historical context in which it was written but apply that historical point of view in conversation with other views of the matters in question. For more on this, see Steve L. Porter, "Theology as Queen and Psychology as Handmaid? The Authority of Theology in Integrative Endeavors," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 29, no. 1 (2010): 33–40.

⁹ See Oliver D. Crisp, "On Analytic Theology," in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. Crisp and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

often than not, properly situated within the purview of some other discipline (e.g., law, medicine, physics, etc.). Philosophy's distinct methodology involves attuning the human mind to a certain kind of sustained attention to the subject matter under investigation. While different philosophers/philosophies will think of this sustained attention as including or prizing different mental efforts, the commonality amongst philosophers/philosophies is a prolonged attention to a particular feature of human experience. So, for example, analytic philosophers prize arguments that fit precise logical forms. While formal logical analysis can be excessive, the clarity that arises when an argument for a certain point of view is subjected to logical analysis is a great good for human thought.¹⁰

One way to appreciate a philosophical approach to spiritual formation is to think of that approach as emphasizing and honing particular habits of thinking. For instance, intellectual carefulness, thoroughness, perseverance, fair-mindedness, intellectual courage, and intellectual humility can be emphasized and honed in one's approach to some matter.¹¹ These ways of attending to an object of investigation are obviously advantageous when one considers their opposites. Consider, for example, the detective who tries to solve the crime with intellectual sloppiness, superficial thinking, treating views other than his own unfairly, keeping an important point to himself because sharing it would make him unpopular, and failing to recognize his intellectual limits and mistakes. The point here is that philosophical theology seeks to purposively avoid these and other faulty ways of thinking and in their place prizes the sorts of virtuous ways of thinking mentioned previously. Since spiritual formation has a complexity to it and therefore a diversity of opinions, the sort of mental rigor that philosophy engenders is vitally important. Perhaps the best explanation of Dallas Willard's influence on spiritual formation can be located in his careful, thorough, and long-standing attention to the need and nature of spiritual formation in Christ. For instance, his book *The Divine Conspiracy* was revolutionary for many precisely because Willard unearthed views of God and the Christian life that were assumed by many to be right but were exposed by Willard's in-

¹⁰ On several occasions Jesus uses informal, logical reasoning to unearth the faulty premises of the challenges of the Pharisees (e.g., Luke 11:14–23) with great effect. How often is it the case that a particular approach to sanctification “sounds right” until the reasons given for that approach are examined carefully (cf., Prov. 18:17)? See Dallas Willard, “Jesus the Logician,” *Christian Scholar's Review*, vol. XXVIII, 4 (1999): 605–614.

¹¹ For a discussion of intellectual virtues and their role in Christian living, see Phil Dow, *Virtuous Minds: Intellectual Character Development* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013); Laura Frances Callahan and Timothy O'Connor, ed., *Religious Faith and Intellectual Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

depth analysis to be clearly flawed.¹² In their place, Willard thoughtfully commended an alternative and compelling picture of transformational discipleship to Jesus.

PHILOSOPHY RUN AMUCK

But while the above shows some of the explicit interconnections between philosophy and spiritual formation, it might be thought that philosophy is in various ways problematic when it is brought to bear on spiritual formation. For one, philosophy can seem to unnecessarily complicate what would otherwise be a simple process of being conformed to the image of Christ. Second, there might be concerns that philosophy ends up trumping the authority of Scripture in developing an understanding of spiritual formation. And, lastly, philosophy could lead to an overly intellectual/rationalistic/cognitive approach to spiritual formation. Let me briefly address these worries in turn.

First, does philosophy unnecessarily complicate what would otherwise be a simple process of growing in Christlikeness? Of course, philosophical analysis can unnecessarily complicate things, including spiritual formation. Some of that is due to the technical vocabulary of philosophy, which can be unfamiliar to the non-philosopher. Philosophers working in spirituality would do well to put their points in language that is accessible to non-philosophers and carefully define technical terms when those terms are required. Another unnecessary complication is due more to the sociology of the philosophical community than philosophy itself. Philosophers tend to operate by developing their views in response to others and at times the point-counterpoint nature of these debates takes the discussion into highly abstract, hair-splitting type arguments that can be extremely difficult to follow as well as difficult to tie back to a meaningful question. Moreover, some areas of contemporary philosophical discourse have become largely disassociated from practical relevance or are rooted in views that are antithetical to Christian commitments.¹³ Bringing these sorts of philosophical considerations to bear on Christian spirituality mires the discussion in confusion. But while philosophy can unnecessarily complicate spiritual formation in these and, no doubt, other ways, this has no bearing on whether spiritual formation in Christ is simple and without need of philosophical analysis. For one, even if conformity to the image of Jesus Christ turns out

¹² Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998). See my overview of some of Willard's contribution to formation, Steve L. Porter, "The Willardian Corpus," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 3, no. 2 (2010): 239–266.

¹³ For the latter, see Peter Unger, *Empty Ideas: A Critique of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

to be simple, it is not obvious that it is, and philosophy can be helpful in clarifying the degree to which it is simple and the degree to which it is not. That itself is a complex affair!

Indeed, the biblical witness of Jesus' first disciples as well as the letters addressed to the earliest Christian communities strongly suggest that spiritual formation in Christ was a complex reality that was difficult to keep in proper focus. Consider, for instance, Paul's words to the Galatians: "O you foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? . . . Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Gal. 3:1, 3).¹⁴ The church in Galatia did not find it easy to stay true to life in the Spirit and so Paul goes on to distinguish true spirituality from a type of legalism that had crept into the Galatians' spiritual lives. Perhaps the "foolish" Galatians should have easily seen the error in their spiritual living, but the point here is that it took some careful theological instruction on the part of Paul to attempt to bring them back around. If Christian spirituality was difficult to get right in the first century, there is all the more reason to think it would remain so in the twenty-first century.

More importantly, the notion that there is a complexity to spiritual formation does not mean that one has to be particularly intelligent to understand the Christian life. The primary meaning of complexity has to do with the intricacy or multi-faceted nature of the reality in question—for instance, the *complexities* of family life. A person does not need a doctorate in family systems theory to understand the complexities of family life and getting a doctorate in that field would not guarantee an in-depth understanding of the complexities of families. All one needs to do to comprehend the complexity of family life is to pay careful attention to a family or two. Sustained and careful attention to families will elicit a profound grasp of the complexities involved. The same holds true of the complexity involved in Christian formation. Sustained and careful attention to following Jesus brings with it the sorts of insights that are required for being conformed to his image. As Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you and *learn* from me . . . and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:29, emphasis added). In this case, careful and sustained attention to Jesus himself brings about what is needed to follow his way of life.

A second potential problem in bringing philosophy into conversation with spiritual formation is that philosophy will end up usurping the authority of Scripture as one's view of formation develops. In response to this worry it is right to remind philosophers to be watchful that their own philosophical views do not end up taking precedence over conclusions that are more faithful to Scripture.¹⁵ But that philosophical conclusions could po-

¹⁴ All Scripture citations are English Standard Version.

¹⁵ Of course, this reminder assumes a certain view of the authority of Scripture that not all philosophers will share. For a defense of this view, see my "Theology as Queen and Psychology as Handmaid?"

tentially trump Scripture is not a reason to bar philosophy from the discussion given that philosophical assumptions are already embedded in the biblical authors' minds, the historical context in which these authors were writing, as well as those who are interpreting these texts across church history. This means that there are no philosophically blind readings of Scripture, only philosophically laden readings that are brought into critical dialogue with Scripture. While understanding the philosophical assumptions of the original historical context of the biblical writings is important for accurately interpreting the text, those philosophical assumptions are not necessarily the best ones. This means that while philosophy is always a handmaiden to theology, our aim should be to bring the best of philosophy into conversation with Scripture. This returns us to C. S. Lewis' often quoted point that, "Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered."¹⁶

A third and final concern about philosophy and formation is that philosophy could lead to an overly intellectual, rationalistic, and/or cognitive view of spiritual formation. Similar to the last point, philosophers need to take care to avoid views of formation that are *overly* intellectualized in that intellectualization is a common defense against interpersonal, affective connection, including interpersonal, affective connection with God. But the problem of *over*-intellectualization and/or *defensive* intellectualization is not inherent to philosophers and can just as easily occur in biblical theology, historical theology, or numerous other approaches to spiritual formation. Indeed, even the anti-intellectualism that is found in some veins of contemporary Christianity can itself become a form of defensive intellectualization. For example, think of the person who has defended himself against an experiential relationship with God through becoming a devotee of the view that the Christian life solely consists in doing whatever the Bible commands where both understanding what the Bible commands and doing it require little to no cognitive understanding. This anti-intellectual Christian has intellectualized the Christian life in such a manner so as to avoid any sort of experiential dimension to the Christian life. All of this to say, philosophy is not alone in the tendency to over-intellectualize things. One hope for a philosophically robust view of formation is that it would make this very point regarding spiritual formation.

So, while we need to beware of philosophy bringing about needless complexity, or trumping the authority of Scripture, or over-valuing an intellectual approach to the Christian life, none of these potential pitfalls disqualifies the otherwise valuable role philosophy can play in helping to clarify, develop, and defend an accurate understanding of spiritual formation in Christ.

¹⁶ C. S. Lewis, "Learning in War-Time," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, rev. and exp. ed. (Orlando, FL: Macmillan, 1980), 28.

AREAS IN NEED OF FURTHER INVESTIGATION

In conclusion, there are several aspects of spiritual formation that are seemingly in especial need of further philosophical attention.

First, philosophers would do well to continue to analyze the nature and dynamics of how it is that God transforms human persons. The Pauline notion that walking in the Spirit brings about love, joy, peace, patience, etc., and allows one to not gratify sinful desires (Gal. 5:16–18) offers a compelling indication of how spiritual transformation can be understood, but such biblical teaching needs to be developed and integrated with a holistic theory of spiritual transformation. William Alston's article, "The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit," is a profitable resource in developing an in-depth account of how the Spirit brings about human transformation.¹⁷

A second area ripe for on-going discussion is how best to conceptualize a real interactive relationship with God, including the various ways of becoming aware of God's presence and his communication with humans. This would, of course, involve various epistemological considerations regarding Divine discourse, potential defeaters of purported experiences of God, the role of the Spirit in illuminating Scripture, biblical claims that the Spirit of God testifies/cries out to the human spirit, and so on. On these issues Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* and Dallas Willard's *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* are essential resources.¹⁸

A final area that deserves additional philosophical attention is the place of suffering in spiritual formation as well as how suffering and pain impact the ability of humans to trust in God. Two sources mentioned earlier address this issue: Eleonore Stump's *Wandering in Darkness* and Paul Moser's *The Severity of God*. While Stump and Moser are extremely helpful on this topic, further philosophical work should continue this focus on the reality of suffering in the life of faith. Not only would this be of assistance to those who struggle in their spiritual lives due to the experience of suffering, but there are also resources in this discussion for addressing how to understand God's allowing evil to occur given the way suffering tends to defeat human resistance to God.

¹⁷ William Alston, "The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit," in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), 121–131.

¹⁸ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012).

CONCLUSION

Philosophers spend a lot of mental energy treating questions of varying import. Again, on some accounts, much of what philosophers philosophize on is largely irrelevant to central matters of human concern and perhaps especially irrelevant to central matters about which Christ-followers ought to be concerned. Bringing philosophical resources to bear on spiritual formation is a ripe and extremely appropriate use of the mental energy philosophers have available. Perhaps an essential pre-requisite for being a Christian philosopher ought to be an on-going research program in the area of spiritual formation. Frankly, it is difficult to imagine a better use of one's philosophical training and abilities than to focus one's attention on the transforming work of the Spirit of Jesus. Then again, perhaps what is most important is that Christian philosophers (as well as non-philosophers) take as their primary calling a life of serious Jesus-following that lets Jesus guide the degree to which their work connects with matters of the Christian life. For those who find their way into the interconnection of philosophy and spiritual formation, we look forward to the fruits of those labors.

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