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A Doxastic Community Approach to Christian Scholarship

By Gregory E. Ganssle, Ph.D.

Introduction

In recent years there has been an explosion of Christian Scholarship in several pockets within the mainline Academy. Such scholars as Alvin Plantinga, George Marsden and William Alston have had much to do both with constructing the bomb and with lighting its fuse. In their research and publications as well as in their teaching and doctoral supervision, they have proved that it is possible to be both wholly converted and thoroughly engaged in scholarly practice.[1] From time to time, they have turned their attention to questions about the nature of Christian scholarship. Professor Plantinga, in his famous address, argues that, if we claim to be Christians, we ought to do our work Christianly.[2] That is, we ought to take what we know as Christians into our scholarly endeavors in shaping the questions we address, in choosing our methodology and in determining which conclusions ought to be embraced. Professor Marsden, in his most recent book, has been presenting arguments to the broader academy that it ought to welcome Christians who do their work from unabashedly Christian perspectives.[3]

These arguments indicate how Christian Scholars straddle a rift between two communities. We have one foot in the Church and one in the Academy. This position is not always comfortable for those doing the straddling and it is not always understood by those on either side. Those firmly entrenched solely in one community or the other often doubt whether one can inhabit both without compromise. In the Church some have believed that a commitment to scholarship inevitably leads to the rejection of or at least a revisioning of the faith. In the Academy, it has been heard that Christian concerns inhibit the pure and open attitude necessary to the scholarly pursuit. To be sure, these doubts are not as prevalent now as they were thirty or even fifteen years ago, but they are still expressed in both communities.

While it may be the case that the idea of Christian Scholarship is accepted more readily today, I think it is also the case that the communities of the Church and of the Academy have less in common in terms of their basic orientations and world views than in recent memory. The task of straddling these two communities requires quite a stretch.

I want to explore the nature of these communities and how each functions in the work of a Christian Scholar. Specifically, I am interested in the relationship between these communities as they function in our belief formation. I believe there are valuable insights to be gained by thinking of these communities as Doxastic, or belief forming, communities. In order to uncover these insights, I will take a brief detour through the sometimes treacherous terrain of epistemology.

Doxastic Practice Epistemology

Recently, William Alston has been defending what he calls a doxastic practice approach to epistemology. We can begin to grasp his project by considering arguments for the reliability of our sense perception. Alston points out that any argument which we might give for its reliability will use premises which themselves can be justified only on the basis of sense perception.[4] There is a circle here although it is not a straight forward logical one. Alston calls this kind of circle an epistemic circle. In these arguments, at least one of the premises is justified based on sense perception. If sense perception turns out to be reliable, then the premise is justified and the argument is successful. The most we can show without falling into epistemic circularity is that if sense perception is reliable, then we can show that it is.

Alston takes sense perception to be paradigmatic for all of our doxastic practices. Memory, introspection, and logical reasoning are also infected with epistemic circularity. If our arguments for the reliability of these basic doxastic practices exhibit epistemic circularity, what stance ought we take regarding them? Alston writes:

Given that we will inevitably run into epistemic circularity at some point(s) in any attempt to provide direct arguments for the reliability of one or another doxastic practice, we should draw the conclusion that there is no appeal beyond the practices we find firmly established, psychologically and socially. We cannot look into any issue whatever without employing some way of forming and evaluating beliefs; that applies as much to issues concerning the reliability of doxastic practices as to any issue. Hence what alternative is there to employing the practices we find ourselves using, to which we find ourselves firmly committed, and which we could abandon or replace only with extreme difficulty if at all?[5]

Rather than opting for skepticism or throwing in the towel in some other manner, Alston argues that it is reasonable to continue to engage in those doxastic practices which are well established socially and which would be psychologically difficult to avoid. Therefore we should continue to regard our sense perception, memory, introspection and faculties of rational inference as generally reliable.

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Doxastic Practices and Doxastic Communities

Alston's analysis of these basic doxastic practices provides a way of looking at how we form beliefs as Christians and as Scholars. Not only do we engage, like all people, in the very basic doxastic practices of sense perception, introspection and so on, but we engage in more sophisticated activities which are doxastic in nature. As a Christian, I participate in a family of activities by which beliefs are formed and sustained within me. This family includes participation in liturgy, in worship, in listening to sermons, in studying the scriptures. I also engage in the responsive readings of the psalms, in the sacraments, in meditation, prayer, and in discussion. My everyday religious experience, which Alston calls "Christian Mystical Perception" is also included. For the most part, these activities are not engaged in isolation. I enter into them in the community of Christian people.

This family of practices may lead me to form beliefs. For example, in listening to sermons and studying and discussing the parables of lost sons in Luke 15, I form beliefs about how one can be obedient and respectable and still be lost. In addition, some of the activities of the Christian Community help sustain my previously formed beliefs. Years ago, I began to hold that I have a responsibility to respect those Christian missionaries, martyrs and thinkers who went before me through the faithful preservation and articulation of the gospel. Taking part in the liturgy, especially reciting the Nicene Creed, deepens my sense of the historical continuity of the church and strengthens my commitment to this belief. We can see, then, how the practices we engage in with the community of the church are doxastic in nature.

As a philosopher, I engage in another family of belief forming activities. This family includes various aspects of analyzing arguments, disputing conclusions, proposing alternative answers to controversial questions, recognizing and evaluating the entailments of specific claims, uncovering disputable assumptions and refuting anticipated (or stated) objections. These activities are learned and pursued in the community of other philosophers. To be sure, there is a good deal of overlap. I engage in some of the same activities in my research that I engage in with the community of the church.

Many of the practices I engage in as a Christian and as a philosopher are what we may call "higher level" practices. In order to engage in any one of these I use such "basic" practices as sense perception, memory, reasoning.[6] Higher level doxastic practices will be infected with epistemic circularity at least in so far as they are dependent upon basic practices which exhibit such circularity. Of course, there may be higher level epistemic circularity as well. It is tempting to think that some arguments for the claim that Jesus is God Incarnate are epistemically circular. That is, if they rely on an appeal to the New Testament as Divine Revelation.

Some higher level practices are community based in ways that others might not be. By this I mean that there are strong community based boundaries which delineate which beliefs or conclusions fall within the commitments of the community and which fall outside. Both the practices of the Christian community and those of the Academy are community based in this way.

The community based boundaries limit how far one can go and still remain consistent with the main thrust of the community. Is it possible to stray so far as to remove oneself from the community altogether? After all, Church History records great concern with various heresies and I suspect that there are academic heresies as well. It seems as though it is up to the community to decide what will constitute its defining commitments and what counts as straying too far. Both the Church and the Academy define themselves accordingly. The creeds functioned as sketching the boundaries for orthodoxy. If I hold beliefs outside those prescribed, I am no longer Christian. In the academy there has been talk about an orthodoxy of method as well as of belief. Orthodox methodology is that which determines what is real scholarship and what is spurious. This distinction has been especially prevalent in the sciences. Now many have pointed out that the way science actually works often differs greatly from the way it is advertised but, nonetheless, the community has defined which methods or approaches are acceptable and which are not. It is the case that in both the church and in the academy there are differences of conviction on exactly where and how to sketch the boundaries. It is also appears that some of the boundaries may shift over time. It is now the case that science is not required to be deterministic as it once was. Psychology was once considered too humanistic to inform practical theology. Now it is welcomed with open arms.

Individuating Practices and Individuating Communities

If it is a given community which determines what falls within the boundaries of acceptable belief and behavior, the question emerges as to how we individuate doxastic communities. We can shed some light on this issue by turning again to Alston's account of basic doxastic practices. Alston notes that individuating basic practices is somewhat, but not completely, arbitrary. How we group activities into practices depends somewhat upon our reasons for wanting to group them together.

One way of cutting the pie will be best for some purposes and other ways for other purposes. I am assuming that any plausible mode of individuation will group mechanisms into a single practice only if there are marked similarities in inputs and functions, but that still leaves us considerable latitude.[7]

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The approach he recommends individuates the doxastic practices according to the type of input and the type of output. Sense perception can count as a single practice because it takes the same type of inputs (sense experience) and produces the same kind of output (sensory beliefs.) We could, if we wanted, split up sense perception into vision, hearing, tasting, smelling and touch since these modes each have their own specific kinds of inputs and outputs. I think the higher level practices may be individuated in similar ways. So the doxastic communal practices can be individuated by the type of activities involved or by the communities in which they are acquired, practiced and regulated. In the case of the Church and the Academy, it is not that the practices of these communities do not have anything in common. Indeed, all higher level practices are based on the same basic practices. Furthermore, many higher level practices are held in common by different communities as well. I evaluate arguments when I listen to sermons as much as when I read journal articles. The Church and the Academy differ significantly, however, in at least two ways. First, in spite of some overlap, they do hold different sets of inputs and outputs to be acceptable. Second, they differ as to how the boundaries are set and maintained. In the Church there is a legitimate appeal, as input, to the authority of scripture, tradition and creed as well as to the reasoning process. In the Academy, there may be covert appeal to authority as long as it is to the authority of the scholarly community or to the proper methodology. As far as outputs are concerned, in the church supernatural explanations are expected while in the community of scholars, such explanations are granted reluctantly if at all.[8]

Doxastic Communities and Three Questions about Christian Scholarship

We have been looking at the Christian Scholar as participating in two Doxastic Communities. One value of seeing Christian scholarship in this way is that it sheds light upon some of many of the questions which have surrounded the claims of Christian scholars about their work. I wish to point to three issues in particular.

1. The Value of Scholarship

One question which may be raised concerns the value of scholarship. Every discipline promotes the idea that it is important. Some do so by reducing other disciplines to it. I used to think that all of biology could be reduced to chemistry and all chemistry to physics. Another reductionistic strategy for grounding the value of a discipline or research project is to show how it is related to some item of practical concern. On this view, for example, if some research into plant hormones may yield side results with medical applications, that project is considered valuable.

Christians often ground the importance of scholarship reductionistically as well. Scholarship has value if it promotes the concerns of Christian community, specifically in persuading others that Christianity is true. Now one of its values is that it can promote the truth claims of Christian faith, but there is more to tell. The Christian Scholar can ground the importance of her work nonreductionistically. It is what we know as Christians about God and the world and human flourishing which makes scholarship an utterly worthy enterprise. It is primarily because God is the creator of heaven and earth and of human beings that grounds the value of investing years in understanding plant hormones, regardless of any possible medical application for the research. It is the doxastic community of the Church which forms and sustains those beliefs which ground the high value of our scholarly projects.

2. Negotiating Beliefs formed by different Communities

What happens when a belief which is formed by the right application of the set of activities in one community falls outside what is acceptable in another? This second concern is the common plight of the Christian scholar. Plantinga treats this with great insight in his lecture.[9] He warns us not to allow the assumptions of naturalism and anti-realism to put a straight-jacket on our commitment to the reality both of the supernatural and of the natural. Plantinga reminds us that we know things in virtue of being Christians and this knowledge is every bit as credible as anything we learn through our activities as philosophers. We know God is real and that He created a real world. We do not have to show that Christianity is true or rational before we can bring this knowledge to bear on our scholarship.

3. The Mission of the Christian Scholar

A doxastic community approach will help us define the mission of the Christian Scholar. Besides those beliefs whose content is relevant to the content of my research, there is another sort of belief which I form through my involvement in the community of the church. These are beliefs about my mission in the world as a Christian. These beliefs too ought to shape my scholarship deeply. God has a redemptive mission for the world and He has drafted His people into this mission. As Christians we are called to embody God's redemptive mission to the whole world. This includes our roles as heralds of the gospel but it also involves our redemptive engagement with all that is created and fallen. In other words, my deepest priorities must be kingdom priorities and kingdom priorities are redemptive. I cannot be content merely to pursue a faithful execution of my scholarly opportunities. I must make God's aims my own and His aims are transformative.

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Taking a thoroughly Christian view of my mission, I find that the horizon of my concern is broadened considerably. I am forced to reckon with questions I would otherwise pass by. For example, I must consider a challenge raised by Charles Malik. In the, 1981 Pascal Lectures on Christianity and the University, he asked, "What does Jesus Christ think of the University?"[10] Discovering what Jesus Christ thinks of the university is an issue which seems quite removed from the question of how to be a Christian philosopher. It is not only about the individual Christian scholar and her work. It is also about the university itself- the institution and our mission to it. But if the beliefs which govern my understanding of my mission are formed and sustained in the Christian Community, they will include this broader redemptive scope. How to be a Christian philosopher, or how to be any kind of Christian Scholar, must include how to think about the institution of the University redemptively.

The mission of the Christian Scholar is shaped by the priorities of the Kingdom of God. This mission is redemptive and transformative. It aims at deep change in the lives of colleagues and students, as we help bring them into contact with the living gospel. It also aims at the transformation of the disciplines in the university. The Christian Scholar labors and prays to the end that the assumptions and projects pursued in philosophy, history, sociology, and the natural sciences will reflect the truth about God and His world. The Mission of the Christian Scholar also aims at institutional renewal. We long for the transformation of the university itself so that the ethos, the policies and the influence of the institution will reflect the truth as it is found in Jesus Christ.

Throughout this paper I have used the metaphor of straddling to describe the Christians scholar's relation to the two doxastic communities. In light of our reflection upon our mission we discover that this might not be the most apt image. We do not stand paralyzed with one foot on the dock and one foot in a boat which is slowly drifting away. Rather we take our priorities and values from the Church and we fully engage the Academy. We discover our fundamental life commitments in Christian practice and we work them out in our scholarship. We have our life priorities set by the concerns of the community of the Kingdom of God and we live out those priorities in the arena of the world. It turns out that there is a better metaphor to describe the relation the Christian Scholar has to the two communities. It is not original. In fact, St. Paul applied it to his own ministry as well as to ours. We are ambassadors.[11]

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[1] This is not to deny that there has been significant Christian Scholarship at the many church affiliated colleges and universities. The recent explosion occurred in mainstream Academia. Certainly scholars at the Christian schools had some part in this as well.
[2] Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984) 253-271.
[3] George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
[4] That is, if the argument does not have some other fatal flaw.
[5] William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) 149-150.
[6] Christian Mystical Practice, as Alston describes it, is a basic doxastic practice. A believer engages in Christian Mystical Practice without necessarily engaging in other more basic practices.
[7] *Perceiving God*, 165.
[8] In this discussion I do not mean to imply that either the church or the university is made up of only one community. Both the academy and the church are comprised of many different, overlapping communities.
[9] See also his "Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship" (Stob Lectures Endowment, 1990). I discuss this negotiation in "Copernicus, Christology and Hell: Faith Seeking Understanding," forthcoming in *Philosophia Christi*.
[10] Charles Habib Malik, *A Christian Critique of the University* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1982).
[11] I want to express my thanks to Eric Gregory and especially to David Mahan for challenging comments which greatly improved this paper.

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