An experience in teaching Christian philosophy

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How does a Christian teacher teach Christian philosophy to a group of teachers of whom nearly half are Buddhist, Hindu, Animist, agnostic or atheist whilst the other half are Christians from various denominations?

I was dreading the experience of teaching this group from widely diverse backgrounds, culturally, experientially and philosophically. The students were required to take the subject in order to obtain education credits towards a teacher's license in Thailand. Previous groups had levelled much criticism at the Christian approach to philosophy and particularly the Christian philosophy itself. This particular group had some very outspoken students who were not afraid to challenge the teacher and who were openly antagonistic towards anything Christian.

Preparation

Much prayer, thought and study was done in an effort to prepare for the class. Christian philosophy needed to be approached in a neutral manner. Yet addressing metaphysical issues like the origin of the universe, the nature of humans and whether or not there is a God can be very controversial. The epistemological question of 'what is truth?' is highly debatable, particularly in a group where some people acknowledge no God and no absolutes. Wading through axiological issues of ethics, morals and aesthetics can be like walking in a field strewn with landmines. How can any of these issues be addressed in a neutral way that still provides a true picture of Christianity and Christian philosophy?

A way forward: The Bible as a source of knowledge and truth

First, the Bible was introduced as a source of knowledge based on revelation (Knight, 1998, p. 21). Naturally, the non-Christians had reservations, perhaps serious ones, about using the Bible as a source of knowledge, so it was necessary to present evidence that this is possibly a reliable source.

Philosophers have developed at least three theories for testing the validity of knowledge that can be applied to the evaluation of a source of knowledge. The coherence theory looks at how consistent and coherent the content and reasoning is, in other words, internal validity (Knight, 1998, pp. 23, 24). The Bible, despite being written over a period of approximately 1600 years (Ball, 2007, p. 28), is remarkably consistent in its theme of "redemption and reclamation of the human race by a loving God" (Ball, 2007, p. 38). It is also remarkably consistent in its teaching regarding all major doctrines, like the character of God, humans being sinful by nature, the relevance of the moral law, and so forth (Ball, 2007, p. 39). Furthermore, there is cohesion in the symbolism used throughout the Old and New Testaments, for example blood representing life and the lamb as a sacrifice (Ball, 2007, p. 40). Lastly, there is internal consistency between the Old and New Testaments, as Hamilton (cited by Ball, 2007) says, "It would be absolutely impossible to understand and interpret the New Testament without the aid of the Old" (p. 41).

Another philosophical theory to test the validity of knowledge or a source of knowledge is the correspondence theory, "which uses agreement with 'fact' as a standard of judgment" (Knight, 1998, p. 23). Biblical archaeology has made many discoveries that support the facts in the Bible about people, events, places and customs (Ball, 2007). Archaeology uses empirical methods often trusted by scientists and even sceptics. Furthermore, although the Bible is not a science textbook, it provides information and guidelines regarding diet which are supported by modern nutrition and medical science, for example it teaches that people should not eat meat with the blood in it (Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 3:17, 17:12, 19:26) because it is life. Today we know that blood carries not only oxygen and nutritional elements; it also carries other forms of life like bacteria and viruses that cause disease. The Bible, Psalm 8:8, stimulated scientific research into ocean currents by Matthew Maury who wanted to understand what is meant by "the paths of the seas" (Gish, 2004).

Some people doubt the validity of the Bible due to the multiple translations and possible mistakes made in copying it. However, the Bible has more surviving ancient manuscripts than any other ancient document and they are remarkably consistent in supporting the Bible translations (Ball, 2007, pp. 74–

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85). Current translations have been done by teams of scholars from many different denominations using multiple manuscripts and strict guidelines (Forum of Bible Agencies, 1999).

Another test used by philosophers to determine validity of knowledge, or the source of knowledge, is the pragmatic theory where the test of truth is seen in its usefulness and how well it works by looking at the results of its application (Knight, 1998, p. 24). When people live according to what the Bible teaches, it has a profoundly positive effect on their lifestyle and behaviour and even on whole communities (Ball, 2007, pp. 42–47). Bible prophecies can also verify the validity of the Bible as a reliable source of knowledge when a person sees how many prophecies have been fulfilled, including time-based and Messianic prophecies (Ball, 2007, chapters 5, 6). The Bible itself encourages people to test for themselves whether it is true or not, in other words, to acquire experiential knowledge (Psalm 34:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:21, 22).

Group work

Once evidence had been provided as to the reliability of the Bible as a source of knowledge, the students were shown how to use the Bible and how to find specific verses. The students then worked in groups for a two-hour workshop where they responded to philosophical questions by finding the answers in the Bible itself.

The discussions in the various groups were interesting, lively and at times heated but always in a good-humoured and positive way. As the teacher moved from group to group and became involved in various discussions and debates, it was wonderful to hear comments like, "I didn't know this is what the Bible said about this" or "Teacher, did you know that it is the first time my friend here has ever held a Bible in her hands and read it?" It was encouraging to see how actively engaged the non-Christians were in the discussions about the meaning of a verse or verses and how the Christian students used the opportunity to explain Scripture. After previous negative remarks by some students, I had not imagined that it was possible to foster such a positive experience. The Holy Spirit was truly present (John 16:7–15).

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Presentation of Christian philosophy

The lecture on Christian Philosophy was given the next week, using a Bible-based approach. The students were encouraged to look up the various Bible verses used to present the philosophical content of metaphysics (nature of reality), epistemology (the nature of knowledge and truth) and axiology (what is of value) (Knight, 1998). The content was presented in a neutral way, without the teacher providing value judgments, thus allowing the students to think about the content. This same approach had been used in presenting all the previous philosophies and theories of education. Since the class is about the philosophical foundations of education, we looked at Jesus as the Master Teacher: how He defined the role of the teacher and the follower (student), His methods, His curriculum/content and the purpose of His teaching.

Student reaction and teacher's reflection

A number of students, including many of the non-Christians, expressed appreciation for the way in which Christian philosophy was presented. Some said that it had been truly thought provoking to engage in the group discussions and the presentation and to realise that they wanted to go home and think more about what they had learned in this process. There was no negative feedback after the group-work or the presentation or in the final evaluation of the subject itself.

What did I, as the teacher, learn from this experience? I learned that it is possible to connect with both Christian and non-Christian students in a meaningful and positive way when one tries, with God's help, to approach a controversial subject in an impartial way. The experience I had been dreading had turned into the most positive experience of the entire semester. Using a wholly Bible-based approach and letting the Bible speak for itself was clearly successful. TEACH

References

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