Peril and Promise: Teaching Philosophy in an Adventist Context

By *Richard Rice*

"Remember, if you're not thinking, you're not living." With these words I ended each session of the "Intro to Philosophy" class I taught for many years to undergraduates on the La Sierra campus. It was my version of Socrates' famous dictum, "The unexamined life is not worth living" which, in turn, was his gloss on "Know thyself," the inscription on the walls of Apollo's shrine at Delphi.

If the fundamental purpose of philosophy is to cultivate "the life of the mind," to invoke an expression I often heard at the University of Chicago, there is a good deal in the Seventh-day Adventist mentality that potentially supports an interest in philosophy. There is also a good deal in the SDA mentality that will arouse suspicions about philosophy, or at least raise serious questions. Let's deal with the negatives first.

One reservation about philosophy arises from a strong belief in our community that education should have a practical pay-off. As a familiar saying puts it, "Philosophy bakes no bread." Another aspect of the SDA outlook that makes us suspicious of philosophy is our robust doctrine of sin. We believe that the fall affects the whole person, mind as well as body, and we cannot trust our intellects to lead us to truth. The epistemic effects of sin cloud our thinking and leave us susceptible to error and deception. Human reason is unreliable. As Bible says, "There is a way that seems right to a

person, but its end is the way of death" (Prov 14:12). From this vantage point, philosophy strikes many as the vain imaginings of fallen human beings, with predictably unfruitful and potentially dangerous, even disastrous, consequences.

Given a visceral suspicion of human "speculation," Adventists believe that only divine revelation provides reliable knowledge, especially when it comes to matters of ultimate significance. And so we look to religion, rather than to philosophy, for answers to life's major questions. In recent years this takes the form of insisting that we must derive our presuppositions directly from the Bible, not from another sources, and particularly not from philosophy.[1] By extension, this means that the essential fault of rejected positions is their reliance on unbiblical presuppositions, in particular, their reliance on philosophy. So, it is not be surprising that SDA colleges and universities have few faculty members whose academic training is in philosophy and few who teach philosophy.

With all this in mind, we have to wonder if philosophy has a place at the SDA table, and if so, just what its role might be. On the other hand, if the fundamental purpose of philosophy is to cultivate the life of the mind, to encourage careful and critical thought, then

[1] Kwabena Donkor concludes an article in a Newsletter from the Biblical Research Institute several years ago with this pronouncement: "So where should Adventists stand? … [W]e should stand on the biblical foundation without any philosophical footings." ("Open Theism: A Review of the Issues," in BRI Newsletter, Number 16 [October 2006], p. 16) Compare this statement from the article on God by Fernando L. Canale in "The Handbook of SDA Theology" which refers to the "Adventist emphasis on scripture as the sole source of data for executing theology": "Systematically distrustful and critical of traditional theological positions," it states, "Adventists were determined to build doctrines on the basis of Scripture alone" (*Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000], p. 148)

there are also elements in the SDA spirit that provide a strong mandate for philosophy in the curriculum of an SDA college or university.

For one thing, SDAs have always been concerned with keeping God's commandments, and the "greatest and first commandment," as Jesus formulated it, is to love God "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your the mind" (Mt 22:37). So, the mind's love for God is just as important as every other form our devotion takes. The very meaning of the word *philosophy*, love of wisdom, suggests that it has an integral role to play in the mind's love for God.

Another feature of the SDA spirit that arguably supports the value of philosophy is our vision of the "whole person." SDAs maintain that human existence comprises physical, emotional, social, mental, and spiritual dimensions—all inseparably connected and intimately intertwined. This conviction lies behind the SDA "health message," and the same conviction lies behind our commitment to education. We believe that all the powers of the soul, mental as well as physical, should be cultivated to the highest degree.

A third element in the SDA spirit that supports an interest in philosophy is our dedication to mission. The world encompassed in the Gospel commission—"all the world"—is not only the physical world, but the cultural and intellectual world as well. A mission that is truly global will seek ways to communicate with privileged as well as underprivileged people, with those who have cultural and educational advantages, as well as those who don't.

We need philosophy in order to communicate the Gospel in ways that will engage thinking people. We need to appreciate the distinctive challenges to faith that are influencing people's attitudes today. And we need philosophy to understand the long history of reflection on the Christian faith. In centuries past, great minds pursued philosophy and theology as collaborative disciplines. Philosophy was often described as "the handmaid of theology." To understand the forms in which Christianity has come to us, we need to understand the philosophical concepts at work in its various historical expressions.

When I was in graduate school years ago, people asked me questions now and then about the wisdom of my decision to study at "an outside institution." I sometimes replied by quoting the following statement of Ellen G. White. "We would that there were strong young men, rooted and grounded in the faith, who had such a living connection with God that they could, if so counseled by our leading brethren, enter the higher colleges in our land, where they would have a wider field for study and observation. Association with different classes of minds, an acquaintance with the workings and results of popular methods of education, and a knowledge of theology as taught in the leading institutions of learning would be of great value to such workers, preparing them to labor for the educated classes and to meet the prevailing errors of our time."[2] I think the same holds for philosophy. A knowledge of how educated people think, of what they are thinking about, and of what's being taught in the world's most

[2] *Testimonies for the Church,* vol. 5, pp. 583-84.

influential institutions, is indispensable if we hope to present the gospel in a way that will address their interests and concerns.

If the study of philosophy can help to fulfill the potential of the "whole person," cultivate the life of the mind, encourage careful and critical thought, enlarge our circle of conversation, indeed, even enhance the effectiveness of our Christian witness, then there appears to be a strong mandate for philosophy in the curriculum of an SDA college or university. Here are some of the things that philosophy can do.

First of all, philosophy cultivates the art of critical reflection—traditionally, the heart of the philosophical enterprise. Young people need philosophy in order to grasp and appreciate the various currents that flow through the thinking of people in the world today. We are painfully reminded on a regular basis of the clash of cultures, ideologies, and mind-sets that affect the lives of millions around the world. Philosophy can help us detect and discern the divergent ways that people view the world they live in. Carefully reflecting on the fundamental convictions that underlie the way people live—the "basic beliefs" that form the framework or foundation of all thought and experience—can help us appreciate the divergent perspectives of those around us.

Second, if indeed philosophy creates problems—and this is often the case, admittedly—we need philosophy to help us solve these problems. The solution to bad philosophy is not no philosophy, it's better philosophy. To cite my own area of interest once again, the

traditional Christian view of God as immobile, immutable (and ultimately insensitive) is arguably due to the unfortunate dependence of Christian thinkers on the static ontology of Greek philosophy. The best way to counter this not to reject philosophy *ueberhaupt*, but to show that a dynamic ontology such as that of process thought has metaphysical advantages over the classical view and provides a more promising way to portray the dynamic God of biblical revelation.

Third, while I have always embraced the priority of faith to reason, I have found that reason can make important contributions to faith. In fact, it was my desire to explore more fully the contours of faith, to shine a rational light on Christian faith, to place my long-held beliefs under the light of careful scrutiny, that led me to a deeper appreciation of philosophy.

Several experiences in my childhood had a lasting effect on my religious outlook. A long series of family problems made me sensitive to life's larger issues at an early age. And the solace my religious beliefs provided along with the reassurance I drew from my religious community confirmed the value of my convictions on a deeply personal level. At the same time, the difficulties we faced left me unconvinced by facile assurances about "God's protecting care" and "God's perfect plan." So, I felt God's presence in my life, but the feeling did not provide easy answers to some important questions.

On the whole, graduate school turned out to be a faith-confirming experience. I discovered that the central claims of Christianity could stand up to searching rational scrutiny. I also found both that

philosophy presents Christianity with some of the most formidable challenges it has to face, and that philosophy provides Christian faith some of the most important resources available. When it comes to theology, therefore, philosophy is both inescapable and indispensable.

This could not have been more clear than it was during the years just before I started my studies. The most striking challenge to Christianity, and religion generally, in the late 1960s came from philosophy, indeed from a particular branch of philosophy. A growing number of people were asking serious questions about the meaning, or lack of meaning, of religious language. During the twentieth century logical positivism had worked its way through science to religion. And a number of thinkers, A.J. Ayer, Anthony Flew and others, argued forcefully for the view that religious language in general, and the locution "God" in particular, has no cognitive significance. Whatever emotive purpose it may serve, they insisted, it communicates nothing about the way things are. It is literally non-informative. In time a number of (so-called) theologians capitulated to this critique and the "death of God" movement emerged to widespread public attention, as evidenced by the most famous cover in the history of *Time Magazine*—the Easter issue of 1966. The question "Is God Dead?" appeared in bold red letters against a black background.[3]

The theologians where I studied confronted this challenge head-on and addressed it in both philosophical and theological dimensions. They wrote and lectured on the value of religious language, drawing on

[3] *Time,* April 8, 1966. A follow-up cover of sorts came three and a half years later. It read, "Is God Coming Back to Life?" (*Time,* December 26, 1969).

various philosophical resources, analytical, phenomenological and metaphysical. To paraphrase one of their more memorable statements, however absurd the idea of God may seem to some, nothing could be more absurd than the idea of Christian faith without God. The arguments they offered to counter this fundamental challenge to faith were impressive, and their confidence in addressing these challenge was contagious.

True, the configuration of Christianity they embraced was different from what I was used to, but the most important thing they provided their students was the assurance that faith could stand up to the most formidable challenges that secular thought could mount. They imparted the abiding conviction that Christian faith has nothing to fear from engagement with the modern mind. Belief in God is not merely a viable option, one among several possibilities. When carefully articulated, it provides by far the most adequate, and intellectually defensible, interpretation of human existence, superior to all alternatives. Furthermore, their work demonstrated, philosophy has an important contribution to make to theology. In fact, in certain situations the resources that philosophy provides are indispensable.

Let me be even more specific. My philosophical reflections led me to a better understanding of the Bible. Captivated by Greek philosophy, traditional Christian thought presents us with a timeless God who is utterly self-sufficient and completely unaffected by anything that happens in the creaturely world. Such a picture obviously conflicts with the biblical portrait of a God who cares

intensely for his earthly children and even notes when a sparrow falls. The history of Christian thought is filled with attempts to pull these two together—a timeless God and a temporal world, none of them very convincing. If we shift our philosophical focus in ways that allow for us to think of ultimate reality as both changing and unchanging, both temporal and eternal, however, we can honor the desire to elevate God beyond all creaturely limits and yet affirm God's intimate relation to us. And my study of philosophy provided a way to do this.

At the same time, I realized that every philosophical position has its limitations. The God of Christian faith is larger than any philosophical program or position. Consequently, when it comes to philosophy and its potential uses, we would do well to remember Paul's injunction to the Thessalonians: "Test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil" (5:21-22).

There may be liabilities or risks in allowing philosophy within the SDA academy. But the dangers of excluding it are even greater. Limited perspectives, a false sense of security, intellectual defensiveness—philosophy can be an antidote to these very real threats. Acquainting our students with various philosophical positions, helping them to do their own thinking, showing them that careful reflection can go hand in hand with religious devotion, demonstrating that truth can be fair and has nothing to fear from searching investigation—all these are facets of the task that SDA philosophy teachers face.

But all this misses one of the most important purposes of philosophy. Whatever its many uses, any good philosophy professor would tell us, philosophy is its own reward. Like the play of a child, it may have no goal but itself, but that can be quite enough.

A mind at work is a beautiful thing to see. It is even more beautiful to experience. Like music, the flow of ideas, carefully and thoughtfully arranged, can be a source of pleasure and of joy. After all, if we're not thinking, we're not living.