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Does Athens need Jerusalem?

A Christian context for secular thought

by Michael Ovey

'There is no longer a Christian mind. The Christian mind has succumbed to the secular drift with a degree of weakness and nervelessness unmatched in Christian history. It is difficult to do justice in words to the complete loss of intellectual morale in the twentieth-century Church.'

Harry Blamires[1]

Summary

Is Christian thinking best done in isolation from secular thought? Or in dependence on it? This paper argues that neither is right, but instead Christian understanding can benefit from the genuine insights of secular thought, and, to achieve this, must put secular thought into the context of the doctrines of creation and redemption, both to evaluate it and to preserve its coherence. An illustration of this process is found in the secular thought of Baudrillard: his claims that we live in a society dominated by 'image' provide a deeper understanding of our culture's current idolatry.

Introduction

Three questions: the leaders of a church ministry team want to find more fruitful ways for the team to work together. Should they use the Myers-Briggs personality-type tests? A committee of elders is considering church growth. Can contemporary organisation theory be used? A Christian parent is reading a feature in the Sunday paper by a secular child counsellor on raising children. Can she adopt the ideas?

These examples relate to secular thinking or learning about the world. That is to say, an understanding of the world or some part of it, whether based on experience, experiment, intuition, or rational reflection, but not consciously arising from God's revelation in the Bible. Such secular learning raises a perennial question for Christians: how does secular thought fit with being a faithful Christian who relies on the revelation of God? 'What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?' demanded Tertullian c. AD200,[2] as he insisted that 'Jerusalem' did not need 'Athens', that Christian thought did not depend on secular thought. But how, then, do Christian and secular thinking relate? The explosion of knowledge, or at least information, over the last three hundred years makes this question particularly acute now. Do we deny secular thinking? Or endorse it? Or respond critically and charitably to it? And if the last, on what basis?

Frameworks for thought

Frameworks in the Christian community

'A text without a context is a pretext'. That motto has served Christians well in handling God's Word. It reminds us we must locate any individual phrase or sentence of God's revelation correctly in the overall framework of what he has said. This helps minimise distortion and misrepresentation. Our knowledge of God and his will is seen holistically, coherently. It is properly contextualised. Unfortunately it is far from clear that Christians take similar care with their knowledge of their world. This is not least because we tend to mirror our culture in compartmentalising our lives into 'public' and 'private'.[3] Christians may well have sufficient learning to take part intelligently in this public, secular square, but this is not related to their belief in Jesus as Lord of all. Since this learning is not put into the larger context of Christian belief, it seems, in practice, functionally separate from faith. In that sense, Blamires' point (cited above) hits home. Furthermore, when Christians contribute as Christians in the public square it can seem like an intrusion into an independent arena. This does, though, raise a question for Christians: just what is the context for our thought about our world?

1   Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind*, London: SPCK, 1963, p3.
2   *Prescription against heretics* 7.
3   See e.g. D. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: the Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Leicester: IVP, 1994, p9ff.

Frameworks for thought in the secular community

Secular thinking does not necessarily provide a workable alternative context. Our culture seems increasingly unable to locate its wealth of information in a viable context or framework, to put a piece of information in its appropriate 'place'. Modernism once claimed – vociferously – to provide just such a context for our knowledge: the overarching power of objective human reason to find truth, not with external help from God, but by dispassionate inquiry. Mankind has come of age, claimed Immanuel Kant, implying that humanity had come into full possession of its powers. Yet those powers have subsequently proved less universal and objective than imagined, as thinkers like Polanyi[4] showed that human knowing has an irreducibly personal, subjective, element.

Yet post-modern understandings offer little more. For the mood is one where a complete account of our condition (a meta-narrative in the jargon) seems implausible, so that any context for our thinking seems fractured and partial, unable to account for why we know what we know or what the real significance of our learning is. This loss of context or framework presents a real difficulty for us: how can we rightly value and use our learning without a full context within which to see and understand it? A piece of information without its full context threatens to become information without full significance. Our current culture has an ocean of facts, but finds navigation increasingly difficult.

A biblical case for secular thinking?

Does Christianity after all provide a viable context for thought, whether Christian or secular? Two very different groups feel uneasy: secularising thinkers and some Christians. For many secularists, Christianity has no contribution to make, either because bringing Christian belief to bear puts the search for truth in danger by biasing dispassionate inquiry (a modernist objection), or because the claim to a unique or exclusive, or 'total' truth which evaluates (or 'judges') other perspectives is oppressive – such claims are 'totalising', even totalitarian (a post-modern objection).

Christian misgivings about Christian engagement

Christians can be wary of such engagement with secular thinking, and not merely because of other-worldly blindness. Some weighty theological arguments are at stake. It is argued, quite rightly, that Romans 1:18–23 describes how sin affects the mind, as well as other features of the human person. Everyone, Jesus excepted, sins (Romans 3:23), and hence suffers from a corruption of the mind. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to overcome this, at any rate in relation to knowing the truth about Jesus (1 Corinthians 12:1–3). To insist, therefore, on the need for rational argument on secular topics with secular people, even from a Christian position, seems dubious for several reasons.

It seems dubious, first, because of the impact on the doctrine of God's revelation. Such purely 'rational', or rather rationalist, argument can suggest that mere rational discourse, on its own, without God's Spirit, conveys God's truth. This implies that we can adequately understand God independent of his revelation. A related point is that some secular thinking simply appears to be in conflict with biblical teaching, and an undue exaltation of secular thinking can create the impression that we can choose which bits of the Bible to reject and which to accept.

Secondly, this approach also affects the doctrine of salvation by God's grace alone. For, if mere rational discourse, on its own, can convey God's truth, then sin seems not to be genuinely enslaving. If one can, without God's grace, think with purity, then why can one not ultimately act with purity? That would mean, this argument suggests, that we have forgotten that salvation is by grace, not works.

Thirdly, and perhaps most obviously, there is the fear of 'drinking impure water'. For, if we start meeting secular thought in this kind of way, even though much is harmless and even useful, eventually we imbibe some idea that is genuinely wrong and dangerous. Moreover, because secular ideas are not located in their proper theological framework, it is harder to deal with such foreign bodies. Thus basic theological hygiene requires minimal traffic between theology and secularised disciplines.

This is all somewhat ironic. Theology was once called the queen of the sciences. But the sciences have long been republican, while even some faithful theologians advocate abdication.

A Christian knowledge of God and the world

The Christian argument outlined above is not negligible, but still needs supplementing with further biblical considerations, which affect the picture considerably. Romans 1:18–23 is predominantly concerned with the knowledge of God, and is not a general account of all human knowledge. Verse 19 suggests a contextual limitation – '...what can be known about *God*' (emphasis added; RSV translation). And the discussion then proceeds on the basis of fallen human suppression of the truth about God, so that, to quote Calvin, '...they wantonly bring darkness upon themselves.'[5] The futility of thought here is in the first instance about God, although its effects may ultimately go wider.

In fact, other biblical material suggests fallen humans can genuinely know things other than God without special revelation. Job 28:1–11 brings this out. It uses the example of mining, and human ability to uncover and use the resources of the natural world. This is a particularly telling example in a book much concerned with what lies hidden – the reasons for Job's suffering. Humans can, however, come to know their world and therefore direct it. This lies very close to the Creation mandate of Genesis 1:28–30, and clearly knowledge helps humans exercise dominion in God's world. What is more, this position of responsible dominion is retained even after the Fall (Genesis 9:1ff), albeit impaired. If dominion is kept, it is no surprise that knowledge is too.

However, part of the fascination of Job 28 is that after the celebration of human ability and knowledge with respect to created things, verses 12–28 speak of the human inability to discern *wisdom* independently. This is what human ingenuity cannot uncover. Now wisdom in the Old Testament is certainly complex, but it does include the idea of an overarching framework within which to view life in God's creation. It is, so to speak, knowing creation in its fullest context.[6] Unfortunately for creaturely knowledge, only the Creator knows that kind of ultimate context. Hence for the creature, the only route to knowing creation in its fullest context is to turn to the God who created. This is indeed the perspective of Job 28: God alone knows Wisdom in this sense (v.23), but in his mercy communicates it (v.28).

This, then, suggests a nuanced account of sin's effect on knowledge. Much depends on the object of knowledge. Fallen humans do not adequately or savingly know God our Creator (Romans 1:18–23), but may usefully, although with limitations, know objects within his creation (Job 28:1–11). The Bible gives an integrated account of fallen humans as knowers, the objects of human knowledge, and even why there is something that humans cannot know without special revelation. However, even our knowledge of creation is shorn of its ultimate purpose and meaning, for it is removed from its final, fullest context: it is decontextualised knowledge, although not without value.

Workable secular thought in a Christian framework

Where does this leave secular learning? Three things follow. First, secular thought is possible, but ultimately decontextualised, because it is ignorant of our triune Creator. The problem with any decontextualisation is that, while it may be harmless, it can also be highly misleading. Theology the queen of the sciences? Yes, for only so can the sciences find their fullest meaning: she is a benevolent monarch.

Secondly, secular knowledge works with capital borrowed from the doctrine of creation. The borrowing takes place on several levels: there is the created capacity for thought and learning that relates to humans as holders of dominion over God's creation, and the knowability and coherence of a cosmos created for that

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4   E.g. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press/London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, corrected edition 1962.

5   *Institutes* I.iv.1.

6   Cp L.G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: the Theology of Wisdom Literature*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, p341.

dominion. Secular thought works – without acknowledgement – because of a Christian Creation. It works not because of secular presuppositions, but despite them. Indeed, secular thought can work very well and may therefore have much to teach on many levels. One can use a gift without recognising the giver. Conversely, the more explicit and consistent its denial of a Christian Creation, the less its thinking coheres, for the gift itself is then being denied. Jettisoning any working capital, even borrowed capital, can lead to bankruptcy. The queen of the sciences, though, to extend the metaphor, is a benevolent monarch providing viable working capital for thinking, whether her subjects acknowledge it or not.

Thirdly, this suggests something about the relationship between secular and Christian thought. Secular thought 'works' through its unacknowledged borrowed capital from a Christian Creation. This, though, suggests that common rational discourse between Christian and secularist is not taking place on the secularist's territory, nor on some 'neutral' meeting-ground, but on Christian territory, on which the secularist, unconsciously, stands. For a Christian, meeting secular thought on the basis of common rational discourse, is a match played at home. But the Christian too must recall that secular knowledge is to be set in its fullest context, its theological context and weighed within it. When the Christian does this, she or he is most able to evaluate that secular contribution effectively and constructively, winnowing out what is falsified, but gratefully and humbly accepting what the fullest context endorses. In this way the primacy of God's written revelation is preserved.

Modernist and post-modernist responses

Now, it will be objected that this is a Christian answer to a Christian objection. We turn then to secularists. For the modernists, one naturally sympathises with their defence of rationality, for a Christian account of Creation stresses this too. But modernist rationalism is indefensible. Scientists, to take the paradigm profession of modernism, apparently obtain coherent results. They have, however, also personal commitments, even at work, which are also apparently inescapable and whose contours they themselves seem unable to determine definitively. Clearly, then, commitment is not necessarily fatal to learning. The point has often been made but bears repetition: it is not so much having a perspective which creates problems, but which perspective one has. And there are good reasons for accepting that Christianity does provide the right perspective, the fullest context.

For the post-modernists, one appreciates both their emphasis that human knowers are not 'neutral' and their stress on what relativises thought. However, our problem is worse than they think. A nostalgic aroma of modernism clings to some post-modern thinking, for it has not grasped the full depth of what relativises and skews our learning: not just time, place, race, gender, class, amongst others, but our rebellion against our Creator. And it is that supremely relativising factor that makes one sceptical of dismissing the Christian context as 'totalising'. Humans have a clear self-interest in dismissing such a claim. And the question is not simply, is Christian discourse 'totalising', but rather, is it true?[7] For a Christian, without that understanding of the sinful relativity of our thought, it is difficult either to demonstrate the validity of post-modern contributions, or to challenge and supplement their views where that is necessary. Moreover, the Christian context proposed here does not automatically dismiss secular thought but asserts its potential contribution. It is to an example of this that we now turn.

Secular knowledge in context: a post-modern case study

The French sociologist Jean Baudrillard has contributed to post-modern thought in several ways, but particularly regarding 'virtual reality' – the reality our computer and television technologies construct. The impact of these technologies is real enough. Some did become clinically depressed over the death of the Princess of Wales, despite meeting her only through television. For some the story of a soap opera can appear more important than their own personal rela-

tionships. It is problematic whether the Gulf War was a genuine war or a lavish piece of entertainment for CNN's viewers. How should we understand this? Baudrillard suggests we have developed a 'simulacrum' society ('simulacrum' in the sense of an image which is a deceptive substitute). For we are a culture that revolves around the image and he notes successive stages of the image society:

1 The image reflects a basic reality.
2 The image masks and perverts a basic reality.
3 The image masks the absence of a basic reality.
4 The image bears no relation to any reality, but is its own simulacrum.[8]

Now Baudrillard is by no means the clearest of writers, but on one interpretation the image has moved in our culture from being something which represents something else to being itself primary and needing no 'validation' by anything external to itself. It is, so to speak, self-referring. And this world of image, in Baudrillard's view, now encroaches on the reality to which it originally referred. For Baudrillard, Disney and the corporation succeeding him exemplify this, especially with their Disney 'worlds':

> But the Disney enterprise goes beyond the imaginary. Disney, the precursor, the grand initiator of the imaginary as virtual reality, is now in the process of capturing all the real world to integrate it into its synthetic universe, in the form of a vast 'reality show' where reality itself becomes a spectacle, where the real becomes a theme park.[9]

A commonsense response is that the real world remains real and the world of image always remains image. However, Baudrillard has captured something of value. He recognises a world where, at least for some, the image has become more real than reality and these virtual realities have an overwhelming power. In fact, there is an aura of inescapability here: Baudrillard speaks of us having gone beyond history to entering 'into pure fiction',[10] so that we are 'forced to abide in our present destruction'.[11]

However, this raises a double question: first, how far should a Christian endorse Baudrillard's analysis, and secondly, if Baudrillard is anything like right, how can one avoid the nihilism that Baudrillard himself apparently thinks inevitable?

Humans as manufacturers and captives

A key point of contact is the view of people as those who manufacture images to stand for reality. Baudrillard himself notes that humans construct images, icons, of God. In fact he uses the icon as one of his examples of the successive stages of the image culminating in the simulacrum. Now Baudrillard's description of the successive stages of the image shows the image coming to *displace* that for which it originally stood. However, in Christian theological terms the displacement of God by that which is not God is idolatry (Romans 1:25). The point is often made that a crucial feature is not so much the physical presence, say, of an image, but the way that in idolatry the true God is displaced by something out of human imagination (Acts 17:29). In this way, we can speak of idolatrous ideologies, and even idolatrous theologies.[12] Yet Baudrillard gives us an enriched account of the range of our own culture's idolatry. For he has brought to our attention the way our technologies have enabled us to inhabit a new virtual reality which seems overwhelmingly 'real'. At this point, it is not simply that one particular object is being given inflated value, a statue, perhaps. Our capacity to manufacture has far surpassed that. Rather it is the entire virtual world humans are coming to live in. On this view, present idolatry is on an engulfing scale because it is the entire 'world' modern humans inhabit, not just one item within it and this simulacrum world is difficult, even impossible, to transcend. Two things follow:

(a) God is occluded or eclipsed, and thereby displaced. For the

7 To dismiss all truth questions as irrelevant is itself a form of tyrannical 'totalising' discourse.

8 From the essay 'The Precession of Simulacra', trans. P. Foss and P. Patton, *Simulations*, NY: Semiotext(e), 1983, pp1–79.
9 J. Baudrillard, 'Disneyworld Company', trans. F. Debrix, *Liberation*, 4.3.96.
10 J. Baudrillard, 'Pataphysics of the year 2000', trans. C. Dudas, *L'Illusion de la Fin*, Paris: Galilee, 1992.
11 J. Baudrillard, 'Pataphysics of the year 2000'; Baudrillard is quoting Elias Cannetti.
12 Where one insists on God as one would like him to be, rather than as he reveals himself.

world of image does not permit us to see through to him. He is not necessarily explicitly denied, but is functionally irrelevant. Keyes comments of an idol 'We become increasingly attached to it until it comes between us and God'.[13]

(b) We are enmeshed in a fictive reality: it claims to be more real than it is. To quote Keyes again, 'The idol deceives both about what it is and what it does',[14] echoing the biblical evaluation of the idol as lie (e.g. Isaiah 44:20; Jeremiah 10:14). But this fictive reality is on a vaster scale than the fictive claims of one particular idol. This fictive nature is also binding, enslaving, as Isaiah 44:18 indicates.

God as creator
What is, of course, missing from Baudrillard's description is exactly the contextualisation of this human manufacturing activity. When it is seen in the context of God the creator and humans as created, then a number of additional factors come into play:

(a) the point about the 'original' reality which human constructions mirror, represent and attempt to replace is that it is a reality established by God. Baudrillard notes a certain inevitable conflict between 'reality' and simulacrum, but he implies the victory of the image when he speaks of images as 'murderers of the real, murderers of their own model'.[15] But this underscores that in his thought God tends to be passive, an object of which images are made, and not an active person. This disallows the way God himself is insistent that in the conflict between idolatrous lying realities and himself, he will be vindicated. For Isaiah 40–55 in many ways revolves around the vindication of God as the only true God as against the idols. The assumption therefore that the simulacrum will win against this active creator God is indeed a leap of faith.

(b) It is perhaps a natural human temptation after the Fall to prefer our idols to the living God. Certainly Baudrillard most often appears as a describer of this overwhelming virtual reality rather than as a critic of it. But again the full creational context alters this value-neutral view of the simulacrum society. If the simulacrum really is idolatrous and occludes God, then it has to be ethically evaluated, and the biblical testimony is clear that such activity is wrong. It is just here that the shoe pinches for those Christians in the 'devel-

oped' world. We may be far more implicated in idolatrous living than we realise, because of our everyday participation in our culture's constructed 'world'.

(c) Lastly, the creational context is liberating. Baudrillard himself seems at the least resigned to, or even accepting of, the victory of the simulacrum society, the 'Disneyfication' of culture. Others feel less sanguine. The difficulty, obviously, is how humans could extricate themselves from virtual reality once having bought into it. This difficulty parallels, but even surpasses, that of the idolater of Isaiah 44 whose reason is so blunted that he cannot escape his idol. And where an entire culture is to a greater or lesser extent implicated in a fictive, virtual reality, the difficulties of escape seem all the more. At this point it is indeed vital to recall that the Creator is not enmeshed as we are, and that he remains graciously concerned for his creatures. Baudrillard drives home (unconsciously) in a new way the force of Athanasius' insight that only the Creator can redeem.[16]

On this basis, then, Baudrillard's analysis has something to teach Christians, making us aware of the potential for idolatry in our current cultural climate, and more acutely aware of our need for another to deliver us. But it is also an analysis that needs the Christian context, for it is that which provides both ethical framework, and also justified hope.

Epilogue
'What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?' The foregoing indicates that Jerusalem does not depend on Athens, but nor can she simply ignore Athens. Instead, Jerusalem is obliged to bring what Athens suggests into the context of the full biblical revelation. This is an onerous task for Jerusalem and probably unwelcome for Athens, but it remains the best way, ironically, to understand, value, employ and even preserve the very learning which Athens claims to desire and prize.

16 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 7.

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13 R. Keyes, 'The Idol Factory' in *No God but God*, eds. O Guinness and J. Seel, Chicago: Moody Press, 1992, p33.
14 R. Keyes, 'The Idol Factory', 1992, p45.
15 E.g. in 'The Precession of Simulacra'.