

F.C.S. GRADUATE CONFERENCE

- a critical report -

On August 12th and 14th, 1978, the Foundation for Christian Studies held a Graduate Conference at Elizabeth Street Chapel in Wellington. Attendance fluctuated somewhat, reaching about 20 at its height, but mainly consisting of those who presented papers.

The aim of the gathering of graduates and others at this Conference was to highlight various key theoretical issues occupying the scholarly investigations of members and associates of the Foundation for Christian Studies. Problems of a theoretical nature were not, however, the only immediate ones facing participants. In attempting to provide a Christian philosophical context for the discussion of scholarly issues, the Foundation encounters some perplexing organisational problems as well. At the moment it would seem that marshalling the man-power, time and resources to manage its own limited activities poses for the Foundation its greatest problem. It is to be hoped that the experience will be learnt from.

Chris Marshall, in his historic-critical investigation, tried to show how the Critical school of Biblical hermeneutics approaches the Scriptures. His discussion was presented as '*only some initial thoughts and considerations of a very complex area*'. It was not a thorough-going critique of the various types of Biblical criticism. It did, however, imply that a thorough-going criticism of these schools involves an alternative view of the Scriptures. But Chris's criticism of the critics did not involve a criticism of the 'orthodox' view of the Scriptures.

Chris focuses upon the method used by 'the opposition'. Conceived in this way, it is much easier to engage one's theoretical energies in a critical attack than it is to propose any alternative theory. 'Initial thoughts', in my opinion, neither lend themselves to a sympathetic, nor do they aid others to give truly sympathetic, criticism.

The first two pages of the paper contain a brief statement of method. This method involves a critical orientation to the literature of the school of 'critical Biblical hermeneutics'. As such, the same methods which this school has applied in the investigation of the Scriptural world-view are utilized in the investigation of the world-view of the 'critical school'.

Chris rests his case in the following terms - '*the fundamental issue is where the critic finds his starting point - within the Scriptures or outside them. A truly Biblical starting point for research is to accept the Scriptures as the authoritative self-authenticating written Word of God*'. In my opinion, such a statement indeed expresses a noble Christian sentiment. However, what are we to make of the phrase '*within the Scriptures or outside them?*'. Combined with the statement '*the Scriptures as the authoritative and self-authenticating written Word of God*', it would seem to imply that the Bible is a system of doctrine. Is this what is meant by the term 'orthodox'?

The same issues are dealt with in James Barr's criticism of 'Orthodox Biblical Scholarship' in 'Fundamentalism' (S.C.M. 1977). A critical analysis of this work would help to highlight some general hermeneutical problems, shedding light on the way in which the Scriptures have been theologically interpreted.

This paper by Chris Marshall, 'Biblical Criticism and the Old Testament' is worthy of careful and critical examination by the readers of this 'Newsletter'. It can be obtained by application to the Editor.

It is not surprising that a Christian organization like F.C.S. should stimulate a certain level of academic excitement. F.C.S. Conferences should however involve the application of Christian principles in the actual organization. For instance, a study group cannot remain passive in its acceptance of a common religious basis for its theoretical reflections. It must demonstrate this in a scholarly way. F.C.S. will have to develop and stimulate ways and means whereby genuinely scholarly interaction can take place. Conferences such as this require 'tighter' presentations; participants should be asked to submit synopses of their work months in advance so each can consider the work of others and come with constructive questions and suggestions.

It was just as well that Duncan Roper's presentation ('Some Economic Ruminations') was brief. The two papers which followed were complex. Three papers in one afternoon after a rather hefty morning was quite a tall order. F.C.S. organisers need to realize that philosophical discussions take time. Christian scholarship must develop its appraisals in a systematic fashion. Just as discussions should not proceed to a level of analytical abstraction beyond the reach of participants, so also clarification is not simply a matter of stating one's personal intention.

In narrowing down his concern to the relation between economic theory and political theory, Duncan Roper's 'ruminations' were an attempt to derive some systematic conclusions from analogical parallels. Notwithstanding his systematic 'point', it was felt by some that the full meaning of such conceptualisation could only be appreciated if it was included in a systematic exposition of his theory of human society as such. Cast in analogical terms, the 'point' was unwieldy and perhaps assumed far too much with respect to Christian social theory.

Peter Simons', 'Inflation and Government' and John Fountain's 'The Opportunity Cost Concept in Economic Analysis: A Critique and Counter Proposal' were papers of substance concerned with economic theory and the economic ordering of events. The problem of inflation was highlighted by Peter Simons by referring to the monetary policy of the State and to the stewardly utilization of resources that is required for the normative development of society. 'Inflation and Government' attempted to highlight the concrete integrity of State, business, banking and domestic economics. The State in New Zealand today totally fails to understand that economic policy has to be formulated in various social 'spheres' and so assumes that its task is that of manager in a national 'business'. Such a vision exacerbates 'cost-demand-push-pull' tensions for material resources.

John Fountain's paper had an explicitly analytic goal, which involved two distinct phases. The first illustrated the developments of the economic concept of 'opportunity cost'. This was achieved through an historio-critical description of the developing tension in non-Christian economic theory. This constituted the first phase of his argument. The opportunity cost concept provided the key for his 'counter-proposal'. The dialectical tension involved in Buchanan's 'Cost and Choice' represents to him an objective-subjective conflict. The alternative is this: if the concept of 'opportunity cost' is based in the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd, then a Christian economic theory will simultaneously resolve the tension and 'go beyond' the present concept to a re-formulation. At the same time, the re-formulation of the concept of 'opportunity cost' was placed in the context of a 'field of concepts'. 'Opportunity cost' is a concept which refers to the 'specifically economic aspect of reality'. The alternative put forward relies upon an analytical framework provided by Dooyeweerd and also hinted at by Radnitzky ('Anglo-Saxon Schools of Meta-Science' - 1968). The presentation was rather long. It was not clear why the 'two phases' had to be brought together. As the work of a Christian Academic at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, it would appear that this paper represented some of John's attempts to introduce the systematics of Christian philosophy in the programmes formed principally by liberal-humanistic economics. It is to be hoped that such attempts continue.

The analytical tradition in twentieth century social science has emphasized that it is the 'economic aspect' which is economic theory's special concern. The Christian idea of economics also highlights the fact that economic theory properly focuses upon the economic aspect of reality. Further critical investigation might seek to show how the Christian idea of theory at root differs from the analytical idea of theory as an abstract 'field' of concepts. This could be a move in a direction which significantly underlines the Christian thrust of John Fountain's Christian economics. As it stands, it is ambiguous.

The present author's paper introduced the thought of Karl Marx by analysing 'The Theses on Feuerbach'. The Theses are a small fragment, 'a personal testimony', the documentation of 'the germ of a new world outlook' (Engels). Marx has a view of 'radicality' which means that a thorough critique will not simply pose Christian radical thought over against Marxist thought (i.e. as the anti-thesis of Marxian theory). Marx, also via his writing, was not simply trying to interpret the world - he was trying to change the world. Marx, in his writing, was not simply trying to interpret Feuerbach - he was entering into Feuerbach's conceptual world for the purpose of transforming it into a mode of revolutionary consciousness. This was the 'fiery brook' (Feuerbach) through which all revolutionary thought must pass. It is this mode of 'immanent criticism' which in my opinion requires an immanent critique from a radically Christian standpoint. A truly immanent critique of Marxist theory will expose the basis of this theory as an apostate religious foundation in man's supposed self-sufficiency. It will need to immanently follow the logic involved in the Marxist concept of radical critique.

Alistair Wilkinson highlighted the problems of 'disinterested observation' in the phenomenological method of social research. By referring to his M.A. 'field of study' (vagrant alcoholics), he outlined some of the 'existential problems' he is encountering in his attempt to apply Peter Berger's 'theory'

to sociological 'practice'. Alistair took the position of one who could not resolve certain problems in 'the social construction of reality' (see my article, F.C.S. Newsletter, No.13, August, 1978). In carefully outlining the problems of current humanistic sociology, a Christian philosophy of society takes its first step in its systematic account of the societal context of social research. The investigation of social problems from a confessedly Christian standpoint can only be undermined when the notion of 'disinterested observation' allows the dogma of the autonomy of theory to slip in unobserved.

Alan Cameron's discussion of Dooyeweerd's 'Encyclopaedia of Jurisprudence' highlighted the problems of the positivist theory of law. The tension between the 'facts' and the 'statements of fact' in positivistic legal theory raise certain problems. This tension and its problems cannot be explained without a comprehensive critique of legal theory. This in turn implies a comprehensive and systematic articulation of an alternative legal theory. The discussion moved from an outline of the positivist theory of law to an outline of the Christian theory of law of Dooyeweerd. It highlighted the possibility of launching into a comprehensive critique of legal theory. The paper was evidence of a definite development on Alan's paper last year on 'Government and Trade Unions in New Zealand'. F.C.S. look forward to the time when the comprehensive critique of positivist theory will expose its tensions and problems. Perhaps next year's graduate Conference will be an occasion when this can be documented in systematic form.

The Conference was a landmark signifying a certain level of theoretical maturity. This was also shown by the restraint of participants. Those who have been contributors to F.C.S. events in the past have obviously learnt that it is not necessary to expose all one's problems in one go. If fact, Alf Harris and Robin Craw showed commendable sacrifice by withdrawing their contributions from the programme. We can look forward to the disclosure of their work in biology on another occasion.

The Conference raised a key theoretical question; Does a mere statement of 'religious presuppositions' safeguard Christian studies from the dogma of the autonomy of theoretical thought?

May the LORD grant Christian scholars, men and women, insight to make a wise and constructive contribution to scholarship in this land. May F.C.S. be given the strength to facilitate such a contribution and may Jesus Christ receive the praise!

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