

DISCUSSION

Theology and Agricultural Ethics at State Universities:

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ABSTRACT Michael Eldridge's critique of the author's earlier paper on the place of theology in agricultural ethics at state universities fails in at least three places: (1) Eldridge presents an inadequate picture of how basic assumptions function in human thinking and misuses terms like "public," "private," "particular," "empirical," and "common experience"; (2) he wrongly distinguishes between philosophers and theologians on the basis of their openness to new data, ideas, and public criticism; (3) he misunderstands the meaning of the First Amendment. Baer argues that whenever faculty at a state university deal with the Big Questions—who we are, how we should live, and what it all means—they must be seen, for First Amendment purposes, as operating within the realm of religion. Without such a functional definition of religion, the state will inevitably give unfair advantage to nontheistic, secular answers to the Big Questions. Eldridge is wrong to claim that Dewey escapes the liabilities of particularity and parochialism in a way that theologians do not. He also misunderstands the nature of the First Amendment when he argues that public schools may legitimately propagate Dewey's naturalistic variety of "religion." Baer claims that when state universities address the Big Questions, the demands of public justice will be met only if theologians participate in the discussion and debate.

Michael Eldridge takes strong issue with my earlier *Journal* piece in which I maintain that theologians as well as philosophers should be represented on the faculties of state universities in any serious discussion of agricultural ethics.¹ My paper and his reply deal with the ground rules for the discipline of agricultural ethics. Must agricultural ethics in state universities be strictly secular? Eldridge thinks so. I think not.²

Professor Eldridge's arguments fail, I believe, in at least three places: (1) he misunderstands how basic assumptions function in human thinking and misuses terms like "public," "private," "particular," "empirical," and "common experience"; (2) he wrongly distinguishes between philosophers and theologians on the basis of their openness to new data, ideas, and public criticism; (3) he seriously misunderstands the meaning of the First Amendment.

Faith Commitments and Initial Assumptions: Theologian vs. Philosopher

Professor Eldridge rightly represents me as arguing for the formal similarities of the belief systems of the theologian and the secular ethicist. But, contrary to what he states (Eldr., p. 47), I do not maintain that there are no important differences between theology and philosophy. My argument is that for First Amendment purposes these differ-

ences may be irrelevant, particularly in connection with teaching ethics in state-sponsored institutions.

Eldridge also misreads me when he claims that I hold that all ethics are subjective (Eldr., p. 47). On the contrary, I believe that both philosophical and theological ethics can be objective. Our difference seems to be about how we understand objectivity.

(1) As to the similarities between philosophical and theological ethics, I argue that it is mistaken to think that reason *per se* produces or directly justifies our initial assumptions or what I have sometimes referred to as "faith commitments." There is no way to think without such initial commitments or assumptions, and there are no generally agreed upon algorithms that tell us at this foundational level what we ought to believe. All human thinking involves the risk that we may be wrong; all human thinking involves a form of belief that is at one and the same time a kind of knowledge and a precondition for all subsequent knowledge.

But I do not claim—as Eldridge asserts—that because of this "we are all religious" (Eldr., p. 47). My argument is much more specific, namely that nontheistic metaphysical beliefs and values can function like religious beliefs, as can be seen from an examination of John Dewey's thinking. If justice is to be achieved in state universities, these nontheistic beliefs and values must be treated as religion.

Eldridge is correct in pointing out that I did not sufficiently emphasize the empirical dimensions of Dewey's thinking, but he is wrong to claim that Dewey escapes the liabilities of particularity and parochialism in a way that theologians do not. He writes:

[a] persistent theme of Dewey's was the necessity of living in harmony with nature. Dewey once exclaimed, "were there complete harmony with nature, life would be spontaneous efflorescence." Dewey's attitude toward nature is indeed one of reverence, for he thought that only through "a thorough-going and deep-seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe" could the self be unified (Eldr., p. 51).

But whose judgment is to count in deciding what is or is not in "harmony with nature"? The phrase has meaning only as it is given specific content, and this content can be decided only on the basis of one's overall philosophical and theological views of reality.

But the far more serious weakness in Eldridge's references to Dewey is his conviction that Dewey escapes the liabilities of particularity and parochialism in a way that theologians do not.

He writes:

Dewey . . . sought to ground his holism in empirical and common experience, rejecting both supernaturalism and sectarianism. His philosophy was religious, but his arguments did not depend on private experience. For him, "the method of intelligence is open and public." Whereas, "the doctrinal method," which he rejected, "is limited and private" (*A Common Faith*, p. 39). He did not ask us to use doctrines that are accepted only within one tradition. Rather we were to submit our views to public scrutiny (Eldr., pp. 51-52).

But in actuality theology is not *inherently* any less public than philosophy. A Christian view of reality is in principle just as accessible to others as is Dewey's way of seeing the world. Mainline Christianity has always refused to base doctrine on private revelations.³ It holds that Christian beliefs must be tested against the publicly available criterion of the Bible (as it has been interpreted within the community of the church), which is accepted as God's authoritative revelation to humankind (or, in the Catholic Church, against the Bible, tradition, and papal teaching).

Professor Eldridge claims that

Dewey's religious proposal was that we find the religious in this-worldly experience. For him, to be religious is to achieve self-integration through allegiance to some inclusive ideal (*A Common Faith*, p.33). It is an aspect of everyday experience. As a metaphysical naturalist Dewey rejected the supernatural. So, for Dewey, the religious had to be found within experience. Moreover it could not be discontinuous with the rest of experience. It was not the irruption of the other-worldly into this world. Rather some features of this world would take on a heightened meaning (Eldr., p. 52).

He also claims that it is legitimate to make use of Dewey's sort of religion in public education:

The this-worldly philosophy of Dewey, to be sure, has its religious dimension, but it is not as a religious philosophy that it commands attention within public educational institutions. It deserves our attention because it not only may assist us with our this-worldly problems, but it does so from a this-worldly perspective (Eldr., p. 52)

Government, if I read Eldridge correctly, may propagate religious ideas and approaches as long as they are of a naturalist variety, but not if they are of a supernaturalist variety. It may make use of secular religion but not "religious" religion.

I am aware of no convincing historical or constitutional warrants for such a position, and I consider its implications deeply troubling for the future of freedom of conscience and religion. On what grounds does Eldridge grant a preferred political and metaphysical status to a naturalistic understanding of reality?

Regarding the role of the theologian, Eldridge writes:

If Baer were to argue that theologians deserve to be included [in the state university] because they have something to say to our this-worldly problems *and* they will submit their assumptions, proposals, and arguments to public scrutiny, then I would welcome them. But he did not do this. Rather he trotted out doctrines without making any attempt to justify them to non-Christians or, even more importantly, without trying to justify them on this-worldly grounds. The Christian may well resent having to do so, but if she or he wants to participate in the secular or this-worldly sphere re-

quired by our Constitution, then he or she will have to meet its demands. The problem then for the Christian theologian is that he or she cannot participate in the modern state university without doing so on secular (this-worldly) terms (Eldr., p. 52).

But what makes Professor Eldridge think that the Christian theologian is *not* open to public scrutiny? If challenged, he will attempt to show the reasonableness of his position. Will he fail to convince everyone of the truth of his position? Of course he will. Will the Utilitarian or Kantian or Rawlsian also fail to convince everyone? To be sure.

The disagreement here is not over the public quality of the beliefs, but rather has to do with Professor Eldridge's untenable position that secular (that is, nontheistic or atheistic) philosophical beliefs are somehow rational and public in a way that Christian beliefs are not. That, I think, he cannot demonstrate. At least, he has failed to do so in his response to my first article.

Furthermore, Eldridge quite misunderstands my purpose in referring to the relationship between Christian theology and the issue of responsibility to future generations. I mentioned this issue *illustratively*. It was not my purpose in the original article (nor in this one) to offer an apologetic for the truth of basic Christian beliefs. I am prepared to do so, as should be any theologian who teaches at the university, but that would have taken far too much space in these articles.

It may be that Eldridge does not think Christian ideas are capable of rational justification. But he would need to offer convincing arguments that they are any less so than, say, the ideas of Dewey. Furthermore, it is important to note that he also does not *justify* those ideas of Dewey to which he refers, although I expect that he too would be willing to attempt to do so.

Eldridge is also wrong in asserting that the Constitution requires a secular or this-worldly sphere. Such an argument is historically dubious and conceptually weak. The Constitution requires that the federal government (later extended via the 14th amendment to state and local governments) not give establishment status to a single religion or prefer one religion over another. The thought that religion must be kept from polluting the public sphere and that somehow public business and education must be carried on in a sanitized, religion-free atmosphere would have been abhorrent to a great number of Americans at the time of the founding and ought to be abhorrent to Americans today.

(2) I am certainly not suggesting that all thinking

is subjective. It is all value-laden, for it all involves some normative judgments, for example judgments about which parts of experience are worth attending to. And as Michael Polanyi so ably argues, it is *personal*, but not in the sense of that which is arbitrary or idiosyncratic.⁴ A number of recent philosophers have conceived of objectivity in terms of "intersubjective testability." They maintain that all human knowledge is gained within particular historical communities and that even the various natural sciences are in significant ways normative disciplines.⁵ Knowledge is the result of communal effort, depends heavily on both language and tradition, and is *public* not in the sense of universal and impersonal but in the sense of being capable of being tested intersubjectively among an appropriate group of peers.

Some contemporary nontheistic humanistic thinkers continue to believe that their own moral and philosophical positions are uniquely justified by reason, whereas theologians and religious people in general have nothing but faith and dogma upon which to rely. Putnam, MacIntyre, Barbour, and others have shown that such a position has little to commend it.⁶

My position is that all human thinking rests on basic assumptions or intuitions and that it is impossible to think without such commitments or to doubt all of them at once. To stress such limits on the role of reason is by no means to imply that our basic assumptions must be believed for no reasons at all. The basic convictions of christian faith can be defended by reason, as can the basic assumptions that philosophers make. This is not to say that some faculty called "reason" produces or infallibly justifies these initial commitments, but rather that they can be shown to be reasonable. To be sure there is a degree of circularity in such attempts, but all thinking is in this sense circular. Empirical data are mediated by one's prior understanding of the world, and there are no uninterpreted facts. One's initial assumptions and view of the nature of reality determine to a large extent what one sees and hears and experiences with the other senses. These sense data in turn act as checks on one's initial assumptions. But one cannot proceed without such initial assumptions or faith commitments.⁷ Theologians and philosophers alike have faith commitments in this sense.

On the other hand, if Eldridge's point is that *as a matter of psychological fact* theologians are more likely than philosophers to cling to their fundamental assumptions or points of view, then I would want to be shown empirical evidence to support this claim. My impression is that, in practice, philos-

ophers hold to their particular positions (Kantian, existentialist, utilitarian, and others) just as tenaciously as theologians.

Theologians and Philosophers as Professionals

Regarding the professional stance and operative methodologies of theologians and philosophers, Eldridge writes:

... The theologian has certain basic commitments that he or she cannot step back from without forfeiting his or her standing as a theologian. For a Christian it is an affirmation of the Lordship of Christ or perhaps a belief that God was in Christ reconciling the world. If the Christian theologian ceases to affirm his Lord's sovereignty or the incarnation, whichever defines his or her faith, then he or she ceases to be a Christian theologian. Other intellectuals can change methodologies or fundamental beliefs and still remain within their disciplines. . . .

... The whole point of being a theologian is to operate within a particular faith. There is thus a basic, non-arbitrary difference between the theologian and other intellectuals (Eldr., pp. 47-48).

But is this position—which I find not altogether clear—really defensible? First of all, a Christian theologian might convert to Judaism, rejecting the doctrines of the incarnation and the Lordship of Jesus Christ and still remain a theologian. Such a change might be seen as analogous to an existentialist converting to, let's say, analytic philosophy but still remaining a philosopher.

Eldridge recognizes this analogy and also realizes that a Christian theologian might cease to be a Christian, but he seems to imply that if the theologian does, he can no longer be a theologian at all. Theologians indeed do operate within the context of particular faith commitments, just as philosophers do, but I am not sure that is "the whole point of being a theologian." I can easily conceive of a theologian's highest commitment as being the attempt to understand and interpret the truth about God, and if he became convinced that the Jewish or Muslim understanding of God was more adequate than the Christian understanding then he could function as a theologian within one of these other traditions. Professor Eldridge's statement that "a Christian theologian is required to be a Christian" turns out to be a tautology on the same level as the statement "a Kantian philosopher is required to be a Kantian." But this is not really very helpful.

A more difficult question would be: Can a Christian theologian who no longer believes in God still be considered a theologian? I think it would be extremely difficult to consider her a *Christian* theologian, even though some "God is dead" theologians of the early sixties still considered themselves Christians. But insofar as this person might come to believe that some impersonal set of forces in nature or some depth level within each person functioned as a transcendent ground or referent in human existence, then it probably still would make good sense to continue to think of her as a theologian. Paul Tillich's theology is a classic example of such an approach.

On the other hand, if a theologian claimed that there was no such thing as a transcendent or depth dimension to human existence, nothing beyond ordinary human experience that makes any claims upon humans or helps them understand who they are and how they ought to live, then indeed it would seem to make sense no longer to call her a theologian at all, even though she might continue to write descriptive and analytic material *about* theology.

But this is not fundamentally different from the situation of the philosopher. Consider a philosopher who comes to believe that reason is not important for understanding human beings and their situation in the world. Should he still be considered a philosopher? At the very least the label would be highly debatable. Let's say he believes that mystical intuitions are more useful than reason in trying to understand reality, and that these intuitions ideally should be taken in their immediate, uninterpreted form—just as they appear to the individual and with no attempts at critical reflection or achieving coherence among them—and they should be seen as always trumping reason and rational reflection in attempts to figure out what the world is all about. Would this person still be a philosopher? Would Florida State or Cornell hire such a person to teach in their philosophy departments?

Or, what if this hypothetical philosopher rejected the law of non-contradiction as having any importance whatsoever for doing philosophy? Let us say that he became so convinced of the immediate truth value of his mystical intuitions that when he discovered that some of them contradicted others, he decided that the best way to proceed was to reject ordinary logic and the law of non-contradiction. Should such a person still be considered a philosopher?

Unless Professor Eldridge would want to answer these questions affirmatively, then it would appear that his statements that according to his "understanding of philosophy nothing is beyond criticism" and that for the philosopher "all asser-

tions are fair game" present a problem. It may be that nothing is beyond criticism, but some things cannot be rejected if the philosopher is to remain a philosopher. Overall, theologians can change as much as philosophers, and the history of theology suggests that they in fact do so. Karl Barth, for example, abandoned a position of theological liberalism to become a major creator and advocate of a new orthodoxy, and he conceivably could have rejected Christian beliefs altogether and become a Jew, a Muslim, or a Buddhist. Or he might have rejected the depth or transcendent dimensions of human existence altogether and completely given up on theology as a discipline. These changes are not fundamentally different from those that are possible for individual philosophers.

The Meaning of the First Amendment in Relation to the Terms *Religion*, *Religious*, and *Secular*

Space permits only a brief response to Professor Eldridge's claim that I radically misunderstand "the American constitutional system" (Eldr., p. 48). It will not do for him to show that my position is not consistent with U. S. Supreme Court decisions, for it is precisely part of my argument that the Court's decisions on religion in education over the past forty years are confused and confusing and that they rest on untenable understandings of the nature of religion and of the First Amendment.

As I argued in my original paper, my position is that the First Amendment makes it illegitimate for the state to subsidize secular philosophical ethics while refusing to support theological ethics. I believe that for First Amendment purposes, a broad, *functional* definition of religion is appropriate. That is, we must enlarge our understanding of religion—as the Court has done in cases dealing with conscientious objection to joining the military—to refer to those beliefs, whether religious in a traditional sense or secular, that deeply encumber a person's conscience and provide basic meaning for that person's life. Eldridge, like the Supreme Court itself (except in a few free exercise cases), apparently assumes that it is possible to have religiously neutral answers to what I call the Big Questions—who we are, the meaning of our existence, and how we ought to live. But we have already seen that his use of Dewey to illustrate how this could be done is seriously flawed.

In arguing that I understand the term "secular" to mean "anti-religious" (Eldr., p. 49), Eldridge totally misses the thrust of my argument. My claim is not that secular humanism is antireligious but rather that when it deals with the Big Questions it functions—in terms of First Amendment concerns—*precisely as a religion*. As such, it can be

and often is anti-Christian (or, more generally, anti-theistic) but hardly anti-religious.

Eldridge also misunderstands my position when he writes:

Baer would have us think that we must choose between Enlightenment rationalism and English individualistic liberalism, on the one hand, or theology, on the other, to solve such vexing problems as the responsibility our generation has to future generations (Eldr., p. 51).

But this is not my point at all. My argument is that as a matter of fact Americans think about the problem of responsibility to future generations within each of these contexts (as well as within others), and that both are reasonable positions that should be represented within the state university—and, one might hope, discussed within the pages of *Agriculture and Human Values*—if the problem of responsibility to future generations is dealt with at all. Although as a Christian, I believe the Christian theological framework is the more adequate of the two views mentioned, I would by no means want to see a government university advance Christian views to the exclusion of other competing views. Neither, however, should a tax-supported institution advance nontheistic or atheistic secular views under the mistaken banner of religious neutrality.

Conclusion

Working out the practical implications of my position lies beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say here that the time when an elite minority, on the basis of a mistaken understanding of the religious neutrality of the secular, can dictate how the great majority of our nation's students should learn and think may be drawing to an end. The myth of a religiously neutral and objective secular rationality is crumbling, and an increasing number of Americans are beginning to ask about the meaning of justice in public education and publicly sponsored research.

For many centuries, European nations were dominated by Christian groups that taught that error has no rights. As a consequence, atheists, nontheistic humanists, Jews, and others were severely restricted in the roles they could play in education and the intellectual life of society. Today—in ways that are strikingly similar to this error-has-no-rights mentality of the past and based on indefensible ideas of religious neutrality and the meaning of such terms as *reason*, *common experience*, *rationality*, *empirical*, and *secular*—we have developed an educational system that perpetuates

educational discrimination against religious and cognitive minorities.

Arguing that theologians should be invited to become part of the agricultural ethics forum at state universities may be an unlikely place to begin a revolution. But history has its surprises, and as we have learned from the civil rights and women's movements, the path of justice is not easily anticipated ahead of time.

Notes

1. Baer, Richard A., Jr., "Agricultural Ethics at State Universities: Why No Input from the Theologians?," *Agriculture and Human Values*, 2 (Fall, 1985) 41-46; Eldridge, Michael, "Theology and Agricultural Ethics in the State University: A Reply to Richard Baer," *Agriculture and Human Values*, 2 (Fall, 1985) 47-53.
2. I want to acknowledge a special indebtedness to my Ph.D. student Harley Cahen for the many helpful suggestions he has made as I have worked on this rejoinder. I have made use of a number of his specific ideas, and overall his assistance has been invaluable.

3. The question of whether or not the Bible is based on what might legitimately be termed "private revelations" is complicated and beyond the scope of this paper. Probably it is no more legitimate to use the term "private" in this case than it would be to consider the origin and function of the Magna Carta or the Declaration of Independence to be private.
4. Polanyi, Michael. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1962.
5. See discussion in Barbour, Ian G., *Issues in Science and Religion*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1966, pp. 175-194. See also Gewirth, Alan, "Positive 'Ethics' and Normative 'Science,'" *Philosophical Review*, 69 (1960) 311-330.
6. See Putnam, Hilary, *The Many Faces of Realism*, La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1987, pp. 63-86; Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 103-216; Barbour, *Issues*, pp. 137-270; MacIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, pp. 49-83.
7. See Barbour, *Issues*, pp. 175-194.
8. This is not to overlook the Quinean insight that everything, including the principles of logic, is potentially subject to revision. Quine is not being unphilosophical when he suggest this. But in practice we do hold some assumptions to be unrevisable, and it is certainly hard to see (for example) what could cause us to relinquish the principle of non-contradiction as essential for doing ordinary philosophy.