

Response to Four Good Friends

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I have been honored with book sessions here and there before—or, as I call them, “Author meets soon-to-be-ex-friends.” But it is a special pleasure to be read so kindly, clearly, and constructively as I have been by these four colleagues. And I am grateful to the editors of this estimable journal to have this conversation expanded through its pages.

I begin with The Exegete, Lynn Cohick, and in response to her I offer a few questions from the Old Testament and one from the New.

First, Professor Cohick says that the commandments to love God and love one’s neighbor are “commandments [the issuing of which] happen within and for the believing community,” as if they are not commandments impinging on all human beings from the moment of creation, as I assert instead (Cohick 2016, 195). I find her point to be surprising. Yes, it’s true that the *articulation* of these commandments as such occur only many chapters later in the Pentateuch than the Genesis account. But should we not assume that in the book of Genesis, an Israelite book written to an Israelite audience, the commandments to love God and love one’s neighbor would be assumed as operative? By contrast, do we imagine that Adam and Eve (and Cain and Abel) were *not* required to love God and their neighbor? And is there anything particularly Israelite or Christian about these commandments? I suggest instead that these commandments belong to the description of what it means to function properly as human beings per se (2008).

Second, Professor Cohick suggests that there is a difference between what I call “loving the earth” and the mandate to “cultivate the earth” (Cohick 2016, 194). But I suggest that “tilling and keeping it” is exactly what it means to show the appropriate *mode* of love toward God’s creation. “Caring *about* the earth” and “caring *for* the earth” together are simply what it means to show love to the earth, unless there a distinction here I am missing.

In addition, I do not understand why we would think we are not going to continue to cultivate the world in the world to come. Indeed, in response to Professor Cohick’s reference to Genesis 1, I might dare to say that we will have more time and energy to do so without all that bother of reproducing. But perhaps I shouldn’t dare to say that.

Third, I appreciate along with Professor Cohick that the focus of Paul, as of the whole New Testament, is on the reconciliation of humans with God through Christ in the Spirit. But I suggest that these Jewish writers presuppose the Old Testament witness, in this case a witness in which *shalom* as global flourishing is a governing teleological concept. Thus the peace God gives us in Christ is the peace of right relationship with God, yes, but it is thus a peace that *issues* in the “Kingdom of God”

(Synoptics) or “the life of the age to come” (John). And these phrases seem to me to include shalom-making done properly and globally. I cannot imagine that Professor Cohick actually thinks that the New Testament narrows our concept of “peace” to relational peace with God alone, as if everyone and everything else somehow doesn’t matter to the apostles.

In sum, I know Professor Cohick to be an admirably broad-minded person, so this narrowing of what I think are quite general ethical and theological matters leaves me puzzled.

I turn next to *The Theologian*, Oliver Crisp. Professor Crisp understandably focuses upon my perhaps controversial suggestion that God might intentionally allow us, or even give us, incorrect ideas our holding of which somehow will conduce to our fulfilling our vocations. So far, he understands me correctly. I do think that the pages of both the Bible and church history show us people, including godly people, who fulfill God’s intentions for their lives partly according to ideas that we ourselves would now judge to be deficient, and even wrong—whether geographical ideas, political ideas, or even theological ideas. (Abraham setting off to sacrifice Isaac immediately comes to mind.)

Professor Crisp seems especially troubled that I might be implying that God would *mislead* us, and particularly in regard to doctrine, in *Scripture*. I rush to assure him that I do not imply *that*, and in fact take pains throughout my treatment of the authority and nature of Scripture so not to imply. Scripture, I affirm, is the Word of God written and was divinely produced as exactly the device by which God brings good news to the world and forms thereby the people of God in the power of the Spirit.

But perhaps I misunderstand Professor Crisp’s concern. Perhaps instead it is that he thinks that I imply that God allows us to form incorrect views of doctrine. Yet that cannot be his objection either, since I would assume he would grant that God evidently does allow lots of sincere Christians—including his own students and mine!—to form incorrect views of doctrine.

So let’s try again. Perhaps his worry is that God allows even whole Christian communities to form doctrinal beliefs that are not entirely true, and thus are at least partly false. Still, surely he would grant that that phenomenon is manifestly the case in the history of the church.

Indeed, the historian in me has challenged the epistemologist in me to account for the wide differences in doctrine, including those quite important for both faith and practice, among manifestly intelligent and pious Christian individuals and communities. I have concluded that God does allow significant misunderstanding among us even about important matters of doctrine—rather, that is, than chalking up such differences to wickedness or stupidity among all except those who hold the correct views.

I argue in my previous book, *Making the Best of It*, that some truths about God and God’s ways may be too complex to be instantiated in, and articulated by, a single Christian group in a given situation: such as a majority of Christians being divinely called to wage war while a significant minority simultaneously is called to a strong peace witness (2008, 245-46). In my experience, few on either side recognize the others’ views as legitimate interpretations of doctrine and ethics. Yet I can see that such disparate callings sum up together the truth about God’s complex attitude to war

in a way that no one group could. Moreover, it is evident that God allows each side to think that they alone are right as they come to what is, in fact, only a partially true position.

Furthermore, as I argue in my previous work on God and evil, we do not get God off the hook by the putative distinction between God *allowing* evil versus God *producing* evil. For one thing, if a moral agent allows evil it could prevent, we hold that agent responsible for a moral failing. For another, the Bible itself is bolder than we are, frequently saying about the actions of clearly evil moral agents (e.g., Assyria, Babylon, a lying spirit, even Satan himself) that *God brought it* (Stackhouse 1998).

So I continue to defend a Bible that is the authority we dare not distrust, a Bible that is indeed perfectly designed by God to do its amazing work in the world. Yet I do not think that history, philosophy, or Scripture itself can assure us that God will prevent us from thinking wrong thoughts. Instead, God may even *bring* us wrong thoughts, among pertinent right thoughts too, of course, in order to help us do what ultimately matters—which is not to know The Truth, but to accomplish his purposes and fulfill our callings.

I will return to this contention in my response to Professor Penner. But for now, I turn to the remarks of The Ethicist, Professor Martens. This worthy interlocutor seems to think I have ignored nature and natural law. He is only half-right about this. I don't ignore *nature*: The natural world is indeed a huge part of our experience, one of the types of "resources" I list in my epistemological scheme, and also a major part of two more: our scholarship and our art. I did not in fact restrict any of those categories to contain only the human world—whatever that could possibly be without the natural world!

I do, however, ignore *natural law*. I am not sure that I mention it anywhere in the book, in fact. But that is only because I am not terribly interested in natural law. I recognize, to be sure, that some people are interested in it—notably, but not exclusively, members of that small sect known at the Roman Catholic Church. And, according my scheme, such Christians are entirely welcome to resort to natural law thinking as part of experience, tradition, and scholarship—depending on whether they are formulating natural law, reflecting on what the church has said about it, or drawing on scholarly discussion of it, respectively—and then use their intuition, imagination, and reason to profit from it as they can.

What I don't see, however, is how "natural law" needs otherwise to be mentioned in my type of project. I would need Professor Martens, or someone else, to demonstrate what difference it would make to omit it *from this kind of scheme*.

Secondly, Professor Martens wants me to say more about the particulars of vocation: "What that means in each context is certainly a matter to be worked out prudentially" (Martens 2016, 208). I am very glad thus to point him, and other interested readers, to my rather large book, *Making the Best of It*, in which I work things out pragmatically at what some readers likely think is rather too much length.

Thirdly, Professor Martens gratifyingly notes my insistence that the self-aware thinker will take pains to attend to the viewpoints of those quite other than oneself. He mentions in this regard my mentioning of the father of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and he might have noted my even more extensive debts to the Canadian feminist epistemologist Lorraine Code.

Professor Martens does, however, want me to go much farther as, in the name of liberationism, he makes this claim: “‘The preferential option for the poor’ has ethical and epistemic entailments: in the former, the poor and marginalized have an urgent and unequal moral claim on Christians; in the latter, the perspective of the poor and marginalized is preferred over other perspectives” (Martens 2016, 208).

I simply must reject both claims. Ethically, I don’t think God has a preferential option for the poor. Rather, to quote a proverb of one of my mentors, Martin Marty, I believe God has a “preferential option for everybody.”

Let me make clear that I am sympathetic nonetheless with this assertion. I myself grew up in the shadow of poverty, only a generation removed from the precarious life of the working poor. My mother was born to indigent missionaries in the middle of the Depression in the British West Indies. A brilliant student, she nonetheless could not afford to attend university until I did, and she graduated with a B.A. and M.A. the same years I did. My father likewise grew up among the working poor in rural Ontario. Both of my parents taught me to value manual, not just intellectual, labor. But neither of them ever sentimentalized the poor as if poverty conveyed some moral or epistemological superiority.

Even if one does grant the ethical preference for the poor in Scripture, moreover, an epistemological privileging does not follow. The janitor in the hospital does know things that the chief surgeon doesn’t, but it is also true vice versa. If one is discussing labor relations, one might prefer the voice of the former, while still insisting that the latter take out one’s appendix. I cannot, that is, see that it is a helpful epistemological principle to give the deciding vote on a contested intellectual matter always to the most marginalized person in the room, just as I advocate not listening only to the most privileged person in the room.

If this is not what Professor Martens means to suggest, then I would sincerely like to know what he does mean. I am the very picture of the privileged white male professional “knower,” and I have tried in this book to both recognize and affirm the viewpoints of others quite different from myself—but in a way that makes the most sense of what each person or community can bring to the conversation. If Professor Martens, or some other reader, has a better way of both construing and operationalizing the relationship of the marginalized (again, especially in the light of my feminist concerns, I prefer that more inclusive adjective to the narrowly economic one of “the poor”), I would genuinely like to hear it.

I turn last to *The Philosopher*, Myron Penner. I am initially grateful to him for doing what some other philosophical reviewers have not done—namely, appreciate that what happen to be the categories and terms of recent analytic philosophy of knowledge do not contain all that might profitably be said about epistemology. Professor Penner generously allows that other disciplines have interesting and important things also to say about how we know and how we might claim to know that we know.

Professor Penner then rightly zeroes in on what I agree is the crux of my book, in his words:

What typically has united epistemologists in their systematic theorizing on the nature of knowledge and rationality is the desire to

maximize true belief. This, says Stackhouse, is mistaken. What the Christian should be concerned about is not the maximization of true belief, but rather the maximization of *shalom*: human flourishing and peace according to the purposes of God. Of course, true belief can, says Stackhouse, in some contexts contribute to *shalom*. But in other contexts, this is not the case. In fact, it could be that given what God has to work with—finite and sinful free human creatures—God’s purposes are better achieved through creatures having *false* beliefs. (Penner 2016, 212)

Professor Penner goes on to note, again correctly, that

here, as elsewhere in Stackhouse’s corpus (e.g. *Finally Feminist*, and *Making the Best of It*), his concept of God as pragmatist *par excellence* shines through. God settles for what might be considered less than the best in some cases in order to achieve other purposes that, all things considered, are more important to God. In this case, bringing about *shalom* is more important than, say, ensuring that humans have a maximal, or even just a significantly larger, stock of true beliefs. (Penner 2016, 212)

From here, alas, Professor Penner proceeds to worry (in a way that reminds one of Alvin Plantinga) that such pragmatism, as in naturalistic evolutionary theory, somehow renders null any confidence we might have in our truth-seeking endeavors. For, if in the providence of God—or according to the imperatives of reproductive success—we tend to think only what is pragmatically useful rather than what is actually true, we can never be entirely confident that what we conclude is true is, in fact, true.

Plantinga has erected an impressive apologetic against naturalism along these lines, in fact. Naturalism gives us no reason to think that the idea of naturalism (or any other idea) is indeed true rather than merely selectively advantageous (2000 and 2011). Professor Penner doesn’t press me this far explicitly, but he seems to imply that my emphasis on pragmatism might undermine the entire knowledge-seeking enterprise. And that is a serious implication indeed.

I reply that, in truth, he is not entirely wrong. I am indeed saying that we human beings lack a royal road to truth such that we cannot doubt that our conclusions are correct. We have no way to claim infallibility, no Sure Thing in the realm of knowledge.

I doubt, however, that Professor Penner disagrees with me thus far. I cannot imagine him making claims for certainty beyond the usual small realms of self-evident statements or descriptions of feelings (e.g., “I am feeling pain right now”). So where do we disagree?

I am not sure that we do. For I have set out this epistemology as a description of what we *ought* to undertake as human beings intent on fulfilling the vocations God has given us. Truth-seeking and, indeed, truth-*finding* are essential to those vocations as we could not succeed in those vocations without a considerable purchase on

reality. Gardeners with no solidly reliable understanding of weather, soil, germination, irrigation, and pest control will fail. Likewise with engineers . . . and physicians . . . and politicians . . . and businesspeople . . . and parents. So we simply *must* keep seeking truth in the best ways known to us, and we can *count on God* supplying us with truth thereby in order to equip us to fulfill God's callings upon us.

What I am trying to account for, albeit in a way that concerns both Professors Crisp and Penner, is the obvious fact that we human beings, including we Christians, manifestly and frequently *fail* to arrive at truth *tout court*. Why would that be, I ask. Yes, some of that is our fault as sinners. Yes, some of that is our limitation as creatures. But that latter deficit, and a considerable part of the former one as well, could be overcome by the power of God luminously leading us to truth despite our fallenness and finitude. So why does God *not* so lead us? That is what I am trying to explain when I suggest that it seems providential, and not merely accidental, that some of us (and likely all of us) sometimes (and likely for a long time) believe some things that are not fully true. Thus we must keep ourselves ever from feeling that we now simply *know for sure*, and instead must epistemologically, as in every other mode of human life, walk by faith, not by sight.

I conclude by thanking my friends and colleagues for the high honor of four truly respectful, capable, and indeed, *loving* readings of my biggish book, and especially for the rendering of such while in the press of their many other duties. I trust that such reading was thus within the call of God on each of their lives to do so, even if it appears that in that vocation God still mysteriously allowed them to get some things wrong!

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