
Pro Rege

Volume 46 | Number 1

Article 1

September 2017

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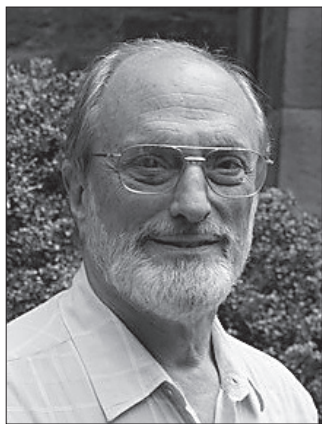
Recommended Citation

Clouser, Roy A. (2017) "An Open Letter to Prof. Eduardo Echeverria," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 46: No. 1, 1 - 3.

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An Open Letter to Prof. Eduardo Echeverria



by Roy A. Clouser

Dear Brother in Christ,

I read with great interest your article to my brother and sister Calvinists at Dordt College, *What Is Christianity? An Evangelical Catholic and Reformed View of Faith and Culture*. It was heartening to learn that you are a member of ECT (Evangelicals and Catholics Together) and thus to be reassured that there are other Catholics such as yourself who want to find ways to join their efforts with those of Protestants to present the gospel to the world. It was also encouraging to learn that the

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ECT is firmly committed to the *truth* of the gospel, and not to some relativistic view of it that takes it to be little more than a comforting lie. In this regard you several times referred to the great creeds of the Church as asserting doctrines that are true in the sense that they correspond to reality by asserting what is in fact the case (3–5). Excellent!

May I suggest that those few pages are a good statement of what all Christians hold in common, and are sufficient all by themselves for Roman Catholics, Evangelicals, Baptists, Reformed, Anglo-Catholics, Pentecostals, Eastern Orthodox Christians, and others, to cooperate in presenting the gospel? I would venture to add that all of the above can agree on the statement of Faith formulated at Nicea in 325, and that this agreement answers the question in your title. In this connection, I'm reminded that just after the end of World War II, Catholics and Protestants went two by two through the neighborhoods of Amsterdam giving away copies of the New Testament: a Catholic translation to a household that said it was Catholic, a Protestant translation to a household that declared its background Protestant.

If that is right, however, it makes me wonder why your title didn't stop with the question mark. Why go on to raise the issue of the relation of faith to culture? Surely that is *not* something all Christians have agreed upon in the past (remember Tertullian's "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?"), and it is not something they all agree upon today. Nor does it seem that Christians need to agree on that issue in order to present the gospel to the world. So why are these two distinct issues lumped together?

To compound the matter, you then propose

to understand not only the faith-to-culture relationship on the basis of the nature/grace schema, but the interpretation of Christianity itself (5, following the heading). In doing this, you have left behind the creedal basis of Christian unity—on which there is genuine agreement—and proposed instead a particular theological *theory* for interpreting Christian doctrine on which there is not universal agreement.¹ In fact, you know full well that many Reformed Christians reject the idea that nature is religiously neutral in the sense that religious beliefs play no role in its interpretation. They hold instead that the theories in math, physics, biology, psychology, and logic are as thoroughly regulated by what a thinker believes to be divine as are his/her beliefs about ethics and human destiny.

Against that point you quote Cottingham: “The truth is simply available for discovery, given sufficient ingenuity and the careful application of the appropriate techniques, and the *dispositions and moral character of the inquirer are entirely irrelevant*” (9). And you do this with no acknowledgement whatever of the deep-rooted and religiously motivated disagreements in the sciences: the differences among formalists, intuitionists, empiricists, and logicists in mathematics; the differences among dualists, positivists, and physicalists about the nature of the cosmos; and the differences among the Gestalt, behaviourist, and Freudian points of view in psychology—to mention but a few.

What is worse, you propose all this as a way forward for ecumenical cooperation when you know full well that Dordt is one of the few colleges in the United States that does not accept the nature/grace schema for doing theology or the proposal that theories in the sciences can be religiously neutral. Your proposal is thus equivalent to the Dordt College faculty’s writing to you and proposing ecumenical cooperation based on our mutual rejection of papal authority. Wouldn’t you be offended at such a letter? Wouldn’t you wonder why the faculty at Dordt would bother making such a proposal? Wouldn’t it have the effect of making their initial appeal for cooperation look disingenuous?

The same thing occurs again on p. 5, where you suggest that we can all agree that the way to understand the sinful nature of fallen humans is by construing it as the difference between substance and

accidents. I’m sure you know full well that many of the Dordt faculty are advocates of the Christian philosophy developed by Herman Dooyeweerd. That philosophy rejects any notion of substance in the Aristotelian sense. In fact, among the criticisms Dooyeweerd raises is his demonstration that the very concept of substance presupposes the reification and deification of particular aspects of creation. So why shouldn’t the good people of Dordt not see this as an appeal for Christian unity that has strings attached, namely, the requirement that we can all work together, provided that everything is understood *your way*, not theirs?

This same attitude prevails in the latter part of your article in which you claim that the theory of “natural law” (laws of morality and justice) “is integral to the Christian tradition” and “provides the common ground for moral reasoning...” (8). Once again, I know you are acquainted with the Reformational critique of the natural law theory, which originated in Stoicism and was promoted by neo-Platonism. You already know that Dooyeweerd has given a detailed account of the juridical and ethical sides of life in terms of the norms of justice and love. His view includes that these norms were built into creation by God and are not human inventions. But at the same time he shows in detail why law and ethics are not well served by the theory that there exists, in addition to those norms, an eternal, uncreated, changeless realm of laws which are separate from the cosmos and which all human laws must copy if they are to be just.

Over against the theory of a realm of countless, changeless laws that cover every possible human exigency, Dooyeweerd argues that it is our task to apply the norms of justice and love to the concrete circumstances of real life. The result, he shows, can often be that the same action (or rule) may be just in one set of circumstances but unjust in another, or that the same act (or rule) may be ethical in one circumstance and not in another. Applying the norms to specific social conditions so as to formulate specific rules is thus part of our calling as followers of Christ; it is a task for which we are responsible, rather than the task for attempting to decipher what the vast realm of changeless laws would require our laws to be.

Your closing appeal is that we should agree

with natural law theory because it will give us “a common ground for moral reasoning in a pluralistic society.” But would it? If you and I accept the natural law theory but disagree as to whether action A is just, how is this to be settled? How can we tell which of us has the greater ability to read God’s mind? (Isn’t the truth that neither of us can do this at all?) How would our differences be any more resolvable on the basis of natural law than the differences we have with Utilitarians, Kantians, or positivists?

It seems, then, that our closing appeal to you should be that we seek together to present the gospel to the world without including any theory about how that relates to culture. It would mean presenting what C.S. Lewis called “mere Christianity”: the

story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection—a story so simple that young children understand and believe it. Perhaps that would be of more service to the Kingdom of God than attempting to promote our favored theories as though they were parts of the gospel itself.

Endnote

1. Calvin himself rejected this dichotomy: “It is vain for any to reason... on the workmanship of the world, except those who have learned to submit the whole of their intellectual wisdom (as Paul expresses it) to the foolishness of the cross.... The invisible kingdom of Christ fills all things and his spiritual grace is diffused through all,” *Commentary on the First Book of Moses*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948), 63.