

Academic philosophers need to speak again of God

By Douglas Todd
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Wouldn't it be great if young women and men could attend UBC, SFU and similar institutions of higher learning and discuss with professors the meaning of life?

To me it would be a dream come true if their fresh, open minds were given the chance to intensely explore the nature of goodness, truth, beauty, chance, purpose, love, transcendence and divinity.

But many of the most profound topics of existence are not on the table in philosophy departments.

Things do not seem to have changed much since I attended university. Hoping to explore life's larger questions in my early 20s, I realized I had to avoid philosophy classes; they did not plumb the depths. Instead, they stressed the deconstruction of meaning and, often, the "absurdity" of existence.

The (largely European-based) philosophy courses did not engage truly significant issues. Many academic philosophers, who may have entered the field hoping it would enhance their sense of wonder, had turned anti-spiritual. A hard atheism became their orthodoxy.

I wound up pursuing a BA in world religions at UBC, since some of the courses on Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism at least dealt with belief systems that revolved around ultimate questions. However, even many of the religion classes were taught with arid "neutrality."

With philosophy departments offering no real home for those drawn to spiritual questions, I later did what many young people do: Looked for answers outside Canada's public universities. I studied philosophy of religion in the U.S. at a creative independent graduate school.

But many young people who are frustrated with the tacit atheism that reigns in secular universities are not so lucky. Searching for answers beyond academia, they often grab on to sentimental religious beliefs.

Or, more likely, they just stop asking big questions entirely. They give in to intellectual cynicism.

It doesn't have to be this way.

Philosophy in the West was richer in ancient days, with Plato and Aristotle, and even in the medieval era. Back then, philosophy did not automatically exclude the transcendent.

Through most of history, in fact, the greatest philosophers delved into metaphysics (the study of the ultimate nature of reality), as well as theology and the philosophy of religion.

However, it's not just the fault of philosophers that metaphysics, and all that goes with it, has lately been barred from the halls of academia.

Many Western theologians have also taught that theology and philosophy can never meet. The famous 20th-century Christian theologian, Karl Barth, argued that religion is "revelatory," or "supernatural," therefore outside the realm of philosophical rationality.

There is a middle way, however, that combines religion and philosophy. Both before and since Barth, many spiritual thinkers have argued for what they call "natural" theology, in which divinity is understood to be part of this world -- and therefore open to the rigors of philosophical analysis.

The rare academics in North America who have dared to bring metaphysics into the secular classroom have often relied on a brilliantly conceived book, *Philosophers Speak of God*, edited by Charles Hartshorne and William Reese.

It shows what 50 famous philosophers from history have said about divinity. From the West they include Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Baruch Spinoza, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud (the latter two were atheists).

The wisdom of the East, which has been largely ignored in North American philosophy departments (a particular drawback in multicultural B.C.), is represented in *Philosophers Speak of God* by the likes of Lao-Tzu, Buddha, Mohammed Iqbal and Radakrishnan.

Spiritual viewpoints are often dismissed in university philosophy classes because the professors think they know what all religious people believe in: An all-controlling Supreme Being who denies human freedom.

But *Philosophers Speak of God* makes it abundantly clear that thinkers throughout history have put forward vast and different definitions of God.

Although difficult to summarize, the belief of many philosophers -- including Plato, Henri Bergson, Charles Pierce, Martin Buber and Alfred North Whitehead -- is that God's non-coercive power is entirely compatible with human freedom. If academic philosophers were to examine such beliefs about God today, they might still end up making an argument for atheism. But that would be all right, because then they would not simply be rejecting theological straw men.

The goal of philosophy, after all, is to get beyond "half-truths" to the whole truth. Philosophy was born out of a sense of wonderment at life and as a way to enhance the art of living.

However, as William James wrote in his essay *On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings*, many philosophers (with the exception of Canada's great Charles Taylor and some others) have mislaid what is significant in life.

I hope tone-deafness to metaphysics doesn't continue in academic philosophy. Too many young minds are not getting the intellectual sustenance they deserve.

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