

St. Augustine's Egyptian Gold Analogy

Questions:

1. How should Christian scholars relate to the ideas, theories and scholarship of their non-Christian counterparts?

2. What should our attitudes be toward the content of thinkers who do not acknowledge, who, indeed, may forcefully reject, Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord?

3. To put it more strongly, how should sincere Christian believers called by God into the academic vocation respond to academic work whose origin is rooted in idolatry and whose service has been on behalf of the kingdom of darkness?

4. Is there anyway for believers to appropriate and employ material that has had its genesis and career in a context diametrically opposed to everything they believe in and hold dear?

5. More specifically, how should we interact with and respond to the contributions of non-Christian thinkers to such areas as management and marketing models, economic schools of thought, theories of literary criticism, contemporary musical and artistic styles, scientific paradigms, postmodern philosophic speculations, methodologies in biblical studies and theology, various hermeneutical practices in the social sciences, and so on?

If those, however, who are called philosophers happen to have said anything that is true, and agreeable to our faith, the Platonists above all, not only should we not be afraid of them, but we should even claim back for our own use what they have said, as from its unjust possessors. It is like the Egyptians, who not only had idols and heavy burdens, which the people of Israel abominated and fled from, but also vessels and ornaments of gold and silver, and fine raiment, which the people secretly appropriated for their own, and indeed better, use as they went forth from Egypt; and this not on their own initiative, but on God's instructions, with the Egyptians unwittingly lending them things they were not themselves making good use of.

In the same way, while the heathen certainly have counterfeit and superstitious fictions in all their teachings, and the heavy burdens of entirely unnecessary labor, which everyone of us must abominate and shun as we go forth from the company of the heathen under the leadership of Christ, their teachings also contain liberal disciplines which are more suited to the service of the truth, as well as a number of most useful ethical principles, and some true things are to be found among them about worshipping only the one God. All this is like their gold and silver, and not something they instituted themselves, but something which they mined, so to say, from the ore of divine providence, veins of which are everywhere to be found. As they for their part make

perverse and unjust use of it in the service of demons, so Christians for their part, when they separate themselves in spirit from their hapless company, to take these things away from them for proper use of preaching the gospel. Their fine raiment too, meaning, that is, what are indeed their human institutions, but still ones that are suitable for human society, which we cannot do without in this life, are things that it will be lawful to take over and convert to Christian use.

Basic Principles:

1. Christian scholars first and foremost ought to seek and search for what is true and agreeable to their faith in the work of non-Christian thinkers. (see Gerald McDermot, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation and Religious Traditions*, Baker, 2000).

2. A particular non-Christian thinker or particular school of non-Christian thinkers may be a more fertile source of truth for believers, just as the neo-platonists were for Augustine and the fifth century Church.

3. Christian scholars should *not be fearful* (indeed, have nothing to fear) from non-Christian thinkers (see Phil. 1: 28 “. . . in no way alarmed by your opponents”).

4. Non-Christian thinkers possess the truth *unjustly* since they do not acknowledge God who is the ultimate source of all truth.

5. The error and falsehood, spiritual idolatry, and moral corruption of non-Christian thinkers ought to be *rejected* and even *despised* by Christian scholars, just as the Israelites rejected and even despised the idolatry, the heavy burdens, as well as the counterfeit and superstitious fictions of the Egyptians.

6. God does not merely permit, but even commands Christian scholars to harvest the truth of non-Christian thinkers, just as He commanded Israel directly to plunder the silver and gold of the Egyptians.

7. The contributions of non-Christian thinkers are wide-ranging, include the liberal disciplines, ethical principles, worship practices, and various social institutions, even though they made perverse use of these things and served the demons with them.

8. Non-Christian thinkers did not create the truths they possess, but merely discovered them under God's providence and by means of His common grace, mining them like ore from the comprehensive veins of God's very good creation.

9. Christian scholars must appropriate these truths from non-Christian thinkers, thoroughly cleanse and renew them, and put them to a better use in service to God and His purposes. Or as Paul puts it in 2 Cor. 10: 5, “We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.”