

Reconciling the Secular and the Sacred

My Experience in
Banking and Academia

Guillaume Bignon
New York, NY

Biographical Introduction

I am a philosopher and a theologian. I have a PhD in “philosophical theology,” so it is a trick I use to speak both at the Evangelical Theological Society and the Evangelical Philosophical Society. Depending on who asks, I can say, “I’m a theologian,” or “Oh, I’m a philosopher,” because somehow, my degree says I am both. But aside from being a Christian scholar, I am also a computer scientist, and I work on Wall Street. This may call for a brief explanation of how this strange situation came to be.

I am French. I was born in the suburbs of Paris, and I lived my life there until I was twenty-five. I grew up in a nonreligious family. We went to a Roman Catholic church, but that was motivated more by tradition than a real-life conviction. As soon as I was old enough to tell my parents I didn’t care for any of this, I just lived my life as an atheist, and there was barely any difference; I was just no longer forced to be bored out of my mind one hour every Sunday morning on the bench of the church.

I was an atheist for a long time. I was at this point a young and fairly satisfied adult trying to pursue my own happiness on all fronts. I ended up studying math, physics, and engineering science in college. I graduated with a degree in computer science. That landed me a job as a computer scientist in finance in France for a corporate and investment bank.

On the personal front, I was also pursuing all different avenues for my own happiness. I was playing the keyboard in a rock band, recording and playing

concerts. Then I grew to be six foot four and so I was scouted by a volleyball coach and ended up playing in national league volleyball in France, traveling the country every weekend for the games.

I was pursuing my happiness on all of those fronts, and in a very secular country like France, the chances of me ever hearing the gospel, let alone believing it, were fairly slim. Nevertheless—I won't give you all the details; that is another story for another time—through all sorts of very improbable events, God had decided to catch me by the throat, break down all my defenses, and make a Christian out of me.¹

In the process, I found myself moving to New York—again, that's part of the story of the connections I made—and in moving to New York, I had to leave my volleyball team and my rock band and quit my job in France, but I found a job in New York. Since I was a computer scientist in finance, it wasn't too difficult to find something in New York City. I ended up being a software developer on the trading floor for a corporate and investment bank in Manhattan. I gained respect and responsibilities and was promoted to be the head of software development on the commodities trading floor of the corporate and investment bank. That is my secular vocation, if there is such a thing as a "secular" vocation—this is how I earn my income.

Shortly after my conversion, I found myself in rather intellectual, French atheistic circles—my family, my friends, everyone around me—was pretty much in the same place that I used to be in, and I felt the need to give answers and explain to people why I hadn't lost my mind, so I started to really think deeply about these issues. Some of my own conversion had led me to think about some reasons to think that God exists, but I wanted more, and then the more I consumed the more I wanted, so like a good junkie, I consumed all sorts of apologetic material: philosophy, arguments for the existence of God, the reliability of Scripture, historical considerations about the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

I spent much of my free time on those things, enjoying every minute of them, and I found myself thinking: "If I am going to spend all of my free time outside of the office studying these matters, then I might as well get a degree out of it." So I ended up applying for seminary, and I obtained a Master's in New Testament Studies from Alliance Theological Seminary in New York City. After a master's degree, I thought it would be a shame to stop there, so I went on and applied for a PhD. I ended up studying under Paul Helm with the London School of Theology, and I graduated with my PhD recently. This is how you end up with a computer scientist working on Wall Street with a PhD in philosophical theology.

Now that this oddity is out of the way, I can tell you a little about what I do and how that affects my activities in the workplace. The job, as I said, is manag-

ing the team of software developers. I work on the commodities trading floor, so we develop software that is used by the traders and the marketers in order to trade commodities—natural gas, electricity, precious metals, even agricultural products—and derivatives and indices on all those.

Faith and Work on Wall Street

As for the impact that my Christian scholarship has on the way that I do my work on Wall Street, there are a few items that I can mention. First, I'd say there are some ethical considerations I bring to the job that probably wouldn't be there if I didn't bring them myself. Thankfully enough, my company in particular, but I would say Wall Street in general, has a lot of emphasis—especially as of late—on ethical considerations. That is, there are plenty of things that the company forces us to be aware of. We have regular training on anti-money-laundering schemes, so I am highly reminded of those sorts of things, to avoid them, and they are strictly forbidden, of course. We have regular reminders about rogue traders. All of those things are constantly fed to us by special trainings in a very healthy way, I think. The company takes the lead on those ethical matters to prevent them. We have regulatory reporting to do, as well as the need to be transparent with the books, so all of this is built into the company.

But there are some things that I may bring personally, that may or may not be there because there is no legal requirement. As a Christian philosopher, I am led to think about the morality of the actual business that we do. For example, there is one consideration I have pertaining to the difference between two types of trading that commodities traders can engage in; there is “market making” and there is “proprietary trading.” In market making, the traders on the floor trade financial products that are essentially aimed at hedging risks for clients: We deal in commodities, so typically an airplane company is going to trade with us because they have an interest to flatten the price of kerosene for the entire year. They don't want to be subject to the fluctuation of the market on the barrel of oil; they want to have flat prices, so they come to a corporate and investment bank and they purchase a swap or a strategy of options to make sure that their company will not take a serious loss if the cost of oil rises dramatically. We, as a bank, take the market risk upon ourselves by selling those products, and then we turn to the market and try to hedge those risks. Those are market-making activities.

But the other type of trading, proprietary trading, is where you take a bet on whether the market is going to rise or fall, and invest without hedging your position in order to make money if the market goes up or down depending on

your position. So that is one personal consideration I had: I feel most at home with the fact that we do market making, and I have some reservations about proprietary trading, which doesn't seem to me like much of a real value added to the market. Some might see it as investment, but I at least feel most at home with the fact that we only do market making, which has a real business value. It is really the same thing as selling car insurance. No one would say that a car insurer is unethical because he is taking a premium on insurance; similarly here, we are in effect selling insurance on the price of the barrel of oil for companies that need it.

So I see a market reality that makes sense, and I am most at home with that. But obviously the sorts of concerns I have with proprietary trading wouldn't be legally problematic. It is legal to do propriety trading; I am just grateful that my company doesn't.²

High frequency trading is another one of those things that is legal, but that I have ethical concerns about as a Christian. I am not necessarily blaming anyone who would be involved in those activities—I'm not sure that their conscience would match up with mine—but reflecting on the idea of high frequency trading, as I am a computer software developer, is an important piece for me. Do we develop software that enables people to engage in an activity that has a real value for society, or are we producing robots that go on electronic markets and simply automatically cash in on discrepancies on the exchange? That activity I have come to think I am personally not comfortable with, because it seems to me like it doesn't produce any sort of value added to society; it is simply a robot that is going to be a cash machine on the market.

Again, it is not to cast stones at those who would do those sorts of things, but this is some of my thought process. I've been confronted with the choice, do I accept a position where, as a computer scientist, I will be extremely well-paid if I produce this kind of software because it is just a cash machine? I decided against it because it seems like it is not right for me.

Another ethical consideration is going the other way: defending what some may say is wrong. When folks on Wall Street (surprisingly, because they are doing it themselves), come to find out that I am also a Christian philosopher and theologian, they're surprised and say, "Really? But ... money! You're a Christian, and you work with money? Isn't that wrong?" Obviously my first response is, "Do you think it's wrong? You're working in this trade as well." But it is very obvious that I do need to explain a little about the Christian view that money in itself is morally neutral; it is what we do with it that really matters and what the state of our heart is in pursuing it and employing it. Just like a hammer, it is neither good nor bad but can be used to do good or bad things. So it is an

interesting ethical concern I have to work them out of, to explain that no, it is not inconsistent with Christianity; it is what you do with money that matters.

Cultural Concerns

Then there are more ethical considerations, not about the business itself but simply from being a Christian scholar in the midst of this culture. There are several ways in which I do stick out a little bit. One thing that I noticed in my early days on Wall Street, for example, is cursing. I keep my mouth clean and I express myself decently, but not everyone does. Now, I don't want to paint the character of Wall Street like you could see in *The Wolf of Wall Street* movie where they are engaging in all sorts of depravity: this is not the kind of environment I work in, but there are lots of strong personality, type-A guys who are very intense—let's put it that way—and I have heard my fair share of cursing. It is something I had to grieve about at first because it was offensive to hear the F-bomb every couple of words. Thankfully, it hasn't been much of an issue lately with my current employer, and I am grateful for that, but it is one piece on which I get to stick out a little bit because they won't hear me curse, and at some point they may ask, "Why is that?" It is one of those things that is a little bit different.

So again, I maintain it is not *The Wolf of Wall Street* kind of situation, but the activity of going to strip clubs, I came to find out, is not all that rare. Folks are in New York City attending strip clubs, and they are usually very happy to extend this invitation to their friends, "Hey, why don't you come with us?" When they invite me, they usually get strange looks from me, and I have to explain that this is not proper. At my previous employer's, I had very friendly conversations with coworkers who are married—happily so—but go to strip clubs, and I have had to debate them on the morality of that thing.

Now, I am a philosopher in theology where there are many controversial debates I like to engage in. The morality of strip club joining while married is not all that controversial, so that is a debate I didn't struggle too much to make my case for. But it is interesting to have that kind of conversation to try to convince them this has to stop.

Similarly, we go out to lunch and there is an attractive woman that walks by and everyone turns their heads and looks toward her, but I look straight. I've had a coworker see me do that and say, "Hey, everyone was looking; why weren't you?"

It is good that as a Christian I obviously have a heart to speak about God and to convince them that there is life to be found in Jesus Christ. But in this legal environment, it is a highly corporate, highly compliant, and a fairly sensitive

field to navigate. Though I do need to be careful about how I proceed with this, I don't usually have to be aggressive in my evangelism; the questions come to me because I stick out a little bit. People ask and I respond.

There are a few other things that, morally speaking, make me stick out a little bit; I don't drink much. I probably wouldn't drink at all if it weren't just given to me. I like to drink just a little bit just to prove I am not a Mormon. When we go out for drinks, I will order a soda. Maybe there is going to be a glass of champagne to celebrate a project that is completed or something, and I will have a flute just to prove that my religion is not morally repressive. But I don't necessarily need to drink, and that sends a statement when some of those folks are struggling with alcoholism.

Another addiction is workaholism. That is one thing on which I am very pleased to differ from some of my coworkers. Some of them will be on the trading floor from 7:00 in the morning to 9:00, 10:00, and sometimes 11:00 p.m. at night, and they surely won't see me at those hours. They know that and they know why, because I have a wife and three babies, and it is very explicitly stated for all of my coworkers that they come first. We have our hands full at home with a three-year-old, a two-year-old, and a one-year-old.

Having the family means that I have to cut back a little bit. I am sure my career would progress a bit more if I were putting in 7:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. kinds of days, but it is very fruitful and somewhat challenging to some folks that I don't do that. I am still doing very well, but they won't see me in the office before 9:00 AM. I wake up early in the morning to do my Christian scholarly engagement: read, write, prepare lectures for conferences, and so forth. So when I was working for my PhD, this is the time of day I used to do my research—I wake up at 5:30, I work for an hour or hour and a half before I go to the office, and I will not be there before 9:00 a.m.

Similarly in the evening, I might have the off day at 11:00 p.m. or midnight if I have a huge crisis on my hands, say there is a production bug that is potentially going to cause millions of dollars of losses, yes, I will put out that fire. But on a typical day, I will not stay past 6:30 or 7:00 at the latest. Why? Because I do need to take care of my babies and my wife. It is not fair for her to be at home all day and take care of three babies and for me to not come home at night.

Similarly, they will go out for drinks after work sometimes and there again is an opportunity for me to advance my career. I could go and speak to the boss and really pitch new ideas. I will not be there. Somehow God has decided that this would still work out, but it is just a matter of common sense that I can't be responsible as a husband and a father if I am going out for drinks after a full day of work when my wife has been changing diapers and holding crying babies all day.

Opportunities for Evangelism

Those points make some folks come and ask questions, which is wonderful because I am all too happy to provide answers, and those questions very quickly arrive at the issue of God and Christianity, at which point I am very happy to engage in evangelism by responding to questions. It works well in the corporate environment; I don't have to raise any red flags for my company that this guy is preaching on the trading floor. I learned how to customize the way in which I engage in those conversations.

In the early days, I was a little bit careless, and I had to readjust. I was very open at first, and I found myself in conversation, open group talks on the trading floor with folks discussing the moral arguments for God's existence. That started to raise a few red flags—not because this topic was off-limits or what-have-you, but speaking with all sorts of atheists like I used to be, I discussed the moral argument. For example, the moral argument says that if God does not exist, then there are no objective moral values, but in fact there are objective moral values therefore God exists.

So we tend to discuss the issue of whether morality is objective or not, and I found myself having very open conversations with groups of folks like other computer programmers where they, trying to deny that God exists, had to consistently deny one of the premises of the argument. Not knowing which one to deny, they end up making all sorts of problematic statements that I am somewhat responsible for because I am the one triggering the conversation. Denying that morality is objective, I've had some coworkers bite the bullet and tell me, "I guess you're right; it's not really objectively wrong to rape my daughters."

Those type of statements tend to raise a few eyebrows, so I've learned to be a little less in your face, and not talk about those things in the middle of the trading floor, but simply very happily receive questions from folks, and say "Oh, I would love to talk to you about this. Let's go for lunch and you can ask all your questions." I've had lots of lunch conversations with folks on those topics when they ask, and that has been rather fruitful. At a one-on-one lunch I can show that I care about them (I'm not just trying to preach), and I can answer questions on any topics. We are no longer on the trading floor, so no one cares what we discuss; this is our business.

Those conversations have led me into very interesting opportunities to explicitly explain the gospel. The gospel is a simple story, isn't it? We are sinners, God is righteous, we stand condemned, and the only way that we can be forgiven is by repenting of our sins and trusting in Jesus who paid the penalty for our sins by dying on the cross and being raised from the dead. I never heard anything

like that small story in twenty-five years when I was in France. I'd never heard this story! We're saved by grace through faith? It's not works? It is not our good works or righteousness or the sacraments of the church; it's faith!

I had never heard such a thing, and my assumption when I come to the workplace is that folks are just in the same place I was, extremely knowledgeable about all sorts of topics, very smart, but they've never heard the gospel. So it is not very hard for me to solve that problem and simply explain to them, "Listen, I'm not even telling you at this point that this is the truth and that you should believe it, but let me just tell you *what* we believe as Christians."

So I've had those good conversations, and the way I know that they at least understand the gospel, is that without fail they always respond with the same objection, straight out of the Bible—they might as well tell it to me in Greek—"If we are saved just by faith, why not go on sinning so that grace may abound?" Now I get the opportunity to say, "I am glad you are asking this, because it was asked right in the pages of the Bible," and so we have good conversations where I have the opportunity and the privilege to really explain the gospel to folks who have never heard it, and now they know it and can respond or consider it. I've had a coworker who really likes those sorts of historical topics about religion, and she turned out to know about the thesis of the Q document, but she didn't know that we were saved by faith alone. Folks have all sorts of strange knowledge about Christianity, yet they may not know the gospel. It's a wonderful thing when I get to actually explain what the gospel is.

The Value of a Theology PhD on Wall Street

People, particularly Christians around me, now regularly ask me: "What do you plan to do, now that you have your PhD? You could teach, you could be a scholar..." But somewhat hidden behind this question is, "You could have a really meaningful job instead of working on Wall Street." For practical reasons, I am not in a position to quit my job anyway; I do need to feed those three babies. As a fairly new graduate with a PhD, I'm not sure that I could make enough money to provide for them any other way.

But on the ministry side of things, I think it is extremely powerful to be in the workplace at the best possible level. I have gained a lot of respect from my peers. The people who work for me respect me as a manager. My managers trust me and really respect my work, and that has an extremely high value when they find out I am a Christian scholar. And then they say, "Wait a second, you are a really smart guy. You're a Christian? How does that work out?" Now, this

strikes us as odd when you are in a professional conference with theologians and scholars everywhere, but for some on Wall Street, a smart Christian may as well be an oxymoron. So it is very helpful when they know and already respect me because they've seen me work at a very good level. To figure out I am a serious evangelical Christian raises lots of questions, and it is very helpful to show them that there is credibility in what I am saying.

Not only that, but the fact that I am so good at my job is not incidental to my Christianity. I get a chance to tell them that *because* I am a philosopher, I am all that much better as a computer scientist. This is an odd one for them to grasp, but a philosopher is someone who excels at understanding the laws of logic: those things that make a good valid argument, detect fallacious reasoning, and clarify words. Do you think those skills matter in computer science? You bet they do! I am very proficient in my job *because* of my philosophical training, and I get to explain this to my coworkers and they really resonate with it.

The other day I explained to my boss what an equivocation is and how it is extremely important for a philosopher to clarify words so that you don't present an argument with two premises that use the same word but with different meanings. That really resonated passionately. He said, "Yes! There's this other guy who was reporting to me who kept using the words with different meanings, and I couldn't tell whether what he was telling me was true or false." I said, "A philosopher will clarify his words for sure." That's what you need to do.

So it is good that they see there is an actual value coming from my Christian scholarship into the workplace. My boss's boss was apparently boasting the other day that one of his employees had obtained a PhD; he was very glad to hear that I had graduated. I was personally surprised to hear that, because it is a PhD *in theology*, so on Wall Street I would have thought it might as well be a PhD in astrology. There is not much to brag about this. But just the fact that I had achieved that level of academic recognition—he was proud to talk about it. So here you have now a manager of managers of managers on Wall Street talking to his peers at the top management level that he's got a PhD in theology on his team, and he is pretty pleased about it. Christianity is making interesting headways in this unlikely place.

Regarding the value of my skills in the work place, there is another point. There is biblical precedent for having a top level of excellence at a certain thing that people value, and then explaining to them that no matter how good I am, this is not the meaning of my life, that I count it as worthless compared to knowing Christ.

Paul does exactly that in Philippians 3, doesn't he? He tells the Jews, "Look, I was better than you. I was the Pharisee of Pharisees. As to the law? Blameless. Circumcised." In everything that they prized, he is telling them that he is better than

them. But you know what? All of those things, he counts for nothing compared to knowing Christ. It is a truly powerful argument, and to some lesser degree, I get to present that a little bit to my friends and coworkers on Wall Street. When I show them I am really good at what I do, they respect my work. But I tell them, “You know what, this is not the meaning of my life. It is a means. It is a means for me to be here to be able to provide for my family and glorify God, but my highest prized possession in life is the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

In conclusion, what do you see on Wall Street and in New York? I would say it is a microcosm of what I see in France, really. What you have is highly secular people who are overall really smart, generally friendly, clearly sinful, and in need of a Savior, yet they’ve never heard the gospel and are just waiting to be surprised by a thoughtful Christian proclaiming to them that there is a God and that life eternal is found by faith in Jesus Christ. In these conditions, I would say that the harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Guillaume Bignon, “How a French Atheist Becomes a Theologian,” *Christianity Today*, November 17, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/november/how-french-atheist-becomes-theologian.html>.
2. In recent years, that decision has become less of a choice for firms like mine anyway, in light of the so-called Volcker rule of the Dodd-Frank reform, aiming to restrict speculative activities by US banks.