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# ADVICE TO CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHERS

Alvin Plantinga

## I. Introduction

Christianity, these days, and in our part of the world, is on the move. There are many signs pointing in this direction: the growth of Christian schools, of the serious conservative Christian denominations, the furor over prayer in public schools, the creationism/evolution controversy, and others.

There is also powerful evidence for this contention in philosophy. Thirty or thirty-five years ago, the public temper of mainline establishment philosophy in the English speaking world was deeply non-Christian. Few establishment philosophers were Christian; even fewer were willing to admit in public that they were, and still fewer thought of their being Christian as making a real difference to their practice as philosophers. The most popular question of philosophical theology, at that time, was not whether Christianity or theism is *true*; the question, instead, was whether it even *makes sense* to say that there is such a person as God. According to the logical positivism then running riot, the sentence "there is such a person as God" literally makes no sense; it is disguised nonsense; it altogether fails to express a thought or a proposition. The central question wasn't whether theism is *true*; it was whether there *is* such a thing as theism—a genuine factual claim that is either true or false—at all. But things have changed. There are now many more Christians and many more unabashed Christians in the professional mainstream of American philosophical life. For example, the foundation of the Society for Christian Philosophers, an organization to promote fellowship and exchange of ideas among Christian philosophers, is both an evidence and a consequence of that fact. Founded some six years ago, it is now a thriving organization with regional meetings in every part of the country; its members are deeply involved in American professional philosophical life. So Christianity is on the move, and on the move in philosophy, as well as in other areas of intellectual life.

But even if Christianity is on the move, it has taken only a few brief steps; and it is marching through largely alien territory. For the intellectual culture of our day is for the most part profoundly nontheistic and hence non-Christian—more than that, it is anti-theistic. Most of the so-called human sciences, much of the non-human sciences, most of non-scientific intellectual endeavor and even a



good bit of allegedly Christian theology is animated by a spirit wholly foreign to that of Christian theism. I don't have the space here to elaborate and develop this point; but I don't have to, for it is familiar to you all. To return to philosophy: most of the major philosophy departments in America have next to nothing to offer the student intent on coming to see how to be a Christian in philosophy—how to assess and develop the bearing of Christianity on matters of current philosophical concern, and how to think about those philosophical matters of interest to the Christian community. In the typical graduate philosophy department there will be little more, along these lines, than a course in philosophy of religion in which it is suggested that the evidence for the existence of God—the classical theistic proofs, say—is at least counterbalanced by the evidence against the existence of God—the problem of evil, perhaps; and it may then be added that the wisest course, in view of such maxims as Ockham's Razor, is to dispense with the whole idea of God, at least for philosophical purposes.

My aim, in this talk, is to give some advice to philosophers who are Christians. And although my advice is directed specifically to Christian philosophers, it is relevant to all philosophers who believe in God, whether Christian, Jewish or Moslem. I propose to give some advice to the Christian or theistic philosophical community: some advice relevant to the situation in which in fact we find ourselves. "Who are you," you say, "to give the rest of us advice?" That's a good question. I shall deal with it as one properly deals with good questions to which one doesn't know the answer: I shall ignore it. My counsel can be summed up on two connected suggestions, along with a codicil. First, Christian philosophers and Christian intellectuals generally must display more autonomy—more independence of the rest of the philosophical world. Second, Christian philosophers must display more integrity—integrity in the sense of integral wholeness, or oneness, or unity, being all of one piece. Perhaps 'integrality' would be the better word here. And necessary to these two is a third: Christian courage, or boldness, or strength, or perhaps Christian self-confidence. We Christian philosophers must display more faith, more trust in the Lord; we must put on the whole armor of God. Let me explain in a brief and preliminary way what I have in mind; then I shall go on to consider some examples in more detail.

Consider a Christian college student—from Grand Rapids, Michigan, say, or Arkadelphia, Arkansas—who decides philosophy is the subject for her. Naturally enough, she will go to graduate school to learn how to become a philosopher. Perhaps she goes to Princeton, or Berkeley, or Pittsburgh, or Arizona; it doesn't much matter which. There she learns how philosophy is presently practiced. The burning questions of the day are such topics as the new theory of reference; the realism/anti-realism controversy; the problems with probability; Quine's claims about the radical indeterminacy of translation; Rawls on justice; the causal theory of knowledge; Gettier problems; the artificial intelligence model for the under-

standing of what it is to be a person; the question of the ontological status of unobservable entities in science; whether there is genuine objectivity in science or anywhere else; whether mathematics can be reduced to set theory and whether abstract entities generally—numbers, propositions, properties—can be, as we quaintly say, “dispensed with”; whether possible worlds are abstract or concrete; whether our assertions are best seen as mere moves in a language game or as attempts to state the sober truth about the world; whether the rational egoist can be shown to be irrational, and all the rest. It is then natural for her, after she gets her Ph.D., to continue to think about and work on these topics. And it is natural, furthermore, for her to work on them in the way she was taught to, thinking about them in the light of the assumptions made by her mentors and in terms of currently accepted ideas as to what a philosopher should start from or take for granted, what requires argument and defense, and what a satisfying philosophical explanation or a proper resolution to a philosophical question is like. She will be uneasy about departing widely from these topics and assumptions, feeling instinctively that any such departures are at best marginally respectable. Philosophy is a social enterprise; and our standards and assumptions—the parameters within which we practice our craft—are set by our mentors and by the great contemporary centers of philosophy.

From one point of view this is natural and proper; from another, however, it is profoundly unsatisfactory. The questions I mentioned are important and interesting. Christian philosophers, however, are the philosophers of the Christian community; and it is part of their task as *Christian* philosophers to serve the Christian community. But the Christian community has its own questions, its own concerns, its own topics for investigation, its own agenda and its own research program. Christian philosophers ought not merely take their inspiration from what’s going on at Princeton or Berkeley or Harvard, attractive and scintillating as that may be; for perhaps those questions and topics are not the ones, or not the only ones, they should be thinking about as the philosophers of the Christian community. There are other philosophical topics the Christian community must work at, and other topics the Christian community must work at philosophically. And obviously, Christian philosophers are the ones who must do the philosophical work involved. If they devote their best efforts to the topics fashionable in the non-Christian philosophical world, they will neglect a crucial and central part of their task as Christian philosophers. What is needed here is more independence, more autonomy with respect to the projects and concerns of the non-theistic philosophical world.

But something else is at least as important here. Suppose the student I mentioned above goes to Harvard; she studies with Willard van Orman Quine. She finds herself attracted to Quine’s programs and procedures: his radical empiricism, his allegiance to natural science, his inclination towards behaviorism, his uncompromising naturalism, and his taste for desert landscapes and ontological par-

simony. It would be wholly natural for her to become totally involved in these projects and programs, to come to think of fruitful and worthwhile philosophy as substantially circumscribed by them. Of course she will note certain tensions between her Christian belief and her way of practicing philosophy; and she may then bend her efforts to putting the two together, to harmonizing them. She may devote her time and energy to seeing how one might understand or reinterpret Christian belief in such a way as to be palatable to the Quinian. One philosopher I know, embarking on just such a project, suggested that Christians should think of God as a *set* (Quine is prepared to countenance sets): the set of all true propositions, perhaps, or the set of right actions, or the union of those sets, or perhaps their Cartesian product. This is understandable; but it is also profoundly misdirected. Quine is a marvelously gifted philosopher: a subtle, original and powerful philosophical force. But his fundamental commitments, his fundamental projects and concerns, are wholly different from those of the Christian community—wholly different and, indeed, antithetical to them. And the result of attempting to graft Christian thought onto his basic view of the world will be at best an unintegral *pastiche*; at worst it will seriously compromise, or distort, or trivialize the claims of Christian theism. What is needed here is more wholeness, more integrality.

So the Christian philosopher has his own topics and projects to think about; and when he thinks about the topics of current concern in the broader philosophical world, he will think about them in his own way, which may be a *different* way. He may have to reject certain currently fashionable assumptions about the philosophic enterprise—he may have to reject widely accepted assumptions as to what are the proper starting points and procedures for philosophical endeavor. And—and this is crucially important—the Christian philosopher has a perfect right to the point of view and pre-philosophical assumptions he brings to philosophic work; the fact that these are not widely shared outside the Christian or theistic community is interesting but fundamentally irrelevant. I can best explain what I mean by way of example; so I shall descend from the level of lofty generality to specific examples.

## II. Theism and Verifiability

First, the dreaded “Verifiability Criterion of Meaning.” During the palmy days of logical positivism, some thirty or forty years ago, the positivists claimed that most of the sentences Christians characteristically utter—“God loves us,” for example, or “God created the heavens and the earth”—don’t even have the grace to be false; they are, said the positivists, literally meaningless. It is not that they express *false* propositions; they don’t express any propositions at all. Like that lovely line from *Alice in Wonderland*, “T’was brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gymbol in the wabe,” they say nothing false, but only because they say nothing at all; they are “cognitively meaningless,” to use the positivist’s charming phrase.

The sorts of things theists and others had been saying for centuries, they said, were now shown to be without sense; we theists had all been the victims, it seems, of a cruel hoax—perpetrated, perhaps, by ambitious priests and foisted upon us by our own credulous natures.

Now if this is true, it is indeed important. How had the positivists come by this startling piece of intelligence? They inferred it from the Verifiability Criterion of Meaning, which said, roughly, that a sentence is meaningful only if either it is analytic, or its truth or falsehood can be determined by empirical or scientific investigation—by the methods of the empirical sciences. On these grounds not only theism and theology, but most of traditional metaphysics and philosophy and much else besides was declared nonsense, without any literal sense at all. Some positivists conceded that metaphysics and theology, though strictly meaningless, might still have a certain limited value. Carnap, for example, thought they might be a kind of *music*. It isn't known whether he expected theology and metaphysics to supplant Bach and Mozart, or even Wagner; I myself, however, think they could nicely supersede *rock*. Hegel could take the place of The Talking Heads; Immanuel Kant could replace The Beach Boys; and instead of The Grateful Dead we could have, say, Arthur Schopenhauer.

Positivism had a delicious air of being *avant garde* and with-it; and many philosophers found it extremely attractive. Furthermore, many who didn't endorse it nonetheless entertained it with great hospitality as at the least extremely plausible. As a consequence many philosophers—both Christians and non-Christians—saw here a real challenge and an important danger to Christianity: "The main danger to theism today," said J. J. C. Smart in 1955, "comes from people who want to say that 'God exists' and 'God does not exist' are equally absurd." In 1955 *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* appeared, a volume of essays that was to set the tone and topics for philosophy of religion for the next decade or more; and most of this volume was given over to a discussion of the impact of Verificationism on theism. Many philosophically inclined Christians were disturbed and perplexed and felt deeply threatened; could it really be true that linguistic philosophers had somehow discovered that the Christian's most cherished convictions were, in fact, just meaningless? There was a great deal of anxious hand wringing among philosophers, either themselves theists or sympathetic to theism. Some suggested, in the face of positivistic onslaught, that the thing for the Christian community to do was to fold up its tents and silently slink away, admitting that the verifiability criterion was probably true. Others conceded that strictly speaking, theism really *is* nonsense, but is *important* nonsense. Still others suggested that the sentences in question should be reinterpreted in such a way as not to give offense to the positivists; someone seriously suggested, for example, that Christians resolve, henceforth, to use the sentence "God exists" to mean "some men and women have had, and all may have, experiences called 'meeting God' "; he added that when we

say "God created the world from nothing" what we should mean is "everything we call 'material' can be used in such a way that it contributes to the well-being of men." In a different context but the same spirit, Rudolph Bultmann embarked upon his program of demythologizing Christianity. Traditional supernaturalistic Christian belief, he said, is "impossible in this age of electric light and the wireless." (One can perhaps imagine an earlier village skeptic taking a similar view of, say, the tallow candle and the printing press, or perhaps the pine torch and the papyrus scroll.)

By now, of course, Verificationism has retreated into the obscurity it so richly deserves; but the moral remains. This hand wringing and those attempts to accommodate the positivist were wholly inappropriate. I realize that hindsight is clearer than foresight and I do not recount this bit of recent intellectual history in order to be critical of my elders or to claim that we are wiser than our fathers: what I want to point out is that we can *learn* something from the whole nasty incident. For Christian philosophers should have adopted a quite different attitude towards positivism and its verifiability criterion. What they should have said to the positivists is: "Your criterion is mistaken: for such statements as 'God loves us' and 'God created the heavens and the earth' are clearly meaningful; so if they aren't verifiable in your sense, then it is false that all and only statements verifiable in that sense are meaningful." What was needed here was less accommodation to current fashion and more Christian self-confidence: Christian theism is true; if Christian theism is true, then the verifiability criterion is false; so the verifiability criterion is false. Of course, if the verificationists had given cogent *arguments* for their criterion, from premises that had some legitimate claim on Christian or theistic thinkers, then perhaps there would have been a problem here for the Christian philosopher; then we would have been obliged either to agree that Christian theism is cognitively meaningless, or else revise or reject those premises. But the Verificationists never gave any cogent arguments; indeed, they seldom gave any arguments at all. Some simply trumpeted this principle as a great discovery, and when challenged, repeated it loudly and slowly; but why should *that* disturb anyone? Others proposed it as a *definition*—a definition of the term "meaningful." Now of course the positivists had a right to use this term in any way they chose; it's a free country. But how could their decision to use that term in a particular way show anything so momentous as that all those who took themselves to be believers in God were wholly deluded? If I propose to use the term 'Democrat' to mean 'unmitigated scoundrel,' would it follow that Democrats everywhere should hang their heads in shame? And my point, to repeat myself, is that Christian philosophers should have displayed more integrity, more independence, less readiness to trim their sails to the prevailing philosophical winds of doctrine, and more Christian self-confidence.

## III. Theism and Theory of Knowledge

I can best approach my second example by indirection. Many philosophers have claimed to find a serious problem for theism in the existence of *evil*, or of the amount and kinds of evil we do in fact find. Many who claim to find a problem here for theists have urged the *deductive argument from evil*: they have claimed that the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God is *logically incompatible* with the presence of evil in the world—a presence conceded and indeed insisted upon by Christian theists. For their part, theists have argued that there is no inconsistency here. I think the present consensus, even among those who urge some form of the argument from evil, is that the deductive form of the argument from evil is unsuccessful.

More recently, philosophers have claimed that the existence of God, while perhaps not actually *inconsistent* with the existence of the amount and kinds of evil we do in fact find, is at any rate *unlikely* or *improbable* with respect to it; that is, the probability of the existence of God with respect to the evil we find, is less than the probability, with respect to that same evidence, that there is no God—no omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good Creator. Hence the existence of God is improbable with respect to what we know. But if theistic belief *is* improbable with respect to what we know, then, so goes the claim, it is irrational or in any event intellectually second rate to accept it.

Now suppose we briefly examine this claim. The objector holds that

- (1) God is the omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good creator of the world

is improbable or unlikely with respect to

- (2) There are  $10^{13}$  turps of evil

(where the *turp* is the basic unit of evil).

I've argued elsewhere<sup>1</sup> that enormous difficulties beset the claim that (1) is unlikely or improbable given (2). Call that response "the low road reply." Here I want to pursue what I shall call the *high road* reply. Suppose we stipulate, for purposes of argument, that (1) *is*, in fact, improbable on (2). Let's agree that it is unlikely, given the existence of  $10^{13}$  turps of evil, that the world has been created by a God who is perfect in power, knowledge and goodness. What is supposed to follow from that? How is that to be construed as an objection to theistic belief? How does the objector's argument go from there? It doesn't follow, of course, that theism is false. Nor does it follow that one who accepts both (1) and (2) (and let's add, recognizes that (1) is improbable with respect to (2)) has an irrational system of beliefs or is in any way guilty of noetic impropriety; obviously there might be pairs of propositions *A* and *B*, such that we *know* both *A* and *B*, despite the fact that *A* is im-



probable on *B*. I might know, for example, both that Feike is a Frisian and 9 out of 10 Frisians can't swim, and also that Feike can swim; then I am obviously within my intellectual rights in accepting both these propositions, even though the latter is improbable with respect to the former. So even if it were a fact that (1) is improbable with respect to (2), that fact, so far, wouldn't be of much consequence. How, therefore, can this objection be developed?

Presumably what the objector means to hold is that (1) is improbable, not just on (2) but on some appropriate body of *total evidence*—perhaps all the evidence the theist has, or perhaps the body of evidence he is rationally obliged to have. The objector must be supposing that the theist has a relevant body of total evidence here, a body of evidence that includes (2); and his claim is that (1) is improbable with respect to this relevant body of total evidence. Suppose we say that  $T_s$  is the relevant body of total evidence for a given theist *T*; and suppose we agree that a belief is rationally acceptable for him only if it is not improbable with respect to  $T_s$ . Now what sorts of propositions are to be found in  $T_s$ ? Perhaps the propositions he *knows* to be true, or perhaps the largest subset of his beliefs that he can rationally accept without evidence from other propositions, or perhaps the propositions he knows *immediately*—knows, but does not know on the basis of other propositions. However exactly we characterize this set  $T_s$ , the question I mean to press is this: why can't belief in God be itself a member of  $T_s$ ? Perhaps for the theist—for many theists, at any rate—belief in God is a member of  $T_s$ , in which case it obviously won't be improbable with respect to  $T_s$ . Perhaps the theist has a right to *start from* belief in God, taking that proposition to be one of the ones probability with respect to which determines the rational propriety of *other* beliefs he holds. But if so, then the Christian *philosopher* is entirely within his rights in starting from belief in God to his philosophizing. He has a right to take the existence of God for granted and go on from there in his philosophical work—just as other philosophers take for granted the existence of the past, say, or of other persons, or the basic claims of contemporary physics.

And this leads me to my point here. Many Christian philosophers appear to think of themselves *qua* philosophers as engaged with the atheist and agnostic philosopher in a common search for the correct philosophical position *vis a vis* the question whether there is such a person as God. Of course the Christian philosopher will have his own private conviction on the point; he will believe, of course, that indeed there is such a person as God. But he will think, or be inclined to think, or half inclined to think that as a *philosopher* he has no right to this position unless he is able to show that it follows from, or is probable, or justified with respect to premises accepted by all parties to the discussion—theist, agnostic and atheist alike. Furthermore, he will be half inclined to think he has no right, as a philosopher, to positions that presuppose the existence of God, if he can't show that belief to be justified in this way. What I want to urge is that the Christian

philosophical community ought *not* to think of itself as engaged in this common effort to determine the probability or philosophical plausibility of belief in God. The Christian philosopher quite properly *starts from* the existence of God, and presupposes it in philosophical work, whether or not he can show it to be probable or plausible with respect to premises accepted by all philosophers, or most philosophers, or most philosophers at the great contemporary centers of philosophy.

Taking it for granted, for example, that there is such a person as God and that we are indeed within our epistemic rights (are in that sense justified) in believing that there is, the Christian epistemologist might ask what it is that confers justification here: by virtue of what is the theist justified? Perhaps there are several sensible responses. One answer he might give and try to develop is that of John Calvin (and before him, of the Augustinian, Anselmian, Bonaventurian tradition of the middle ages): God, said Calvin, has implanted in humankind a tendency or *nisus* or disposition to believe in him:

“There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity.” This we take to beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty.... Therefore, since from the beginning of the world there has been no region, no city, in short, no household, that could do without religion, there lies in this a tacit confession of a sense of deity inscribed in the hearts of all.<sup>2</sup>

Calvin’s claim, then, is that God has so created us that we have by nature a strong tendency or inclination or disposition towards belief in him.

Although this disposition to believe in God has been in part smothered or suppressed by *sin*, it is nevertheless universally present. And it is triggered or actuated by widely realized conditions:

Lest anyone, then, be excluded from access to happiness, he not only sowed in men’s minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken, but revealed himself and daily disclosed himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As, a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him (p. 51).

Like Kant, Calvin is especially impressed in this connection, by the marvelous compages of the starry heavens above:

Even the common folk and the most untutored, who have been taught only by the aid of the eyes, cannot be unaware of the excellence of divine art, for it reveals itself in this innumerable and yet distinct and well-or-

dered variety of the heavenly host (p. 52).

And now what Calvin says suggests that one who accedes to this tendency and in these circumstances accepts the belief that God has created the world—perhaps upon beholding the starry heavens, or the splendid majesty of the mountains, or the intricate, articulate beauty of a tiny flower—is quite as rational and quite as justified as one who believes that he sees a tree upon having that characteristic being-appeared-to-treely kind of experience.

No doubt this suggestion won't convince the skeptic; taken as an attempt to convince the skeptic it is circular. My point is just this: the Christian has his own questions to answer, and his own projects; these projects may not mesh with those of the skeptical or unbelieving philosopher. He has his own questions and his own starting point in investigating these questions. Of course, I don't mean to suggest that the Christian philosopher must accept Calvin's answer to the question I mentioned above; but I do say it is entirely fitting for him to give to this question an answer that presupposes precisely that of which the skeptic is skeptical—even if this skepticism is nearly unanimous in most of the prestigious philosophy departments of our day. The Christian philosopher does indeed have a responsibility to the philosophical world at large; but his fundamental responsibility is to the Christian community, and finally to God.

Again, a Christian philosopher may be interested in the relation between faith and reason, and faith and knowledge: granted that we hold some things by faith and know other things; granted that we believe that there is such a person as God and that this belief is true; do we also *know* that God exists? Do we accept this belief by faith or by reason? A theist may be inclined towards a *reliabilist* theory of knowledge; he may be inclined to think that a true belief constitutes knowledge if it is produced by a reliable belief producing mechanism. (There are hard problems here, but suppose for now we ignore them.) If the theist thinks God has created us with the *sensus divinitatis* Calvin speaks of, he will hold that indeed there is a reliable belief producing mechanism that produces theistic belief; he will thus hold that we *know* that God exists. One who follows Calvin here will also hold that a capacity to apprehend God's existence is as much part of our natural noetic or intellectual equipment as is the capacity to apprehend truths of logic, perceptual truths, truths about the past, and truths about other minds. Belief in the existence of God is then in the same boat as belief in truths of logic, other minds, the past, and perceptual objects; in each case God has so constructed us that in the right circumstances we acquire the belief in question. But then the belief that there is such a person as God is as much among the deliverances of our natural noetic faculties as are those other beliefs. Hence we *know* that there is such a person as God, and don't merely believe it; and it isn't by *faith* that we apprehend the existence of God, but by reason; and this whether or not any of the classical theistic arguments is successful.

Now my point is not that Christian philosophers must follow Calvin here. My point is that the Christian philosopher has a right (I should say a duty) to work at his own projects—projects set by the beliefs of the Christian community of which he is a part. The Christian philosophical community must work out the answers to *its* questions; and both the questions and the appropriate ways of working out their answers may presuppose beliefs rejected at most of the leading centers of philosophy. But the Christian is proceeding quite properly in starting from these beliefs, even if they are so rejected. He is under no obligation to confine his research projects to those pursued at those centers, or to pursue his own projects on the basis of the assumptions that prevail there.

Perhaps I can clarify what I want to say by contrasting it with a wholly different view. According to the theologian David Tracy,

In fact the modern Christian theologian cannot ethically do other than challenge the traditional self-understanding of the theologian. He no longer sees his task as a simple defense of or even as an orthodox reinterpretation of traditional belief. Rather, he finds that his ethical commitment to the morality of scientific knowledge forces him to assume a critical posture towards his own and his tradition's beliefs.... In principle, the fundamental loyalty of the theologian *qua* theologian is to that morality of scientific knowledge which he shares with his colleagues, the philosophers, historians and social sciences. No more than they can he allow his own—or his tradition's—beliefs to serve as warrants for his arguments. In fact, in all properly theological inquiry, the analysis should be characterized by those same ethical stances of autonomous judgment, critical judgment and properly skeptical hard-mindedness that characterizes analysis in other fields.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, this “morality of scientific knowledge insists that each inquirer start with the present methods and knowledge of the field in question, unless one has evidence of the same logical type for rejecting those methods and that knowledge,” Still further, “for the new scientific morality, one's fundamental loyalty as an analyst of any and all cognitive claims is solely to those methodological procedures which the particular scientific community in question has developed” (6).

I say *caveat lector*. I'm prepared to bet that this “new scientific morality” is like the Holy Roman Empire: it is neither new nor scientific nor morally obligatory. Furthermore the “new scientific morality” looks to me to be monumentally inauspicious as a stance for a Christian theologian, modern or otherwise. Even if there were a set of methodological procedures held in common by most philosophers, historians and social scientists, or most secular philosophers, historians, and social scientists, why should a Christian theologian give ultimate allegiance to them

rather than, say, to God, or to the fundamental truths of Christianity? Tracy's suggestion as to how Christian theologians should proceed seems at best wholly unpromising. Of course I am only a philosopher, not a modern theologian; no doubt I am venturing beyond my depths. So I don't presume to speak for modern theologians; but however things stand for them, the modern Christian *philosopher* has a perfect right, as a philosopher, to start from his belief in God. He has a right to assume it, take it for granted, in his philosophical work—whether or not he can convince his unbelieving colleagues either that this belief is true or that it is sanctioned by those “methodological procedures” Tracy mentions.

And the Christian philosophical community ought to get on with the philosophical questions of importance to the Christian community. It ought to get on with the project of exploring and developing the implications of Christian theism for the whole range of questions philosophers ask and answer. It ought to do this whether or not it can convince the philosophical community at large either that there really is such a person as God, or that it is rational or reasonable to believe that there is. Perhaps the Christian philosopher *can* convince the skeptic or the unbelieving philosopher that indeed there is such a person as God. Perhaps this is possible in at least some instances. In other instances, of course, it may be impossible; even if the skeptic in fact accepts premises from which theistic belief follows by argument forms he also accepts, he may, when apprised of this situation, give up those premises rather than his unbelief. (In this way it is possible to reduce someone from knowledge to ignorance by giving him an argument he sees to be valid from premises he knows to be true.)

But whether or not this is possible, the Christian philosopher has other fish to fry and other questions to think about. Of course he must listen to, understand, and learn from the broader philosophical community and he must take his place in it; but his work as a philosopher is not circumscribed by what either the skeptic or the rest of the philosophical world thinks of theism. Justifying or trying to justify theistic belief in the eyes of the broader philosophical community is not the only task of the Christian philosophical community; perhaps it isn't even among its most important tasks. Philosophy is a communal enterprise. The Christian philosopher who looks exclusively to the philosophical world at large, who thinks of himself as belonging primarily to *that* world, runs a two-fold risk. He may neglect an essential part of his task as a Christian philosopher; and he may find himself adopting principles and procedures that don't comport well with his beliefs as a Christian. What is needed, once more, is autonomy and integrality.

#### IV. *Theism and Persons*

My third example has to do with philosophical anthropology: how should we think about human persons? What sorts of things, fundamentally, *are* they? What

is it to be a person, what is it to be a *human* person, and how shall we think about personhood? How, in particular, should Christians, Christian philosophers, think about these things? The first point to note is that on the Christian scheme of things, *God* is the premier person, the first and chief exemplar of personhood. God, furthermore, has created man in his own image; we men and women are image bearers of God, and the properties most important for an understanding of our personhood are properties we share with him. How we think about God, then, will have an immediate and direct bearing on how we think about humankind. Of course we learn much about ourselves from other sources—from everyday observation, from introspection and self-observation, from scientific investigation and the like. But it is also perfectly proper to start from what we know as Christians. It is not the case that rationality, or proper philosophical method, or intellectual responsibility, or the new scientific morality, or whatever, require that we start from beliefs we share with everyone else—what common sense and current science teach, e.g.—and attempt to reason to or justify those beliefs we hold as Christians. In trying to give a satisfying philosophical account of some area or phenomenon, we may properly appeal, in our account or explanation, to anything else we already rationally believe—whether it be current science or Christian doctrine.

Let me proceed again to specific examples. There is a fundamental watershed, in philosophical anthropology, between those who think of human beings as *free*—free in the libertarian sense—and those who espouse determinism. According to determinists, every human action is a consequence of initial conditions outside our control by way of causal laws that are also outside our control. Sometimes underlying this claim is a picture of the universe as a vast machine where, at any rate at the macroscopic level, all events, including human actions, are determined by previous events and causal laws. On this view every action I have in fact performed was such that it wasn't within my power to refrain from performing it; and if, on a given occasion I did *not* perform a given action, then it wasn't then within my power to perform it. If I now raise my arm, then, on the view in question, it wasn't within my power just then not to raise it. Now the Christian thinker has a stake in this controversy just by virtue of being a Christian. For she will no doubt believe that God holds us human beings responsible for much of what we do—responsible, and thus properly subject to praise or blame, approval or disapproval. But how can I be responsible for my actions, if it was never within my power to perform any action I didn't in fact perform, and never within my power to refrain from performing any I did perform? If my actions are thus determined, then I am not rightly or justly held accountable for them; but God does nothing improper or unjust, and he holds me accountable for some of my actions; hence it is not the case that all of my actions are thus determined. The Christian has an initially strong reason to reject the claim that all of our actions are causally determined—a reason much stronger than the meager and anemic arguments the determinist can muster

on the other side. Of course if there *were* powerful arguments on the other side, then there might be a problem here. But there aren't; so there isn't.

Now the determinist may reply that freedom and causal determinism are, contrary to initial appearances, in fact compatible. He may argue that my being free with respect to an action I performed at a time *t*, for example, doesn't entail that it was then within my power to refrain from performing it, but only something weaker—perhaps something like *if I had chosen not to perform it, I would not have performed it*. Indeed, the clearheaded compatibilist will go further. He will maintain, not merely that freedom is *compatible* with determinism, but that freedom *requires* determinism. He will hold with Hume that the proposition *S is free with respect to action A* or *S does A freely* entails that *S* is causally determined with respect to *A*—that there are causal laws and antecedent conditions that together entail either that *S* performs *A* or that *S* does not perform *A*. And he will back up this claim by insisting that if *S* is not thus determined with respect to *A*, then it's merely a matter of *chance*—due, perhaps, to quantum effects in *S*'s brain—that *S* does *A*. But if it is just a matter of chance that *S* does *A*, then either *S* doesn't really do *A* at all, or at any rate *S* is not responsible for doing *A*. If *S*'s doing *A* is just a matter of chance, then *S*'s doing *A* is something that just *happens* to him; but then it is not really the case that he *performs A*—at any rate it is not the case that he is *responsible* for performing *A*. And hence freedom, in the sense that is required for responsibility, itself requires determinism.

But the Christian thinker will find this claim monumentally implausible. Presumably the determinist means to hold that what he says characterizes actions generally, not just those of human beings. He will hold that it is a *necessary* truth that if an agent isn't caused to perform an action then it is a mere matter of chance that the agent in question performs the action in question. From a Christian perspective, however, this is wholly incredible. For God performs actions, and performs free actions; and surely it is not the case that there are causal laws and antecedent conditions outside his control that determine what he does. On the contrary: God is the author of the causal laws that do in fact obtain; indeed, perhaps the best way to think of these causal laws is as records of the ways in which God ordinarily treats the beings he has created. But of course it is not simply a matter of *chance* that God does what he does—creates and upholds the world, let's say, and offers redemption and renewal to his children. So a Christian philosopher has an extremely good reason for rejected this premise, along with the determinism and compatibilism it supports.

What is really at stake in this discussion is the notion of agent causation: the notion of a person as an ultimate source of action. According to the friends of agent causation, some events are caused, not by other events, but by substances, objects—typically personal agents. And at least since the time of David Hume, the idea of agent causation has been languishing. It is fair to say, I think, that most con-

temporary philosophers who work in this area either reject agent causation outright or are at the least extremely suspicious of it. They see causation as a relation among *events*; they can understand how one event can cause another event, or how events of one kind can cause events of another kind. But the idea of a *person*, say, causing an event, seems to them unintelligible, unless it can be analyzed, somehow, in terms of event causation. It is this devotion to event causation, of course, that explains the claim that if you perform an action but are not caused to do so, then your performing that action is a matter of chance. For if I hold that all causation in ultimately event causation, then I will suppose that if you perform an action but are not caused to do so by previous events, then your performing that action isn't caused at all and is therefore a mere matter of chance. The devotee of event causation, furthermore, will perhaps argue for his position as follows. If such agents as persons cause effects that take place in the physical world—my body's moving in a certain way, for example—then these effects must ultimately be caused by volitions or *undertakings*—which, apparently, are immaterial, unphysical events. He will then claim that the idea of an immaterial event's having causal efficacy in the physical world is puzzling or dubious or worse.

But a Christian philosopher will find this argument unimpressive and this devotion to event causation uncongenial. As for the argument, the Christian already and independently believes that acts of volition have causal efficacy; he believes indeed, that the physical universe owes its very existence to just such volitional acts—God's undertaking to create it. And as for the devotion to event causation, the Christian will be, initially, at any rate, strongly inclined to reject the idea that event causation is primary and agent causation to be explained in terms of it. For he believes that God does and has done many things: he has created the world; he sustains it in being; he communicates with his children. But it is extraordinarily hard to see how these truths can be analyzed in terms of causal relations among events. What events could possibly cause God's creating the world or his undertaking to create the world? God himself institutes or establishes the causal laws that do in fact hold; how, then, can we see all the events constituted by his actions as related to causal laws to earlier events? How could it be that propositions ascribing actions to him are to be explained in terms of event causation?

Some theistic thinkers have noted this problem and reacted by soft peddling God's causal activity, or by impetuously following Kant in declaring that it is of a wholly different order from that in which we engage, an order beyond our comprehension. I believe this is the wrong response. Why should a Christian philosopher join in the general obeisance to event causation? It is not as if there are cogent *arguments* here. The real force behind this claim is a certain philosophical way of looking at persons and the world; but this view has no initial plausibility from a Christian perspective and no compelling argument in its favor.

So on all these disputed points in philosophical anthropology the theist will have



a strong initial predilection for resolving the dispute in one way rather than another. He will be inclined to reject compatibilism, to hold that event causation (if indeed there is such a thing) is to be explained in terms of agent causation, to reject the idea that if an event isn't caused by other events then its occurrence is a matter of chance, and to reject the idea that events in the physical world can't be caused by an agent's undertaking to do something. And my point here is this. The Christian philosopher is within his right in holding these positions, whether or not he can convince the rest of a philosophical world and whatever the current philosophical consensus is, if there is a consensus. But isn't such an appeal to God and his properties, in this philosophical context, a shameless appeal to a *deus ex machina*? Surely not. "Philosophy," as Hegel once exclaimed in a rare fit of lucidity, "is thinking things over." Philosophy is in large part a clarification, systematization, articulation, relating and deepening of pre-philosophical opinion. We come to philosophy with a range of opinions about the world and humankind and the place of the latter in the former; and in philosophy we think about these matters, systematically articulate our views, put together and relate our views on diverse topics, and deepen our views by finding unexpected interconnections and by discovering and answering unanticipated questions. Of course we may come to change our minds by virtue of philosophical endeavor; we may discover incompatibilities or other infelicities. But we come to philosophy with pre-philosophical opinions; we can do no other. And the point is: the Christian has as much right to his pre-philosophical opinions as others have to theirs. He needn't try first to 'prove' them from propositions accepted by, say, the bulk of the non-Christian philosophical community; and if they are widely rejected as naive, or pre-scientific, or primitive, or unworthy of "man come of age," that is nothing whatever against them. Of course if there were genuine and substantial arguments against them from premises that have some legitimate claim on the Christian philosopher, then he would have a problem; he would have to make some kind of change somewhere. But in the absence of such arguments—and the absence of such arguments is evident—the Christian philosophical community, quite properly starts, in philosophy, from what it believes.

But this means that the Christian philosophical community need not devote all of its efforts to attempting to refute opposing claims and or to arguing for its own claims, in each case from premises accepted by the bulk of the philosophical community at large. It ought to do this, indeed, but it ought to do more. For if it does only this, it will neglect a pressing philosophical task: systematizing, deepening, clarifying Christian thought on these topics. So here again: my plea is for the Christian philosopher, the Christian philosophical community, to display, first, more independence and autonomy: we needn't take as our research projects just those projects that currently enjoy widespread popularity; we have our own questions to think about. Secondly, we must display more integrity. We must not au-

tomatically assimilate what is current or fashionable or popular by way of philosophical opinion and procedures; for much of it comports ill with Christian ways of thinking. And finally, we must display more Christian self-confidence or courage or boldness. We have a perfect right to our pre-philosophical views: why, therefore, should we be intimidated by what the rest of the philosophical world thinks plausible or implausible?

These, then, are my examples; I could have chosen others. In ethics, for example: perhaps the chief theoretical concern, from the theistic perspective, is the question how are right and wrong, good and bad, duty, permission and obligation related to God and to his will and to his creative activity? This question doesn't arise, naturally enough, from a nontheistic perspective; and so, naturally enough, nontheist ethicists do not address it. But it is perhaps the most important question for a Christian ethicist to tackle. I have already spoken about epistemology; let me mention another example from this area. Epistemologists sometimes worry about the confluence or lack thereof of epistemic *justification*, on the one hand, and *truth*, or *reliability*, on the other. Suppose we do the best that can be expected of us, noetically speaking; suppose we do our intellectual duties and satisfy our intellectual obligations: what guarantee is there that in so doing we shall arrive at the truth? Is there even any reason for supposing that if we thus satisfy our obligations, we shall have a better chance of arriving at the truth than if we brazenly flout them? And where do these intellectual obligations come from? How does it happen that we have them? Here the theist has, if not a clear set of answers, at any rate clear suggestions towards a set of answers. Another example: creative antirealism is presently popular among philosophers; this is the view that it is human behavior—in particular, human thought and language—that is somehow responsible for the fundamental structure of the world and for the fundamental kinds of entities there are. From a theistic point of view, however, universal creative anti-realism is at best a mere impertinence, a piece of laughable bravado. For *God*, of course, owes neither his existence nor his properties to us and our ways of thinking; the truth is just the reverse. And so far as the created universe is concerned, while it indeed owes its existence and character to activity on the part of a person, that person is certainly not a *human* person.

One final example, this time from philosophy of mathematics. Many who think about *sets* and their nature are inclined to accept the following ideas. First, no set is a member of itself. Second, whereas a property has its extension contingently, a set has *its* membership essentially. This means that no set could have existed if one of its members had not, and that no set could have had fewer or different members from the ones it in fact has. It means, furthermore, that sets are contingent beings; if Ronald Reagan had not existed, then his unit set would not have existed. And thirdly, sets form a sort of iterated structure: at the first level there are sets whose members are non-sets, at the second level sets whose members are non-sets or first

level sets; at the third level, sets whose members are non-sets or sets of the first two levels, and so on. Many are also inclined, with Georg Cantor, to regard sets as *collections*—as objects whose existence is dependent upon a certain sort of intellectual activity—a collecting or “thinking together” as Cantor put it. If sets were collections of this sort, that would explain their displaying the first three features I mentioned. But if the collecting or thinking together had to be done by *human* thinkers, or any finite thinkers, there wouldn’t be nearly enough sets—not nearly as many as we think in fact there are. From a theistic point of view, the natural conclusion is that sets owe their existence to *God’s* thinking things together. The natural explanation of those three features is just that sets are indeed collections—collections collected by God; they are or result from God’s thinking things together. This idea may not be popular at contemporary centers of set theoretical activity; but that is neither here nor there. Christians, theists, ought to understand sets from a *Christian* and *theistic* point of view. What they believe as theists affords a resource for understanding sets not available to the non-theist; and why shouldn’t they employ it? Perhaps here we *could* proceed without appealing to what we believe as theists; but why *should* we, if these beliefs are useful and explanatory? I could probably get home this evening by hopping on one leg; and conceivably I could climb Devil’s Tower with my feet tied together. But why should I want to?

The Christian or theistic philosopher, therefore, has his own way of working at his craft. In some cases there are items on his agenda—pressing items—not to be found on the agenda of the non-theistic philosophical community. In others, items that are currently fashionable appear of relatively minor interest from a Christian perspective. In still others, the theist will reject common assumptions and views about how to start, how to proceed, and what constitutes a good or satisfying answer. In still others the Christian will take for granted and will start from assumptions and premises rejected by the philosophical community at large. Of course I don’t mean for a moment to suggest that Christian philosophers have nothing to learn from their non-Christian and non-theist colleagues: that would be a piece of foolish arrogance, utterly belied by the facts of the matter. Nor do I mean to suggest that Christian philosophers should retreat into their own isolated enclave, having as little as possible to do with non-theistic philosophers. Of course not! Christians have much to learn and much of enormous importance to learn by way of dialogue and discussion with their non-theistic colleagues. Christian philosophers must be intimately involved in the professional life of the philosophical community at large, both because of what they can learn and because of what they can contribute. Furthermore, while Christian philosophers need not and ought not to see themselves as involved, for example, in a common effort to determine whether there is such a person as God, we are all, theist and non-theist alike, engaged in the common human project of understanding ourselves and the world in which we find ourselves. If the Christian philosophical community is doing its job

properly, it will be engaged in a complicated, many-sided dialectical discussion, making its own contribution to that common human project. It must pay careful attention to other contributions; it must gain a deep understanding of them; it must learn what it can from them and it must take unbelief with profound seriousness.

All of this is true and all of this is important; but none of it runs counter to what I have been saying. Philosophy is many things. I said earlier that it is a matter of systematizing, developing and deepening one's pre-philosophical opinions. It is that; but it is also an arena for the articulation and interplay of commitments and allegiances fundamentally religious in nature; it is an expression of deep and fundamental perspectives, ways of viewing ourselves and the world and God. The Christian philosophical community, by virtue of being Christian, is committed to a broad but specific way of looking at humankind and the world and God. Among its most important and pressing projects are systematizing, deepening, exploring, articulating this perspective, and exploring its bearing on the rest of what we think and do. But then the Christian philosophical community has its own agenda; it need not and should not automatically take its projects from the list of those currently in favor at the leading contemporary centers of philosophy. Furthermore, Christian philosophers must be wary about assimilating or accepting presently popular philosophical ideas and procedures; for many of these have roots that are deeply anti-Christian. And finally the Christian philosophical community has a right to its perspectives; it is under no obligation first to show that this perspective is plausible with respect to what is taken for granted by all philosophers, or most philosophers, or the leading philosophers of our day.

In sum, we who are Christians and propose to be philosophers must not rest content with being philosophers who happen, incidentally, to be Christians; we must strive to be Christian philosophers. We must therefore pursue our projects with integrity, independence, and Christian boldness.<sup>4</sup>

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## NOTES

1. "The Probabilistic Argument from Evil," *Philosophical Studies*, 1979, pp. 1-53.
2. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960). Bk. 1, Chap. III, pp. 43-44.
3. *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury Press), 1978, p. 7.
4. Delivered November 4, 1983, as the author's inaugural address as the John A. O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame.