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METHOD IN CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY: A REPLY

Alvin Plantinga

First, I wish to thank Professor Keller for his thoughtful and interesting comment on my advice to Christian philosophers. In offering that advice I was hoping that Christian philosophers would turn explicit attention to this problem—the problem of how to be a Christian in philosophy. I am therefore delighted to see that Professor Keller has done precisely that.

I am sorry to say, however, that I shall have to disappoint those of you who hope for a knock-down drag-out brawl; I find myself in pretty complete agreement with Keller on most of the substantive issues. Perhaps a real disagreement or two may lurk somewhere nearby, but I have been hard put to identify them. It does seem to me, however, that at several points Keller has misunderstood or misinterpreted what I said or meant to say; no doubt this is due as much to expository deficiency on my part as to hermeneutical inadequacy on his. I am therefore pleased to have the opportunity to explain myself a bit more fully; once these misunderstandings are out of the way, perhaps we shall be able to see whether or not we have any real disagreement.

But first a brief recap of what it was, as I see it, that I offered by way of advice. What I said, essentially, is that Christian philosophers should exhibit more autonomy, and more integrality. First, Christians should not automatically take over the research programs, to use the Lakatosian phrase, popular at the great contemporary centers of philosophy. This is for two reasons: (a) the Christian philosophical community has its own questions, its own topics and its own concerns. If Christian philosophers pay attention only to what is currently fashionable in the philosophical academy generally, they will neglect an important part of their task as Christian philosophers. And a part of this task—an important and substantially neglected part of this task—is the job of working out answers from an explicitly Christian or theistic perspective to the sorts of questions philosophers ask and answer. (b) Christian philosophers ought not automatically take over these research projects, because many of them have deeply anti-Christian roots; they fit in badly with a Christian or theistic way of looking at the world. Then secondly, I said that Christian philosophers have a perfect *right* to start with the views they hold as Christians; these, I said, are quite as suitable as starting points for philosophical inquiry as the naturalistic perspective from which most contemporary philosophers do in fact start. Christian philosophers,



I said, are under no obligation first to prove that theism follows from or is probable with respect to premisses widely accepted in the contemporary secular philosophical academy before trying to work out its implications for epistemology and ontology, for ethics and logic, for aesthetics and philosophy of mathematics.

Now where (if at all) do Keller and I disagree? He attributes two principles to me. First, Christian philosophers have or should have their own agenda and their own research projects; here Keller agrees. The other principle he attributes to me is that Christian philosophers should, in his words, “do their philosophizing in light of the fundamental beliefs which they have as members of the Christian community, not in light of the fundamental beliefs of the philosophers who happen to be the current ‘bright lights’ of philosophy” (p. 145). Well, I did indeed say something like that, and it still seems to me to be both true and good advice. Where does Keller object? “Nevertheless,” he says, “I do not think it is wise for us Christians to follow his other principle, at least as he develops it in his examples. What I find lacking in his principle and his examples is a discussion of the role that beliefs of our contemporary intellectual community (which I shall term ‘secular beliefs’) can and should play in modifying our Christian beliefs. I think that one’s Christian beliefs and these secular beliefs should be related in a far more dialectical fashion than Plantinga seems to suggest” (p. 145).

So perhaps we could put Keller’s main point by saying that our Christian beliefs and our secular beliefs should be related *dialectically*. This means, says Keller, “that neither one should automatically always be given precedence”; it could be, for example, that there are some secular beliefs that we should hold more firmly than some Christian beliefs, so that if the secular and Christian belief conflict, then the Christian belief should be modified. Or perhaps it might be that a pair of my Christian beliefs might conflict in the presence of some secular belief; then it is possible that I should give up or modify one of the Christian beliefs. It isn’t automatically the case that the secular belief should give way.

Now this seems to be both eminently sensible and quite correct. “Secular beliefs” as Keller thinks of them, comprise something like the beliefs widely shared by our contemporaries, or perhaps contemporary western intellectuals; they would therefore include among other things a good bit of logic, mathematics, current science, history, common sense beliefs such as that there are material objects and that there has been a past, and the like. And I quite agree that if one of my Christian beliefs conflicts with one of these beliefs, then it could be that the Christian belief should be modified. If, for example, it becomes clear that my version of the Christian doctrine of the atonement is inconsistent, or is inconsistent with some obviously true ethical principle, then my understanding of God’s atoning activity might very well require modification. Suppose my understanding of the doctrine of creation involves the idea that the world was

created no more than 6,000 years ago: if I encounter excellent evidence for the proposition that the earth is much older than that, then perhaps the right thing to do is to modify my view of creation, as well as my view as to what it is that the Lord intends to teach us in *Genesis*.

But this is entirely consistent with the idea that a Christian philosopher perfectly properly starts from his beliefs as a Christian; and here we come to what I see as misunderstanding. These misunderstandings have to do, fundamentally, with what it means to say that one *starts from* a certain belief, or *properly starts from* a certain belief in conducting philosophical inquiry. I say Christian philosophers can and should start from what they believe as Christians; Keller apparently understands me here, as suggesting three things. First, if Christian philosophers start from their beliefs as Christians, then they should not also start from other sorts of beliefs; second, if someone properly starts from a given belief, then he will not or will not properly modify that belief in the light of other beliefs; and third, one must accord the same weight to all the beliefs one starts with. My reason for thinking Keller understands me this way is that otherwise I cannot see why he thinks what he says is incompatible with my advice.

But in fact I don't mean to endorse any of these suggestions—not at all. First, to say that one can properly start from a given sort of belief is not to suggest that one cannot also start from some other beliefs. The beliefs one starts from, in a philosophical inquiry, constitute the initial constraints on the sorts of answers one will explore and accept; they constitute the views and beliefs one initially takes for granted in attacking the problem. But then one might have initial constraints of many different sorts: obvious logical and ethical principles, some mathematics, perhaps some set theory, perhaps some contemporary science, and of course obvious philosophical principles, as well as one's Christian beliefs. So to say that we ought to start from our Christian beliefs is not to say that we ought to start from nothing but those beliefs. Indeed, it is hard to see how that would be so much as a possibility. Wouldn't we at least also have to start from logic?

Second, a corollary of this point: to say that I start from a certain set of beliefs is not to say that I weight all of these beliefs equally. These beliefs constitute a mixed bag, and I will be very much more certain of some of them than of others. I may be very sure of *modus ponens*, but less sure of, say, contemporary physical theories, even though I start from both. But then the fact I propose to start from my beliefs as a Christian does not mean that I will weight each of my Christian beliefs more heavily than any secular belief, in Keller's sense of secular. Thus, for example, I will not weight my own understanding of the atonement or original sin as heavily as *modus ponens* or elementary arithmetic.

And third, still another corollary: the fact that one starts from a given belief does not mean that that belief is above criticism and cannot properly be modified

by further inquiry. I may start from my understanding of original sin or divine election, say; but by virtue of further reflection I can perfectly properly come to modify it. Perhaps I see, for example, that it is incompatible with the conjunction of the idea that God is just together with certain obvious principles of justice.

As I see it, therefore, a Christian philosopher should start both from her beliefs as a Christian, but also from beliefs of other sorts, including philosophical beliefs. And of course one should try to put them together, to understand them in the light of each other. Keller points out that Aquinas used philosophical ideas in an effort to deepen our understanding of the Christian faith; and he adds, "I cannot help wondering whether he would even have attempted his bold undertaking if he had heard and followed Plantinga's advice." But, if I may put it so, I cannot help wondering why Keller wonders. I accept general revelation as well as special revelation; I did not mean to suggest, nor did I suggest, that philosophical ideas should not be employed in trying to reach a deeper understanding of the Christian faith. Indeed, what else is there to use?

So to start from the beliefs one holds as a Christian is not to start from nothing else and is not to hold these beliefs in such a way as to be invulnerable to criticism. Of course not. If I find good reason to modify my understanding of the Christian faith, then (so far forth) I should do so. "Good reason" could come from many sources: logic, obvious ethical principles, common sense beliefs of various kinds, science, and the like; and it was no part of my advice to suggest otherwise. My advice was aimed in quite a different direction. I meant to say, for one thing, that the mere fact that Christian supernaturalism, or some aspects of it, is rejected at leading centers of philosophy as obviously outmoded and destined for history's junk yard, or as inappropriate for man come of age—that fact is nothing against it and should not deter the Christian philosopher from taking the view in question as a starting point for philosophical inquiry. If some part of Christian supernaturalism leads to trouble, then no doubt we should modify it: sure enough. But the fact that many contemporary philosophers reject it out of hand is not in itself *already* trouble. There are indeed many philosophers who reject Christian supernaturalism; that is deplorable, but it is not news and it should not deter Christian philosophers from pursuing their vocations in Christian philosophy. Philosophy is many things; among other things it is an attempt to work out a vision—a quasi-religious or theological vision of man and world and the place of the former in the latter. Many or most of our contemporaries are animated by a vision quite different from the Christian or theistic one; and their research programs as well as the assumptions underlying their research programs comport ill with a theistic way of looking at the world. I say these research programs and assumptions have no claim on a Christian philosopher just by virtue of their current popularity; she can quite properly reject them just because they *do* conflict with a theistic view of the world. She needn't first

show, from some allegedly neutral starting point, that these assumptions are false. She has a perfect right to get on with her own research projects, with developing and articulating a Christian view of God and man and the world, even if that enterprise presupposes what most contemporary philosophers reject. I say the Christian philosopher has a right and, indeed, a duty to do exactly this.

There are at least three kinds of projects, I think, that we Christian philosophers should pursue in a more determined and explicit way than we have been doing. First, there is philosophical reflection on specifically Christian topics—Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement, Sin (both the original and the less creative varieties), Election, and the like. Second, there is examining and criticizing contemporary ideas from an explicitly Christian and theistic perspective. Third and perhaps most important, or at any rate most difficult, there is developing from a theistic perspective a full-orbed, articulate, systematic set of answers to the main philosophical questions.

But here I have no reason to think Keller and I disagree. By way of conclusion, then, let me mention a couple of points where perhaps we do disagree. First, I think it is a mistake to hold that according to the whole Thomistic tradition “to whatever extent we understand God, we do so by analogy with creatures; we cannot reverse that project” (p. 153). If this is what the whole Thomistic tradition holds, then Thomas Aquinas, so far as I can see, is not much of a Thomist. Aquinas held that much of what we understand about God, we learn by *revelation*, and not from analogizing God to ourselves. Furthermore, Aquinas also held that God is simple, impassive, outside of time, and immutable; according to him we don’t learn these things by seeing God as analogous to us, but by deducing them from the fact that God is the unconditioned creator of the universe.

A second place where perhaps we disagree: Keller seems to suggest that we cannot properly reject a proposed hermeneutical technique or a proposed principle of historical investigation just because it conflicts with the Christian faith as we understand it: this means “that we must decide on the acceptability of techniques on the same basis as our non-Christian colleagues decide.” This seems to me to be an error, at least if I understand it. Techniques and hermeneutical principles, obviously enough, are not theologically neutral. Suppose someone proposes a hermeneutical principle according to which it could not be the case that certain writings were divinely inspired in a way that other human productions are not; and suppose the fundamental motivation for accepting this principle is just incredulity that there could be such a person as traditional Christians consider God to be—someone who proposes to reveal himself in a special way through the *Bible*. More realistically, suppose someone suggests that in interpreting the New Testament, we must assume that any authentic saying of Jesus would have to reflect the cultural patterns of early Palestine.¹ Such principles would have little claim on Christians, even if they were widely accepted by our non-Christian

colleagues. Our non-Christian colleagues, indeed, might accept this principle just because they are indeed *non-Christian* colleagues; but a Christian has a right to decide on its acceptability in quite a different way. She would have a perfect right, I should think, to reject it just because it conflicts with the Christian understanding of God, his revelation, and Jesus Christ. Of course if there were some powerful *arguments* for such principles—some arguments distinct from the mere fact that they fit well with certain contemporary views as to what kind of a God, if any, there might be—then these arguments must be taken account of. But in the absence of such arguments, it seems to me quite proper for a traditional Christian thinker to reject the principle just because it conflicts with traditional Christianity. And this is true even if the principle in question is accepted by the vast majority of the experts. Christians are not obliged to accept just any historical or hermeneutical methods, even if they are widely popular among our contemporaries. We must *test* the spirits, not automatically invite them in just because they are decked out in the latest academic regalia.²

One final point: different advice is appropriate at different times and places. The sort of advice appropriate for Parisian Catholics of the 1930's and 40's or Amsterdam Calvinists of the 30's, 40's and 50's might be quite different from the advice I gave. But my advice was for contemporary American Christian philosophers. It isn't necessary, I think, to advise them to philosophize in the light of secular beliefs; here what is needed (as I see it, at any rate) is the sort of advice I gave.

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NOTES

1. See my "Sheehan's Shenanigans," *The Reformed Journal*, April, 1987, p. 23.

2. Another point on which perhaps we have a real disagreement has to do with agent causation and the role of theological considerations here; my comment, however, is already entirely too long; I shall therefore leave these points for another time.