

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 5 | Issue 2

Article 4

4-1-1988

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Recommended Citation

Keller, James A. (1988) "Method in Christian Philosophy: Further Reflections," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol5/iss2/4>

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METHOD IN CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY: FURTHER REFLECTIONS

James A. Keller

I am pleased to learn that Professor Plantinga thinks we are in substantive agreement; I now think so too. Nevertheless I still detect a difference in emphasis that may have been the occasion for what I earlier took to be perhaps a difference in principle. In his reply (though not in the original paper) Plantinga does state explicitly that some secular beliefs do outweigh some Christian beliefs and that if they conflict, the Christian belief might require reinterpretation or modification, and he gives a few examples of *possible* conflicts. But neither in his original paper nor in his reply did he discuss any *actual* cases. Thus, I was tempted to take his apparent concessions in the original as somewhat *pro forma*—and I wrongly yielded to the temptation.

These features of Plantinga's papers do, however, suggest at least a difference in emphasis between him and me. I commended secular beliefs as a help in defining, clarifying, and challenging one's present understanding of his Christian faith. Plantinga does not mention this use (though he also does not deny it). Yet in his own work he certainly does so use secular beliefs—e.g., a possible worlds ontology to clarify the nature of God's existence, goodness, etc. So why did he not mention this use in his original paper? Perhaps because he thought it unnecessary for his intended audience, as he suggests in the last paragraph of his reply.

But I had a somewhat different group of possible readers in mind: one which included people who might use secular beliefs only to the extent that they confirmed all (or some of) their Christian beliefs or who were not aware that what they now took to be Christian beliefs long ago were secular beliefs or who had incorporated secular beliefs into their Christian beliefs without recognizing or acknowledging that they had baptized something secular. Perhaps no Christian *philosopher* of today would fall into any of these groups, but in case any might, I thought it salutary to bring out in some detail the contributions which secular beliefs had made and still might make to articulating and challenging our understanding of the Christian faith.

I do agree with Plantinga that one task of Christian philosophers is to engage in philosophical reflection on specifically Christian doctrines—Trinity, Incarnation, atonement, etc. But as we do this, to what extent should we attempt to take into account not just philosophical difficulties in articulating them in a form



free of philosophical problems, but also historical and biblical studies into the origin of these doctrines and the pattern and causes of their growth within the Christian community? Historical and biblical studies are not within the usual province of philosophers, but these studies often raise serious questions about whether traditional doctrines are the best way, to say nothing of the only way, to formulate beliefs involved in Christian faith. For what we take as traditional Christian doctrines have been developed by Christian thinkers in light of particular philosophies (and in light of certain understandings of biblical and historical matters). Are we as Christians obligated to defend those philosophies or to defend formulations which incorporate aspects of these philosophies? I see no reason to think so. And in the light of historical and biblical studies there often seems little basis for giving much initial weight to traditional formulations. (I suspect that another difference between Plantinga and me might be in the degree of confidence we place in traditional doctrinal formulations.) A concern about such matters influenced me to include a discussion of the role of principles underlying historical and biblical studies and to stress our responsibility as Christians to criticize our current understanding of the Christian faith.

Plantinga also discusses two points “where perhaps we do disagree.” On the second, I will agree with him that some hermeneutical principles might conflict (or might require interpretations of texts in ways that conflict) with certain Christian beliefs and that in such cases the Christian is not obligated to accept the principle simply because her non-Christian colleagues do so. I would only caution that she should be willing to examine critically the hermeneutical principles that underlie her own understanding of the Christian faith. I do think that no one should adopt hermeneutical principles or use them in such a way as to make it impossible to discover or admit that they are inadequate.

I fear, however, that I cannot agree with Plantinga about Aquinas and the Thomistic tradition. My claim was that according to this tradition “to whatever extent we understand what we *say* about God, we do so by analogy with what we *say* about creatures” (italics added). I made this claim in the context of criticizing Plantinga for using his understanding of the personhood of God to draw conclusions about what a human person is. Plantinga responded that according to Aquinas much of what we understand about God, we learn by *revelation*” (italics his). Aquinas did indeed hold that much of what we know (or properly believe) about God we do on the basis of revelation. But my point was concerned with how we understand what we *say* we know or believe on the basis of revelation. And on this point I take it that Thomas said that the terms we apply to God we understand on the basis of analogy with their creaturely meaning. In particular, if we should say on the basis of revelation that God is a person (or that God is an agent or that God does things), our understanding of God as a person (or an agent or doing things) is arrived at by analogizing

from the creaturely meaning of these terms. No doubt the content of the analogical meaning is in part determined by other things we believe about God (perhaps on the basis of revelation), but that means it is controlled by our understanding of what we say we believe about God, and there more analogical understanding is involved. Thus, I continue to think that according to the Thomistic tradition we cannot use our understanding of “person” applied to God to illuminate our understanding of “person” applied to humans.

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