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REFLECTIONS ON DIVINE PROVIDENCE

Arthur F. Holmes

It was in Chicago, at the Spring of 1977 meetings of the Central Division of the American Philosophical Association, that I first caught wind of what was to become the Society of Christian Philosophers. Arriving late at the meetings, I was greeted by some of the Calvin College philosophers with word that Bill Alston wanted to see me. He was back from a sabbatical at Oxford, and had experienced a renewal of faith while there. Now he was saying, "If the Holy Spirit can work at Oxford, why can he not work in the American Philosophical Association?"

Over twenty years previously, at APA meetings in St. Louis, I had visited with an enthusiastic older scholar and former college president who declared that an association for Christian philosophers would be "a great witness". I wasn't sure that was either a sufficient or a right reason, and at that time I knew few overt Christians in the profession. In any case I thought such an initiative had best come from someone in a major university. But by 1977 things were different in a number of ways: now the time seemed ripe.

What Bill wanted of me, it turned out, was a mailing list. Ever since 1954, when we wanted to mark the sixteen hundredth anniversary of Augustine's birth, our department had convened an annual Wheaton College Philosophy Conference that attracted Christian philosophers from a wide geographical area. An informal network had evolved and, consequently, a mailing list that now promised wider usefulness.

But other factors too were converging. Not only Bill Alston, but a number of other philosophers also had recently come to faith. Alan Donagan, for instance, told me at one of those Wheaton conferences that he decided, after finishing work on *The Theory of Morality* but before it appeared, that if Christian morality was essentially correct as he had shown, then the underlying theology was probably correct also, and he ought to become a Christian. As the SCP developed, I came to know others with their own stories, some of which have been recorded by Tom Morris in *God and the Philosophers*, or by Kelly Clark in *Philosophers Who Believe*. The Holy Spirit, it seems, had already been working in the APA.

The two or three decades leading up to the late 1970's were a period of significant growth for our profession. The first divisional meeting I attended was in Madison, Wisconsin, probably the last one to be housed



in on-campus continuing education facilities. By 1977, not even large city hotels could always accommodate us. But we changed in other ways, too. I recall when obituaries published in the APA Proceedings routinely reported that so-and-so had studied theology or been an ordained clergyman before moving into philosophy. By the 1970's that was a rarity: they came rather from backgrounds in science than in religion. Philosophically, too, we changed. My grad school work in the early 50's was largely historical, or else on early twentieth century figures like Russell and Whitehead. The only post-positivist course I recall was with Douglas Morgan on Oxford Ordinary Language Analysis: Wittgenstein's *Investigations* had just appeared. For an epistemology course we read C. I. Lewis; but by the late 70's younger scholars had probably not even heard of him. Changes even more significant for Christian thought occurred in philosophy of religion, philosophy of mind and ethical theory.

Christian philosophers, moreover had become more visible. At the St. Louis meetings to which I referred earlier, a young James Ross presented a paper on "A Scotist Argument for the Existence of God", vigorously defending it against a barrage of skeptical objections. As we left the room I overheard one senior member of the profession say to another, "It cannot possibly be true, but for the life of me I cannot see the hole." Ten years later, in the 60's and in the same hotel, I chaired a symposium on the problem of evil that featured three overtly Christian speakers: George Mavrodes, Stanley Kane and Dick Purtill. It seemed to have a markedly different audience.

Meantime growing numbers of Christian students were entering philosophy graduate schools, many of them from Christian liberal arts colleges. At one professional meeting I was accosted by a well-known Ivy League professor: "Holmes," he said, "I've been wanting to meet you. I'm trying to figure out what makes graduates of schools like Calvin and Wheaton such good philosophers." He added that he had gone to Calvin, wandered around the place incognito for a couple of days, and was coming to two conclusions: they have a supportive intellectual community that encourages advanced studies, and their defined theological heritage enables them to spot a conceptual problem when they see one. I agreed, but added a third factor, that their religious faith motivates intellectual inquiry.

For these various providential reasons, then, by 1977 the time seemed ripe for some sort of initiative. Bill Alston talked of two purposes for the society he had in mind: to provide a supportive fellowship, especially for the one isolated Christian in a department; and to facilitate discussions of particular interest to Christians, as he later put it to the organizational meeting, by treating topics and utilizing assumptions that would not be appropriate in an APA Philosophy of Religion section. Such topics might of course be in other areas than philosophy of religion, or they might be about specifics of Christian doctrine or experience with little interest to others. So it was agreed in Chicago that spring of 1977 that several of us would jointly send out a call for an organizational meeting in Cincinnati the following year.

Parlor I of the Netherland Hilton Hotel, seating some forty or fifty persons, was reserved for 4 p.m. on Thursday, April 27, and it was with some apprehension that we waited to see how many might turn up. Frankly, I was amazed. It was standing room only! Some were there whom we had never suspected of interest in Christian things, but here they were, as someone put it, crawling out of the woodwork to identify with our goals. About 80 were present altogether.

Chairing the meeting, Bill sketched the idea of the society and then invited discussion. Would it meet at all the regional APA conventions? And the Canadian Philosophical Association? And the American Catholic Philosophical Association? Should the name be "The Society for *Christian Philosophy*" or "*of Christian Philosophers*"? "Christian philosophy" has a very specific meaning for some people, and I thought of the different usages of Maritain and my Thomist acquaintances on the one hand, and Dutch Reformed thinkers like Dooyeweerd on the other. Then, too, how do we define "Christian"? Or should membership be open to anyone interested? What about membership dues? What about officers? In the end, Bill Alston was elected president, and Ken Konyndyk secretary-treasurer. An Executive Committee was named, fourteen people representing different Christian traditions and all three divisions of the APA. The Society was born.

Central Division meetings traditionally concluded around noon on Saturday, but we still had work to do. At eleven o'clock the new SCP's new Executive Committee convened for its first meeting: Bob Adams, Bill Alston, Art Holmes, Ken Konyndyk, George Mavrodes, Al Plantinga, and Mary Rose were there. The minutes show that divisional representatives were appointed, to initiate regional meetings, that Bill Alston volunteered to draft a constitution, and that we discussed holding occasional workshops—an idea that later bore fruit through SCP encouragement to local initiatives. But my strongest recollections are of the warm mutual respect and the bonds of fellowship that developed as we worked together then and in the following years.

In 1981 the question arose of possibly launching a journal. At first I was not enthusiastic, thinking we might do more with Christian points of view in existing journals. But I was soon persuaded. Asbury College had offered a generous and ongoing subvention, which with adjusted membership dues would make it feasible. Bill Alston, true to his vision, insisted that editors should make a practice of mentoring younger contributors. So the following year, after input from the membership, it was decided to proceed. Bill assumed the role of editor, coopted a group of editorial consultants, and then solicited papers for the opening number due out in the winter of 1984. I had just spent a sabbatical semester working on Whitehead, and so I sent him the first of three pieces I eventually did on the relation of process theology to ethical monotheism.

One idea that was favored at the organizational meeting, but has not as far as I know come to much, was that SCP meetings not be just another paper-reading forum. At an Eastern Division SCP meeting in Washington, D.C., a panel discussed how Christianity affects one's philosophy: Al Plantinga described how it affects his choice of topics to

work on, someone else spoke of what philosophers can contribute to theology, but the others, myself included, left no lasting impressions. We seem now to have settled for hearing lectures and discussing the papers that are read.

From the beginning, efforts were made to ensure that regional meetings include worship. The first such occasion in the Central Division was led by Ernan McMullan in a Liturgy of the Word. We met in a Chicago hotel parlor. Bill Alston, that man of many accomplishments, led our singing of a hymn (I learned he was an undergraduate music major, a saxophonist). Bob Adams read Scripture, and Ernan McMullan gave a homily on the love of wisdom, based on Proverbs 8: a Roman Catholic priest assisted by an Episcopalian and a Presbyterian in genuinely ecumenical worship. It lifted our hearts and minds towards God and united us in our calling.

Has the society been effective in regards to its goals? I think unambiguously so. It has indeed provided a supportive and nurturing fellowship. Returning one time from a lecture trip, I found myself on the same plane into Chicago as Ernan McMullan who, with pastoral care, filled me in on how several former students now at Notre Dame were progressing both academically and in their personal lives. Over lunch at an SCP meeting on the west coast, Bob Adams commented on the large number of Christians among the graduate students in their department. To my inquiry as to how he accounted for the increase, he simply responded that 'some of us have come out of the woodwork'. Examples of these sorts could be multiplied again and again: established scholars encouraged to become more open about their faith, younger scholars nurtured in their Christian faith and life, and a sense of purpose that has taken some of our members as far as Russia and China.

The philosophical contribution of the society also is plain. *Faith and Philosophy* has become one of the leading philosophy of religion journals, and it has helped broaden that field to include philosophical theology, an area largely neglected before but of particular interest to Christians. The discussion of Reformed epistemology has also been served well, and Christian concerns in ethics, though perhaps to a lesser extent. It remains to be seen whether the society will do as well in regards to philosophers of science, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, where postmodern developments markedly affect Christian concerns.

Be that as it may, in a culture where philosophers rarely make news, Christian philosophers have been doing just that. And the Society of Christian Philosophers has become a model that other Christian professional organizations might do well to emulate.