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TWENTY YEARS WORTH OF THE SCP

Alvin Plantinga

When Mike Peterson asked me to write something about my recollections of the beginning of the Society of Christian Philosophers, now that it has been in existence for twenty years, it made me feel a bit like an elder statesman, or anyhow an elder *something*. But the first thing to say is clear: it is that Bill Alston deserves the credit (or, some say, blame) for starting the SCP. It was his idea originally; he then approached me, and we approached Nick Wolterstorff, Ralph McInerny, Arthur Holmes and George Mavrodes. I must shamefacedly confess that it didn't at the time seem to me to be a really exciting idea, because I wasn't sure what it would really accomplish. (Bill thought the reason I didn't see the need as clearly as he had to do with the fact that I was teaching at Calvin, where I had terrific colleagues all of whom shared my interest in Christian philosophy.) But since Bill was my mentor and friend and besides that was usually right about things, I went along with him. He turned out to be right again; the growth in the Christian philosophical community since the foundation of the Society and of *Faith and Philosophy* has been phenomenal, both in quantity and in quality. Not all of this can be ascribed to the founding of the Society, of course, or even to the Society together with the journal; but some of it surely can be. And the difference between now and then is considerable. At present the Society has more than 1000 members; more than 1000 members of the total philosophical community are willing to admit (boast?) that they are Christians. Back when the Society began, we original six thought that (apart from members of the American Catholic Philosophical Association) there might be at most maybe a few dozen or so more out there. (Although right from the start there were more than we thought).

Speaking of his time at Notre Dame, a European junior fellow in the Center for Philosophy of Religion says

These encounters were not only intellectually stimulating, they conveyed the impression of being part of a Christian university community, and that is something that hardly exists any more in Europe. To me as a Christian, the academic environment often seemed to be hostile. As a firm believer in God I often felt like an outsider in the crisp academic circles of professional philosophers. In Notre Dame it was quite different, I would fit right in. This



experience meant and still means a lot to me. It gave me more confidence not to hide my religious background while working in the academy.

What the SCP was designed to do and indeed does for some of its members is nicely illustrated here. It gives a Christian philosopher—particularly one whose work is in an area where being a Christian is likely to make a difference—the sense of belonging to a community of like-minded thinkers, rather than the sense of being someone who by virtue of his views and opinions is marginalized or isolated, a sort of odd duck. It reduces the feeling of being an outsider looking in. It also gives a Christian philosopher a chance to go beyond the very first steps of being a Christian philosopher—beyond arguing, e.g., that the arguments against the existence of God are not demonstrative, that the argument from evil is not conclusive, and that it is actually possible to be both a rational, reasonably intelligent human being and also a Christian. It enables her to go on to other things: for example, the question of the relation of will and intellect in Christian faith, or the question how one should think about evil from a Christian perspective (maybe all the best possible worlds contain incarnation, atonement, redemption: but these are to be found only in worlds in which there is a good deal of sin, evil and suffering; therefore the best possible worlds all display sin, evil and suffering, so that it is hardly a surprise that the world God has created does so). It induces the confidence that goes with feeling part of a community of like-minded thinkers, suggesting, particularly to a young philosopher, that perhaps she is not as peculiar an item as would appear just by looking at her own department. The SCP, by virtue of its many and widely accessible meetings and by virtue of *Faith and Philosophy*, performs this function and plays this role.

I've just returned from a meeting of the Rocky Mountain States chapter of the SCP. This is by no means one of the largest chapters of the SCP, but the meeting was nonetheless well attended, with people coming not only from the Rocky Mountain states, but also from the west coast, the east coast, and even the Netherlands. I found two things especially heartening. First, the meetings exemplified just what the Society was established to facilitate: Christian philosophers getting together in a professional setting to work with like-minded people on questions of special interest to the Christian community, both giving and receiving the sort of encouragement and stimulation that goes with knowing that as a matter of fact there *are* like-minded others. The other particularly encouraging note was the preponderance of young people at the conference. There were a few elders, many more middle aged types, and still more young people, including a large contingent of graduate students. I realize that some of this is to be accounted for in other terms (grad students' need to build a CV, e.g.); still, the membership of the SCP overall is heavily tilted in the direction of youth. When I began in philosophy some 40 years ago, there could hardly have been a tenth, perhaps not a twentieth as many young people seriously interested in Christian philosophy, and seriously proposing to integrate faith and philosophy. That, I

believe, is a real occasion for thanksgiving and hope.

Much of great interest has gone on in Christian philosophy (and philosophy done by Christians) in the years since the founding of the SCP. Much of this work is really terrific; I won't name names or even areas, because I'd be sure to forget some of real importance. There has also been a renewed appreciation of the fact that Christian philosophers belong to the Christian community, and that their first allegiance is really to that community rather than to the community of philosophers at large. This means at least two things. First, the Christian philosophical community should devote a good deal of its time and energy to questions and topics of interest to the wider Christian community. That doesn't mean, of course, that no one should devote her whole career to thinking, say, about possible worlds, or the philosophy of mathematics, or the function of proper names, even if these latter aren't of any particular relevance to the rest of the Christian community (although there may be more relevance than meets the eye). But it does mean that there is a sort of obligation here laid upon the whole of the Christian philosophical community. Secondly, this allegiance to the Christian community also means trying to make the results of Christian philosophy, where they are relevant to the whole Christian community, accessible to that community rather than just buried away in professional journals. Writing papers peppered with carnaps is important and worthwhile; so is making what one has learned available to the rest of the Christian community. "Popularizer" is for the most part a term of semi-disapprobation in the academy; but in the Christian academic community it shouldn't be—no more than the term "teacher" should be. Here I must mention explicitly *Reason for the Hope Within*, edited by Michael Murray; in it some 13 young Christian philosophers, all or most of them members of the Society, address some of the main areas of philosophy of concern to the broader Christian community, and do so in a way accessible to non-philosophers. Bravo!

Finally, I can't forbear giving a little more advice (old habits die hard). There is an area which, it seems to me, will demand particular attention from Christian philosophers over the next decades. This is the area of the relation of religion and science, the latter construed broadly so as to include naturalistic and other interpretations of science. The development of modern science is perhaps the most important intellectual development of the last half millennium or so; of course this area has been of interest and concern to Christian thinkers for a good long time; but perhaps it will be even more crucial over the next decades. That is in part because from the time of Newton until the last thirty or forty years, the paradigm science has been physics (which may account for the high incidence of physics envy in the other sciences, perhaps particularly the social sciences). Many physicists still seem to believe that physics is where the action is, but an objective look, I think, will convince one that the torch has been passed to biology, including molecular biology, evolutionary biology, environmental studies, evolutionary psychology (Pinker, Dennett, Wright, etc.), sociobiology, as well as other branches of cognitive science.

Now there has been and remains a good bit of interaction between physics (at least as popularly understood) and Christian thought. There are questions about whether the universe has a beginning; there are also anthropic questions and suggestions, and inflationary answers. But questions from biology, broadly construed, cut closer to the bone. First, of course, there remain questions about the relation between Christian faith and evolution (the thought that all of the diversity the biosphere displays is a result of "descent with modification"), Darwinism (the idea that the fundamental mechanisms underlying evolution are random genetic mutation together with natural selection, with a bit of an assist, perhaps, of such other processes as sexual selection, genetic drift and neutral evolution), and *unguided* Darwinism (the idea that these processes go on without any guidance or supervision or orchestration from God). What is new at present, I think, is that philosophical naturalism has, in good Hegelian fashion, become much more articulate and explicit. Along with this, naturalistic construals of science properly so called—biological science generally, but perhaps in particular science of mind—have assumed a much higher profile in contemporary intellectual life.

This is in part due to a lively cultural conversation on these matters, a conversation to which many scientists contribute. (Examples would be Stephen Gould, Richard Dawkins, Terry Deakin, Steven Pinker, Richard Lewontin, Mark and Matthew Ridley, Robert Wright, Steven Weinberg and others, along with such cheerleaders and science wannabes as Michael Ruse and Daniel Dennett.) The interpretation of science these people put forward is a naturalistic one; and they urge us to understand ourselves and our universe from a naturalistic perspective. (In particular, they urge us to understand ourselves in terms of unguided evolution and indeed unguided Darwinism.) A typical if unusually explicit statement here is from the very eminent Harvard biologist Lewontin:

Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the supernatural. We take the side of science *in spite of* its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, *in spite of* the tolerance of the scientific community of unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but on the contrary, that we are forced by our *a priori* adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counterintuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door. The eminent Kant scholar Lewis Beck used to say that anyone who could believe in God could believe in anything. To appeal to an omnipotent deity is to allow that at any moment the regularities of nature may be ruptured, that Miracles may happen. *New York Review of Books*, Jan. 7, 1997, p. 31

There is much on which to comment here (and believe me, I'm tempted). But here is the main point: although this is unusually explicit (and a bit heavy-handed), it typifies the assumptions underlying much, indeed, most of this conversation. This is a conversation that Christian philosophers (and scientists) must join. The idea that science somehow supports a naturalistic or materialistic way of looking at the universe is false, but nonetheless rampant; it needs to be combated.

Such ways of thinking strongly tend to corrupt our ways of understanding ourselves. I don't mean that we philosophers are especially vulnerable here; perhaps we are protected to some degree by experience with different ways of looking at the world. But it is easy to see how the Christian community generally can be misled here, given that these views are put forward with all the authority and panache of (alleged) scientific discovery. For example, such have no real room for morality; accordingly, Dennett, Ruse and their compadres address themselves, not to the question how there can be genuine moral obligation, given evolutionary naturalism, but how it is that people's accepting moral views can enhance fitness, how it is that such beliefs (beliefs that can't in fact really be true) should arise and be sustained in the evolutionary history of our race. Christian love with its altruism (as exemplified, e.g., in Mother Teresa) must be understood, somehow, in terms compatible with our evolutionary origin: Herbert Simon suggests unusual docility (inability to think for oneself) and limited rationality (stupidity, not to put too fine a point on it). Christian belief itself and love of God must be understood in the same sort of way; and every other issue of the *New York Review of Books* contains a new "understanding" of religion from this point of view (many of them rivaling, for sheer, high angle fantasticalness, Freud's stories about how religion got started when the patriarch of one of those roving packs of early humans was killed and eaten by his jealous sons).

I believe that these ways of thinking are becoming stronger, and are achieving a much wider currency throughout our society generally; they will inevitably influence the Christian community. Christian philosophers with a serious understanding of science and Christian scientists with a serious understanding of philosophy need to work out their own (our own) ways of understanding science; they must join this conversation. Christian voices need to be heard—for the benefit of the Christian community, certainly, but also to enable others to see that things aren't nearly as unproblematic and unidirectional as the present contours of this conversation suggest.

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