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A LONG AND FAITHFUL JOURNEY

Michael L. Peterson

As recently as twenty-five years ago, who could have foreseen the establishment, let alone the flourishing, of the Society of Christian Philosophers? But in just two decades, the Society has grown from a fledgling organization into what is probably the single largest special interest group associated with the American Philosophical Association. Even at the SCP's founding, we could not foresee the exact direction in which we would go or the steps we would take. I am amazed by how far we have come in our journey and know that we have been the recipients of divine guidance and blessing. Trying to retrace some of the steps we have taken along the way, I must begin with a few steps I was taking at the beginning of my own professional journey. This was my personal angle of approach.

I entered graduate work knowing that the climate was extremely unfavorable for putting my philosophical interests in close contact with my Christian beliefs. Empiricism was the prevailing epistemological assumption on which most philosophy was done, although strict positivism had obviously lost its grip. Naturalism was the metaphysical assumption, though more veiled so as to provide deniability that there was any metaphysics going on at all. All this, of course, during the earlier decades of this century, ruled out taking religious claims seriously. Other than the extremely rare (for me anyway) brushes with existentialism or phenomenology that one might have in graduate school, about the only philosophical framework for addressing religious claims was the later Wittgensteinian view of language. In the later 1960s and through the 1970s, it was in vogue to treat religious assertions as contextualized within a "language-game" and to inquire into their peculiar "use" while questions of truth were dismissed.

When I entered the teaching ranks in 1974, I was assigned to teach philosophy of religion. It seemed to be a rich and fertile field with important issues everywhere but was clearly marginalized in the profession. I thought I would like to do some serious work in that field—if only it could be given legitimacy within contemporary analytic philosophy! But things were changing for the better even at that time. More steps, I see in retrospect, were being taken to legitimize philosophy of religion and to bring a forum for discussing it closer to reality. It is now well known that a number of influential philosophers were coming back



to Christian faith or were becoming more willing to represent their Christian faith. The various forces that were converging—and are well documented in my colleagues' preceding pieces—led to the letter that led to meeting that led to the official birth of the Society of Christian Philosophers in 1978. This was eventually to make a profound difference in the climate in the profession such that no student or aspiring young professional need worry, as I did, about whether issues in religion deserve serious philosophical attention.

Very early, I found myself elected to the Executive Committee. Impressed by the caliber of people, level of philosophical ability, and the potential influence we could have, I began to dream some dreams about a publishing vehicle for the Society. Although we tossed around several options, the notion of a scholarly journal took hold. I believe that the SCP officially sanctioned *Faith and Philosophy* to begin its work in 1982. That was another step. For the Executive Committee to make Bill Alston the first Editor was a tremendously wise and auspicious move. He immediately began soliciting high quality manuscripts and putting together a board of editorial consultants. With my institution, Asbury College, providing space for the journal and annual subventions until we got on our feet, I, as Managing Editor, began to study production methods, work on the graphic design of the journal-to-be, and engage in other nuts-and-bolts activities that would make possible regular publication. We were simply taking more steps as we saw our way clear.

It is fun to remember some of the things we did just to get out the first issue. I can remember searching for an attractive and meaningful logo. I played with countless arrangements of the English letters F and P, which always came out (in my view) looking like the unattractive emblem of a trucking company. Gradually, the idea of putting the Greek "chi-rho" (symbolizing Christ) in the center of "phi" (symbolizing philosophy) seemed like just the right thing. A graphic art specialist polished off the logo, giving it a kind of medieval feel, embellished with seraphs and all. The logo was born. *Faith and Philosophy* came one step closer to realization. In January of 1984, we published our premiere issue, with articles by Bob Adams, Diogenes Allen, Art Holmes, Henry Veatch, and others gracing its pages. More small, promising steps headed us in the direction of establishing a strong, respectable scholarly journal. The journal has taken more positive steps forward under the superb leadership of its two subsequent editors, Phil Quinn and Bill Wainwright.

One important step that the Society and the journal has taken along the way is that of inviting honest, open dialogue with those who do not share our Christian commitment. It is a new day in this regard as well. I am delighted to know and to read the various nontheists with whom our ranks have entered discussion. The respective positions are defined with great analytical rigor, the debates are vigorous, and the upshot is that we are significantly extending the frontiers of philosophy of religion. It is truly exciting! The exchanges between Christian theists and their interlocutors have been very fruitful. Bill Rowe comes to my mind as one whom we really need. His careful treatment of the problem of evil is a major contribution, a serious challenge that sharpens us as we

attempt to address it. The list of other valued people with whom we have entered dialogue would get quite long if space permitted. I'm glad we took this step.

Although the Society and the journal have gained visibility within the profession of philosophy, they have also been noticed more widely. In 1980, *Time* carried an article entitled "Modernizing the Case for God." The piece examines the obvious increase in philosophical discussions of the existence and nature of deity but fails to observe that this increase was due in large part to the efforts of members of the young and not widely known Society of Christian Philosophers. We now know what was happening then: More steps were being taken. *Christianity Today*, arguably the leading Protestant magazine for thoughtful evangelical Christianity, contained an article in April 1982 discussing the impressive impact of the SCP. The article tells of the resurgence of philosophy of religion and of the renewed interest in Christian faith within the ranks of academic philosophers. The story is woven around fascinating vignettes of several relevant figures (van Inwagen, Alston, Plantinga, and the Adamses). *Faith and Philosophy*, one very visible outgrowth of this renewal, is pronounced to be "the world's most prestigious journal in philosophy of religion."

Our deeply-missed colleague, Ken Konyndyk, did a really fine job of chronicling the history of the SCP and its journal in *Perspectives* (November 1992, pp. 17-20). Ken states: "It would be hard to overestimate the significance of the Society in the American philosophical community." *God and Reason*, Ed Miller's recent book on philosophical theology, ends with a recommendation about what the reader can do to pursue further interest in the field: "One should attend to the continuing parade of articles (sometimes technical) to be found in *Faith and Philosophy*, the Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers." I learned last year that the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, edited by Columbia University's Randall Balmer, will carry entries on both the Society and the journal. Our steps are leaving visible footprints!

Perhaps the most intriguing, if not the most accurate, bit of coverage that the Society and the journal have received is an article by Tony Pasquarello in *Free Inquiry* (Winter 1992/93). In "Humanism's Thorn: The Case of the Bright Believers," this professional philosopher bemoans the seemingly unstoppable rise of interest in Christianity among bright university students in general and professional philosophers in particular. He says he has always been bothered by the fact that some of his best undergraduate students were believing Christians but declares that the greatest insult occurred when he took early retirement and was replaced by a talented young philosopher with excellent credentials who was a member of the Society of Christian Philosophers. The bulk of the article then goes through all sorts of histrionics trying to come to grips with the existence of the Society: "There is that thriving SCP itself to consider—an anachronism, to be sure; and a crucial piece of the humanistic puzzlement." Rather than directly engage the philosophical issues that are relevant to theism and to Christianity, Pasquarello lapses into

every textbook fallacy of reasoning, with the overall aim of discrediting the SCP. In fact, I have great fun turning my introductory logic students loose on this stuff!

Pasquarello's article, however, still reveals something that is very significant: the genuine sense of perplexity we induce in a number of onlookers. They just don't seem to have the categories to explain us. Pasquarello goes all over the place struggling to understand the phenomenon—proposing that the SCP is surely a microcosm of the religious tensions in American society at large, wondering if we simply compartmentalize our beliefs to insulate them from rational attack, insisting that Plantinga's neo-ontological argument is impotent to compel one "to take the pledge at the back of those funny little fundamentalist tracts," asking how the SCP can be so obtuse as to think our archaic religious beliefs have survived decisive Enlightenment critique, and endorsing Paul Kurtz's humanist rejection of "theological nonsense." Exhausting all the possible explanations that occur to him, he concludes his diatribe with the frustrated admission that he has not dealt adequately with "that nasty set of incompatible propositions":

1. There are bright believers.
2. Bright people don't believe nonsense.
3. Traditional theism is nonsense.

I feel for Pasquarello's plight, since he thinks he has good grounds for the truth of each of these propositions. But those whose own journeys have intersected in any serious way with the long journey of the Society over the past twenty years, or with the paths its members have taken in fulfilling their vocation as Christian philosophers, know full well which proposition in this set must be surrendered.

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