

Chapter \*\*\*

## **Philosophy, Religion, and Worldview**

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This chapter consists of a series of reflections on widely endorsed claims about Christian philosophy and, in particular, Christian philosophy of religion. It begins with consideration of some claims about how (Christian) philosophy of religion currently *is*, and then moves on to consideration of some claims about how (Christian) philosophy of religion *ought to be*.

### **The Triumphalist Narrative**

An oft-told triumphalist narrative holds that we are currently in a golden age for Christian philosophy of religion. While the details of the narrative vary, the central thread is that the bad old days have been replaced by good times. In the bad old days, philosophy of religion was in the doldrums, Christian philosophers were not pursuing philosophy of religion, Christian philosophers were hiding their Christian credentials under a bushel, Christian philosophers were held in contempt by ‘establishment’ philosophers, philosophy of religion had low status, philosophy of religion was not published in high-status generalist journals, philosophy of religion had no presence in major philosophy conferences, major presses were not taking on books in philosophy of religion, and philosophy of religion was not being taught in the higher education sector. But good times have returned: philosophy of religion is booming, Christian philosophers are pursuing *Christian* philosophy of religion, Christian philosophers are proudly proclaiming their Christianity to the academy and the world at large, philosophy of religion has high status, philosophy of religion is published in high-status generalist journals, philosophy of religion has a significant presence in major philosophy

conferences, major presses are publishing loads of books in philosophy of religion, and philosophy of religion is widely taught in the higher education sector.

Dating of the bad old days varies. For some, it is the period between the cessation of hostilities in World War II and the end of the baby boom. For others, it is a period of indeterminate commencement that ends with the 1950s, or the 1960s, or the 1970s, or the 1980s. Some take particular events to mark the ending of the bad old days: the publication of Plantinga's *God and Other Minds* (1967); the formation of the Society for Christian Philosophers (1978); the giving of Plantinga's 'Advice to Christian Philosophers' (1983). Diagnosis of what caused the bad old days to be *bad* also varies. Some take it to be the baleful influence of the Vienna Circle's logical positivism, and, in particular, widespread acceptance of verificationism. Some take a longer perspective, attributing the badness to the widening entrenchment of materialism, empiricism, scientism and naturalism in the academy. Others point the finger at trends and developments in theology in the twentieth century. Craig (n.d.) provides a representative narrative. He starts with a quote from Plantinga (1990): 'The contemporary western intellectual world ... is ... an arena in which wages a battle for men's souls'. Craig then says:

In recent times, the battlelines have dramatically shifted. ... Undoubtedly the most important philosophical event of the twentieth century was the collapse of the verificationism that lay at the heart of scientific naturalism. ... The collapse of verificationism brought with it a ... disillusionment with the whole Enlightenment project of scientific naturalism. ... In philosophy the demise of verificationism has been accompanied by a resurgence of metaphysics, ... the birth of a new discipline, philosophy of religion, and a renaissance in Christian philosophy. ... Since the late 1960s, Christian philosophers have been out of the closet and defending the truth of the

Christian worldview with philosophically sophisticated arguments in the finest scholarly journals and professional societies. ... Today, philosophy of religion flourishes in young journals ... not to mention the standard non-specialist journals. ... Philosophy departments are a beachhead from which operations can be launched to impact other disciplines at the university for Christ. (Craig, n.d.)

Plantinga's 'Advice to Christian Philosophers' begins with a very similar account:

Christianity, these days, and in our part of the world, is on the move. ... Thirty, or thirty-five years ago, the public temper of mainline establishment philosophy in the English speaking world was deeply non-Christian. Few establishment philosophers were Christian. ... There are now many more Christians, and many more unabashed Christians in the professional mainstream of American philosophical life. For example, the foundation of the Society for Christian Philosophers ... is both an evidence and a consequence of that fact. (Plantinga 1984, p. 254)

Although this narrative is oft-told, I am sceptical that it stands up to scrutiny.<sup>1</sup> In particular, I suspect that this narrative is written without sufficient consideration being given to what the world was actually like in 'the bad old days' and how it has changed since then. Plantinga's 'thirty to thirty-five years' identifies the period 1948-1953. What was the state of the world in 1948-1953, and how does it compare with, say, 2008-2013? What was the state of academic philosophy in 1948-1953, and how does it compare with, say, 2008-2013?

### **Some Relevant Data**

In 1953, 91% of Americans were Christians; in 2015, 70% of Americans are Christians. In 1953, a negligible percentage of Americans were religiously unaffiliated; in 2015, 23% of Americans are religiously unaffiliated, and 7% of them are atheists or agnostics. In 1953, Eisenhower joined the Presbyterian Church, not because he was himself a religious believer, but because he held that some form of piety was appropriate in a President. In 1954, “Under God” was added to the pledge of allegiance. Eisenhower said: ‘Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith—and I don’t care what it is’ (Henry (1981, p. 41). The 1950s saw a marked increase in church membership: only 49% of Americans were church members in 1950, while 69% of Americans were church members in 1960. Since 1960, church membership in the United States has been in steady decline. These observations and figures alone suggest that it is pretty implausible to suppose that Christians have made significant gains in academic philosophy in the United States in the period from 1950 to the present.

In the period from 1948 to 2015, the US population has more than doubled: 151 million in 1950, and 308 million in 2010. Moreover, in that same period, there has been a fourfold increase in undergraduate participation, and a tenfold increase in postgraduate participation. Specifically in higher education, in 1950, there were 432,000 BAs and 6600 PhDs; in 2010, there were 1,600,000 BAs and 67000 PhDs. In 2015, there are around 400 universities and colleges—20% of the total—that have religious affiliations; and there are a further 200 seminaries in which philosophers are employed to teach philosophy. I have been unable to find corresponding figures for 1950, but you can be sure that there were many fewer universities and colleges—and you can also be pretty sure that the percentage with religious affiliations was not any lower. These figures indicate—what was anyway obvious—that, in the United States, population, access to higher education, employment opportunities in universities, and so forth have grown at a much faster rate than the decline in participation

in the Christian religion. In absolute terms, by a very considerable margin, there are more Christians in the academy now than there were in 1950, even though, in relative terms, there are fewer Christians in the academy now than there were in 1950.

According to Gross and Simmons (2008)—who conducted a large-scale survey of academics by discipline (but not including philosophers)—20% of academics are agnostics or atheists (but 36.6% of academics in ‘elite doctoral universities’ are agnostics or atheists); 35.7% of academics have no doubt that God exists (but only 20.4% of academics in ‘elite doctoral universities’ have no doubt that God exists); 61% of biologists are atheists or agnostics; 63% of accountants have no doubt that God exists; 33% of believers are ‘born again’, and most of those are politically conservative. According to the PhilPapers survey of academic philosophers—which is not as methodologically rigorous as the survey conducted by Gross and Simmons—62% are atheists, 11% lean towards atheism, and 5% are agnostic.<sup>2</sup> While there is clearly room for a methodologically rigorous study that includes philosophers, it is worth noting that there is nothing in the data that we do have that suggests that philosophy has been transformed into a stronghold for Christians in the academy.

Membership in the American Philosophical Association has grown exponentially. In 1920, the APA had 260 members; in 1960, it had 1500 members; in 1990, it had more than 8000 members. In 1920, one in 407,000 Americans was a member of the APA; in 2000, one in 31,000 Americans was a member of the APA. There has been a similar growth in the introduction of new journals [in the UK, the US and Canada] in philosophy. In the period from 1900 to 1950, there were 30 new journals; between 1950 and 1960, there were 15; between 1960 and 1970, there were 44, and between 1970 and 1990, there were 120. In the period between 1953 and 2013, there were dramatic improvements in travel and communication. In 1953, it was not possible for any academic philosopher to attend very many conferences, and rates of communication between academic philosophers were set by

postal services; in 2013, cheap air travel, the internet, mobile phone technology, and a host of other innovations enabled academic philosophers to attend lots of conferences and workshops, and facilitated instant group conversations between philosophers in all parts of the planet. Given all of these developments—and given the absolute increase in numbers of Christian philosophers in the United States—it would be astonishing if Christian philosophers in the United States had *not* managed to establish some new societies, found some new journals, and run some new conferences and workshops in that period.

Craig gives an indicative list of the ‘young journals’ in which he claims that philosophy of religion is flourishing: the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, *Religious Studies*, *Sophia*, *Faith and Philosophy*, *Philosophia Christi* and the *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*. It is worth considering a longer list, with information about start and end dates. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* was launched in 1927 as *New Scholasticism*, and was rebadged in 1990. *Modern Schoolman* first appeared in 1925, and was rebadged as the generalist *Res Philosophica* in 2013. *Thought* was published between 1926 and 1992. *Tulane Studies in Philosophy* appeared between 1952 and 1987. *The Philosopher* was launched in 1949, and folded in 1972. *The Thomist* was introduced in 1939. The *Heythrop Journal* first appeared in 1960. *Sophia* was launched in 1962. *Religious Studies* was inaugurated in 1966. The first issue of the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* appeared in 1970. Since then, we have witnessed the introduction of *Faith and Philosophy* (1984), *Philosophia Christi* (1999), and *Ars Disputandi* (2001, rebadged in 2013 as the *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*). Given the runaway explosion of philosophy journals in the second half of the twentieth century, the history of specialist journals in philosophy of religion is nothing to write home about—and, in any case, the dates of the various comings and goings do nothing to support the triumphalist narrative.

Has philosophy of religion come to flourish in the ‘standard specialist journals’? Let’s consider the journal, *Mind*. In 1948, *Mind* ran to 544 pages; by 1953, it had grown to 576 pages. In 2008, *Mind* ran to 1168 pages; by 2013, it had grown to 1248 pages. A search on the *Mind* website for articles that mention both God and religion returns 15 articles and 16 book reviews in the period 1948-1953, and 6 articles and 33 book reviews in the period 2008-2013. Given that there are now twice as many pages in the journal, a doubling in the number of book reviews is no more than maintenance of the status quo. And, more importantly, a reduction from 15 to 6 in the number of articles that mention both God and religion is hardly what the triumphalist narrative ought to lead one to expect. Of course, I have only provided a single datum here; it would be good to have a much more detailed examination of *Mind*, as well as such important journals as *Journal of Philosophy*, *Philosophical Review*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, and the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, among others. But I do not think that there is any doubt what such an examination would show.

How do ‘establishment’ universities compare across the two time periods? Consider Princeton, for example. In the period 1948-1953, Faculty at Princeton included: Jacques Maritain, Walter T. Stace, Walter Kaufmann, Robert Scoon, James Ward Smith, John Rawls and Ledger Wood. (Theodore M. Greene departed in 1946, to go to Yale.) Of these, Maritain, Stace, and Kaufmann were all major figures in philosophy of religion (as was Greene), and Scoon lectured regularly on Aquinas. Maritain published *Approaches to God* in 1953; Stace published *Religion and the Modern Mind* and *Time and Eternity* in 1952; Greene published ‘Christianity and its Secular Alternatives’ in 1946; Kaufmann—who was born Lutheran and converted to Judaism at age 11—lost his own faith at the beginning of World War II, but published many books about religion in the 1960s and 1970s. Smith co-edited, with A. Leland Jamison, a four-volume work on *Religion in American Life*. I have been unable to learn anything about Wood’s views on religion but, even if he had no interest in religion, the

department would still have had a very strong focus on philosophy of religion. Not so today. While there has been some very recent work in philosophy of religion—e.g. Mark Johnston’s *Saving God* (2009)—and some appointments of Christian philosophers, there is no way that Christianity and philosophy of religion were more strongly represented in philosophy at Princeton in the period 2008-2013 than they were in the period 1948-1953.

I have already mentioned that Greene left Princeton for Yale in 1946. Did matters stand differently there? The period from 1948-1953 preceded the ‘war of methodology’ that plagued the Yale department of philosophy (see Allen (1998)). Leading figures at Yale in this period included John E. Smith, Brand Blanshard and Paul Weiss. All three were sympathetic to theism; all three wrote extensively on, and were major figures in, philosophy of religion. Smith, in particular, maintained close ties with prominent members of the Yale School of Divinity, including Richard Niebuhr and Robert Calhoun. Collectively, the Yale Philosophy Department in this period was noted for its inclusive treatment of the various established traditions in American philosophy: idealism, pragmatism, process philosophy and realism. In 2015, despite the fact the department of philosophy is much larger, it is arguable that there is less philosophy of religion than there was in the period from 1948-1953, and it is quite clear that there is a smaller concentration of specialisation in philosophy of religion across the members of the department. Perhaps there are more Christian philosophers in 2015—I couldn’t find enough data to decide that question—but, even if so, Yale is no more a centre for Christian philosophy in 2015 than it was in the period between 1948 and 1953.

What about Harvard? In the period 1948-1953, it is hard to find much interest in philosophy of religion—or much evidence of Christian belief—among the big names at Harvard: Willard Quine, Henry Aiken, Donald Williams, Raphael Demos, Morton White, and their ilk. Then again, in 2015, there is no mention of philosophy of religion on the page that lists the areas of specialisation of current Harvard faculty.



There is a task here for anyone who wants to undertake it. In principle, it is possible to collect data about areas of specialisation, areas of interest, fields of publication, and fields of teaching in US philosophy departments in the periods 1948-1953 and 2008-2013. That data could be broken down to paint a picture of how things stood in ‘establishment’ universities (whatever they might be), ‘prestigious graduate-degree conferring’ universities (again, whatever they might be), other universities and colleges, state universities and colleges, universities with religious affiliations, seminaries, and so forth. In the absence of that detailed data, I see no reason at all for anyone to accept the claim that philosophy has been transformed from a post-war haven for atheists to a contemporary stronghold for Christian philosophy.

So far, we have only considered the United States. But, of course, Anglophone philosophy has been practised in many other parts of the world: the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, etc. It might be worth giving some attention to the question whether we can find support for the triumphalist narrative in data that derives from outside the United States.

At Federation in 1901, Australia implemented the White Australia Policy. In 1911, 96% of Australians were Christians. In 2011, 61% of Australians were Christians, 22.3% had no religion, and 9.4% were not prepared to disclose any information about their religious beliefs. In the period 1948-1953, there were 8 universities in Australia, with 32,000 students. In the period 2008-2013, there were 41 universities in Australia, with 1.3 million students. As in the US, the demographic data alone suggests that, while the absolute number of Christians in the Australian academy has increased significantly, the relative number of Christians in the Australian academy has declined across the selected time periods.

I have been unable to find historical data about the distribution of religious belief in the Australian academy and, in particular, in Australian departments of philosophy. I turn instead to anecdote. In 1952, Sydney Sparkes Orr was appointed to the Chair of Philosophy at the University of Tasmania, from a field that included Kurt Baier and John Mackie, because the Vice-Chancellor, John Morris ‘wanted a sound Christian fellow who would speak out against communism and take a stand on moral issues in the community’ (Pybus 1993, p. 204). Even allowing for the fact that there are three recently established universities in Australia that have religious affiliations, I think that it is Paris to a peanut on that there was a higher percentage of Christians in departments of philosophy in Australia in the period 1948-1953 than there was in the period 2008-2013.

How have things changed at Oxford? Some of the biggest names at Oxford in the period 1948-1953—Alfred Ayer, Gilbert Ryle, John Austin—were not much interested in philosophy of religion. But there were other very well-respected philosophers at Oxford at this time—e.g. Elizabeth Anscombe and Michael Dummett—who were well-known for their public defence of Christian belief. While I do not have to hand a careful comparison of Oxford philosophy in the two periods of interest, I am reasonably sure that there has been no dramatic upsurge in interest in philosophy of religion or explicit commitment to Christian doctrine among Oxford philosophers.

Again, there is a task here for anyone willing to undertake it. What we need is data about areas of specialisation, areas of interest, fields of publication, fields of teaching, and so forth, in Anglophone philosophy departments across the globe in the periods 1948-1953 and 2008-2013. In the absence of that data—but given everything else that we know about those periods, and given the piecemeal and anecdotal evidence that is already available—there is no reason at all for anyone to accept the claim that philosophy has been transformed from a post-

war haven for atheists to a contemporary stronghold for Christian philosophy across significant portions of the globe.

Of course, even if I am right that the triumphalist narrative is greatly overstated, it hardly follows that there is nothing for some Christian philosophers to cherish in the post-war trajectory of philosophy. The Society for Christian Philosophers is a significant organisation that has played an important role in bringing some kinds of Christian philosophers together. *Faith and Philosophy* is a very good journal that has enabled quality publication by some kinds of Christian philosophers; Templeton funding has had a galvanising effect on research for some kinds of Christian philosophy of religion; greater visibility in the American Philosophical Association has brought some power and influence to some kinds of Christian philosophers; and so on. That the demographic and other data leads one to *expect* these kinds of developments does not diminish the achievements of those who participated in bringing them about in the form that they actually took.

### **The Correlative Advice**

In 1983, when the triumphalist narrative was just beginning to gain a foothold, Plantinga gave the following advice to Christian philosophers:

Do not rest content with being philosophers who happen, incidentally, to be Christians. ... Strive to be Christian philosophers [who operate with] integrity, independence, and Christian boldness. ... The Christian philosopher has a right (I should say a duty) to work at his own projects—projects set by the beliefs of the Christian community of which he is a part. The Christian philosophical community must work out the answers to its questions; and both the questions and the appropriate

ways of working out their answers may presuppose beliefs rejected at most of the leading centres of philosophy. (Plantinga 1984, pp. 271, 263)

In the present volume, with the triumphalist narrative much more firmly entrenched, Trent Dougherty emphasises the continuing relevance of the given advice:

[T]he ‘temper of mainline establishment philosophy in the English speaking world’ is still ‘deeply non-Christian’ ... (but) there are now at least some ‘establishment’ philosophers (who) self-identify as Christian. Few Christian philosophers today hide the fact that they are Christians (though they tend to fly a bit under the radar, just to be safe), for many (though far from all) it makes a real difference to their practice as philosophers. ... [But] for the most part, ‘successful’ Christian philosophers these days primarily focus on secular projects. I am the first to commend ‘arts for art’s sake’ to a reasonable degree, but I do think that Plantinga’s implication of a duty is well-placed. For almost a decade after ‘Advice’ was issued, there was a steady stream of anthologies collecting work on specifically Christian themes, but then, in the early-to-mid-90s it slowed to a relative trickle.

In both cases, the giving of the advice is interwoven with fragments of the triumphalist narrative: ‘beliefs rejected at most of the leading centres of philosophy’; ‘now at least some ‘establishment’ philosophers self-identify as Christian’; etc. I propose to focus on the advice, and leave the interwoven elements of the triumphalist narrative to one side.<sup>3</sup> In order to bring the advice into focus, it may help to reimagine it as advice to Naturalist philosophers, or Atheist philosophers, or perhaps even to philosophers in general.

Here, for example, is a substantial part of the advice that is contained in Plantinga's talk rewritten so that it is simply advice to philosophers at large:

Every philosopher quite properly starts from his or her own pre-philosophical beliefs, and presupposes them in his or her philosophical work, even if those beliefs cannot be shown to be probable or plausible with respect to premises accepted by all philosophers or most philosophers at the great contemporary centres of philosophy.

Each philosopher has his or her own questions to answer, and his or her own projects; these projects may not mesh with those of other philosophers. Each philosopher has his or her own questions, and his or her own starting point in investigating those questions. A philosopher is under no obligation to confine his or her research projects to those pursued at leading centres of philosophy, or to pursue his or her own projects on the basis of the assumptions that prevail there.

A philosopher has as much right to his or her pre-philosophical opinion as other philosophers have to theirs. Of course, if there were genuine and substantial arguments against the opinions of a given philosopher from premises that have some claim on that philosopher, then that philosopher would have a problem. But, in the absence of such arguments—and the absence of such arguments is typically evident—each philosopher quite properly starts from what they pre-philosophically believe.

Of course, a philosopher does have a responsibility to the philosophical world at large. He or she must listen to, understand, and learn from the broader philosophical community, and he or she must take his or her place in it; but his or her work as a philosopher is not circumscribed by what the rest of the philosophical world thinks of his or her opinions. I do not mean for a moment to suggest that a given philosopher has nothing to learn from philosophers who do not share his or her pre-

philosophical opinions: that would be foolish arrogance, utterly belied by the facts of the matter. Nor do I mean to suggest that philosophers should retreat into isolated enclaves, having as little as possible to do with philosophers who do not share their pre-philosophical beliefs. Of course not! Philosophers have much to learn from dialogue and discussion with dissenting colleagues. All philosophers are engaged in the common human project of understanding ourselves and the world in which we find ourselves. If a philosopher is doing his or her job properly, he or she is engaged in a complicated, many-sided dialectical discussion, making his or her own contribution to that common human project.

Strive to be philosophers who operate with integrity, independence, and boldness. A philosopher has a right (I should say a duty) to work on his or her own projects—projects set by the pre-philosophical beliefs and values that he or she has and which, perhaps, he or she shares with a wider community. A philosopher must try to work out the answers to his or her own philosophical questions; and both the questions and the appropriate ways of working out their answers may presuppose beliefs and values rejected at most of the leading centres of philosophy. (revised paraphrase from Plantinga 1984)

The core of this advice, it seems to me, is that you should be authentic: you should embody your deepest values and convictions in the life that you lead. Of course, the advice does not suppose that authenticity is the only virtue; and nor does it suppose that you cannot revise your deepest values and convictions. What the advice does quite properly suppose is that inauthenticity is a strike against flourishing: if you are failing to live out your deepest values and convictions, then you are not leading a fully flourishing life.

One strand of this advice to philosophers is that the projects that you choose to pursue should sit well with your deepest values and convictions: you should be taking on projects that can be viewed as embodiments of your deepest values and convictions. On this strand of the advice, you should not take on projects merely because pursuit of those projects is currently fashionable or well-funded, if pursuit of those projects does not embody your deepest values and convictions. This strand of the advice seems plausible to me. Pursuit of philosophical projects typically requires an investment that will not be sustained by such superficial motives. Perhaps the demands of academic life require the occasional compromise. But, if you only ever take on philosophical projects simply because they are fashionable or well-funded, you will end up very dissatisfied with your lot.

Another strand of this advice to philosophers is that the projects that you choose to pursue should have their subject matter fixed by your deepest values and convictions, perhaps even to the extent that the projects that you choose to pursue are about your deepest values and convictions. On this strand of the advice, sometimes—or perhaps even always—you should be working on projects that systematise, or extend, or explain, or defend, your deepest values and convictions. This strand of the advice seems less plausible to me. I do not deny that it is possible for philosophers to end up working on worthwhile projects that systematise, or extend, or explain, or defend, their deepest values and convictions. But it seems to me to be no more plausible to suppose that philosophers must work on projects that systematise, or extend, or explain, or defend, their deepest values and convictions than it is to suppose that mathematicians—or physicists, or chemists, or biologists, and so on—must work on projects that systematise, or extend, or explain, or defend, their deepest values and convictions. If I devote my working life to pure mathematics, it need not be the case that the theorems that I derive are systematisations, or extensions, or explanations, or defences of my deepest values and convictions; indeed, it is more or less impossible to see how they could be. Rather, the

most that is required is that my devotion of my working life to pure mathematics is an embodiment or expression of my deepest values and convictions. If I suppose that devoting my working life to pure mathematics is not a way for me to genuinely flourish, then I have the best of reasons to be looking for something else to do with my working life.

Even if you agree with me that much—though perhaps not all—of what Plantinga says can be successfully reinterpreted as good advice to philosophers in general, you may still think that there is something important that goes missing under this reinterpretation. Dougherty and Plantinga both suggest that Christian philosophers have a duty to contribute to Christian philosophy, i.e. to working on ‘specifically Christian themes’ and ‘projects set by the beliefs of the Christian community’. While the reinterpretation allows that a philosopher’s projects might be set by pre-philosophical beliefs and values that he or she shares with a wider community, it is the pre-philosophical beliefs and values that are of primary significance: that those pre-philosophical beliefs and values are shared with a wider community is not essential to the philosophical task. What the philosopher really has a duty to do is to try to work out the answers to his or her own philosophical questions; it is just good fortune if those philosophical questions turn out to be shared with others.

### **Christian Philosophy**

In order to think about what ‘Christian philosophy’ might be, it will help to start by thinking about what philosophy is. In my view, philosophy is primarily a domain of inquiry or discipline: philosophy is the domain of inquiry or discipline that addresses questions for which we do not yet know to produce—and perhaps cannot even imagine how to produce—consensus answers among experts using methods more or less universally agreed by experts. All disciplines started out as philosophy: for example, much that now belongs to physics once belonged to philosophy. Moreover, all disciplines shade into philosophy: for all disciplines,



there are borderline questions for which it is not currently clear whether those questions will, in time, come to have consensus answers among experts arrived at through the use of methods more or less universally agreed by experts. Some domains that have been subject to investigation for thousands of years—metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of logic, philosophy of language, philosophy of science, ethics, aesthetics, political philosophy and so forth—remain resolutely philosophical: in these domains, there are no agreed answers to the questions that are addressed, and no agreed methods for resolving enduring disagreements about the answers to these questions.

Given this characterisation of philosophy, there is one obvious way to understand what ‘Christian philosophy’ might be: Christian philosophy could be an attempt to address questions about Christianity for which we do not yet know how to produce agreed answers using any of the other disciplines that might be used in studying Christianity: sociology, demography, anthropology, archaeology, history, human geography, religious studies, and so forth. However, I do not think that this is a good candidate for the kinds of investigations that Plantinga and Dougherty endorse: there is no particularly good reason to think that *Christians* are uniquely well-placed to address questions about Christianity for which we do not yet know how to produce agreed expert answers using any of the other disciplines that might be used in studying Christianity.

We may get closer to what Dougherty and Plantinga have in mind if we consider a domain of inquiry in which a range of Christian doctrines are presupposed by all of the participants in the domain of inquiry: various Christian doctrines are lodged on the ‘conversational scoreboard’, and no participants in the domain of inquiry challenge the location of these claims on the ‘conversational scoreboard’. It seems clear enough that the ‘beliefs of the Christian community’ could give rise to questions about Christianity that members of the Christian community do not yet know how to produce agreed answers using

any of the other disciplines with which they are familiar: and those questions would also appear to be good candidates to be questions that belong to ‘Christian philosophy’.

Perhaps, however, this suggestion runs afoul of other things that Plantinga and Dougherty say. Remember, in particular, that Plantinga says:

[I do not] mean to suggest that Christian philosophers should retreat into isolated enclaves, having as little as possible to do with philosophers who do not share their pre-philosophical beliefs. .... Christian philosophers have much to learn from dialogue and discussion with dissenting colleagues. (Plantinga 1984, p. 270)

But a domain of inquiry in which a range of Christian doctrines are presupposed by all of the participants in the domain of inquiry is precisely a domain of inquiry that belongs to an isolated enclave: if only those who presuppose the given range of Christian doctrines are participants in the domain of inquiry, then there is no engagement with those who do not share those presuppositions in that domain of inquiry.

Would we do better to consider a domain of inquiry in which a range of Christian doctrines are taken as antecedents in the conditional questions that frame that domain of inquiry? Clearly, we do not have the same worry about isolated enclaves in this case: anyone with appropriate interests can participate in a domain of inquiry in which a range of Christian doctrines are taken as antecedents in the conditional questions that frame that domain of inquiry. But, if it is true that ‘philosophers have much to learn from dialogue and discussion with dissenting colleagues’, then, if there is an expectation that non-Christians have a useful contribution to make in dialogue and discussion with Christians when a range of Christian doctrines are taken as antecedents in the conditional questions that frame the domain of inquiry, there is plainly a similar expectation that Christians have a useful contribution to

make in dialogue and discussion with non-Christians when a range of non-Christian doctrines are taken as antecedents in the conditional questions that frame a corresponding domain of inquiry. If ‘Christian philosophy’ is not to be the preserve of an isolated enclave, then Christian philosophers have an obligation to be ‘dissenting colleagues’ when it comes to ‘Naturalist philosophy’, ‘Atheist philosophy’, and the like.

If Christian philosophers are to fulfil the obligation to be ‘dissenting colleagues’ when it comes to naturalist philosophy or atheist philosophy, they cannot discharge that obligation merely by X-splaining naturalism and atheism to naturalists and atheists. (Equally, of course, naturalist and atheist philosophy cannot discharge their obligation to be ‘dissenting colleagues’ for Christian philosophers by ‘splaining Christian belief to them.)

Suppose that a Christian philosopher and a naturalist philosopher are engaged in ‘the common human project of understanding ourselves and the world in which we find ourselves’. The Christian philosopher embodies a Christian worldview  $W_C$ ; the naturalist philosopher embodies a naturalist worldview  $W_N$ .  $W_C$  and  $W_N$  share many propositions in common; but there are also many propositions on which  $W_C$  and  $W_N$  diverge. One important part of ‘the common human project of understanding ourselves and the world in which we find ourselves’ is trying to figure out whether one of the worldviews in question is superior to the other. One worldview is superior to another just in case the one worldview is more theoretically virtuous than the other, i.e. just in case, given that neither worldview lapses into some kind of inconsistency, the one worldview makes a better trade-off of explanatory breadth and depth against theoretical—ontological, ideological, nomological—commitment than is made by the other worldview.

Making an evaluative comparison of worldviews is a very demanding project. First, we need to have articulations of the two worldviews to the same level of detail and with the same level of accuracy. Second, we need to determine whether either of the worldviews fails

on its own terms, because it lapses into some kind of inconsistency. Third, if both worldviews survive internal scrutiny, we need to determine whether one of the worldviews is more virtuous than the other. Because the articulation of worldviews is always incomplete, the comparison of worldviews not shown to lapse into some kind of inconsistency is always provisional. Moreover, when worldviews are shown to lapse into inconsistency, the conclusions to be drawn are typically very modest: the most that is likely to be mandated is some minor tinkering (involving a few relatively peripheral propositions).

There are various contributions that a ‘dissenting colleague’ can make to the development of the worldviews of those with whom he or she disagrees. A ‘dissenting colleague’ may find hitherto undetected consequences of a worldview. (Worldviews—like commitments, but unlike beliefs—are closed under logical consequence.) A ‘dissenting colleague’ may find that a worldview lapses into inconsistency. A ‘dissenting colleague’ may note areas where a worldview makes a sub-optimal trade-off between theoretical commitment and explanatory breadth and depth. The overwhelmingly likely outcome of any of these contributions is to improve the worldviews under examination: the goal of having everyone believe the best—one true—worldview is extremely remote because we are so far away from being in possession of any serious candidates for best—one true—worldview.

‘The common human project of understanding ourselves and the world in which we find ourselves’ involves much more than the evaluation of Christian, naturalist, and atheist worldviews. While there are many different Christian, naturalist, and atheist worldviews, there are also many different Jewish worldviews, Buddhist worldviews, Muslim worldviews, Hindu worldviews, Jain worldviews, Shinto worldviews, Confucian worldviews, Daoist worldviews, indigenous worldviews, and so on. Fulfilling one’s obligation to be a ‘dissenting colleague’ requires a preparedness to be a ‘dissenting colleague’ for proponents of a very wide range of worldviews. One very good reason for thinking that philosophy of religion is

not in a good state at present is that so little of this range of worldviews gets so much as a look in. If philosophers of religion were currently making an adequate fist of their role as ‘dissenting colleagues’, there would be much wider discussion of the full sweep of religious worldviews in philosophy of religion than is currently the case.

I do not think that there is any reason for anyone to look askance at a domain of inquiry in which a range of Christian doctrines are taken as antecedents in the conditional questions that frame that domain of inquiry: for the investigation of those conditional questions to be philosophical, all that is required is that we do not yet know to produce—and perhaps cannot even imagine how to produce—consensus answers to those conditional questions among experts using methods more or less universally agreed by experts. But, as I have noted, there is no reason to single out Christian doctrines for special attention: for *every* worldview, there is a domain of inquiry in which a range of doctrines proper to that worldview are taken as antecedents in the conditional questions that frame that domain of inquiry. And, if we think that there is ‘a common human project of understanding ourselves and the world in which we find ourselves’, then, collectively, we have an obligation to act as ‘dissenting colleagues’ across the full range of these domains of inquiry.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Here are some more examples of the narrative. Long (2000): 'The climate has changed considerably since mid-century. Philosophy of religion is widely considered to be a flourishing field.' Duncan (2007): 'The dramatic story of the revival of theism in the philosophy of religion, one that brought theism from the brink of intellectual annihilation to something approaching intellectual respectability in the space of a single generation'. Smith (2001:196): 'Naturalists passively watched ... until today ... one third of philosophy professors are theists'.

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://philpapers.org/surveys/>

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<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps worth noting the dates of publication of some of Richard Swinburne's books: *Miracles* (1989), *Responsibility and Atonement* (1991), *Revelation* (1991), *The Christian God* (1994), *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (1998), *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (2003). Manifestly, Swinburne's work on 'specifically Christian themes' did not 'slow to a relative trickle in the early-to-mid-nineties'. There are plenty of other works from this period that take up specifically Christian themes: consider, for example, Morris (1994). In 1989, at the beginning of *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes*, Ed Wierenga wrote: 'The historical references I cite are mainly to the work of Christian authors. But I hope that this does not limit the interest of what follows only to Christians or only to those who taken an interest in the "philosophical credentials of the Christian faith"' (pp. 1-2). Could it be that investigating the philosophical credentials of the Christian faith was just as much a thing at that time?