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James Keller

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REFLECTIONS ON A METHODOLOGY FOR CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHERS

James A. Keller

In a recent article in *FAITH AND PHILOSOPHY*, Alvin Plantinga advised Christian philosophers to philosophize in light of their fundamental beliefs as Christians. Believing that his discussion does not give proper weight to the necessary role of secular beliefs in modifying our Christian beliefs, in this article I propose that Christian beliefs and secular beliefs should be related more dialectically than Plantinga suggests—i.e., that neither should always be given precedence. I defend this proposal with several examples on a variety of topics from the history of Christian thought and suggest how much weight to give to beliefs of each type.

One of our perennial problems as Christians is how our Christian beliefs and commitments relate to the rest of our beliefs and commitments. That we are Christian *philosophers* helps to specify the problem for us, for it indicates a tradition of issues and (conflicting) beliefs and commitments to which we belong. But it also intensifies the problem, for philosophers are supposed to include among their special concerns this sort of question about how various beliefs and commitments relate to each other. Thus, in addition to the general responsibility which we share with all Christians to be concerned about this problem, we have some professional responsibility to be concerned about it—and that not just for our own sakes, but also for the sake of the entire Christian community. (Of course, even among Christian philosophers it makes sense to allow for differences of focus. I would not want even to seem to suggest that every Christian philosopher must devote his professional energies to worrying about this problem. But I do think that we Christian philosophers as a group have a particular responsibility to think about it.)

Therefore, I noted with considerable pleasure Prof. Alvin Plantinga's recent discussion of this problem in *Faith and Philosophy*.¹ Plantinga advises that Christian philosophers should display more autonomy and "integrity—integrity in the sense of integral wholeness" (254). He articulates two main ways in which Christian philosophers should show this autonomy and integrity: (1) they should select the topics for their own research programs not merely from those current in the broader philosophical community, but also from the philosophical topics at which the Christian community must work, regardless of whether these are of



interest to that broader community; and (2) they should do their philosophizing in light of the fundamental beliefs which they have as members of the Christian community, not in light of the fundamental beliefs of those philosophers who happen to be the current “bright lights” of philosophy. Plantinga claims that the Christian philosopher is fully within his intellectual rights in philosophizing in these ways rather than in whatever ways happen to be popular currently. He illustrates his advice and claims with several examples, some of which I shall comment on later in my paper.

Plantinga’s advice to Christian philosophers has an admirable boldness. It seems to recall us to our roots in our faith. And yet attractive as this advice might seem, I am unable to follow it in one important regard. I have little trouble with his suggestion regarding choosing research topics, particularly since he does not suggest that one must choose either the currently fashionable topics or the ones of interest only to the Christian community, as though this were an exclusive or exhaustive disjunction. But I do not think it is wise for us Christians to follow his other principle, at least as he develops it in his examples. What I find lacking in his principle and his examples is a discussion of the role that beliefs of our contemporary intellectual community (which I shall term “secular beliefs”²) can and should play in modifying our Christian beliefs.³ But I would not want simply to reverse his principle; at least sometimes the Christian philosopher should, as Plantinga claims, use her Christian beliefs to illuminate and attempt to solve problems in the broader philosophical community. (He gives as an example the idea of God as a collector of elements into sets as a way of solving certain problems in set theory [270].) Rather I propose that one’s Christian beliefs and these secular beliefs should be related in a far more dialectical fashion than Plantinga seems to suggest. In this paper I want to articulate and defend this proposal.

Christian and Secular Beliefs as Dialectically Related

By saying that one’s Christian beliefs and secular beliefs should be dialectically related, I mean that neither one should automatically always be given precedence. Sometimes Christian beliefs should be given precedence, but sometimes secular beliefs should be, even when these have the consequence of implying the falsity of some Christian beliefs. Later I will say something about how one should determine which should be given precedence. But now I want to try to give some plausibility to my proposal by describing some situations in which it seems appropriate to give precedence to secular beliefs and explaining why it seems so.

The obvious problem with ever giving precedence to secular beliefs over one’s Christian beliefs is that it seems to involve a denial of one’s faith or disloyalty to God. But I think that this appearance is deceiving. Indeed, I want to reverse

the charge: clinging to one's Christian beliefs can sometimes compromise or inhibit one's loyalty and service to God. For one's Christian beliefs are generally the beliefs of that part of the Christian community with which one is currently affiliated. And always to give precedence to any of this group's beliefs over all of those of one's current culture would forever block any hope of gaining *from that culture* any critical insight into one's beliefs that might lead one to a more correct understanding of Christianity and of God's will. This is crucial to my whole case, so let me reemphasize it: one has no legitimate grounds for assuming that one's current understanding of the Christian faith as reflected in one's Christian beliefs is correct in every regard—indeed given the very considerable differences among Christians and the inadequacies we all have, one has good reason to suspect it may not be fully correct—nor does one have any reason to think that Christian beliefs alone can supply sufficient resources for correcting whatever inadequacies there may be. (Perhaps Plantinga would agree with me on this point, but I do not find in his advice a recognition and appropriation of it.) This is not merely a theoretical point with little relevance to Christian beliefs, but a general truth which has many important illustrations in the history of Christian thought. In using these illustrations from other times I am presupposing that my suggestions on a methodology for Christian philosophers (and Plantinga's advice) apply to Christian philosophers not just today but throughout the history of Christianity.

Examples from Biblical Interpretation

I will begin with some relatively uncontroversial examples even if they are not central to the current concerns of Christian philosophers. Consider how modern scientific discoveries forced a reinterpretation of certain biblical texts. For example, in Galileo's time the heliocentric theory of the universe was opposed on the basis of several biblical texts, among them Joshua 10:12-13, in which Joshua commands the sun to stand still (not the earth to stop rotating).⁴ When the heliocentric theory had become widely accepted, the Christian community decided that Joshua was just speaking popularly, so there was not really any conflict between Christian and secular beliefs on this matter. But little was learned from this episode. For when modern geology proposed that the earth was far more than a few thousand years old, many intellectual members of the Christian community opposed the theory as contradicting the Genesis narrative and thus challenging the authority of the Bible. Today I suspect that most Christian philosophers accept the view that the earth is billions of years old and that the Bible should not be interpreted as teaching otherwise. But I doubt that this view would have become widespread among us Christian philosophers without the pressure provided by modern science.

Nor is it plausible to suggest that Christianity had within itself resources to evoke these reinterpretations of the biblical texts. To be sure, certain earlier thinkers, including even Augustine, had proposed an allegorical interpretation of various biblical materials, including the Genesis material. But these proposals had not altered the general tendency to interpret the term “day” in Genesis 1 as a period of twenty-four hours. Moreover, this allegorizing was done in accordance with a general theory of literary interpretation also not derived from Christian beliefs.

It might be thought that these first two examples concern matters peripheral to the Christian faith. But the general topic of the interpretation of the Bible is surely not peripheral.⁵ So let us ask whether there is a Christian theory of how to interpret the Bible. Is it an explicit part of our Christian beliefs or can it be derived from them alone? I hardly think so.⁶ Rather we must rely on secular theories of historical and literary criticism to guide us in our attempt to understand the Bible. The Protestant Reformation was supported in part by what were then new techniques of historical and literary criticism, developed in the Renaissance and later accepted by Roman Catholicism as well. And the last 100 or so years of biblical scholarship, employing more recently developed techniques of literary and historical analysis of the biblical texts, have greatly revised our understanding of the Bible and of the history of Israel and the first-century Christian community.⁷ These were new techniques, advanced by the “bright lights” of the disciplines. To be sure, these more modern techniques and their conclusions are not beyond question or criticism. Even scholars who employ these techniques do not always agree on the details of their conclusions. But the significance of this fact should not be overestimated. Secular historians using similar techniques on issues in secular history also do not always agree on all the details, yet they do not therefore question the techniques in general (though any particular technique might be questioned).

A more radical challenge to the use of modern techniques of historical and literary analysis of the biblical materials is offered by very conservative Christians who do not accept the techniques because they find the results unacceptable.⁸ (Of course, these Christians are also employing techniques for interpreting the Bible, techniques which are no more derived solely from Christian beliefs than are the techniques which they reject.) But if they reject any technique which yields results in conflict with their current Christian beliefs, they will be forever locked into their current understanding of the Bible and the Christian beliefs which they derive from it. But suppose they are wrong. How would they ever find out? Although I do not want to suggest that Plantinga would endorse the views on the Bible held by these very conservative Christians, it does seem to me that they are operating in accordance with his advice. Their approach exemplifies the problem I find with Plantinga’s advice.⁹

Plantinga does acknowledge that Christian philosophers might have to modify their beliefs “if there were genuine and substantial arguments against them from premises that have some legitimate claim on the Christian philosopher” (268). But he does not suggest what these premises might be or what the criteria are for a legitimate claim on a Christian philosopher. Do the premises include only Christian doctrinal beliefs? Or do they include certain other beliefs as well? If the latter, what are the criteria for them? If they include well substantiated secular beliefs, then there may be less difference between his advice and my proposal than I had thought. But even if they do, we still need a discussion of how they should be identified and how they relate to Christian beliefs.

Problems of Identifying Essential Christian Beliefs

We have looked at problems arising in connection with methods of biblical interpretation. Similar difficulties arise when claims are made to the effect that certain beliefs, understood in certain ways or within a certain range of ways, are essential Christian beliefs or are the correct way to understand the Christian faith. How would such claims be defended? Probably a large part of the defense would rest on claims about the past, perhaps claims that these have been part of the confessions of most churches or have been taught by certain church authorities or theologians or are taught in the Bible. But how would these claims be defended? Presumably by historical investigation. But what techniques would this investigation employ? Is it legitimate to require that the techniques produce a certain result for them to be acceptable? If so, how would one ever discover that one was wrong? And if not, what shall we conclude if we discover that there has been a great variety of understandings of many basic creedal elements among Christians? Should we say that anything within this range is legitimate? Or should we be more restrictive? If so, on what basis? Conversely, why should we limit the permissible range of variance to the range already achieved? On what grounds can we say so much variance is all right, but no more? Perhaps it is a matter of historical accident that some permissible (or even preferable) variation has not yet been formulated.

These questions underscore the obvious: we cannot justify a claim about what we should take to be Christian beliefs simply by listing what past Christians have taken them to be. To complete the argument we need another sort of premise, something like “We should take Christian beliefs to be the same as past Christians—more precisely, certain past Christians—have.” But this premise is far from evident. How could it be justified? Even worse, it seems that no matter how we identify these beliefs, many Christians will disagree, for not all Christians take the same beliefs to be Christian. One might reply, “Well, it is enough if we understand the essentials in the same way.” But we have seen the

difficulties in determining what the essential beliefs are and what is the correct way to understand them.¹⁰

The difficulty in answering this question about how we should determine what are essential Christian beliefs suggests that we may not be able to make this determination with any certainty or precision. Our inability to do this has important consequences because one person's acceptable modification may be another person's apostasy. The views of the very conservative Christians discussed earlier illustrate this. But they are by no means the only examples. Paul Tillich was praised by some for his creative reinterpretation of the Christian faith and condemned by others for abandoning that faith. Similar controversy greeted the proposals regarding the understanding of the incarnation in *The Myth of God Incarnate*.¹¹ In these and many other instances, what some Christians saw as an abandoning of the Christian faith, other Christians saw as mere reinterpretations of Christian beliefs supported by research or argument. But if we cannot agree on what are the essential doctrines of Christianity or on what are the permissible limits on ways to interpret them, then we cannot expect agreement on when a doctrine is simply being reinterpreted and when it is being abandoned. Yet I do not believe that we should respond to this uncertainty simply by clinging to our current beliefs, for that is no guarantee of faithfulness to God. And surely our primary calling as Christian philosophers is to faithful obedience to God as revealed in Christ, not to loyalty to our ecclesial tradition or to our current understanding of Christianity.

The Propriety of Using Philosophical Beliefs and Techniques

I have spent considerable time defending the propriety and necessity of using some secular techniques and beliefs regarding historical and literary analysis. I discussed these rather than philosophical theories and techniques for two reasons. First, any defense of a certain belief as Christian typically will involve claims for whose assessment these disciplines are relevant. Second, as I argued, it is not legitimate to reject such techniques and beliefs solely because they yield results inconsistent with the Christian faith as one understands it; however, there is no reason not to extend this principle to philosophical beliefs and techniques (though this extension would not commit one to accepting every philosophical belief or technique being discussed, any more than scholars in other disciplines would have to accept everything being discussed in their disciplines). Thus, it is appropriate to use certain philosophical beliefs and techniques to interpret and criticize one's Christian beliefs. Always to reject any philosophical techniques or beliefs solely because they yield conclusions inconsistent with one's current Christian beliefs would be to make too strong an assumption of the correctness of one's current understanding of Christianity; if one does not make that assump-

tion, then such inconsistencies would provide an occasion for investigating the correctness of some of one's Christian beliefs, an investigation which would require using secular as well as other Christian beliefs. But though I make this case for the appropriateness of using certain philosophical beliefs and principles, I would also emphasize something about philosophical theories: no philosopher has established his general approach to the general satisfaction of the philosophical community, and few even try. Therefore, there is no basis for making it incumbent on the Christian philosopher to do so or even to try to do so before he is intellectually permitted to employ his general Christian framework in his philosophizing. Moreover, he is not obligated to accept as true any controversial philosophical theory being discussed in his day, even if it is advanced by one of the "bright lights."

The history of Christianity contains many crucial disputes for which philosophical beliefs and techniques were relevant. For example, shortly after the beginning of the Protestant Reformation some leaders of the Lutheran and of the Reformed movements met at Marburg in an attempt to define a common understanding of the faith which could serve as a basis for uniting the two movements. They were able to reach agreement on all but one point: the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. On that point, it seems to me that Luther exemplified starting with what he believed as a Christian. Quoting the words of institution, "This is my body," he insisted that Christ is physically as well as spiritually present in the elements. In opposition, the Reformed thinkers drew on two arguments: (1) a passage in John 6 shows the propriety of interpreting statements metaphorically, and (2) since Jesus now sits at the right hand of God, his body is physically present elsewhere and cannot be physically present in the elements. This argument clearly rests on the philosophical conviction that a physical body cannot be in two places at the same time. Luther had no reply to the philosophical point; he could not explain how Jesus' body could be physically present in two or more places at once.¹² A full response to the philosophical point certainly would have required development of an explanation of how Jesus' body could be in more than one place at a time (not only on the right hand of the Father, but also everywhere the Lord's Supper is being celebrated simultaneously). Should Luther have tried to develop such an explanation? If he could not, should he have considered reinterpreting his belief? It should be noted that he would have seen this as no less than an abandoning of his faith.

It is not my purpose here to argue for either the Reformed or the Lutheran view. I want only to point out that if the Reformed thinkers were right, there would seem to be no way that Luther could have discovered his error. However, if he had followed my proposal, either side might have been able to establish its point. Since "is" can mean identity as well as bear the metaphorical (or "spiritual") meaning urged by Reformed thinkers, each side could have argued

for its view of the proper interpretation of Jesus' words, drawing on whatever secular or Christian beliefs seemed relevant. But to proceed in this way is to assume the legitimacy of allowing secular beliefs to reinterpret (and thus to correct) one's Christian beliefs.

My last major illustration in support of my proposal about the dialectical relation of one's Christian beliefs and secular beliefs is the use of broad-ranging philosophical schemes to interpret one's Christian beliefs. Here the greatest and clearest example, but certainly not the only one, is Thomas Aquinas. As is well known, Aquinas embarked on a bold venture: he used the philosophy of the new "bright light" in the philosophical firmament to interpret the Christian faith. Of course, he did so in the full confidence that he would not have to abandon any of the truths of Christianity. And he did not simply accept Aristotle's system without reservation or criticism; to name only one important difference, he used the concept of existence (*esse*) in a quite new way. Nevertheless, his attempt was greeted with considerable reservations by his contemporaries, and his writings were for a brief time banned by the bishop of Paris. I cannot help wondering whether he would even have attempted his bold undertaking if he had heard and followed Plantinga's advice.

However, Aquinas was emboldened by another belief, the belief that all truth is God's truth. This belief gave him courage in his bold venture, for he was sure that true philosophy could not contradict the truths of the Christian faith. This belief has been widely held throughout the history of Christian thought; probably many, perhaps all, Christian philosophers would accept it. But there are a couple of rubs in applying it. One rub concerns identifying the true philosophy. The other concerns identifying the correct understanding of the Christian faith. Because I do not believe that we can *assume* that we have got either of them right, I do not want to give absolute precedence to beliefs of either type.

Determining the Burden of Proof

But though I do not want to give absolute precedence to beliefs of either type, I regard it as legitimate to place the burden of proof differently on different sorts of issues. A Christian philosopher need not accept various broad-ranging metaphysical schemes which have no place for anything like a Christian God (like naturalism) unless the grounds for such a scheme are far more overwhelming than the grounds for any scheme with which I am familiar in the history of philosophy. Nor is the Christian under any obligation to justify on naturalistic grounds his belief in God for that belief to be intellectually respectable—here I agree with Plantinga.¹³ On the other hand, it seems to me highly dubious for a Christian philosopher to determine the acceptability of far more local theories (such as compatibilism and event causation) simply (or even primarily) on the

grounds of their implications for Christian beliefs. Somewhere in-between would come far-ranging metaphysical schemes which have a divine figure, but one whose characteristics do not agree completely with those of one's tradition—for example, such process philosophies as Whitehead's and Hartshorne's. It clearly is question-begging to reject them simply because they do not offer the same understanding of God as certain traditional views. Not only is there not unanimity on the characteristics of God within the Christian tradition (consider, e.g., the differences between Plantinga's and Aquinas' beliefs about God, or between Plantinga's and Pseudo-Dionysius'), but the characteristics various Christian thinkers ascribed to God were themselves the result of the interactions of these Christians with various metaphysical schemes (Platonism of various sorts and Aristotelianism, to name only two), and one may well question whether these are the best schemes in terms of which to understand the characteristics of God. Indeed, the Christian faith that any of us holds today employs many philosophical notions for its understanding and expression. Thus, the line between Christian beliefs and secular beliefs is a vague and ever-changing one.¹⁴

The three-fold delineation offered in the previous paragraph might be defended in terms of some common epistemological principles. For example, a person should require more evidence before he abandons a more central belief than he would require to abandon a less central belief. If belief in the existence of God occupies a central position in the thought of a Christian philosopher, he should hold fast to it in the absence of truly overwhelming evidence for some view inconsistent with it. But some beliefs about God (or other Christian beliefs) might be changed without abandoning one's faith and with at most minor changes in one's central beliefs; thus, schemes with a divine figure who does not have all the same characteristics as one already believes God to have do not require such an overwhelming case. Nor do secular beliefs which impact more peripherally on one's Christian beliefs. This three-fold delineation is admittedly rough, but I do not see any clear way at present to make it more precise. Indeed, my proposal may preclude more precision. For I am insisting that we should not put unquestioned reliance on either Christian or secular beliefs and that we must therefore determine in each case how much weight we should give to each. But though I may not be able to give any more precision to my proposal in the abstract, I might be able to indicate further where it agrees and where it differs from Plantinga's advice by commenting briefly on some of the examples he discusses.

I agree with him that the Christian philosopher is not required to meet the criteria of verificationism (256-58), but this accords with my proposal as well as his because verificationism is a global theory. Although it was presented as a thesis about meaning, its proponents advanced it in order to validate important conclusions on issues that pertain to world-views. (Moreover, verificationism

has so many problems other than its conflicts with Christian beliefs that there is little wonder that a Christian philosopher might not think her Christian beliefs were seriously challenged by it. But would she think her Christian beliefs were more seriously challenged if the only problems with verificationism were its conflicts with Christian beliefs?)

Plantinga also discusses the probabilistic argument against the existence of God based on the existence of a certain (presumably large) quantity of evil in the world (259-64). He points out that even if we grant for the sake of argument that so large a quantity of evil renders the existence of God improbable, it would not be irrational to continue to believe in the existence of God if we have other, adequate grounds for believing that God exists. And he claims that the Christian philosopher is perfectly within his rights to take the existence of God as one of his basic beliefs and that he does not have to try to justify this belief on grounds acceptable to his non-theistic colleagues. I am not concerned here to dispute this. However, I am concerned to ask whether the existence of so much evil of such-and-such types might suggest the appropriateness of questioning not the existence of God, but our understanding of the characteristics of God and the nature of his relation to the created order. After all, even if thinkers like Calvin are correct in claiming that we have a divinely-implanted disposition to believe in God, how detailed and precise an understanding of God does this disposition include? And even if it is in principle detailed and precise, should one not, given the differences among Christians, ask which Christian's detailed and precise understanding of God is the correct one? If one does not assume that her current understanding of God is beyond correction, must she restrict herself to Christian sources for correctives, or may she also use secular sources? Indeed, must she not also use secular sources?

In a third example Plantinga discusses personhood, determinism and free will, and agent causation. Taking God as his model for a person, he argues for libertarianism, since God is a free person in a sense which precludes both determinism and compatibilism; then he argues that because God is an agent cause, the Christian has reason to reject claims that event causation is the only kind of causation (264-68). My problems with this account center on what he takes it that we already "rationally believe" as Christians and how he interprets and applies these beliefs. Even if we do rationally believe that God is a person, do we understand the personhood of God well enough to use that understanding to illuminate what is involved in being a human person? The whole Thomistic tradition, to name only one important Christian tradition, would reject this approach as impossible. To whatever extent we understand what we say about God, we do so by analogy with what we say about creatures; we cannot reverse that process. Of course, Plantinga is not a Thomist, but his differences with the Thomists are differences with other Christians. Can he appeal to his beliefs as

a Christian as rational grounds for rejecting their beliefs as Christians? If not, to what will he appeal?

Later on in his discussion of agent causation, Plantinga claims that the Christian “already and independently believes that acts of volition have causal efficacy; he believes, indeed, that the physical universe owes its very existence to just such volitional acts—God’s undertaking to create it” (267). I hold no brief for event causation, but I am surprised by Plantinga’s claim. How did volitions become an element in Christian beliefs? This concept of volition as an explicit concept in Western thought is of fairly recent origin, and it would surely take considerable argument to show that it is implicit in certain Christian beliefs. Moreover, even if we overlook the reference to volitions, it seems to me that the discussion of agent causation requires supplementation. To be sure, Christian narratives and confessions speak of God as doing certain things. But this is non-technical language. In their everyday conversation even advocates of event causation use this non-technical language to speak of people doing things. The question is whether such speech can be interpreted adequately—or perhaps even preferably—in terms of event causation.

Plantinga suggests that Christian speech about God doing things can not be interpreted in terms of event causation, for God is not subject to the causal laws of the universe which he himself established by creating the universe. Let us grant this. But might there not be analogous laws of the divine nature—laws which are not foreign impositions or limits on God, but laws which are partly constitutive of the divine nature? This suggestion is not as clear as I would like it to be, but I do not think that I have a sufficiently clear understanding of the divine nature to use my understanding of it to rule out theories of how human agents function. Plantinga’s discussion seems to imply that he does. If he would claim this, can he rationally make that claim without providing a justification for it? Surely a simple appeal to what Christians—or even Christian philosophers—believe will not be adequate, for they do not agree on this matter. The appeal must be at least to beliefs which are truly Christian,¹⁵ and if one makes this appeal one must specify how these beliefs are to be identified. I claim that in making this identification, it is proper and indeed necessary to use secular beliefs and techniques; I understand Plantinga to be denying this (or at least strongly de-emphasizing it). And there I see the difference between us.

This difference has significant implications for how one should view secular beliefs and should relate those beliefs to one’s Christian beliefs. On my proposal, one’s Christian beliefs enjoy no privileged status simply because they are (supposedly) Christian; of course, any one of them may have a very secure status because of the strength of its grounds or because of its centrality in our set of beliefs, but in this regard they are not in principle different from various secular beliefs which might enjoy a similar status. If there are inconsistencies, conflicts,

or tensions between one's secular beliefs and one's Christian beliefs, one should approach these problems as one would approach problems between one's secular beliefs. My proposal admittedly incurs the danger of distorting or even losing one's faith through a too-easy acceptance of secular beliefs. But Plantinga's advice runs the opposite danger of distorting it by clinging to inadequate formulations because one misses the critical perspective on it offered by secular beliefs. There are dangers either way; neither way guarantees that we shall be faithful to God. But I have tried to suggest reasons why my proposal for a greater openness to secular beliefs is preferable to Plantinga's advice.¹⁶

Wofford College

NOTES

1. "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy*, I, 3 (July 1984), 253-71. Page references in parentheses refer to this article.

2. In terming them "secular beliefs" I am not implying or suggesting anything about their content other than that they do not belong to Christian beliefs. Thus, I am not implying that they are hostile (or indifferent) to those beliefs, though some may be. Admittedly the line between Christian beliefs and secular beliefs is neither clear nor unchanging. Beginning with the New Testament itself and continuing throughout the history of the Christian community, Christians adopted—and sometimes adapted—secular concepts and beliefs to aid them in understanding and expressing their faith. Therefore, my distinguishing as I do between Christian and secular beliefs must be understood as an oversimplification.

This distinction between Christian and secular beliefs deserves much closer attention than either Plantinga or I give it. What beliefs belong in each category? On what basis should the distinction be made (e.g., by source or by content)? Is it legitimate to use concepts derived from secular philosophical thought (e.g., *homoousios*, *agenetos*, *esse*, being-itself) to express Christian beliefs? If this is done, is the belief still Christian, and does the concept then become a Christian concept (whatever that would be)? Moreover, if it is done, what checks, if any, should there be on the process? But though these and other questions about the distinction between Christian and secular beliefs deserve attention, I shall not focus on them in this paper. Rather, I shall simply assume that the distinction can somehow be made. (Note that Plantinga must also make this assumption or there would be no point to his paper.)

3. In fairness to Plantinga, I want to point out that he is not saying that the Christian philosopher has nothing to learn from his non-Christian colleagues nor saying that the Christian philosopher should isolate himself and refuse to enter into discussion with his non-Christian colleagues. Indeed, he explicitly denies both these ideas. Moreover, he adds that "while Christian philosophers need not and ought not to see themselves as involved, for example, in a common effort to determine whether there is such a person as God, we are all, theist and non-theist alike, engaged in the common human project of understanding ourselves and the world in which we find ourselves" (270). But none of this, he insists, "runs counter to" the things he said elsewhere in his paper, some of which I

summarized in the text. However, I do not understand how these statements about the usefulness of secular beliefs relate to his other points. Moreover, even in these statements I find missing an affirmation of the usefulness, indeed of the indispensability, of certain non-Christian beliefs and techniques for modifying our Christian beliefs. I shall be emphasizing this in my paper; therefore, I shall be focusing on the differences rather than the similarities between Plantinga's advice and my proposal.

4. This and other texts are mentioned by Jerome J. Langford in *Galileo, Science and the Church* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), pp. 52-53. Scriptural passages were of course not the only grounds on which certain thinkers rejected the heliocentric theory, not even the only grounds advanced by Christians. But they were among the grounds. Will Durant points out that "many theologians felt that the Copernican astronomy was so clearly incompatible with the Bible that if it prevailed the Bible would lose authority and Christianity itself would suffer" (*The Story of Civilization, Vol. VII: The Age of Reason Begins* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961], p. 606).

5. The interpretation of the Bible is not a professional concern for philosophers, but my reason for discussing it will become clear.

6. It might be suggested that we should interpret the Bible as Jesus or Paul or other New Testament writers interpreted their Scriptures. For the sake of argument, let us grant that this principle is properly derivable from Christian beliefs. It surely is not sufficient to give us a technique of biblical interpretation. For we must determine how Paul and the other New Testament writers interpreted their Scriptures. What method shall we use in doing this? We cannot yet use Paul's and the other New Testament writers', for we have not yet identified that method. (And what shall we do if we find that they used different, or even conflicting, methods? Perhaps that issue will not arise, but can we be sure it will not?) Similarly for Jesus' method, we need a method of interpreting the Gospels and assessing their historical reliability in order to identify his method.

7. The literature on these matters is vast, but a good survey of the developments in Old Testament criticism may be found in Herbert Hahn, *The Old Testament in Modern Research* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1954), and of developments in New Testament criticism in Werner Georg Kummel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems*, tr. S. McLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1972).

8. I am referring to Christians who believe that the Bible is "inerrant" (their term). Cf., e.g., Norman L. Geisler (ed.), *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980) and James Montgomery Boice (ed.), *The Foundation of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978). According to this view, one must regard the Bible as free from all factual errors of any type (scientific and historical, as well as doctrinal). Any approach to the Bible which does not make this assumption or which yields a result indicating some factual error in the Bible must be rejected. (See especially J. Barton Payne, "Higher Criticism and Biblical Inerrancy," pp. 83-113 in the Geisler volume.) Since advocates of this view also generally believe that certain traditional doctrines are clearly taught in the Bible, they cannot admit that any doctrines inconsistent with them are also taught in the Bible, for that admission would indicate that the Bible is not inerrant (since two inconsistent doctrines cannot both be true). Therefore, adherents of this view do not have in their other Christian beliefs any resources which might lead them to significantly new understandings of their Christian faith. (Useful discussions of this view may be found in David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975], pp. 17-24 and Stephen T. Davis, *The Debate about the Bible* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977], pp. 23-48.)

9. Admittedly, beliefs about the proper techniques for historical or literary analysis are not easy

to justify. Such techniques are accepted because they seem to enable us to understand a wide range of historical events or literary texts. That is, they are substantiated by fruitfulness in widespread use. But such fruitfulness is not easy to demonstrate directly. That a technique has passed the test of fruitfulness in use can properly be determined only by someone with a detailed knowledge of the results it gives. Generally only specialists in that area will have that knowledge, and the rest of us will have to rely on their judgment. Thus, for nonspecialists the best evidence of the appropriateness of a technique is its widespread acceptance by experts. This is, of course, not an infallible indicator that a certain technique gives reliable results, but it is the best we have. Because it is not an infallible indicator, very conservative Christians can claim that they are not being irrational in rejecting techniques which yield results at variance with their beliefs, for they have a right to their pre-philosophical convictions. But again I ask, if they were wrong, how could they ever find out?

10. Those branches of the Christian tradition with an authoritative teaching office—most notably the Roman Catholic—have a somewhat less acute problem than do those branches which lack it. But even within Roman Catholicism there are disputes about the significance of authoritative teachings and how to interpret them. Do these teachings, for example, positively state what is true or merely authoritatively delimit what is false? And whichever view one takes, how shall one understand the meaning of what was said in the past? In principle, one might always seek a contemporary clarification from the teaching authority; but a local bishop's pronouncement is not infallible, and the pope rarely makes *ex cathedra* pronouncements. So even in traditions with a teaching office, the use of modern beliefs and techniques seems difficult to avoid.

11. John Hick (ed.) (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977).

12. Accounts of the Marburg Colloquy can be found in Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The Reformation: A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 155-62, and in Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 333. Hillerbrand (p. 157) quotes Oecolampadius, a Reformed thinker, as saying, "Christ is risen and sitting at the right hand of the Father; consequently he is not in the bread."

It is interesting to note that the Lutherans had a (philosophical!) reply which they might have used: it is inappropriate to take the quote as referring to Jesus' literal body, for God does not have a body and thus does not have a literal right hand. But the Reformed thinkers might have pushed their philosophical objection by pointing out that according to the New Testament accounts, when Jesus spoke the words of institution before his death, his body was (presumably) a normal physical body. How then could Jesus have been physically present in his normal human body and also physically present in the elements?

13. As I pointed out earlier, however, many non-Christian philosophers do not try to justify their metaphysical schemes, and none have succeeded in justifying them to the satisfaction of the general philosophical community. Thus, the conviction that a Christian philosopher should not be required to justify his Christian framework before using it accords with the typical *practice* of the philosophical community in relation to metaphysical schemes.

14. Perhaps because Plantinga views Christian beliefs as pre-philosophical (268), he does not confront this indebtedness of many Christian beliefs to what were once secular beliefs and concepts. In the life of an individual, most Christian beliefs are (in most cases anyway, but perhaps not for many Christian philosophers) pre-philosophical beliefs. But in the Christian tradition, they are not pre-philosophical, for they were formed through contact over centuries with various philosophies. And the Christian individual gets his "pre-philosophical" beliefs from the Christian tradition, in which he

participates. So even if a Christian has, as Plantinga claims, “as much right to his pre-philosophical opinions as others have to theirs,” a Christian may well wonder if he should rest content in these beliefs, given their ancestry. Moreover, even if the beliefs were not influenced by various philosophies, not all pre-philosophical beliefs have equally good genealogies. So is it wise for the Christian philosopher to take these beliefs as touchstones for evaluating secular beliefs, even if he is within his intellectual rights to do so? I think not. (I am indebted to Lad Sessions for some of the ideas in this note.)

15. I say “at least” because maybe the appeal should also be explicitly to truly Christian beliefs which are also true. But perhaps in this context we would just assume that any truly Christian belief would also be true.

16. I am indebted to several people for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper: Prof. David Basinger of Roberts Wesleyan College, Prof. Richard Creel of Ithaca College, Prof. Lad Sessions of Washington & Lee University, and Prof. Linda Zagzebski of Loyola Marymount University.