Philosophers and Theologians at Odds

THOMAS V. MORRIS

In the past ten or fifteen years, the areas of philosophy of religion and philosophical theology have been among the fastest growing fields within the discipline of philosophy. Only a few decades ago, many of the leading philosophers in the world were either openly hostile to religion or else completely indifferent to its concerns. This created a nearly pervasive atmosphere in the profession and renewed the long-rumored reputation of philosophers as enemies of faith. But now a new breeze is blowing down the halls of the academy. A significant number of the most active and prominent contemporary philosophers are these days devoting their energies to a careful examination, and even defense, of many of the traditional tenets of Christian theology. There has been a great amount of new and exciting work on the concept of God, on the various divine attributes such as omnipotence and omniscience, on the rational status of religious belief and on the nature of religious experience. There has also recently been a development which is even more fascinating and unexpected, given the philosophical climate of previous decades: philosophers have begun to show deep interest in the distinctive doctrines of the Christian faith, focusing their attention on such ideas as those of incarnation, trinity, atonement, sanctification and the nature of sin. An immediate result of this is that we are quickly attaining a new level of conceptual clarity concerning the content and credibility of these doctrines. Philosophers, for a long time thought of as nothing more than critics of religious thought, are now to be numbered among its champions. At least this is true for a surprising number of contemporary thinkers.

There is no little irony in the fact that this comes at a time when a number of respected academic theologians have, purportedly on philosophical grounds, largely abandoned the traditional claims distinctive of the Christian faith throughout most of its history. In the writings of some prominent contemporary theologians, the doctrinal foundations of the Church are labelled as myths, reinterpreted as symbols or reassessed as grammatical rules merely intended to govern a particular religious “language-game.” As straightforward claims about the way things are, they seem to be thought of as something of an embarrass-

Thomas V. Morris, Ph.D., is associate professor of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame.
ment. This, to put it mildly, is a remarkable turn of affairs. Until fairly recently, the existential force of the Christian gospel was understood in the context of a Christian story about God, the world and human beings which, as a conjunction of claims about the way things are, was believed to be true, metaphysically and morally correct. Of course, the apostles and the authors of the New Testament documents were not viewed as metaphysicians or moral philosophers. But it was generally recognized that their message has presuppositions and implications as well as central components which fall within the province of metaphysics and moral philosophy, and which can be very useful when elucidated in the technical terms appropriate to these important domains of human thought.

This view of the Christian message is now often termed "propositionalism" or "cognitivism" by its theological detractors, and is thought to be a pre-modern mistake which arose only out of a philosophical innocence now long lost. In fact, anyone who thinks otherwise is nowadays quite often said to be naive, unsophisticated, a-historical [a charge shortly to be explained] and --- nearly everyone's favorite term of disapprobation now that 'heretic' is unfashionable --- a fundamentalist. How is this aversion to the tradition's self-understanding on the part of leading academic theologians to be explained? What motivates their large scale move away from what they call propositionalism? What, if anything, grounds their charges? In light of the wide divergence between such theologians and a great many contemporary philosophers on this issue, it may be worthwhile to examine a bit, however briefly, why it is that some theologians are now criticizing philosophers for taking the straightforward cognitivism of the tradition seriously, as providing the framework for their own efforts.

A dominant trend in modern theology is to reinterpret the traditional Christian doctrines as symbols whose function is merely to express and evoke certain sorts of evaluative and religious attitudes and experiences. Representing one variant of this trend quite candidly and succinctly, John Hick once remarked concerning the central Christian claim that Jesus was, and is, God Incarnate (the claim captured in the classical doctrine of the incarnation), that "the real point and value of the incarnational doctrine is not indicative but expressive, not to assert a metaphysical fact but to express a valuation and evoke an attitude."1

This systematic focus on human attitudes and experiences has become so firmly entrenched in modern theology since the work of Schleiermacher as to become a hoary tradition unto itself. In his recent and enormously influential book, The Nature of Doctrine, George Lindbeck makes some very revealing comments about this "long and very notable experiential tradition" in theology. Expressing at one point a very common assessment, he says:

The origins of this tradition in one sense go back to Kant, for he helped clear the ground for its emergence by demolishing the metaphysical and epistemological foundations of the earlier regnant cognitive-propositional views. That ground-clearing was later completed for most educated people by scientific developments that
increased the difficulties of accepting literalistic propositional interpretations of such biblical doctrines as creation, and by historical studies that implied the time-conditioned relativity of all doctrines.²

These statements from Lindbeck are enlightening in a number of ways.

First of all, there is a conviction expressed here which seems to be widespread among contemporary theologians, the belief that Kant, or Hume, or both together, some two centuries ago dealt death blows to natural theology and to the sort of classical theistic metaphysics underlying traditional approaches to revelational theology. In a strange way, these philosophers have become the unlikely patron saints of current academic theology, as the popular appraisal of their work has shifted the whole theological enterprise into its now common non-metaphysical directions. What is particularly interesting about the references theologians make to Kant or Hume is that most often we find the philosopher merely mentioned, in a somewhat deferential and even slightly appreciative tone, but we rarely, if ever, see an account of precisely which arguments of his are supposed to have accomplished the alleged demolition of cognitivism, and exactly how they may be supposed to have had that effect. In fact, I must confess to never having seen in the writings of any contemporary theologian the exposition of a single argument from either Hume or Kant, or any other historical figure, for that matter, which comes anywhere near to demolishing, or even irreparably damaging traditional theistic metaphysics, historical Christian doctrine or the epistemology of what we might call "theological realism" (the construal of theology as a discipline whose intent is to represent religious realities as they, in fact, are). A great number of the foremost contemporary philosophers, who are quite well acquainted with the work of Hume and Kant, reject this conclusion common among theologians about what their writings show concerning traditional religious belief.³

The developments of modern science that Lindbeck alludes to no more clearly proscribe a traditionalist understanding of Christian doctrines than do the writings of Hume and Kant. His reference, of course, is to scientific developments since the time of Kant, although he does not specify the precise developments he finds to be troublesome. It is unlikely that he has in mind recent strides in molecular biology, quantum mechanics or cosmology, although the last of these fields has been thought by some to pose challenges to religious belief. (Of course, just as many have hailed its details as corroborating the ancient theistic claims of cosmic design.) But, in any case, Lindbeck's mention of the biblical doctrine of creation indicates that what he probably means to invoke here is modern evolutionary theory. If, however, one draws the simple distinction which must be drawn between the biblical doctrine of creation and the literary representations of creation to be found in, for example, the book of Genesis, it is unclear how this development of scientific theorizing is supposed to increase the difficulty of construing a sentence like

(C) Everything in the universe is created by God and depends on him for its existence moment to moment
as the expression of a proposition which is true. How other scientific developments could increase the difficulty of accepting the rest of Christian doctrine as cognitively available propositional truth is even more difficult to see.

In addition to the spectres of Hume and Kant and the apparently bullying image of modern science, historical studies are cited by Lindbeck as contributing to the downfall of cognitive-propositional views of Christian doctrine. Now, there are many ways in which historical studies since the time of Spinoza might be thought to have had a negative impact on traditional Christian thought. First, in reference to biblical studies, it might be argued that we have discovered the classical Christian doctrines not to be clearly present within the biblical corpus. Further, it is sometimes added, they are not even hinted at in “the earliest strata” of the core New Testament documents and their sources. And so, the conclusion is drawn, if we are historically sensitive to the earliest roots of the Christian faith, we will recognize the standard Church doctrines to be later accretions inessential to, and even corrosive of, the most authentic Christian witness.

I must admit that during my own training in biblical studies before I came to philosophy, I often wondered whether it was the heavy hand of philosophical presuppositions which, usually unacknowledged, guided the work of biblical scholars, in everything from their exegetical and critical efforts to their application of procedures for dating documents. This is how I suspected it often went: No theologian or biblical scholar identified in any sense as a Christian wants to recognize in the earliest and foundational beliefs of his own faith community metaphysically implausible, cosmologically incongruous or logically absurd claims about reality. If, on the basis of some philosophical argument or, more commonly, rumors of such an argument, the biblical scholar comes to believe that one or another traditional doctrine is deeply flawed in any of these ways, he or she may well be less inclined to acknowledge intimations or anticipations of the problematic formulation in the authentic sayings of Jesus or in the earliest witness of the Church. Since there is no purely mechanical procedure for textual archeology on complex ancient documents, there is ample room within the parameters of accepted scholarly practice for such philosophically inspired subjective disinclinations to have their effect. If this, or anything like this, has been an operative dynamic in the development of biblical studies in the recent past, then we clearly have from this quarter no independent historical challenge to a classical conception of Christian faith and doctrine—we are merely directed back to purely philosophical arguments as potential sources of trouble. Whatever the merit of this speculation about the possible psychological dynamics behind some recent work in biblical studies, the Christian faith has been traditionally understood to be rooted in the entirety of its canonical Scriptures, as well as in the creeds, confessions and conciliar decrees of the believing community. Any Marcionite picking and choosing of favorite sources is unacceptable. Whether the first Christian to commit faith to papyrus had a propositionally oriented, incipiently doctrinal mindset or not, this is a fundamental orientation
of the Christian Church throughout the centuries, and one which cannot be abandoned lightly.

We may suppose, however, that it is not primarily to the domain of historical biblical studies that Lindbeck alludes when he cites broadly "historical studies" as implying "the time-conditioned relativity of all doctrines." It is likely that he has in mind rather something like this: Quite simply, modern historical research has made us sensitive to the fact that thought forms vary from culture to culture, and from one historical period to another. Religious thought forms are no exception. They seem to be thoroughly conditioned by the times and places within which they arise. As Lindbeck himself says later in his book:

The first-order truth claims of a religion change insofar as these arise from the...shifting worlds that human beings inhabit. What is taken to be reality is in large part socially constructed and consequently alters in the course of time. The universe of the ancient Near East was very different from that of Greek philosophy, and both are dissimilar from the modern cosmos. Inevitably, the Christianized versions of these various world pictures are far from identical.4

The argument that Lindbeck, in effect, goes on to give is that since Christian claims about reality have been made in very different times and places, those claims themselves must be viewed as deeply different; thus, if doctrines are claims about God, the world and human existence, first-order claims about reality, then they have been importantly changing and differing over space and time--there is no single doctrine of creation, or incarnation or salvation, but a set of very different time-conditioned cultural expressions of the faiths of different Christians. Surely we want a conception of Christian doctrine such that there is continuity in it. Thus, we cannot view doctrines as first-order truth claims about reality. They are instead, in Lindbeck's view, grammatical rules. Or so he argues. But what of "the time-conditioned relativity of all doctrines" that historical studies are supposed to unveil for the cognitive-propositional view of doctrine? What is relative to what? Perhaps Lindbeck means to suggest that since religious claims are, on his conception, functions of socially constructed world-views, the truth of such claims can be understood only as intrasystemic truth, or truth-relative-to-the-operative-worldview. But the mere existence of different conceptual schemes does not alone entail the semantic relativity of claims made within those schemes, any more than the existence of differing theories in some domain of scientific inquiry alone entails scientific antirealism. An argument is needed. And no argument is forthcoming whose contours are easily discernible and which might have any chance at all of contributing in a forceful way to dispatching the cognitive-propositional conception of Christian doctrine. What is at work here is one particular, philosophically loaded, sociology of knowledge, or perhaps better, of belief, which seems strangely attractive to many contemporary theologians. But for such a view
there is no compelling argument or independent purchase on truth, aside from a stipulative truth-within-its-own-conceptual-framework which we are free to ignore.

Of course, Platonistic and Aristotelian metaphysics and moral theory were presumably unavailable to the great majority, if not all, of the biblical authors. It does not follow at all from this that their own perspectives and claims cannot be captured and unfolded in such philosophically attuned thought forms. The development of doctrine which ensued from appropriating such thought forms is something quite different from, and much more deeply continuous than, a mere succession of distinct, time-conditioned linguistic artifacts. We can understand the medievals, the patristics and the biblical authors about as well as we can understand each other. And we can disagree with them. We are not limited to just noting that what is true-in-our-framework sometimes differs from what is true-in-their-framework, and to admitting that the very existence of such a difference is itself a fact only in-our-framework. We can really engage the past. Nothing within the purview of modern historical studies has shown otherwise. Thus, again, from this direction there is not, after all, any decisive obstacle to working within the traditional understanding of Christian faith and doctrine.

The mere existence of ongoing doctrinal disputes through the history of the Church, and the existence of metaphysical disputes related to these doctrinal controversies, seems to be deeply troubling to many modern theologians. Or, more specifically, the fact that there is no humanly available Archimedian point from which to resolve such disputes, no single, simple decision procedure for adjudicating rival doctrinal positions, seems to have been a cause for dismay among recent theologians contemplating the history of Christian thought. I believe that it is concern over such matters which has served as a powerful motivation in recent years for the move toward theological anti-realism, or at least toward the attempt to develop a practically metaphysics-free form of theological reflection. And yet, all too often, the resulting reflection has not been free of metaphysics at all, but rather has been constrained by a naturalistic or materialist metaphysics alien to the gospel and the whole body of traditional Christian thought. If Christian thinkers do not, as part of their theological work, seek to develop and refine suitable philosophical tools for the expression of their faith, they inevitably just inherit their philosophical assumptions and dispositions from the culture around them. Here is a modicum of truth behind one of Lindbeck's convictions noted above. And, as I think Lindbeck, on reflection, would agree, not all such cultural legacies are equally suitable to the expression of Christian faith.

The lack of a simple algorithm for resolving doctrinal, or metaphysical, differences does not prevent rational adjudication of such differences. It just makes it much more difficult. Nor, as most epistemologists agree, does the unavailability of such a procedure in many other departments of human thought prevent the attainment of genuine propositional knowledge in these spheres. It has often been said that a little philosophy is a dangerous thing. I suspect that
one reason for the significant divergence of assumptions between numerous contemporary academic theologians and the professional philosophers now doing Christian philosophical theology is that the theologians have had a dangerous amount of philosophy in the course of their theological training. They have had enough to see problems in the tradition, but not enough to equip them to work carefully through those problems.

It is not the conviction of the philosophers now working on these topics that traditional theologizing is without any serious flaws. The contrary conviction on the part of many will become clear in reading their recent publications. The shared assumption is rather that the tradition has substantive commitments well worth exploring and refining, resources which merit detailed philosophical scrutiny and contemporary reappropriation. Whatever flaws there are should be brought to light as clearly and precisely as possible, so that we might seek to eliminate them and do our part to capture anew the deep truths heretofore imperfectly expressed.

One would have thought that in the years since Lindbeck's book was written, or at least in the five years since it was published, the proof of the pudding here would have been had in the tasting. A great deal of successful, illuminating work has been done during this time in precisely the direction deemed by Lindbeck to be a dead-end. But, unfortunately, it seems that many theologians have not been keen to follow these developments, to see where, in fact, they might lead. Thus we find in a quite recent essay by a prominent theologian, the repeated insistence that the whole framework of contemporary philosophy of religion is faulty. In "Evidentialism: A Theologian's Response," Gordon Kaufman argues that current philosophical attention to religion errs from the start by adopting three basic presuppositions shared by traditional Christian theological thought. These three basic assumptions or presuppositions provide the focus, agenda and methods of current philosophical theology, as done by philosophers. And they are assumptions which Kaufman believes have been undermined altogether, rendered intellectually unacceptable, by three corresponding modern developments. It is remarkable to see the degree to which Kaufman just repeats some of the same worries voiced by Lindbeck, but in a slightly different and interesting packaging which is worth our attention.

The first assumption or presupposition identified by Kaufman, we can call "Religious Propositionalism." This is simply the assumption that certain crucial propositions actually believed or adhered to by religious people can be found beneath, or distilled out of, the complex of religious practice, as themselves proper objects, and the primary objects, of philosophical attention. A proposition is, by definition, a claim or assertion, the content of a declarative or indicative sentence, a truth bearer or, more cautiously, the sort of thing which can be said to be true or false, which can be believed, doubted or denied. The assumption of Religious Propositionalism, when brought to an examination of Christianity, leads to an identification of certain crucial propositions as believed by Christians, and treats these propositions as such that belief that they are true is partly constitutive of what it is to be a Christian. Familiar examples of such
propositions would of course be the traditional claims that there is a God, that Jesus is God incarnate, that God is a Divine Trinity and that human salvation consists in being properly related to God through Christ. It has been the practice of contemporary philosophers, when turning their attention to the Christian religion, to focus their efforts of analysis and evaluation on these and other propositions commonly thought of as central to Christianity.

Kaufman believes that Religious Propositionalism ignores the complex dynamic function of religious conceptions, symbols and utterances. It is his contention that the modern understanding of human religious pluralism brings this to our attention. According to Kaufman, when we come to an intimate knowledge of the various, disparate human religious traditions, we find that what initially seem to be very different symbols, concepts and propositions are actually items which serve the same practical functions in each of the different religions. Hindu utterances and Christian utterances, sentences spoken in a religious context by the Hopi, or by a Buddhist, may appear to serve to convey very different claims about reality. But Kaufman urges us to view this appearance as deceptive. Or so, at least, it seems that this is his point. In the holistic approach meant to be taken to religion and religious utterances instead of Religious Propositionalism, Kaufman urges that philosophers join his new breed of theologian in focusing more on the similarities among religions in their practical functions rather than on the awkward dissimilarities among them in their apparent claims about reality.

But it is not easy to get clear on exactly what Kaufman finds unacceptable in Religious Propositionalism. Is it that he thinks that Christian propositions about God and humankind have fared poorly in the realm of scientific confirmation and so wants to take some approach other than a propositional one to the Christian faith? Or does he endorse a radical semantic thesis that from first-order religious activities discrete assessable propositions conceptually cannot be extracted? Sometimes it seems that he is motivated by the former consideration, sometimes the latter. But it really doesn't matter since either reason is equally controversial. Unless we do attribute discernible, discrete religious beliefs to religious people, their religious behavior becomes totally opaque and unintelligible. Moreover, it isn't even a question, finally, of whether we as observers can abstract propositional attitudes, for example belief states, and thus propositions, as the objects of those attitudes--religious people report having such beliefs. And those of us engaged in the study of religion who are fortunate enough to be insiders with respect to our object of study, know first hand that certain propositions are crucial to Christian faith, as it was delivered to us, and as we maintain it. Any semantic theory which is at odds with such a plain fact has little to be said for it. And as for the worry that purported theological propositions do not fare well in our hard-headed day of empirical inquiry and scientific confirmation, recent philosophy of religion engaged in doing what Kaufman dislikes seems to be demonstrating quite the contrary view.
The second presupposition of recent philosophical work on religion rejected by Kaufman is what we have already referred to as “Theological Realism.” This is the assumption, simply, that the propositions extracted from religious belief have as their intent objective truth. Or, to put it another way, it is the assumption that those religious people making declarative utterances about God (and so forth) intend by doing so to express objective truths about the way things really are. Having made this assumption, philosophers then go on to test religions by evaluating the purported truths or systems of purported truths they appear to contain.

Just as Kaufman seems to think of Religious Propositionalism as semantically naive, he judges Theological Realism to be epistemologically naive. He, like Lindbeck, claims that recent developments in the sociology of knowledge have indicated both the holistic character of human thought and the relativity of conceptual frames, or frameworks. In light of this, he thinks that religions should be viewed instrumentally, not cognitively as attempts to articulate and embrace truths. Religion, from his perspective, functions rather “...to present a framework from within which basic orientation and meaning for the whole of human life can be found.” Kaufman thus accordingly believes that philosophical priority ought to be given to questions about the motivation of religious utterances, their function and their practical consequences, not to questions about their truth.

But there are at least a couple of serious problems here. Quite apart from the philosophical status of the sociological accounts of knowledge, or rather, of what is otherwise normally thought of as knowledge, there are two difficulties in Kaufman’s diagnosis and recommendation which seem to me decisive. First, if we seek a map to orient us and guide our movements, we surely want a map that is accurate. And a map of propositions, a framework for the orientation of human life, in order to be accurate must be composed of truths. Thus, there is no driving a wedge between function here and the concern for truth.

It is true that, in order to determine what proposition a particular utterance might be expressing, we have to understand something about the function of the utterance in its context, but it does not follow from this at all that philosophers need to study the details of ritual and religious activity before they can expect to have any proper philosophical objects for study. If we are taking mainstream Christian faith at face value and not trying to be ultra-sophisticated about it, it seems fairly straightforward, at least in broad outline, what Christianity proclaims, and thus what Christians believe. And these objects of proclamation and belief are interesting and proper objects of philosophical inquiry in their own right. Kaufman’s insistence to the contrary is unpersuasive.

The third framework assumption or basic presupposition of contemporary philosophy of religion that Kaufman rejects we can call “Conceptual Traditionalism.” This is, roughly speaking, the assumption that major religious concepts, as they have developed over the centuries and have been handed down to us, have a certain integrity and have at least a defeasible privileged status as fit ob-
jects of philosophical attention. Concerning what he refers to as “this symbol ‘God’,” Kaufman says:

We cannot take it for granted that this symbol has always meant the same thing; nor can we assume that the meaning it carried in earlier periods of history (whether biblical, or the high Middle Ages, or the Reformation) is the meaning which it should (or can) carry for us today. The intellectual development that Kaufman thinks has caused us to question this assumption is, he says, our awareness that many of the problems of the twentieth century, from the Holocaust to our current ecological troubles, are somehow results of a mindset produced by traditional Christian theology and its many conceptions of God, man and nature forged in former centuries under very different cultural conditions.

This is to me the most astonishing part of Kaufman’s essay. The enormity of his accusations along with the utter paucity of his evidence for such connections is one thing. But the philosophical relevance of the alleged connections is utterly mysterious. Even if one person or fifty million people are emotionally and attitudinally such that their handling of a concept or a claim leads to disastrous consequences, that has absolutely nothing to do with whether the concept in itself is coherent or philosophically interesting and whether the claim is true. The psychological questions and sociological questions can be raised, but they serve in no way to undermine the properly philosophical questions of meaning, coherence and truth. To suggest otherwise without argument is utterly implausible, quite apart from the merit or demerit of the allegations about causal connections between traditional theology and contemporary disaster.

In Kaufman’s essay, as in Lindbeck’s book, we find the strong conviction that what contemporary philosophers of religion are up to is wrong-headed, out-moded, uninteresting and futile. What we do not find are any strong arguments to back up this conviction. We do, however, find the expression of a set of opinions all too common nowadays among otherwise astute and judicious scholars in departments of theology and divinity schools. It is my hope that we contemporary philosophers of religion can convince our dubious colleagues to cease doing obeisance to Hume and Kant, to throw aside the needless self-imposed shackles of groundless materialism and self-defeating relativism, and to join us as companions in exploring the vast intellectual riches which fill our tradition.
Notes


3. See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, Does God Have A Nature? (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980).

4. Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine, p. 84.

5. Many examples of this work are to be found in the journals Faith and Philosophy and Religious Studies, as well as in such collections of new essays as Thomas V. Morris, ed., Philosophy and the Christian Faith (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) and Ronald Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, eds., Incarnation, Trinity and Atonement (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).


7. Ibid., p. 41.

8. Ibid.