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TAKING PLANTINGA SERIOUSLY: ADVICE TO CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHERS

Merold Westphal

Part of a symposium on the fifteenth anniversary of Al Plantinga's "Advice to Christian Philosophers," this essay reflects briefly on the current status of Christian philosophy. Then, in the light of three reminders from Plantinga, it suggests that Christian philosophers pay more attention to their other audience, the church, that they reflect on the ways in which their situation is similar to that of feminist philosophers, and that they seek to transcend not only the foundationalism and evidentialism of modernity, but also to go beyond its monological concept of reason to a dialogical concept. Finally, and at greater length, it suggests that Christian philosophers abandon the widespread assumption that the coin of their realm is propositions, assuming too easily that we have already transcended Plato's cave when we start our work. The bearing of this issue on the realism/anti-realism debate and on the relation of metaphysics to both politics and spirituality is explored.

Looking back from the eighties to the forties and fifties, Al Plantinga, in his Notre Dame inaugural address, described how "deeply non-Christian" was the philosophical mainstream in the English speaking world. "Few establishment philosophers were Christian; even fewer were willing to admit in public that they were, and still fewer thought of their being Christian as making a real difference to their practice as philosophers" (253).¹ Noting the change that had occurred in three or three and a half decades, he noted that there were in 1983 "many more Christians and many more unabashed Christians in the professional mainstream of American philosophical life" (253). I assume that by "unabashed" Christian philosophers he means those who were both willing to admit they were Christian and who thought that their being so made a difference to their philosophical practice.

The change over the past fifteen years has not been nearly so dramatic. Yet it has been real, and I think no careful observer would deny that we live in a renaissance of unabashed Christian philosophizing. Unfriendly observers might be tempted, in the words of that great metaphysician, Howard Cosell, to complain about a "veritable plethora" of Christian philosophers on the scene. I did hear one Jewish philosopher complain about the "Christian mafia" in the APA. I think we should we should take that comment both as a warning against tendencies toward triumphalist attitudes (remembering how frequently throughout history



groups that gain a measure of recognition and power after being suppressed or oppressed misuse their new status) and as a compliment. The presence of Christian philosophers in positions of leadership and responsibility in the APA, both at the divisional and national levels, is one, but only one sign of the vitality of Christian philosophizing today.

I, for one, am grateful to God for this flourishing. But I would also like to use this occasion to express my gratitude to two quite extraordinary servants of God to whom all of us in the Society of Christian Philosophers are indebted. One is Al Plantinga. The combination of his "Advice to Christian Philosophers" and the way he has served as a role model of what it would be like to follow that advice, has played a crucial role in getting us to where we are today. The other is Art Holmes. The annual Wheaton College Philosophy Conference, whose moving spirit he was for decades, was probably the most important single precursor of our Society, the place where Christian philosophers from all over could gather together to encourage and exhort one another in Christian philosophizing by simply doing it. (It is Art, by the way, whose willingness to speak of Christian philosophers but not of Christian philosophy, as if some system or style had a unique privilege from the standpoint of faith, is responsible for my avoiding the term 'Christian philosophy' and using the less than elegant phrase, 'Christian philosophizing', in its place.)

In singling out two of our leaders for special mention, I do not in the least intend to slight the invaluable contributions of so many others. As they say in post-game interviews, "It was a real team effort."

But that sort of past tense talk is not appropriate for us, if for no other reason than that the game is not over. I am glad for this opportunity to look back in gratitude for what had happened by 1983 and what has happened in the decade and a half since then. But surely this is even more importantly a time to look forward and to ask how we can best build on the foundation that has been laid, on the inheritance we have received. For the tasks of the Christian philosopher are never finished in this life.

So I, too, shall offer some advice to Christian philosophers, including myself. Put in its most general terms, it is that we look back at Al's advice from 1983 and try to take it even more seriously than we have. I refer to two reminders and an exhortation. First, there is the reminder that we belong to the church as well as to the academy. Second comes the reminder that by virtue of the former affiliation we have our own agenda (255) and our own assumptions (256). Finally there is the exhortation to greater autonomy vis-a-vis other agendas and assumptions, greater "integrality" in relation to our own, and greater courage, boldness, strength, and self-confidence in pursuing this autonomy and this integrality (254).

Three observations to begin with. First, what I call the two hats thesis suggests that we have two audiences as well as two allegiances. We are the philosophers of the Christian community. But most members of the church are not members of the academy; and that suggests that we may need to become more popular and less technical in **some** of our writing. Taking Dewey or Emerson as our models rather than, say, Quine or Husserl, we may need to reach out to a wider audience **more frequently** than we are accustomed to doing. And perhaps we need to do this in

cooperation with one another. Beyond the occasional essay or even monograph we write for an audience outside the guild, we might think about joint volumes or conferences aimed both at bringing our expertise to bear on issues we think the church should be thinking about and at learning from the wider church what topics we should be addressing.

Needless to say, in making this suggestion I am not advocating that we abandon our responsibilities and our opportunities within the academy and its often esoteric languages, though even there I think we should be known for our lucidity and not our density. "Behold how they love one another" might have as a corollary, "Behold how they love their readers," which, being translated, is, "Behold how accessibly they write (within the limits of the subject matter)."

Second, I cannot omit noting the formal similarity between AI's call for greater autonomy, integrality, and self-confidence and the advice given to feminist philosophers by their leaders. I think we would do well to think a bit about the ways in which, at this stage of the game, the community of feminist philosophers and the community of Christian philosophers are similar and different, recognizing, of course, that some individuals are members of both. A woman with official responsibilities in the American Academy of Religion once complained to me that the hardest part of the job was dealing with the evangelicals and the feminists, adding that the meetings of the latter group often seemed to her more like camp meetings than anything else.

Third, Plantinga writes that "the Christian philosopher has a perfect right to the point of view and pre-philosophical assumptions he brings to philosophic work; the fact that these are not widely shared outside the Christian or theistic community is interesting but fundamentally irrelevant" (256). Paraphrasing Richard Nixon's "We're all Keynesians now," I am tempted to respond, "We are all Gadamerians now." Not that Plantinga derived his insight from Gadamer's attack on the prejudice against prejudice (pre-judgment), or that he should do penance for failing to do so — no, the point is rather that the sea change signified, however imprecisely, by talk about the collapse of foundationalism or of the Enlightenment project, means that in the abandonment of the ideal of philosophy as presuppositionless science, philosophers from "analytic", "continental", and American pragmatist traditions, have more common ground than their vocabularies or habits of reading and conversation might suggest. No doubt philosophical ecumenism is no more easily achieved than its ecclesiastical counterpart, but perhaps the possibilities are greater now than they have been for a long time.

Now that the search for truth "after Babel" has replaced the presumption of "the view from nowhere," we can be more honest and less guilty about the fact that our transcendental egos are quite concrete, quite particular, quite laden with presuppositions derived from our belonging to various traditions. But it does not follow that it is "fundamentally irrelevant" that our assumptions "are not widely shared outside the Christian or theistic community . . ." This fact may be irrelevant as to where we begin, but not to how we proceed. For the change that no longer requires us to check our concrete identities at the door in order to pre-

tend to be impersonal thinking machines means we may have to rethink the nature of philosophical dialogue with those whose starting points are diametrically opposed to our own. If we cannot presuppose neutral common ground and if method is reduced to something like the search for reflective equilibrium, what are the implications of this for conversations that do **not** begin with a fairly broad overlapping consensus? In what ways and to what degree does the emphasis shift from the logic of debate to its ethics and even its rhetoric?

We will need to go beyond insisting on our right to be ourselves, as fundamental and indispensable as that is, to fresh reflection about the possibilities and the proprieties of debating with those who are very different from ourselves. Whether or not we like what Habermas, or Gadamer, or MacIntyre, or Rorty, for example, have said about these matters, we will need to join this conversation about the possibilities and proprieties of conversation. This will mean going beyond questions of deontological rationality, warrant, entitlement, and the like, which for the most part presuppose a monological conception of reason, to a more dialogical interpretation of reason. Otherwise we may be subject to something like the objection raised by an unsympathetic observer of an increasingly influential circle of British philosopher-theologians. He recently said to me, "They think the collapse of foundationalism is just an excuse to go on being conservative!"

I want now to look more closely at a crucial claim Plantinga makes just before insisting that we have a perfect right to our own pre-philosophical assumptions. The Christian philosopher, he tells us, "has his own topics and projects to think about; and when he thinks about the topics of current concern in the broader philosophical world, he will think about them in his own way, which may be a *different* way. He may have to reject certain currently fashionable assumptions about the philosophic enterprise—he may have to reject widely accepted assumptions as to what are the proper starting points and procedures for philosophical endeavor" (256). Just as Plantinga proceeded fifteen years ago to address several specific themes in the light of these claims, so I want to suggest several reasons for Christian philosophers to part company with one "currently fashionable assumption about the philosophical enterprise." It is the belief in propositions, or, to be a bit more precise, the assumption that propositions are the coin of the realm in which we carry out our philosophical business.

That seems like a harmless enough assumption, but the fact that it is rarely articulated as an assumption, and even more rarely defended, does not mean that questions are not begged when it is made. Whether this is so and whether it should be of concern to Christian philosophers as such is the question I wish to explore.

Strictly speaking, propositions differ from sentences and statements in that the latter belong to some natural language while the former do not. When we say, for example, that 'It is raining' and 'Es regnet' are sentences in English and German, respectively, that express the same proposition, we make it clear that the proposition in question is neither in English nor in German, and not because it is in French. But this is to

presuppose the highly controversial philosophical claim that meaning is independent of language, that natural languages are externally related to the meanings they convey. This is a much stronger claim than the one that in natural languages signs (graphemes and phonemes) are arbitrarily related to the meanings they signify; for meanings could easily be a function of the language games in which they are embedded (as Wittgensteinians, Heideggerians, structuralists, and post-structuralists agree) without disturbing the arbitrary relation of signs to meanings. The English word for rain could easily enough have been *sain* or *rian*. So the arbitrariness thesis does not entail the externality thesis.

Nor does the latter follow from the fact that we recognize "It is raining" as a good translation of "Es regnet" and vice versa. It is a fact that we can translate from one natural language into another (and from one sentence in English to its equivalent, e.g., from 'It's raining hard' to 'It's pouring') and that we can discriminate better and worse translations. But the externality thesis and the accompanying belief that we speak the heavenly language of propositions is not required by those facts. They belong to a particular theory about translation, and a highly controversial one at that.

We should be clear that the issue here is not some nominalist anxiety about overpopulating the world with abstract entities. I for one have no such anxieties and take the types, as distinct from tokens, of both sentences and statements to be abstract entities. It is just that these abstract entities, like the tokens to which they are internally related, belong to some natural language or another. Their natural habitat is the cave. Propositions, by contrast, are more ethereal.

And it is just for this reason that I think Christian philosophers would do well to forswear the proposition presupposition. For it encourages us to think that at the moment we begin to philosophize, we have already transcended the cave and ascended to a realm where our meanings, untouched, as it were by human hands (read traditions, practices) have an unchanging stability and clarity fit for the gods of Pure Reason. For if our meanings are free from embeddedness in the traditions and practices that make up natural language games, why should we not think them free from all the contingencies and particularities that make up the cave. Plato, and such notable Platonists as Husserl or Russell and Whitehead, thought it to be no small task to escape the cave into such a semantic empyrean. The language game of proposition talk presupposes, with Descartes, and Locke, and sense data theorists, I think, that we begin in the ether of Pure Meaning and that the only task is to distinguish true propositions from false ones.

In addition to the reasons our secular colleagues might give for resisting the temptation of this all too easy Platonism, it seems to me that Christian philosophers have a special reason. It consists in the importance of preserving the difference between God and ourselves, in this instance not confusing the human intellect with the divine. The assumption that our truth is God's Truth strikes me as dangerous, both spiritually and politically, and this, it seems to me, is the claim we make whenever we claim to be in possession of true propositions.

There is a close link, I suspect, between the proposition presupposition and the assumption that Christian philosophers have a special and proper propensity toward realism or even that Christianity stands or falls with realism. Since the realist sets herself off from Kantian idealism and all its anti-realistic variations, she must say more than that the real is and is what it is independently of what and how we think. For Kant says that; that's what the thing in itself and the noumenal are all about. To distance oneself from all forms of transcendental idealism, one must also claim that we (sometimes) know the real as it truly is, as it is in itself, as it is independently of human modes of apprehension. But for the theist, the thing in itself, the thing as it truly is, can only be the thing as God sees and knows it to be. Kant knew this well, and for that reason identified the thing in itself with the thing as it would appear to a creative, divine intellect that knew by means of intellectual intuition.

But this means that the (Christian) theist who wants to be a realist (but why?) needs to claim that we know things as God knows them. Of course, there will be the quantitative disclaimer. God knows many propositions to be true that we do not know to be true. And, of course, some that we think are true are in fact not. But when we do know a proposition to be true, that piece of our knowledge is fully on a par with God's knowledge of the same proposition.

Would we not be more consistent theists if we acknowledged that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, not just occasionally, when we are ignorant or in error, but all the time — that the infinite qualitative difference between God and ourselves also means, as Kant claimed, that God's thought is systematically different from ours? Is not the proposition presupposition the cornerstone of the tower of Babel where we chant as we climb, "I will ascend into heaven . . . I will be like the most High" (Isa. 14:13-14)?

"But," someone may respond, "the 'propositions' we talk about are almost always English sentences; we speak loosely and do not mean to imply by our proposition talk that we have transcended the cave of sentences and statements." No doubt this is often true, though where it is not explicitly emphasized a preoccupation with propositions stands as an open invitation to be taken at face value. We can easily mislead both our readers and ourselves.

But even if we avoid this danger, there is another closely related danger lying nearby. If with speech act or discourse theory we speak of statements rather than propositions (and remember that statements are made with sentences in one language or another), we will be reminded that making assertions of fact (uttering a constative statement) is just one of the many things we can do with words. This will help us to remember that when God speaks to us we are more likely to be dealing with promises, warnings, commands and the like than with mere assertions of fact. And we will be reminded that our own God talk should not primarily consist in asserting true "propositions" **about** God but in speaking **to** God in prayer, in praise, in confession, in gratitude, and so forth.

In short, the primacy of theoretical reason will be challenged, along with the corollary that our chief end is to collect a pocket full of true

propositions about God. I sometimes refer to this as the King Midas theory of truth; a long chain of Christian traditions puts the point by saying the goal of theology is to be *sapientia* and not merely *scientia*, that metaphysics must always be in the service of spirituality. One of the dangers of proposition talk, even when it is not the babelian claim to have transcended the cave, is that it encourages us to focus our attention too narrowly on asserting facts, on theoretical reason, on *scientia*.

Philosophers have not always been to blame, by any means, for the times when the church has allowed the quest for orthodoxy to be separated from the quest for orthopraxy, at the expense of the latter. But it seems to me that as the philosophers of the Christian church, we should resist the assumptions and practices of our guild when they encourage us to be part of the problem rather than a thoughtful resistance to it. Even as classical foundationalism and evidentialism bite the dust, we may need to be more autonomous vis-a-vis the theoretical bias derived, not from biblical faith but from modern science and the epistemological preoccupations of modern philosophy.

Closely related to this problem is another, one which contributes to both of the problems already mentioned: the tendency to marginalize practical reason in relation to theoretical reason and the tendency, embodied in anti-anti-realism, to overvalue our theoretical achievements in relation to the divine knowledge that for theists is the measure of Truth. (Of course, there can be truth which falls short of God's knowledge, but Kant acknowledges that!) Proposition talk suggests that the unit of meaning is not the term but the judgment, whether we call the judgment a sentence, a statement, or a proposition. But is not this too atomistic a theory of meaning? Is this not to deny or ignore a double embeddedness of our sentences and statements that calls for a double holism?

First there is semantic holism. Just as terms do not mean by themselves but only in the context of judgments, so judgments do not mean by themselves but only in the context of the networks and systems of judgments to which they belong. When Quine, drawing on Carnap and Duhem, insists that "our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body"² one chief reason is that they have the meaning they have "not individually but only as a corporate body."

The attempt to defend realism in the face of theism depends, as described above, on a semantic atomism that assumes we can deal with "propositions" one at a time and in isolation from each other. Semantic holism makes it easier to see how our thoughts are not God's thoughts but differ wholesale, if for no other reason than that, as theistic realists readily admit, God sees the whole picture while we do not. So our meanings cannot be the same as God's, and a fortiori, neither can our knowledge.

But there is a practical or pragmatic holism that takes us beyond this merely semantic holism. Our judgments are not only embedded in chains and chiasms of other judgments; they are embedded in the practices that make up the various language games we play. If merely semantic holism calls attention to the contingency, particularity, and irreducible plurality of our natural languages and, a fortiori, of the con-

ceptual schemes or paradigms we construct within them, practical or pragmatic holism makes even clearer how deeply, yes, even essentially we are cave-men-and-women.

For the Christian to acknowledge this double embeddedness of our meanings in one or another cave culture is to adopt a theistic anti-realism in place of the realism that claims we can know things as they really are, that is, as God knows them. Just as Aristotle insists against Plato that our souls are essentially embodied (and not divine), so pragmatic holism insists, against Platonic semantics, that our meanings are essentially embedded (and not divine). Christian thinkers often prefer the externality thesis to the embeddedness thesis out of fear of the historical relativism implicit in semantic-pragmatic holism. But it seems to me that we are committed to the claim that only God is absolute and that everything else is relative. So if one way our knowledge turns out to be finite is that it is relative, first to our being in the cave to begin with and then to our more specific location within the cave, that is not a discovery to be refuted in the name of faith. Here it is not that as Christians we have a "perfect right" to our own "pre-philosophical assumptions," even when this means we "may have to reject certain currently fashionable assumptions about the philosophic enterprise" (256); in this case we may well have a perfect duty to reject the currently fashionable assumption that the human intellect (at its best) is the highest standard of truth, even if we are so deeply embedded in the philosophical culture of our times (the latest footnotes to Plato) that the assumption in question is embedded in our philosophical muscles.

If I seem to dwell on the realism/anti-realism issue it is because I remain deeply puzzled why some of the finest Christian philosophers remain so deeply committed to realism. It is not because I think that is the most important issue raised by holistic resistance to proposition talk. For I take the challenge to the primacy of theoretical reason to be even more important. Pragmatic holism calls attention to the embeddedness of our meanings and truths not only at the point of input but also at the point of output. By that I mean that practices not only play a constitutive role in generating our meanings and truths, but that our cognitions feed back into our practices as well. When, in our preoccupation with propositions, we abstract from the role of practices in forming beliefs, we are all too likely at the same time to abstract from the role of beliefs in shaping practices (and attitudes or emotions as well—the correlate to practices in an Aristotelian ethics of embedded persons).

One way to express the change which Al's inaugural lecture served both to express and to evoke, is to say that for Christian philosophers, the gap between philosophy and theology has been dramatically reduced, or perhaps deliberately fuzzied. What I am suggesting is that, building on this substantial accomplishment, which puts us back in touch with a variety of premodern traditions, we need to close the gap between metaphysics and spirituality and between metaphysics and politics. There has been no shortage of work in metaphysics by Christian philosophers, seeking to spell out as carefully as possible the picture of reality presupposed by Christian faith. But it seems to me that this has primarily been metaphysics as speculative theory. I am not sug-

gesting that now we turn to the task of applying our metaphysical discoveries to practical life but rather adumbrating a different way of doing metaphysics, one in which metaphysical reflection grows so directly out of practices of prayer and public action that the language of applying true beliefs to right practices will seem quite inept for describing the relation of reflection to action and attitude.

In drawing the distinction between spirituality and politics as two modes of practice, I do not mean to suggest the difference between inwardness and outwardness. There is, of course, a personal and private dimension to any true Christian spirituality, but there is also a public dimension in liturgy and worship. In calling for a Christian philosophizing more overtly oriented toward practice in these senses, I am suggesting a priestly role for the philosopher. Correspondingly, in calling for a Christian philosophizing more overtly oriented toward political practice, in the broadest sense of the term, I am suggesting a prophetic role (and most assuredly not calling for philosopher kings). I am not suggesting that there is something inappropriate about the role of philosopher as apologist, only that we have other tasks we ought not to neglect.

For example, at present I am trying to think through the appropriate correlation between transcendence and self-transcendence. In other words, I am trying to rethink the meaning of divine transcendence by seeing what forms of human self-transcendence are essentially linked to it, the ways in which God's transcendence manifests itself in calling and leading us away from our natural preoccupation with ourselves, individual and corporate. My working assumption is that the practices of divine transcendence will go beyond the prayer, Lord I thank Thee that I am not a pantheist. I do not offer this work as a model, but only as a hint; for it is neither complete, nor, if it were, would I presume to offer it as a model.

But there are models from whom we can learn. In bringing metaphysics into closer touch with spirituality, there is a variety of traditions on which to draw, patristic, Augustinian, Franciscan, and even, if I may say so, Kierkegaardian. And, in seeking to link our God talk to public practices in society at large, we might do well to pay more attention to the liberation thinkers of our time. Perhaps, by God's grace, we might even be able to develop new models.

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NOTES

1. References in the text are to Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July 1984).
2. "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View*, (2nd ed. rev.; New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 41.