

Christian Philosophy: Conceptions, Continuations and Challenges, edited by J. Aaron Simmons. Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. xvi + 304. \$99.00 (hardcover).

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Christian Philosophy: Conceptions, Continuations, and Challenges begins with a thoughtful and reflective foreword by Nicholas Wolterstorff, where he writes that “The essays in this present volume are reflections on the state of Christian philosophizing after Plantinga’s issuance of his manifesto” (x). This is an apt introduction for at least two reasons: first, the impact of Plantinga’s “Advice to Christian Philosophy” is of central importance to this text, though the authors disagree about whether it should be viewed as largely positive, negative, or of mixed results; second, the topic of these works really is best understood as Christian *philosophizing* rather than Christian philosophy. To draw again from Wolterstorff’s introduction, he writes that “when one speaks of philosophy . . . one might have in mind the social practice of philosophy, or one might have in mind the thought and texts produced by those who engage in that practice.” This volume centers upon the former rather than the latter. The primary question addressed in this book is this: how ought Christians to *do* philosophy?

One notable feature of this collection is that, for the most part, it represents the perspective of continental philosophy. This is a refreshing and compelling departure from the typically analytic leanings of Christian philosophy. Continental philosophers will surely appreciate the variety of voices from their background, and analytic philosophers (like myself) will benefit from the challenges raised for analytic philosophy of religion. A handful of authors invoke a tone of derision and, at times, outright scorn towards analytic philosophy of religion, but they are the exception. In contrast, Bruce Ellis Benson’s chapter, “The Two-Fold Task of Christian Philosophy of Religion,” beautifully depicts the complementary nature of analytic and continental Christian philosophy. I found this chapter to be particularly inspiring. On the whole, this is a collection of essays that ought to be of interest to any Christian working in philosophy today.

This volume contains seventeen chapters, thirteen of which are original to this book. J. Aaron Simmons introduces this work as having two broad aims: (1) “To survey where Christian philosophy has been and what it has become in the contemporary philosophical landscape; (2) To consider what Christian philosophy should be and what role it should play in the future of philosophical inquiry” (14). I would add that nearly every chapter in this volume is concerned with one of the following questions: Is contemporary analytic Christian philosophy properly Christian? Is it



properly philosophical? Is it perhaps hostile to, or ignorant of, continental strains of Christian philosophy?

This book is divided into three parts: Conceptions, Continuations, and Challenges. Part I begins with two previously published papers: Plantinga's canonical "Advice to Christian Philosophy" and Jean-Luc Marion's "Christian Philosophy: Hermeneutic or Heuristic?" Given how many of the papers in this anthology directly engage with the content of Plantinga's "Advice," it is fitting that it is included in its entirety here. In Marion's essay, first published in 2008, Marion argues that Christian philosophy ought to be understood not as a hermeneutic but rather as a "heuristic theory of charity" (48). This chapter accords well with the aims and motives of many of the contributors to this volume.

Chapter 3 stands out as exceptional. Here, Kyla Ebels-Duggan proposes that we view Plantinga's advice for Christian philosophers "to ask your own questions" as a twofold project: we are to strive for *autonomy* from the philosophical community as a whole and for *integrity* as members of the Christian community. This chapter is clear, careful and compelling, and Ebels-Duggan's careful consideration of what autonomy and integrity require is well worth a careful read.

Merold Westphal's "Taking Plantinga Seriously: Advice to Christian Philosophers" comes next. Westphal challenges Christian philosophers to adopt "a priestly role . . . a prophetic role" He writes, "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" (81). In the process, Westphal urges Christian philosophers to reconsider their commitment to propositions and the role that theoretical reasoning plays in philosophy. By rejecting propositions, he hopes that "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" (79). It is interesting to note that Westphal's 1973 "Prolegomena to any Future Philosophy of Religion which will be able to Come Forth as Prophecy" is not included in this volume. Given that it is frequently referenced by other contributors to this volume, I would have appreciated its inclusion alongside Plantinga's contemporaneous advice.

Chapter 5 is Benson's "The Two-Fold Task of Christian Philosophy of Religion." Like chapter 3, this paper stands out among the rest. Benson reflects on the ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life, noting that philosophy is a practical pursuit and a theoretical pursuit; "it is *one task* that takes two forms" (83). I cannot adequately capture the richness of Benson's position here; I encourage all Christian philosophers to read it for themselves. The primary conclusion is this: continental and analytic philosophers of religion ought not to get too caught up in each other's failings, but should instead see themselves as "engaged in a common project to which we are all contributors in different ways" (102). CPR might lean

towards the practical while APR leans towards the theoretical, but both are essential aspects of the two-fold task of Christian philosophy.

Part One concludes with Kevin Hart's "Christian Phenomenology." Hart writes that due to the nature of philosophical phenomenology, "There is no Christian phenomenology practiced in philosophy. Yet this claim does not preclude the possibility that the religion is itself phenomenological in one or more sense, and that knowing some philosophy helps one to see this" (107). Drawing upon the parables of Christ to present Jesus as phenomenologist, Hart suggests that Christian phenomenology is "an impulse within Christianity rather than philosophy" (108). Unfortunately, this chapter includes a critique of analytic Christian philosophy that strikes me as something of a strawman. Hart writes that "Unlike most versions of Christian philosophy, Christian phenomenology begins with the testimony of Scripture" (112). He suggests that "Usually, but certainly not always, the views in play in analytic philosophy of religion are informed neither by theology nor by biblical criticism; often they do not pay sufficient attention to Christianity as a concrete practice" (118). In my experience, these claims are just not true. Further, these criticisms are unnecessary. Hart's insights regarding Christian phenomenology are interesting and compelling enough to stand on their own.

Part Two concerns what Simmons calls *continuations* of Christian philosophy; here the discussion turns towards the future of the discipline. This section begins with Charles Taliaferro's "On Divine Dedication: Philosophical Theology with Jeremy Taylor." Taliaferro's stated goal is to "extend the list of themes covered in Christian philosophy . . . to include the nature, value, and scope of dedications" (123). Drawing on the work of seventeenth-century Anglican theologian Jeremy Taylor, Taliaferro examines the impact of contemplative prayer on our perception of time. He quotes Taylor as writing that "God rewards our minutes with long and eternal happiness" and then goes further, suggesting that time spent in prayer can be, in some sense, a momentary experience of eternity (128). He concludes: "What I hope to have identified is how time itself can be a dedicatory good and that using it in dedicated, meditative, prayerful ways can set up a separable time frame as distinct from the many goods we may aspire to in ordinary temporality" (130). This discussion is novel, but brief; it felt a bit like the beginning stages of an interesting and compelling project.

Neal DeRoo's "Discerning the Spirit: The Task of Christian Philosophy" follows. He argues that "the primary task of Christian philosophy should be discerning the 'spirits' of the age. Here, DeRoo references an aside from Plantinga's advice, where Plantinga wrote that most disciplines are "*animated by a spirit* wholly foreign to that of Christian theism" (133). Plantinga noted that he did not "have the space here to elaborate and develop this point"; DeRoo sets out to do so. First, drawing on Husserl's writing on the "spirit of Europe," he articulates a notion of the "spirits" of an age. Second, he suggests an anthropology—inspired by Herman Dooyeweerd's—and unpacks the way in which this anthropology is both useful

for discerning the spirits of the age and wholly compatible with Christian conception of spirits—including the Holy Spirit. Finally, he “argue[s] that the task of philosophy, and especially Christian philosophy, is to discern the nature of these spirits as they are operative in human action, and try to clarify and articulate these spirits in a theoretical and systematic fashion” (143). By discerning and responding to the spirits of our age, Christian philosophers should be able to speak to the tensions between, for example, “the West and Islam, the global North and the global South, and/or the 1 percent and the 99 percent” (145).

Chapter 9 is “Christian Philosophy and Disability Advocacy” by Kevin Timpe. In this chapter, Timpe draws four parallels between Christian philosophy and disability advocacy: both are *normative, hermeneutically situated, developmental* and *communal*. Further, Timpe notes that they share the following feature: “Christian philosophy and advocacy are not *just* about arguments or truth claims (though they *are* about those); they’re about crafting and living out a vision that invites others to participate with us” (163). This well-crafted and persuasive chapter would be particularly useful in a classroom setting.

As a person with deep commitments to the value of teaching philosophy, I consider chapter 10 the highlight of this book. In “Teaching Evil,” Meghan Sullivan reflects on the substantial challenge posed by teaching the problem of evil, particularly as a committed Christian who nevertheless judges the problem of evil to be “a model for a successful philosophical argument” (165). She asks, “Am I intellectually committed to atheism but simply unwilling to quit my Mass-attending ways?” (165) In response to this challenge, Sullivan remarks that “a *dialectical mismatch* occurs when one side of the debate is able to state her argument in a short, plausible-seeming and logically valid argument. But to refute any particular premise of the argument, the other side must appeal to a complex theory with difficult-to-transmit evidence” (166). The theist is in a position of dialectical mismatch with respect to the problem of evil. As a result, the problem *seems* simpler, more elegant, than any response. However, Sullivan introduces a number of analogous cases, noting that “we *expect* a bit of complexity in a theory of the nature of justice or a theory of the nature of truth. And as we investigate the details in the more complex responses, we observe systems that are beautiful and enlightening” (167). Accordingly, Sullivan advocates for and defends a *particularist* response to the problem of evil, one that draws heavily and unabashedly on particular Christian commitments.

Part Two concludes with Trent Dougherty’s “Advice for Analytic Theologians: Faith Guided Scholarship.” I suspect that many readers, like myself, will be disinclined to take advice from this source.

The third and final part of this book addresses *challenges* to Christian Philosophy. The first challenge comes in chapter 12, J. Aaron Simmons’s “The Strategies of Christian Philosophy.” Simmons argues that “we now find ourselves in a situation where continuing to engage in Christian

philosophy, in the technical sense as laid out by Plantinga, is likely to be a problematic strategy" (191). Contrasting his own experience as a Christian student of philosophy with that of the fictional student in Plantinga's address, he writes "My experience does not lead me to conclude in favor of the oppositional necessity that Plantinga and many other Christian philosophers seem to locate between something called 'the philosophical community' and something called 'the Christian community'" (190). Instead, drawing heavily on Westphal's 1973 "Prolegomena," he proposes that "what is needed in the current situation is an approach that primarily understands philosophy of religion as an attempt to foster expanded dialogue and relational engagement beyond any overly narrow construal of *Christianity* or *philosophy*" (200).

The second challenge comes in chapter 13 with Paul Moser's "Christian Philosophy and Christ Crucified: Fragmentary Theory in Scandalous Power." Here, Moser asserts that most Christian philosophy is Christian in name only, more accurately described as "mere theism" (210). In contrast, should we recognize the centrality of Christ's crucifixion, we would see that "[true] Christian philosophy and wisdom are scandalous power but fragmentary in their theoretical reach" (212). The love and power of God are scandalous because, by submitting to death on the cross, Christ upends "the human power of domination" (215). They are epistemically scandalous as well, for "God's ultimate evidence for self-revelation to humans does not rely on human arguments or any other source of human self-boasting or self-credit" (219). Finally, they are fragmentary because "At best, we 'know in part' and 'see through a lens dimly,' as candor in the face of unjust suffering makes undeniable. Where do our obvious intellectual limits leave Christian philosophy? In fragments, in the best scenario" (224).

J. L. Schellenberg's "Is Plantinga-Style Christian Philosophy Really Philosophy?" comes next. Schellenberg's thesis here is that, *no*, Plantinga-Style Christian philosophy is *not* really philosophy. More specifically, these "philosophers" fail Schellenberg's "Communal Condition: to be doing philosophy one must aim not just to solve certain fundamental problems, or contribute thereto, but to do so together with like-minded others in a shared enterprise leading to informed consensus" (232). The arguments in this chapter struck me as deeply implausible—despite Schellenberg's belief that his requirement "will, I expect, seem quite modest and intuitive to many" (232). There is a great deal more to be said about this, but William Hasker's response to this objection in chapter 17, Meghan Sullivan's defense of a particularist response to the problem of evil in chapter 10, and Graham Oppy's competing conception of philosophy in chapter 15 all do a far better job of undermining Schellenberg's thesis than I could hope to do here.

In chapter 15, Graham Oppy's "Philosophy, Religion, and Worldview" calls into question the triumphalist narrative of Christian philosophy. He reconceives Plantinga's Advice as "Advice to Philosophers *in general*:" "The core of this advice, it seems to me, is that you should be authentic: you should embody your deepest values and convictions in the life that

you lead" (253). With that in mind, Oppy maintains that "There is no reason to single out Christian doctrines for special attention: for *every* worldview, there is a domain of inquiry in which a range of doctrines proper to that worldview are taken as antecedents in the conditional questions that frame that domain of inquiry" (258).

The final challenge comes in chapter 16 in Peter Ochs's "Beyond Two-Valued Logics: A Jewish Philosopher's Take on Recent Trends in Christian Philosophy." Just as Westphal seeks to undermine the Christian philosophers' commitment to propositions, Ochs expresses disappointment that the majority of Christian philosophers "uphold the hegemony of the modern model of logic and reasoning: practicing and promoting types of two-valued, propositional logic as the standard model of rationality even when applied to subjects toward which Christianity has privileged access" (260). Instead, he advocates multivalued logic. This chapter includes a lengthy appendix, which he describes as "a sample of a more technical philosophical modeling of scriptural logic . . . a taste of how multivalued logics may be applied to help identify the reasoning that are indigenous to scriptural traditions or also cross-traditional practices" (279–280).

The book concludes with a chapter by William Hasker entitled "Responding to Challenges." As the title indicates, Hasker adopts the role of defending Christian philosophy from the challenges raised in chapters 12–16. Hasker's treatment of each challenge is fair, clearly and carefully presented, and charitable—even when little charity has been given in return. His response to Simmons is the most lengthy, but his overall goal can be summarized as "to show that the two approaches [CPR and APR] are not as sharply opposed as Simmons sometimes seems to suppose" (298).

Hasker's response to Moser is brief yet powerful, accurately depicting the core problems in Moser's chapter. He notes Moser's "apparent lack of appreciation for the work of other contemporary Christian philosophers" (296). Even more damaging, however, is the lack of any *positive* conception of Christian philosophy to be found in Moser's criticism. "Instead of joining with them in common cause, he aspires to create a new discipline, or subdiscipline, of his own, one that he is as yet unable to describe in any positive fashion, except that it will not suffer from the defects that mar Christian philosophy as it now exists" (297). Hasker likewise decisively addresses Schellenberg's "Communal Condition," concluding that "I think what we have here is a convincing case that we not only have not achieved, but are nowhere close to achieving, sufficient agreement to establish the Communal Condition as a necessary condition for anyone's qualifying as a philosopher" (293). Hasker's responses to Oppy and Ochs include both a defense of Christian philosophy and a concession that certain aspects of the challenge ought to be taken up by Christian philosophers as part of "the challenge for a philosophical movement to engage with a question (or group of questions) that are of importance for the movement but are not receiving adequate attention" (289).