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## HOW CHRISTIAN CAN PHILOSOPHY BE?

I who write this am both a Christian and a philosopher. Perhaps you, my reader, are both of these things as well. Perhaps, furthermore, you know of other persons who are both Christians and philosophers, or who aspire to exemplify that combination of attributes. Very likely, it has occurred to you to wonder what the relationship between Christian commitment and philosophical practice is, or what it ideally ought to be.<sup>1</sup> In this essay I shall address this issue by posing the question, “How Christian can philosophy be?”

One answer to our question is that philosophy can’t be Christian at all. Now, if I agreed with that, I would hardly be writing an essay such as this one! Still, the viewpoint is one that a number of people do hold, and it deserves some attention from us. Some of the people who hold this are professional philosophers who hold it because they think philosophy, if properly done, will quickly and decisively eliminate religious perspectives such as Christianity from serious consideration. Such an attitude is less common today than it was a few decades ago, but it does still exist. However, the view that philosophy and Christianity are incompatible is also held by some Christians. I imagine all of us have encountered Christians such as this, persons who regard philosophy as thoroughly opposed and antagonistic to Christian faith, and who would scorn anything called “Christian philosophy” as dangerous nonsense. This sort of viewpoint will not be congenial to most readers of this essay. Nevertheless, we must admit that in some circumstances, such an attitude has a real though limited justification. If one’s en-

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<sup>1</sup> Clearly similar questions can arise, and have in fact arisen, in the context of faith traditions other than Christianity. For present purposes, it will aid clarity of focus to keep the discussion within the Christian context, but some of what is said here may admit of application in those other contexts as well.

counter with philosophy has been with individual philosophers and with types of philosophy that are hostile to Christian faith, and if (importantly) one sees no prospects of any other sort of philosophy that might offer a more congenial framework for thinking about one's beliefs, then no doubt the best solution, in the short run, is simply to turn one's back on philosophy and all its works.

Seen in a larger perspective, however, such an approach clearly has its limitations. Part of our calling as Christians is to "love God with all our minds," and doing this centrally involves making the attempt to understand, as best we can, what the affirmations of Christian faith are all about. And it has repeatedly been the experience of Christians seeking to do this, that the sorts of reflection made possible by philosophy are helpful if not essential in the process. Different styles and types of philosophy have been favored in different periods, but the urge to make use of philosophy in clarifying the content of the faith seems to be widespread. And on the other hand, the anti-intellectualism that would reject philosophy—and "worldly learning" in general—holds little promise for a constructive Christian use of the mind.

There are, however, some philosophers who are not necessarily opposed to Christianity who nevertheless think philosophy cannot be Christian. Their reason for thinking this is that philosophy has to be neutral and impartial between all options; to adopt in one's philosophy a particular viewpoint such as Christianity would mean that the philosophy is biased, prejudiced, and so not good philosophy. As a representative of this sort of approach, we may consider the French philosopher René Descartes. According to Descartes, we should begin in philosophy by doubting—by ceasing to seriously believe—literally everything we have previously accepted as true. We then should proceed in building up our belief-system, step by laborious step, accepting only what can be proved with absolute certainty using the special methods of philosophy. Descartes admitted that we cannot possibly get along in the everyday affairs of life like this. In everyday, practical matters we have to go on accepting the assumptions held by everybody around us, in spite of the fact that we don't really know whether these assumptions are true or not. But with regard to the things we seriously accept and believe as being the truth, the impartial, starting-from-scratch method is the only way to go.

This aspiration to reject, or hold in suspension, all previous beliefs and start over from scratch with "pure reason" is one that has been shared, in one way or another, by quite a number of philosophers. But it is an aspiration that more and more philosophers now recognize is simply impossible to ful-

fill. If you really could strip yourself completely of everything you now believe, you would, to be sure, reach a certain sort of perfection. You would be perfectly, unconquerably ignorant—with no hope of ever recovering from that ignorance! The truth is that we simply have no option except to do philosophy as the people we are, believing the things we actually do believe, and doing our best to bring ourselves and our beliefs more in line with what is in accord with sound reason. What is required for good philosophy is not an impossible state of absolute neutrality, but rather fairness and a resolute attempt to evaluate all perspectives and beliefs, including one's own, for their internal coherence and their correspondence with the evidence we have. In particular, we must seriously try our best to understand the beliefs of those who disagree with us, rather than caricature and distort those beliefs. And our evaluation of all beliefs, of others as well as our own, must be carried out fairly, not claiming for our own favored perspective privileges we deny to others. These, I submit, are requirements that can and should be accepted in good faith by Christian philosophy.

We now turn to consider the views of three philosophers who are dedicated Christians, and who believe that the relationship between philosophy and Christianity can be one that is positive and mutually supporting, rather than one that is characterized either by neutrality and separation or by actual hostility. All three fall within the broad domain of “analytic philosophy of religion,” though with significant differences in the way they pursue their philosophical work. These are not by any means the only Christian philosophers who have spoken to the issue,<sup>2</sup> but what they have to say presents us with some intriguing and challenging alternatives as we seek further insight concerning our topic.

The first philosopher whose views we will consider is Paul K. Moser. Moser is Professor and Chair of Philosophy of Loyola University in Chicago. He has recently served as Editor of the *American Philosophical Quarterly*. He is Co-Editor of the Cambridge University Press book series in Religion, Philosophy, and Society, and has served as General Editor for the Oxford University Press series of Handbooks in Philosophy. His answer to our question, briefly summarized, is that philosophy can and should be Christian

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<sup>2</sup> See Alvin PLANTINGA, “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” *Faith and Philosophy* 1,3 (1984, July): 253–71; also the symposium, “More Advice to Christian Philosophers,” *Faith and Philosophy* 16,2 (1999, April): 147–93, comprising Eleonore STUMP, “Orthodoxy and Heresy,” 147–63; Peter VAN INWAGEN, “Some Remarks on Plantinga’s Advice,” 164–72; Merold WESTPHAL, “Taking Plantinga Seriously,” 173–82; and Alvin PLANTINGA, “On Heresy, Mind, and Truth,” 182–93. And there are many more examples.

to a maximal degree. In practice, however it usually isn't, even when done by professing Christians. For more detail, we turn to a lecture of his, entitled "Christ-Shaped Philosophy."<sup>3</sup> He writes:

Following Jesus, the apostle Paul is the most profound advocate of a Christ-shaped philosophy. . . . Paul's Letter to the Colossians offers a striking portrait of Christ-shaped philosophy. To that end, it offers a firm warning: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy . . . and not according to Christ" (Col. 2:8; translations from NRSV). Note the contrast between philosophy and Christ. Philosophy outside the authority of Christ, according to Paul, is dangerous to human freedom and life. The alternative is philosophy under Christ, and this involves a distinctive kind of wisdom. If philosophy is the love and pursuit of wisdom, *Christian* philosophy is the love and pursuit of wisdom under the authority of Christ, which calls for an ongoing union with Christ, including one's belonging to God in Christ (p. 2).

The last sentence, with its reference to union with Christ, points to the importance, for Christ-shaped philosophy, of the philosopher himself or herself being shaped by Christ. And indeed, most of the lecture is focused more directly on the philosopher's own union and communion with Christ, than with the actual philosophy as such. I offer a few extracts from Moser's rich and impassioned exposition:

[F]aith in God does not disappoint us [because] we have been flooded in our deepest experience by the presence and power of God's personal *agapē*, courtesy of the Spirit of Christ. Without this experience, one will have a hard time adequately understanding the Good News of God in Christ. An appeal to the testimony of God's Spirit will fall short, cognitively and existentially, if it omits reference to the experienced flood of the Spirit's *agapē*. It then will be too remote from God's actual self-revealed moral character in Christ. Christian philosophy should hallmark this unique vital flood of God's *agapē* in Christ. It is puzzling indeed that instead it has neglected it. (p. 4f)

The Good News . . . calls for the Gethsemane union of all Christians, even today, with the Christ who obediently suffered the Roman cross in ancient times. If we omit this union, the cross of Christ loses its divine redemptive power for today, however attentive and even emotional one's response to it is. (p. 7)

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<sup>3</sup> "Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United," available at <http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=131> (accessed January 12, 2016). Page references in this section are to this lecture.

Paul has in mind . . . the tendency of the world's wisdom and philosophy to obscure or divert attention from the reality of "Christ [as] the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24). . . . Aside from the diversionary dangers of philosophy, Paul acknowledges that "among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age" (1 Cor. 2:6). He would add that among the mature we Christians do offer a philosophy, though it is not of this age. (p. 8)

Christian philosophy joins Gethsemane union with a religious epistemology oriented toward the Spirit of God and Christ. Christian philosophy must find knowledge of God, like human redemption, in divine grace rather than human earning. (p. 9)

As has been noted, these passages are predominantly concerned with the philosopher's own union with Christ, more than with Christian philosophy as such. (We are however put on notice that "Gethsemane union with Christ," and the witness of Christ's Spirit, must be an important part of the content of such philosophy.) Towards the end of his lecture, however, Moser addresses the issue of Christian philosophy more directly:

How, then, is Jesus relevant to philosophy as a discipline? I mention just one important way. Philosophy in its normal mode, without being receptive to authoritative divine love commands, leaves humans in a discussion mode, short of an obedience mode under divine authority. Philosophical questions naturally prompt philosophical questions about philosophical questions, and this launches a regress of higher-order, or at least related, questions, with no end to philosophical discussion. Hence, the questions of philosophy are notoriously perennial. (p. 12)

Any philosopher will quickly recognize the essential truth of what is said here. But while many have viewed the perennial nature of philosophical questions as a positive, and indeed endearing, characteristic of the discipline, for Moser's version of Christian philosophy it is an evil that needs to be overcome:

As divinely appointed Lord . . . Jesus commands humans to move, for their own good, to an obedience mode of existence relative to divine love commands . . . Accordingly, we need to transcend a normal discussion mode, and thus philosophical discussion itself, to face with sincerity the personal inward Authority who commands what humans need: Faithful obedience and belonging to the perfectly loving Giver of life. Jesus commands love from us toward God and others *beyond* discussion and the acquisition of truth, even philosophical truth. He thereby cleanses the temple of philosophy, and turns over our self-promoting tables of

mere philosophical discussion. He pronounces judgment on this long-standing self-made temple, in genuine love for its wayward builders. His corrective judgment purportedly brings us what we truly need to flourish in lasting companionship with God and other humans. (pp. 11–12)

This, then, is one distinctive characteristic of Christian philosophy: it moves us from the “discussion mode” of ordinary philosophy into the “obedience mode” called for by the divine commands and the divine offer of love. For a more extensive characterization of Christian philosophy, we turn to an earlier essay by Moser entitled “Jesus and Philosophy: On the Questions We Ask.”<sup>4</sup> Here again we find the contrast between the discussion mode and the obedience mode, with Christian philosophy to be done in the obedience mode. Furthermore,

we should think of philosophy in the obedience mode as first and foremost philosophy in the eager service of the church of Jesus. We must reorient philosophy to be used as a spiritual gift designed for ministry within the church of Jesus . . . Philosophers should eagerly serve the church by letting the focuses of philosophy, including its questions, be guided by what is needed to build up the church as a ministry of the Good News of Jesus. As a result, there is no place under the lordship of Jesus for lone-ranger philosophers who choose their questions apart from the needs of the church. (pp. 276–77)

Philosophy so conceived, to be sure, will not correspond with the discipline of philosophy as this is commonly understood:

The reorientation of philosophy under Jesus does not fit with philosophy as practiced in a secular setting, and this is no surprise. The mission of Jesus is, owing to its unrelenting exaltation of the will of God, altogether out of place in a secular perspective. (p. 277)

Among other things, this means that certain sorts of questions often pursued by philosophers should be seen as pointless distractions, equivalent to the “endless genealogies” denounced by Paul in 1 Timothy 1:3–6. Among these are certain “interpretive minutia of the history of philosophy”; examples given are questions about the conceptual development of the theory of forms in Plato’s dialogues, and questions about multiple theories of primary substance in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. We should also set aside as “not compel-

<sup>4</sup> *Faith and Philosophy* 22,3 (2005, July): 261–83. Page references in what follows are to this article.

ling” the medieval dispute over whether several angels can inhabit the same place at the same time (pp. 278f.). Moser concludes that “Philosophy . . . is not automatically a friend of Jesus as the Lord of heaven and earth; nor is he automatically a friend of philosophy” (p. 279). Nevertheless, “Jesus relates to Philosophy . . . as the One truly reflected in it, whenever it is done right. So, Jesus is Lord even of Philosophy” (p. 281).

Let me begin my response by acknowledging that, in his advocacy of Christian philosophy, Moser is witnessing to the Gospel of Christ. Furthermore, we all need to hear that Gospel, even and perhaps especially those of us who consider that we have already heard it and have accepted God’s invitation to become his children. For this witness, then, we are in Paul Moser’s debt. Nevertheless, it is my conviction that we will do well to resist much of what he says in his account of Christian philosophy.

Let me begin by asking, Why is important for him to describe both Jesus and Paul as philosophers?<sup>5</sup> It is clear that neither Jesus nor Paul performed the sorts of activities characteristic of philosophers, then or now. They did not give public lectures on philosophical topics, nor did they accept pupils for instruction in philosophy, or compose treatises on philosophical subjects. So why should we call them philosophers?<sup>6</sup>

It turns out, however, that if we pose the question like this, we are misunderstanding Moser’s use of the word ‘philosopher’. We may be supposing that he was using the word in the way most philosophers today would use it, to refer to people who teach in philosophy departments, contribute articles to philosophical journals, attend philosophical conferences, and the like. It

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<sup>5</sup> This question cannot be answered by appealing to Colossians 2:8 and the other New Testament texts cited by Moser. Paul’s use of *philosophia* cannot be simply equated with the contemporary discipline of philosophy. (The full description reads, “philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe . . .”) The commentator T.K. Abbot remarks that *philosophia* is a “term not occurring elsewhere in the N.T., and no doubt adopted here because it was used by the false teachers themselves.” He also states, “St. Paul is not condemning philosophy in general, which, indeed, would be quite beside his purpose.” *The Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*. International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1905), 246, 247. A similar view is taken in *The Interpreter’s Bible* and in various more recent commentaries. Nor do Paul’s references to “wisdom” in 1 Corinthians imply anything similar to philosophy as we know it. This wisdom—some of it, no doubt, contained in Paul’s existing New Testament writings—is for the spiritually mature, not for the philosophically sophisticated.

<sup>6</sup> For more discussion along these lines, see my “Paul Moser’s Christian Philosophy,” Moser’s “Reply to Hasker,” and my “Two Wisdoms, Two ‘Philosophies,’” all available at the website referenced above.

would of course also include earlier thinkers whom we recognize as our antecedents and forerunners—men such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, and Wittgenstein. And because of the obvious differences between the sorts of things done by people such as these on the one hand, and by Jesus and Paul on the other, we might question the point of calling Jesus and Paul “philosophers.”

It turns out, however, that this is the wrong way to understand Moser’s use of ‘philosopher.’ It really has nothing especially to do with philosophy as a profession. Rather, he appeals to the etymology of ‘philosophy’ as “love of wisdom,” and in calling Jesus and Paul philosophers he was underscoring the evident fact that both Jesus and Paul loved and pursued wisdom. This however was a spiritual wisdom, something which is significantly different from the sort of insight that is prized, and sometimes attained, by philosophers. To see this difference clearly, compare some beloved biblical text—say, the letter to the Philippians—with a philosophical construct such as Saul Kripke’s theory of necessary truth. Both of these, I would say, convey genuine wisdom, but surely not the same kind of wisdom. Indeed, there is no evident reason why the sort of spiritual wisdom found in Paul’s letters is more the concern of professional philosophers than it is the concern of Christian ministers, or Christian kindergarten teachers, or Christian bricklayers. The challenge to become mature in Christ is a challenge for each and every Christian believer—for professional philosophers not less or more than for others.

Unfortunately, however, Moser is not consistent in using ‘philosophy’ and ‘philosopher’ in this sense. When he says that Christian *philosophy* has neglected the “unique flood of God’s *agapē* in Christ,” it is clear that ‘philosophy’ has gone back to its more accustomed, professional connotation: Moser is saying that the things said and written by *professional Christian philosophers* are lacking in this respect. But if the meaning of ‘philosophy’ shifts back and forth in this way it is becoming a source of confusion, something we need to be on guard against as we read his articles.

So there are two sorts of wisdom, and, if you like, two kinds of “philosophy.” No harm in that, so long as we are clear about the distinction between the kinds. Moser, however, tends to conflate them, and I have come to see that this conflation is the key to the entire strategy of his proposal for “Christ-shaped philosophy.” Once we think that there is a single thing, called “wisdom,” which both the Apostle Paul and Saul Kripke were seeking, the question becomes inevitable: Which of them got it right? And for



a Christian, at any rate, the answer is obvious: the *true* wisdom, the wisdom we need to seek with all our hearts, is the wisdom of the Cross, the wisdom that is advocated and exemplified by the apostle. (One might say, Saul needs to become Paul, or at least to become a whole lot more like Paul!) The sorts of questions typically raised by philosophers may have their place, but *only* insofar as they serve to advance the Gospel; otherwise they are at best distractions, and often a sinful evasion of the truth about ourselves and our spiritual need that we are so reluctant to face.

Moser does value philosophy, considered as the love and pursuit of spiritual wisdom. In contrast, however, he displays an extremely low opinion of the value of the things professional philosophers actually do—of the things in which the profession of philosophy largely consists, in the real world. To be sure, philosophers do sometimes continue their discussions long after there is nothing left worth discussing, and pursue at length minutia that are worth at best no more than a footnote. But these are easy targets; such foibles are common in many fields of study, and they are not characteristic of the best philosophical work. But to dismiss philosophical discussion as inherently diversionary, and to do so by placing it in competition with a Christian's obedience to God and to Christ, is another matter. If we put into practice Moser's restriction of acceptable philosophy to what is related to some particular need of the church, most of philosophy as we know it would disappear.<sup>7</sup> His sweeping dismissal of historical minutia would, if accepted, negate the serious study of the history of philosophy.<sup>8</sup> "And a good thing, too," perhaps he would say—but I beg leave to disagree, and I believe a strong majority of Christian philosophers will be on my side about this. Philosophy is not the Gospel of Christ, and is no substitute for the Gospel. But philosophy is a serious, worthwhile intellectual discipline, one whose value and importance is not limited by the constricting boundaries imposed by Moser.

<sup>7</sup> Plantinga recommends that "the Christian philosophical community ought to get on with the philosophical questions of importance to the Christian community" ("Advice to Christian Philosophers," p. 264), but he never states that Christian philosophers should address no other questions. Peter van Inwagen trenchantly remarks, "In philosophy's house there are many mansions, and it is possible to wander about its corridors for quite a long while without encountering anything that either affirms or contradicts the Christian faith" ("Some Remarks on Plantinga's Advice," 169).

<sup>8</sup> If Plato's theory of forms, and Aristotle's doctrine of substance, are trivial and not worth investigating, the historian of philosophy had better take up some more serious profession.

Let me add one more thing: It seems to me that there is a certain disconnect (and I am not the only one to have noticed this) between Moser's advocacy of Christian philosophy and his own philosophical practice. His philosophical activities are prodigious—and, in many ways, highly successful. And they certainly include philosophical work that falls squarely under his rubric of Christian philosophy. But not all of it does, by any means. Consider, for instance, his editorship of the *American Philosophical Quarterly* (*APQ*). What happened, one wonders, when he was approached with regard to taking on that responsibility? We could imagine him responding to the inquiry something like this: "I am honored and flattered by your invitation, and will give it my most serious consideration. I think you should be aware, however, that I regard philosophy as it is usually practiced, and as it has been practiced by most of your contributors, as dangerous to human freedom and life. The endless discussions, which as we know are all too characteristic of our discipline, easily distract philosophers from the need for redemption through Christ. Nor is there any human value in pursuing minutia of historical scholarship which offer no practical benefit. What is needed, instead, is philosophy in the obedience mode, philosophy which will serve the church of Jesus Christ in its mission of evangelism and service to humankind. If I am appointed I will do my utmost to bring about this shift in the thinking of our discipline, and in the contents of the *APQ*. If that is what you are looking for in an editor, I am your man."

Now, I am in no way privy to the actual deliberations which surrounded Moser's appointment, but I should be astonished to learn that anything resembling that fictitious speech was ever delivered. What Moser undertook to do, I believe, and what he has in fact done, is to conduct the editorial affairs of *APQ* according to the highest standards of the discipline of philosophy—the actual, existing, largely secular discipline. Similar remarks would apply to his editorship of the two important book series mentioned above—and rightly so, in my opinion. So given the choice between Moser's vision of Christian philosophy on the one hand, and his actual practice of the discipline on the other, I recommend that we applaud and emulate his practice, and take the vision with more than a grain of salt.

The second philosopher whose views will concern us is Robert Merrihew Adams. I think there will be no controversy if I say that he is one of the most highly respected Christian philosophers of our time—respected and honored by his fellow Christian philosophers, but also by the philosophical community generally. He taught for many years at U.C.L.A., and then served for

some years as chair of the Yale University philosophy department. He is a past president of the Society of Christian Philosophers, and a Fellow of the British Academy. We will consult his views as expressed in his recently published “A Philosophical Autobiography.”<sup>9</sup>

Robert Adams’ answer to the question, “How Christian can philosophy be?” is complex and not easily summarized.<sup>10</sup> We can’t help but notice, however, how his vision contrasts with what we have seen in Paul Moser. For Moser, there is a sharp antithesis between ordinary, secular philosophy and the message of Christ, and he aggressively advocates an alternative vision that is so radical that some will fail to recognize it as philosophy. In Adams, there is none of this drama. From his autobiographical essay we receive the impression that philosophy and his Christian faith have co-existed throughout most of his life; not free from tensions, to be sure, but without the all-out conflicts that Moser perceives. His earliest significant philosophical thinking occurred at age fourteen or fifteen, when he worked out on his own a view which was extremely similar to Berkeleyan idealism. By the time he went to college he felt a vocation to the ministry, and “I had come to think it would be part of my vocation to be a theologian. And it seemed to me that philosophy was the most important discipline for theology”—a view that he still holds, “unfashionable as it may have become in theology” (pp. 17–18). So he majored in philosophy, and wrote his senior thesis on the use of language in prayer.<sup>11</sup> After three years of theological study, at Oxford and Princeton, he ministered in a Presbyterian parish for another three years, continuing his personal study of philosophy throughout this period. He then entered graduate school in philosophy at Cornell, after which he began his career of teaching philosophy.

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<sup>9</sup> In *Metaphysics and the Good: Themes from the Philosophy of Robert Merrihew Adams*, ed. Samuel Newlands and Larry M. Jorgensen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 16–32. (Page numbers in what follows refer to this essay.) Besides Adams’ essay, the book consists of papers delivered at the conference held honoring his retirement from Yale.

<sup>10</sup> Adams does not use the term, “Christian philosophy.” He explains that whereas “What I have written in moral philosophy . . . has certainly been influenced by Christian beliefs and sources, and has sometimes touched quite explicitly on theological themes and issues, at the same time I have usually written for a general philosophical audience. In that context I have not wished to presuppose commitment to Christianity, and I hope that Christian ideas may shed light on ethical views that will commend themselves also to people who are not Christians” (pp. 29–30).

<sup>11</sup> He states that “the result was a disappointment to me, and I suspect to my advisors”; the topic, though intrinsically important, turned out to be one on which he did not have a great deal of novel significance to say.

One of the most enlightening passages with regard to Adams' view of philosophy comes in his comments on the benefits of studying the history of philosophy:

Few of the big questions of philosophy have been permanently settled. Few of the main theoretical positions have been conclusively determined to be right or wrong. Philosophy has been much more successful in exploring possible ways of thinking, giving us a clearer, deeper, and fuller understanding of them, than in generating agreement as to which of those ways of thinking accord best with reality. . . . Even if we do not have agreed answers to large issues of metaphysics and metaethics, a philosophical understanding of concepts and arguments related to those issues may help us think in clearer-headed and uncontroversially better ways about particular scientific and ethical questions. But I do not think that is the deepest reason for studying philosophy and its history. The realm that philosophy is likeliest to succeed in exploring, the realm of possible ways of thinking, is full of objects of great beauty. It is worth loving for its own sake. (p. 25)

Adams goes on to say, "It is hard to date my falling in love with philosophy" (p. 26)—and here the contrast with Moser becomes acute. I don't think you can find, anywhere in Moser's two essays, any indication that it is a good thing, or even acceptable, for anyone to love philosophy, as opposed to valuing it instrumentally as an aid to ministry.

Insight concerning the relation between religion and philosophy can be gained from Adams' remarks about the Society of Christian Philosophers, which, he says, "a number of us formed in 1978 with a view to helping and encouraging each other to integrate our Christian faith and our philosophical vocation. It has certainly helped and encouraged me to do that" (p. 29). He goes on to say,

Not that I have ever seen philosophy and religious belief as inherently opposed. On the contrary . . . I believe that religious thought, and even spiritual meditation, can advantageously take a philosophical form. But even where faith and philosophy are married, each has its own integrity, and there will be tensions. It requires some courage for the believer to acquire the experience that teaches the limits of what philosophy can do either for or to religion. (p. 29)

This last sentence could fairly be described as somewhat obscure, if not enigmatic; accordingly, I shall venture a few thoughts of my own by way of

interpretation. What are we to make of “the limits of what philosophy can do either for or to religion”? This I think is a way of emphasizing the point already made, that religion—in Adams’ case, Christianity—has an integrity of its own which it brings to the encounter with philosophy. Because of this, what philosophy can “do to” religion is limited; philosophy cannot, and must not, transmute the faith into something fundamentally different than what it inherently and properly is. (Here we might think of Hegel, or perhaps of Tillich.) And on the other hand, what philosophy can “do for” the faith is also limited. Philosophy can be an aid to faith, but the kingdom of God does not conquer the world through philosophy, not even through our most ingenious apologetics. But what is the experience through which these limits are learned, experience which it requires courage for the believer to acquire? What I think Adams has in mind is the experience, acquired over many years of one’s life, of pursuing philosophical thinking about religious matters with rigor and determination, respecting and maintaining the integrity of philosophy itself. In doing this one must never lose sight of the inherent identity and distinctiveness of the faith one is engaged with, but one also must not back away from the implications of one’s thinking in the interest of shielding one’s religious preconceptions. To think about religion in this way is in a real sense to put one’s faith at risk; the deeper faith here is the faith that all truth belongs to God and the humble but resolute pursuit of truth will lead one back to God.<sup>12</sup> But this is not an endeavor for the faint of heart! Significantly, Adams goes on to say,

[I]t is a potentially crippling temptation for religious philosophers to adopt a primarily defensive and protective stance in relation to religious doctrines, where what is really need is creative and imaginative thinking about religious questions. (p. 29)

It will be appropriate, I think, to close this survey of Adams’ thought with the summary of his philosophical convictions with which he concludes his autobiography:

I believe that there is a metaphysically significant difference between appearance and reality; that there is a capital ‘R’ Reality that grounds

<sup>12</sup>A similar passage occurs in Adams’ *A Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 218: “For instance, one learns by experience that one can think seriously, and with some sympathy, about moral and political and religious views that are contrary to one’s own without dissolving one’s own structures of meaning.”

everything that appears; that it is mental; that it is good; and that doing philosophy can be a way of loving it. (p. 32)

The third philosopher whose ideas about Christian philosophy will inform our discussion is Eleonore Stump. It is true of her, as it is true of Robert Adams, that she has earned the highest regard and respect both from her fellow Christian philosophers and from the philosophical community in general. Stump is Henle Professor of Philosophy at St. Louis University, having taught previously at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and the University of Notre Dame. She is a past president of the Society of Christian Philosophers, and also a past president of the Central Division of the American Philosophical Association. Much of her philosophical work has been devoted to medieval philosophy, especially the thought of Thomas Aquinas, but her interests and expertise are wide-ranging.

In a certain way, Stump could be regarded as providing a counterpoise to some themes we have seen in Paul Moser and Robert Adams, though it must be emphasized that she never explicitly took this as her aim. With regard to Moser, much of her professional work can be seen as demonstrating in practice a corrective to what we have seen is Moser's extremely casual and even dismissive attitude towards the history of philosophy. Not that Stump is an enthusiast for historical minutiae pursued for its own sake. However, she is deeply convinced that Christians in the present have much to learn from the great Christian thinkers of the past, especially Thomas Aquinas and the other greats of the middle ages. But in order for their insights to be accessible and available for our appropriation today, we must first do the hard work of seeing exactly what they were meaning to say, understood in terms of the language and the technical philosophical ideas of their own period. Stump has devoted great effort to this task, and without question she stands as a major authority on the thought of Aquinas. One important aspect of this work is that Stump is not content, as are some students of the middle ages, to discuss the thought of Aquinas and others strictly in terms of the ideas and technical terminology that were prevalent in their own time. Faced with the results of such a study a contemporary philosopher or theologian, to whom the medieval concepts and thought-patterns are not natural or congenial, may well ask, What am I supposed to make of all this? Stump, however, does the hard work of translating, as best she can, the crucial concepts in ways that make them intelligible and accessible to philosophers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this way, her historical studies are very much in the service of the Church (as Moser would say they should be) as well as of the scholarly academy.

For further development of Stump's thoughts about Christian philosophy, we look to her lecture, "Orthodoxy and Heresy."<sup>13</sup> As she is well aware, some might find the very title ominous, and she spends much of the lecture warning against inappropriate uses of the idea of orthodoxy. (She argues that while views may be heretical, we should not designate persons as "heretics," nor should we ever employ any kind of coercion in attempting to secure adherence to orthodoxy.) Her discussion of orthodoxy and heresy is somewhat complex, and we need not go into the details here. Her main conclusion is summarized as follows:

In my view, contemporary Christian philosophers should think about orthodoxy and heresy not in order to take the mote out of somebody else's work and thought but to ask themselves whether there is any beam in their own.

For this purpose, I think that Christian philosophers should be willing to put some time and effort into learning about the history of Christian philosophy and theology. . . .

And then I think that we should care if we find ourselves disagreeing with that tradition, or even with some large or important part of it.

So my thesis is simple. Christian philosophers should know enough about their tradition to have some idea when they are at odds with it; and when they are at odds with it, or some significant part of it, they should care. (p. 159)

I suggested earlier that Stump's views might be seen as a counterpoise to some of what we have seen previously in Moser and Adams. The contrast with Moser's attitude towards the history of philosophy is obvious; the contrast with Adams is more subtle. I think, however, that her thoughts about orthodoxy and heresy can be seen as standing in a certain tension with Adams' assertion that "[I]t is a potentially crippling temptation for religious philosophers to adopt a primarily defensive and protective stance in relation to religious doctrines, where what is really need is creative and imaginative thinking about religious questions." Stump's writings contain numerous example of such "creative and imaginative thinking." However, she surely wants to insist that this thinking should not be carried on in disregard for our shared Christian tradition. Still, whatever contrast we may find here stops well short of contradiction. Stump acknowledges that the "experts" whose authority stands behind the tradition can be wrong, and have on occasion

<sup>13</sup> *Faith and Philosophy* 16,2 (1999, April): 147–63. Page references in this section are to this essay.

proved to be wrong. She does not advocate that we give up our carefully considered beliefs whenever they conflict with the tradition – but when such conflict does occur, we should care about it, and consider seriously whether our conclusions may be in error. I don't think Adams need disagree with this, though my sense is that he would place somewhat less emphasis on the notion of orthodoxy than is done by Stump. Adams is certainly in agreement with the need to inform ourselves concerning the history of Christian thought, and to utilize that knowledge in our own religious and philosophical reflections.<sup>14</sup> A final thought from Stump: "In this fallen world, love of truth is more precious than success in getting religious doctrine right, however important right religious doctrine is" (160). Adams would surely agree.

Now that we have briefly considered the thoughts of our three philosophers on the theme of Christianity and philosophy, I will undertake to bring them together with some thoughts of my own, in an attempt to provide an answer to our question, "How Christian can philosophy be?"

But can philosophy be Christian at all? I believe the answer is clearly Yes. I do think we can distinguish between philosophy and theology on the basis that theology does, and philosophy does not, make formal appeal to divine revelation as a basis for its conclusions. But this distinction need not, and should not, have the effect of erecting a "wall of separation" between the two disciplines. Once we have discarded the untenable idea that in philosophy everything has to be built up from a neutral starting point on the basis of "pure reason," there is nothing to stop philosophy from taking religious and theological ideas as hypotheses. Philosophy can try to understand these ideas, can probe them for consistency, can investigate the grounds on which they are held, can seek to determine their implications, and so on. And on the other hand, nothing prevents theology from exploiting the techniques and resources of philosophy in explicating its revealed doctrines. This sort of work is now coming to be known as "philosophical theology"; it has massive precedent in the work of Thomas Aquinas and the other great medievals. In this way the dividing-line between philosophy and theology becomes an extremely permeable boundary, or perhaps even a continuum. Philosophical work done by Christians in this border area, with close and positive attention

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<sup>14</sup> Adams' essay, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1977): 109–17, has proved to be seminal for the current debate about divine middle knowledge. The strategy of the article is to consider Alvin Plantinga's free will defense against the problem of evil in the light of the discussions of middle knowledge in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.



given to convictions that are characteristic of Christianity, may fairly be described as Christian philosophy.<sup>15</sup> But I add this caveat: I have not attempted to set out anything like a precise delineation of the territory describable as “Christian philosophy,” and I doubt that doing so would prove to be a rewarding or profitable exercise. Nor do I think there is much to be gained by self-designating one’s own philosophical work, or the work of some group with which one is associated, as “Christian philosophy.” In the present philosophical climate, this would suggest to many a parochial, self-enclosed enterprise with little relevance to the broader philosophical community—precisely the opposite of what Christian philosophers should be attempting to achieve.

But how Christian should Christian philosophy be? Or better, how should Christian philosophy be Christian? What should a philosopher do, in order to achieve excellence in this domain of philosophy? To begin with, the philosopher’s own Christian commitment and maturity must surely be of primary concern. (Here Moser makes an important point.) This is not merely because philosophers, like everyone else, are in need of redemption through Christ, important as that is. But Christian and spiritual maturity is also important for the sake of the philosophy that is to be done. Philosophers receive no exemption from the apostolic admonition that the things of the Spirit are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14). If we lack spiritual maturity, we will also be lacking in insight into the significance of the doctrines we may be discussing, as well as inner sympathy with the intent of those doctrines, and if that is the case those particular topics had perhaps best be avoided by us.

But what can be said about the content of Christian philosophy—or more broadly, of philosophy done by Christian philosophers? We certainly should applaud Moser’s call (in this respect echoing Plantinga) for Christian philosophers to attend to the sorts of philosophical issues and questions that are pertinent specifically to the concerns of the Christian community. We should not, however, insist as he does that Christian philosophers should limit their philosophical interests to such topics, thus in effect consigning philosophy to a merely instrumental status and value. Quite simply, our aim in philosophy should be the truth, and while not all truths are equal in value and importance, truth is under-valued if we suppose that only those truths are worth knowing that have become an issue for the life of the Christian church.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Much of what is published in such journals as *Faith and Philosophy* and *Philosophia Christi* falls under this description. Neither journal, however, excludes contributions from philosophers who are critics or opponents of Christianity and theism.

<sup>16</sup> Moser’s strictures may also underestimate the systematic nature of the philosophical

Christian philosophers are committed to the view that important truths are to be found in the nearly 2000-year-old writings of the New Testament – truths that are crucial for our philosophical view of the world, even if they were not first discovered by philosophy. And this strongly suggests that we should heed Stump’s admonition to pay attention to the earlier history of Christian thought. It would be most implausible, not to mention arrogant, for us to suppose that our own generation is the first to derive valuable insights from those writings. Knowledge of this tradition is important not only for enabling us to avoid heresy, but as informing our own work with the insights and concerns that have been important to Christian thinkers throughout that period of time. Analytic philosophy has sometimes been accused, not without reason, of operating in a historical vacuum; Christian philosophers in particular need to recognize the folly of doing so. Rightly considered, tradition should not be seen as a set of walls enclosing our own intellectual endeavors but rather a source of guidance, inspiration, and strength as we move forward with the topics that challenge us today. To be sure, at this point a certain division of labor is required. Not everyone has the time, the inclination, and the skills needed to do original work in interpreting ancient documents. Those of us who do not are dependent on scholars like Stump (and many others) who do for us the hard work of interpretation. Those scholars in turn need to make the effort to make the ancients accessible and intelligible to those of us today who have grown up in a vastly different intellectual climate.

An additional clue to the broader objectives of Christian philosophy is provided by Adams, when he speaks of our need to “integrate our Christian faith and our philosophical vocation.” Indeed, our aim should be to integrate with the faith not merely our philosophical ideas, but literally everything that we are able to know about everything there is to know. This of course is an enormous and unending task, and it requires the participation of scholars from many different disciplines, including psychology, sociology, history, and various domains of natural science, among others. I am convinced, however, that the task cannot be accomplished with anything approaching adequacy, without the substantial involvement of Christian philosophy and Christian philosophers. In carrying out the task, our objective should not be to create an impervious defensive ringwall around existing doctrinal formu-

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enterprise. Questions that on their face seem to have little relevance to broad worldview concerns may unexpectedly come to play an important role in the construction of one’s overall philosophical perspective.

lations, but to venture into the unexplored territory, lying between philosophy and faith, from which genuinely new insight can emerge. We need to respond to Adams' call for "creative and imaginative thinking about religious questions." At the same time, we should also remember Adams' insistence, seconded by Stump, on respecting the identity and integrity of the Christian faith we are interpreting. The work to be accomplished is vast. And that's a good thing.

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## HOW CHRISTIAN CAN PHILOSOPHY BE?

## Summary

This essay addresses the question, in what sense can and should philosophy be Christian? After considering some views according to which philosophy should not and cannot be Christian, the ideas of three prominent Christian philosophers on the topic are surveyed, and in the light of this some conclusions are formulated.

## JAK BARDZO CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKA MOŻE BYĆ FILOZOFIA?

## Streszczenie

Niniejszy esej podejmuje kwestię dotyczącą tego, w jakim sensie filozofia może i powinna być chrześcijańska. Po rozważeniu kilku koncepcji, według których filozofia ani nie powinna, ani nie może być chrześcijańska, dokonuje się przeglądu koncepcji trzech wybitnych filozofów chrześcijańskich na ten temat. W świetle tych ujęć zostają sformułowane określone wnioski.

**Key words:** philosophy; Christian philosophy; wisdom; Paul K. Moser; Robert Merrihew Adams; Eleonore Stump.

**Słowa kluczowe:** filozofia; filozofia chrześcijańska; mądrość; Paul K. Moser; Robert Merrihew Adams; Eleonore Stump.

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