Advice to Philosophers who are Christians

D.Z. Phillips

Cardinal Mercier Lecture 1988[1]

According to Alvin Plantinga, 'we who are Christians and propose to be philosophers must not rest content with being philosophers who happen, incidentally, to be Christians; we must strive to be Christian philosophers.'[2] He gives advice on the character such striving should have. I think his advice is bad advice, bad for philosophy and bad for Christianity. Here I shall concentrate, in the main, on the philosophical aspects of this bad advice. The aspects I have in mind are of two kinds: first, Plantinga's appeal to considerations external to philosophy which distort the spirit of philosophical enquiry; second, Plantinga's conception of philosophical enquiry itself.

1. *The Appeal to External Considerations*

Plantinga claims, 'Christianity, these days, and in our part of the world, is on the move ... There is also powerful evidence for this contention in philosophy' (p. 253). How is this supposed to be established? By comparison, it seems, with the state of philosophy in the fifties vis á vis Christianity: 'the public temper of main-line establishment philosophy in the English speaking world was deeply non-Christian. 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' (p. 253). These three characterisations of the fifties are very different from each other.

The first sign that Christianity in philosophy was not on the move in the fifties is supposed to be the fact that few Christians were in the philosophical establishment. Is that supposed to have been a bad thing? Plantinga assumes that it was. In that case, the remedy is obvious: Christians must become part of the philosophical establishment, or set up an establishment of their own. Plantinga is obviously pleased to announce that this is exactly what has happened: 'But things have changed. There are now many more Christians and many more unabashed Christians in the professional mainstream of American

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb01353.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

philosophical life. For example, the foundation of the Society for Christian Philosophers is both an evidence and a consequence of that fact. Founded some six years ago, it is now a thriving organization with regional meetings in every part of the country; its members are deeply involved in American professional philosophical life. So Christianity is on the move, and on the move in philosophy, as well as in other areas of intellectual life' (p. 253).

That conclusion has not been earned; not, at least, if 'on the move' is supposed to be a commendatory description. If the phrase is merely descriptive, indicating that Christians can now be found where they could not be found in the fifties, very little follows from the fact in terms of Christian or philosophical commendation. 'To say that Christianity is on the move would not be to indicate the direction in which it is moving. To think otherwise would be to use what Flannery O'Connor called 'the language of the herd'. Writing to the novelist John Hawkes, she said: 'You say one becomes "evil" when one leaves the herd. I say that depends on what the herd is doing. The herd has been known to be right, in which case the one who leaves it is doing evil. When the herd is wrong, the one who leaves it is not doing evil but the right thing. If I remember rightly, you put that word, evil, in quotation marks, which means the standards you judge it by there are relative; in fact you would be looking at it there with the eyes of the herd.'[3]

In the same way, one might say that if someone argues: 'Christians used not to be part of the philosophical establishment, now they are, so Christianity is on the move' or 'Christians used not to be part of the philosophical establishment, but now they have a philosophical establishment of their own, so Christianity is on the move', one should again reply: 'That depends on what the establishment is doing'. This reply is as relevant to philosophy as it is to Christianity. Does the fact that there is a philosophical establishment show that philosophy is on the move? Surely, it can at least be argued that the reverse is true: that 'establishments' tend to be restrictive, self-congratulatory and stultifying. If this is so, the philosophical health of one's soul depends on keeping clear of them. Of course, in one sense, this is Plantinga's complaint against the philosophical establishment of the fifties with respect to Christian concerns. The answer, however, is not to commit the same mistake, compound such circumstances, erect similar obstacles, in the name of Christianity. It is not how something stands with respect to an establishment which determines whether that 'something' deserves to be called Christianity or philosophy 'on the move'. This would be to judge Christianity and philosophy by an appeal to external considerations. Rather, judgements which are themselves Christian or philosophical should be brought to bear on the respective establishments. Establishments may be healthy, but their health is not simply a matter of

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb01353.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

their being establishments.

The second consideration Plantinga appeals to is the fact that now, in America, unlike in the fifties, Christians who are members of the philosophical establishment are not ashamed to say that they are Christians. It is, of course, true that it is a condemnation of a Christian to say that he is ashamed to say he is a Christian in the professional circles in which he moves. On the other hand, that philosophers who are Christians are now not ashamed to say so does not, in itself, show that something called 'Christian philosophy' is on the move. In fact, it shows nothing at all about the philosophical quality of the work of the Christians concerned. Philosophers who are not ashamed to say they are Christians may still make up a pretty poor bunch of philosophers. Incidentally, readiness to testify cannot, in abstraction, be commended. Much depends on the circumstances, the spirit and the tone. In certain contexts, the ever-ready testifier may exemplify a lack of those very truths to which he takes himself to be a witness.

The third consideration Plantinga appeals to, in attempting to show that Christian philosophy is on the move, is the fact that now, unlike in the fifties, Christians think that being a Christian makes a real difference to the way in which they practise philosophy. Now, Christians have a Christian philosophy. How does Plantinga think of this? Does he allow that if philosophers in the fifties thought otherwise, they could have arrived at this conviction philosophically? If not, if he is suggesting that philosophers in the fifties did not espouse a Christian philosophy simply because the external pressure against doing so was so strong, or because it was not fashionable to do so, it will be no answer to cite the fact that nowdays Christians do espouse a Christian philosophy. The answer why is obvious: the new practice may be just as much a matter of fashion as the old practice; just as much the result of pressure, pressure, for example, from the Society for Christian Philosophers.

If some Christians today say that there is such a thing as Christian philosophy, I take it that they think that such a claim can be defended philosophically. In the same way, the philosophers of the fifties would have been saying that there is no such thing as Christian philosophy, and they advanced philosophical reasons for saying so. The nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical question, and the answer cannot be taken for granted. The question, 'Can there be a Christian philosophy?' is itself a philosophical question. It cannot be answered by saying, 'Of course there can, and we have regional meetings to prove it'. Once again, that would be an attempt to answer, by an appeal to external considerations, what ought to be discussed philosophically. It is at this point that we need to turn to considerations which are internal to philosophy.

Before doing so, however, I want to show how external

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb01353.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

considerations are also at work in the advice Plantinga gives to a student who is a Christian proposing to study philosophy; advice which I think any student wanting to study philosophy should ignore. Plantinga laments that 'most of the major philosophy departments in America have next to nothing to offer the student intent on coming to see how to be a Christian in philosophy' (p. 254). He outlines the likely fate of a Christian college student who becomes a graduate at Princeton, Berkeley, Pittsburgh or Arizona: 'There she learns how philosophy is presently practised. The burning questions of the day are such topics as the new theory of reference; the realism/anti-realism controversy; the problems with probability; Quine's claims about the radical indeterminacy of translation; Rawls on justice; the causal theory of knowledge; Gethier problems; the artificial intelligence model for the understanding of what it is to be a person; the question of the ontological status of unobservable entities in science or anywhere else; whether mathematics can be reduced to set theory and whether abstract entities generally—numbers, propositions, properties—can be, as we quaintly say, "dispensed with"; whether possible worlds are abstract or concrete; whether our assertions are best seen as mere moves in a language game or as attempts to state the sober truth about the world; whether the rational egoist can be shown to be irrational, and all the rest' (p. 254—5). We may or may not be depressed at the fact that these are, allegedly, the burning questions of philosophy today. We may or may not be depressed at some of Plantinga's descriptions of what he takes these issues to be. But if this depression is itself intellectual, Plantinga can give no account of it. Why not?

He tells us: 'Philosophy is a social enterprise; and our standards and assumptions—the parameters within which we practise our craft—are set by our mentors and by the great contemporary centres of philosophy' (p.255). Saying this is unobjectionable in so far as it is taken as an indication that philosophy and its problems, like any other subject, has a history and diverse traditions. The subject is not the creation of an individual. Nevertheless, the critical character of philosophical enquiry is an essential feature of it. Think of the critical character of the great works of philosophy. Of course, a student may agree with his teachers, but whether he has made that agreement his own will be shown in his independence in criticising other views. Failure to display that independence leads to changes of unthinking conformity and slavish adherence. Such is the picture we get from Plantinga's description of his graduate student. He says, 'It is then natural for her, after she gets her Ph.D., to continue to think about and work on these topics. And it is natural, furthermore, for her to work on them in the way she was taught to, thinking about them in the light of the assumptions made by her mentors and in terms of currently accepted ideas as to what a

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb01353.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

philosopher should start from or take for granted, what requires argument or defence, and what a satisfying philosophical explanation or a proper resolution to a philosophical question is like' (p. 255). But the crucial question concerns how the student is related to these activities Plantinga describes. Has she made them her own? In a give-away remark, Plantinga reveals that she has not: 'She will be uneasy about departing widely from these topics and assumptions, feeling instinctively that any such departures are at best marginally respectable' (p. 255). But if it is simply a question of respectability, no serious concern with philosophy is involved, no matter how clever the publications may be. Plantinga says of the graduate student's story, 'From one point of view this is natural and proper' (p. 255). I would deny that it is proper from any point of view. We all know the play of fashions in philosophy, the way one book supplants another on the student's shelves as one influentially-placed philosopher succeeds another. But these tendencies, however widespread, are not ones of which we, as philosophers, should be proud.

Plantinga says that from another point of view the fate of the graduate student is 'profoundly unsatisfactory' (p. 255). But what this amounts to is a fear that Christians will 'devote their best efforts to the topics fashionable in the non-Christian philosophical world' (p. 255). But is the remedy that Christians should devote their philosophical attention to what is fashionable in the Christian world? 'Christian philosophers', Plantinga tells us, 'are philosophers of the Christian community and it is part of their task as *Christian* philosophers to serve the Christian community. But the Christian community has its own questions, its own concerns, its own topics for investigation, its own agenda and its own research programme' (p. 255). There are wider issues involved in these remarks, but, for the moment, let us simply note that, once again, there is no discussion of whether the philosophy student in question has made these philosophical concerns his own. As far as anything we have been told so far goes, one fashion has been exchanged for another. In neither case has any serious commitment to philosophy been described. Plantinga wants the Christian philosopher to display autonomy, integrity and boldness. Heeding Plantinga's advice thus far would not lead to any of these virtues. On the contrary, one follower of fashion in Princeton or Berkeley has simply been replaced by another follower of fashion in Grand Rapids or Arkadelphia, Arkansas. The spirit of philosophical enquiry has yet to emerge. Given Plantinga's advice so far, it never will.

2. *Religious Belief and Philosophical Enquiry.*

Plantinga clearly believes that there is such a thing as Christian philosophy. He also believes that there is such a thing as non-theistic

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb01353.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

philosophy. He says that the Christian philosopher may well think of 'topics of current concern in the broader philosophical world ...' in 'a different way' (p. 256). Why does he think this? Much of the answer can be found by noting the conception of philosophy Plantinga wants to reject. Having rejected it, I suspect Plantinga thinks that his conception of philosophy is the only alternative. I want to show that this assumption is mistaken.

Plantinga is opposed to a conception of philosophy as the arbiter of either the truth or the rationality of religious belief: 'What I want to urge is that the Christian philosophical community ought *not* to think of itself as engaged in this common effort to determine the probability or philosophical plausibility of belief in God' (pp. 260—1). If the Christian thinks that he must justify his religious beliefs, as though they were probable or improbable hypotheses awaiting a verdict based on evidence common to believer and unbeliever alike, he will thereby not only fail to do justice to the character of religious belief, but also, notoriously, base his faith on the fiction of common evidence. In pointing this out, Plantinga is quite correct. It has indeed been a scandal in the philosophy of religion that it has been assumed, for so long, that foundationalism and evidentialism are the appropriate philosophical modes for discussing religious beliefs. But these conclusions are arrived at by reflecting on the character of religious belief. They do not lead to Plantinga's conception of a Christian philosophy. These conclusions are not confined to philosophers who are Christians or to something called a Christian mode of philosophising. Any philosopher reflecting on the logic or grammar of religious belief may reach these conclusions.

Plantinga also objects to the claim that philosophy can arrive at a set of criteria which determine the rationality or meaningfulness of any belief, religious belief included. These claims, as we know, led logical positivists to conclude that religious beliefs are meaningless. Plantinga quotes J.J.C. Smart saying in 1955: 'The main danger to theism today comes from people who want to say that "God exists" and "God does not exist" are equally absurd.' Why did philosophers come to such a radical conclusion? They did so because they adopted the 'verifiability criterion of meaning' 'which said, roughly, that a sentence is meaningful only if either it is analytic, or its truth or falsehood can be determined by empirical or scientific investigation—by the methods of the empirical sciences' (p. 257). As Plantinga says, no good arguments were given to show why these restrictive philosophical definitions should be adopted. He says of Christian philosophers: 'What they should have said to the positivists is: "Your criterion is mistaken: for such statements as *God loves us* and *God created the heavens and the earth* are clearly meaningful: so if they aren't verifiable in your sense, then it is false that all and only statements verifiable in that sense are meaningful" ' (p.258).

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb01353.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

But how does Plantinga know that the meaning of these religious beliefs cannot be captured by the positivists' criteria? Surely, by reflecting on the place these beliefs have in people's lives and the roles they play there. Plantinga, of course, would also oppose a less restrictive, but, nevertheless, *common* set of criteria for what constitutes knowledge by which religious claims are to be assessed. He quotes remarks by David Tracy to indicate the viewpoint to which he is opposed. Tracy says:

> In principle the fundamental loyalty of the theologian *qua* theologian is to that morality of scientific knowledge which he shares with his colleagues, the philosophers, historians and social scientists. No more than they can he allow his own—or his tradition's—beliefs to serve as warrants for his arguments. In fact, in all properly theological inquiry, the analysis should be characterized by those same ethical stances of autonomous judgment, critical judgment and properly sceptical hard-mindedness that characterizes analysis in other fields.[4]

Plantinga wants the Christian philosopher to turn from these other fields to the preoccupations of his own. Speaking of his graduate student who becomes attracted to Quine's philosophy, he says, 'It should be natural for her to become totally involved in these projects and programmes, to come to think of fruitful and worthwhile philosophy as substantially circumscribed by them' (p. 256). Plantinga responds: 'This is understandable; but it also profoundly misdirected. Quine is a marvellously gifted philosopher: a subtle, original and powerful philosophical force. But his fundamental commitments, his fundamental projects and concerns, are wholly different from those of the Christian community—wholly different and, indeed, antithetical to them ... So the Christian philosopher has his own topics and projects to think about' (p.256). This response, in itself, however, would be insufficient, since philosophers might have no objection to concentrating on topics taken from the Christian community, taking them as a starting point, as long as they are then made subject to some common method of assessment. Such a position has been well expressed by John Wippel:

> Thus for the Christian it may be that in certain circumstances some revealed datum serves as a leading question or working hypothesis for his philosophical inquiry. While as a believing Christian he will continue to assent to this datum or believe in it, he may now decide to investigate it as a possible object of rational or philosophical demonstration. If he succeeds in finding rational evidence which supports it, then and to that extent his procedure will be strictly philosophical in the moment of proof. In other words, in the moment of proof his procedure cannot be described as Christian philosophy. But since in the moment of discovery it was his religious belief

that first suggested this particular issue to him as a possible subject for philosophical investigation, one might refer to such a procedure as Christian philosophy in the order of discovery.[5]

Plantinga rejects such a conception of proof and wants to insist that when the Christian philosopher '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' (p.256). Yet, how can Plantinga draw this conclusion? Is it not by philosophical reflection that one can come to see that Tracy's and Wippel's conception of common standards is a confused one? And is not that reflection open to Christian and non-Christian alike? It does not lead us to a conception of Christian philosophy. On the contrary, it leads us away from such a thought.

Why does Plantinga think otherwise? Part of the answer is that he *assumes* that if Christian and non-Christian ways of thinking are said to be subject to philosophical enquiry, that *must* mean that these modes of thought are to be assessed by common criteria. Since Plantinga does not believe these common criteria exist, he seems to reach the over-hasty conclusion that Christian and non-Christian modes of thought cannot be subject to common methods of philosophical enquiry. Plantinga says, 'Of course, if the verificationists had given cogent *arguments* for their criterion, from premises that had some legitimate claim on Christian or theistic thinkers, then perhaps there would have been a problem here for the Christian philosopher, then we would have been obliged either to agree that Christian theism is cognitively meaningless, or else revise or reject those premises' (p.258).

Even here, in what may look like a concession to the broader philosophical community, what premises should have a legitimate claim on Christians is not specified. Further, the force of the apparent concession is blunted by remarks such as the following: 'Even if there were a set of methodological procedures held in common by most philosophers, historians and social scientists, or most secular philosophers, historians and social scientists, why should a Christian theologian give ultimate allegiance to them rather than, say, to God, or to the fundamental truths of Christian?' (pp.263—4). In any case, Plantinga's main position is that these counter-arguments against what is fundamental in Christianity simply do not exist. He says, 'Of course if there *were* powerful arguments on the other side, then there might be a problem here. But there aren't: so there isn't' (p.266) He therefore concludes: 'Christian philosophers must be wary about assimilating or accepting presently popular philosophical ideas and procedures; for many of these have roots that are deeply anti-Christian. And finally the Christian philosophical community has a right to its perspective; it is under no obligation first to show that this perspective is plausible with

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb01353.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

respect to what is taken for granted by all philosophers, or most philosophers, or the leading philosophers of our day' (p.271).

It would be unfair to Plantinga to suggest that he does not have philosophical arguments for these conclusions, but they are arguments which constitute a form of negative apologetics. When Plantinga says that 'the modern Christian *philosopher* has a perfect right, as a philosopher, to start from his belief in God. He has a right to assume it, take it for granted, in his philosophical work' (p.264), what he means is that nobody can produce a general criterion of basicality—means of gauging whether a truth-claim is basic—to show that there is any impropriety involved in the Christian taking belief in God as basic in his perspective. Of course, he has to admit that he too possesses no such general criterion by which the unbeliever could be shown why belief in God should be basic. Believer and non-believer cannot stop each other from committing themselves to the fundamental beliefs of their perspectives. That is how far Plantinga's philosophising seems to take us. It does not follow at all from these conclusions, however, that Christian and non-Christian modes of thought cannot be the subject of a common mode of philosophical enquiry. In seeing what the characteristic concerns of such an enquiry are, we shall see how philosophy can go far beyond the somewhat arid limits of Plantinga's philosophical enterprise. We will be able to give substance to some of Plantinga's assurances; assurances which seem rather hollow in the light of his philosophical practices. Plantinga says:

> Of course I don't mean for a moment to suggest that Christian philosophers have nothing to learn from their non-Christian and non-theist colleagues: that would be a piece of foolish arrogance, utterly belied by the facts of the matter. Nor do I mean to suggest that Christian philosophers should retreat into their own isolated enclave, having as little as possible to do with non-theistic philosophers. Of course not! Christians have much to learn and much of enormous importance to learn by way of dialogue and discussion with their non-theistic colleagues. Christian philosophers must be intimately involved in the professional life of the philosophical community at large, both because of what they can learn and because of what they can contribute. Furthermore, while Christian philosophers need not and ought not to see themselves as involved, for example, in a common effort to determine whether there is such a person as God, we are all, theist and non-theist alike, engaged in the common human project of understanding ourselves and the world in which we find ourselves. If the Christian philosophical community is doing its job properly, it will be

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb01353.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

> engaged in a complicated, many-sided dialectical discussion, making its own contribution to that common human project. It must pay careful attention to other contributions; it must gain a deep understanding of them; it must learn what it can from them and it must take unbelief with profound seriousness (pp.279—1).

Despite these remarks and the reference to dialogue and a many-sided dialectical discussion, it must be remembered that the dialogue and discussion is supposed to be between some people doing something called Christian philosophy, and other people doing something called non-Christian philosophy. What I am insisting on is that the dialectical discussion, the common attempt at understanding, can refer to a mode of philosophical enquiry in which Christians and non-Christians can share. In the course of this enquiry issues, fundamental issues, arise on which the philosophical procedures advocated by Plantinga throw little light. Let us examine some of these.

First, it is possible for a Christian or a non-Christian to be philosophically puzzled about the grammar of belief in God. What kind of belief is it? Is 'God' a proper name? Does it make sense to ask what it stands for? It is clear that possessing a Christian belief does not, in itself, clarify these questions for us. Plantinga's negative apologetics will not prevent these puzzles from arising. For example, Plantinga says of the graduate student who is attracted by Quine's philosophy: 'Of course she will note certain tensions between her Christian belief and her way of practising philosophy' (p.256). But can Plantinga take that for granted? After all, he admits to having a philosophical acquaintance who 'suggested that Christians should think of God as a *set* ... the set of all true propositions, perhaps, or the set of right actions, or the union of those sets, or perhaps their Cartesian product' (p.256). Plantinga depicts these suggestions as an attempt to harmonise perceived tensions between Quine's views and Christianity. But what if the suggestions were simply advanced as an account of the grammar of belief in God? How would Plantinga try to show the inadequacy of this account? Plantinga and his philosophical acquaintance are, presumably, disagreeing about the conceptual character of the same or similar religious beliefs. The religious beliefs are the same, but the philosophical accounts are different.[6] At least one distinguished philosopher of religion, whose religious background was not dissimilar to Plantinga's, nevertheless thought that Plantinga's philosophical projects concerning religious belief were fundamentally misconceived. Speaking for myself, while I might see how a philosopher of mathematics may say that thinking about sets gives glory to God, I think it confused to say, as Plantinga does, that the infinity of sets leads naturally to the belief in an infinite mind which can think them all, that it shows 'that sets owe their existence to *God's*

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb01353.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

thinking things together ... that sets are indeed collections—collections collected by God' (p.270). Such a conclusion, it seems to me, does not do justice to either the notion of infinity or the notion of divine activity. Religious concepts are being torn from their natural setting and brought into contexts where the proposed language concerning them is merely idling. I am not arguing for this conclusion now. My point is that my reaction is a possible one in face of Plantinga's suggestion about how a Christian philosopher should argue about sets.

Faced with these different philosophical accounts, one has no option but to continue the discussion, hoping that clarity will be achieved. In the course of the discussion, one may get someone to see that he is confused, or he may get one to recognise one's own confusion. There is no by-passing such discussion and the hazards it involves if we want to pass from philosophical puzzlement to clarity. In such a discussion, it may become impossible to draw a sharp line between philosophical and religious difficulties. The course of the argument may cloud or clarify a person's religion or atheism, and he may lose or gain either as a result. We cannot legislate in an a priori fashion about such matters. If I am confused about the sense in which belief in God is basic, I can only be freed from my confusion if I can be brought to see what led me into it in the first place. Simply being told that no general criterion of basicality has been found which prevents the Christian saying that belief in God is basic, will not be of much help here. What I am puzzled about is the kind of basicality that belief in God has, or what believing in God amounts to. Here, a non-confused non-Christian may be of infinitely greater help than a philosophically confused Christian. Coming to see what belief in God means is a matter of bringing out its grammar and clearing away the tendencies of thought which stand in the way of the clarity I desire.

Plantinga is right in thinking that belief and unbelief cannot be assessed by common evidence or common criteria of rationality. But this should not lead to notions of Christian or non-Christian philosophies. Plantinga wants to insist that perspectives, for example, Christian perspectives, should not be assessed by criteria of meaning which are alien to them. But this insistence on the differences between perspectives, on differences between beliefs and concepts which feature in our lives, was one of the main features of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, published posthumously in 1953, a work about which and its influence on philosophy, Plantinga, and reformed epistemologists generally, are interestingly, if not surprisingly, silent. This may be because Wittgenstein's work shows the possibility of a common method, a common engagement in disinterested enquiry which Christians and non-Christians alike can participate in. As we have seen, Plantinga is deeply suspicious of the notion of a common method. He assumes that

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb01353.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

the practice of a common method entails believing in the availability of common criteria of truth or rationality by which any belief can be assessed. But what if disinterested enquiry reveals a variety of meanings and conceptions of truth which cannot be reduced to any single paradigm? But this variety *can* only be revealed by clarifying the grammar of the various concepts involved in the language-games we play.

Plantinga is wrong, therefore, in suggesting that it is only with the benefit of hindsight that we can appreciate the inadequacy of the logical and epistemological parameters set by the collection *New Essays in Philosophical Theology,* published in 1955; 'a volume of essays that was to set the tone and topics for philosophy of religion for the next decade or more' (p.257). The inadequacy of those parameters had *already* been exposed in Wittgenstein's work. What is true is that those insights, for the most part, were not appropriated in the philosophy of religion.

A comparison of Wittgenstein and Plantinga on 'what we take for granted' reveals how rich and substantial Wittgenstein's method is in contrast to Plantinga's negative apologetics. Plantinga says, as we have seen, that the modern Christian philosopher has a perfect right to start with his belief in God, to take it for granted. This right is established by the failure of any philosopher to produce a criterion of basicality which shows that the Christian philosopher cannot do this. By contrast, in *On Certainty,* Wittgenstein discusses a variety of propositions which we take for granted. It can be said that these propositions underlie others. The central question concerns what we mean by 'underlying' in these contexts. The propositions are basic, not because of any epistemic or phenomenological properties they may be said to possess, but by virtue of the place they occupy in human life. The propositions, such as 'There are physical objects', 'There are human beings', 'The earth has existed for a long time', are held fast by all that surrounds them. Instead of the aridity of negative apologetics, Wittgenstein endeavours to give perspicuous representations of what those surroundings are. The surroundings will not be the same in each case. Appropriating these insights for the philosophy of religion involves bringing out the basicality of belief in God, showing the kind of surroundings which hold it fast. So one does not *begin,* philosophically, by asserting the basicality of the beliefs. On the contrary, their basicality is something which has to be shown by giving perspicuous representations of their status. This is a difficult undertaking, as difficult in the case of 'Thou art God' as it is in the case of 'That's a human being'. Plantinga, it is true, does say that belief in God is connected with experiences such as 'hearing God speak', 'feeling punished by God', 'desiring to praise him', etc. The trouble is that they too are called properly basic, and the whole game of negative apologetics begins again. What is missing is a lively presentation of the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb01353.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

grammar of these beliefs and expressions. Without this, it is no good saying to someone philosophically puzzled by what these expressions and beliefs come to, that they are clearly meaningful to other people and then challenge him to show why they shouldn't be.

In elucidating the surroundings in which belief in God is held fast, the philosopher is not doing something called Christian philosophy, any more than he is doing non-Christian philosophy in elucidating the surroundings which hold certain forms of atheism fast. He is simply doing philosophy. Certainly, he is not embracing a religious or atheistic perspective by elucidating its grammar. His concern is with their conceptual character, not with their truth. Indeed, clarity about their conceptual character will bring one to see why philosophy cannot determine truth in such matters. Of course, the philosopher will be interested in what it means to speak of truth in such contexts, but that interest is not itself a desire to embrace those truths.

Wittgenstein talked of language as a city with no main road. Again and again in the history of philosophy, philosophers have wanted to postulate something, metaphysically, as the main road, seeing all other roads as subsidiaries or minor in relation to it. Wittgenstein wants to release us from this presumption. He wants to reveal the constant temptations which beset us, temptations to obscure the variety of the world. He wants, as far as possible, to give us clarity concerning that variety; to give us a disinterested view of it. Is not this a philosophical passion which characterises his work? If this is our understanding, too, of what a philosophical interest is, then we can see, at the same time, why there cannot be a Christian philosophy, a Marxist philosophy or any other philosophy of that kind.

Of course, we do not *start* with a conception of philosophy as disinterested enquiry. We start with our puzzles and difficulties. By working through them, some may come to conclusions they wish to describe as Christian or Marxist philosophy. But, then, they will have reached these conclusions by listening to argument and counter-argument. The method of procedure will not itself be Christian or Marxist. The person who thinks the variety philosophy should recognise is being distorted by these conclusions will try to get someone who reaches these conclusions to look at them again. This, too, can only be achieved by discussion, the philosophical discussion which cannot be by-passed.

In any event, whatever conclusions are reached, this openness to discussion is very different from an attitude which says that the parameters for discussion must be determined *ab initio* by Christian or Marxist values. Suppose someone says that they intend calling these latter procedures 'philosophy'. True, no one can stop him doing so. All we can do, then, is to show the differences involved between these

procedures and disinterested enquiry. What cannot be allowed is that Christian or Marxist philosophies, so conceived, can pretend to carry on in the spirit of disinterested enquiry.

It may be thought that we cannot give ourselves to disinterested enquiry without sacrificing some traditional religious claims. For example, it may be asked, how can we say, philosophically, that the city has no main road, while at the same time believe, religiously, that God is the creator of the city. The answer is that, in thinking a tension exists here, a religious belief is being misconstrued as a theoretical explanation. To say that all things are created by God, is not to give a theoretical explanation of all things. Such a displacement of religious belief occurs when Plantinga says: 'Belief in the existence of God is in the same boat as belief in the truths of logic, other minds, the past and perceptual objects; in each case God has so constructed us that in the right circumstances we acquire the belief in question' (p.262). Belief in God does have something to do with all the factors Plantinga mentions. We pray, 'God be in my mind, and in my understanding'. We are asked to look on others as our neighbours. Past, present and future are said to be in God's hands and we see him in his creation. But are these religious beliefs captured by Plantinga's reference to the way in which we are allegedly constructed? The shift from 'creation' to 'construction' marks the shift from religious belief to a confused epistemological theory. The same reference to 'construction' has led some Reformed epistemologists to displace the belief that all men are created in the image of God, with a confused philosophical or psychological thesis which says that all human beings have been so constructed that they know that there is a God.[7]

Plantinga holds that fundamental Christian beliefs are not answerable to philosophical justification. I agree, but I come to this conclusion as a *result* of philosophical reflection.[8] It is not a presumption with which I begin. This does not mean that religious beliefs are ultimately based on philosophical justifications after all, since the philosophical procedures referred to are those which seek to clarify the grammar of religious concepts themselves, and not ones which impose alien criteria and tests on these concepts. But there is risk involved in philosophical enquiry. The conclusions I have come to cannot be guaranteed in advance, and one may not arrive at them. But the man who is genuinely philosophically puzzled has no choice. He has to go where the argument takes him. With Plantinga, it seems, things are different. As we have seen, he believes that although the 'Christian philosopher does indeed have a responsibility to the philosophical world at large; ... his fundamental responsibility is to the Christian community, and finally to God' (p.262). Contrast this with Wittgenstein's remark: 'The philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas; that's what makes him a philosopher.'[9]

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb01353.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

In concluding, I must not be taken to have suggested that there is a necessary tension between being a Christian and the disinterested enquiry I have talked of. Of course, many Christians have viewed such enquiry with distrust and dislike, and that is always likely to be the case. But for others, it need not be so. While genuinely giving himself up to disinterested enquiry, a Christian may also feel that through it those beliefs which mean so much to him will be shown to possess a distinctive grammar and to play an equally distinctive role in human life. Simone Weil made a remark once by which she probably meant more than this. But at least the Christian conviction I have indicated, as a Christian who gives himself to disinterested enquiry, might find a place in her words when she said, that, if she pursued truth without fear, she would find herself, in the end, falling into the arms of Christ.

1 This paper was one of the Cardinal Mercier Lectures delivered at the University of Leuven 1988. A wider consideration of Plantinga's epistemology of religion was given in the 1987 Aquinas Lecture 'Shaking the Foundationalists', delivered at Blackfriars, Oxford. Material used in that lecture appears in *Faith After Foundationalism,* Routledge 1988.

2 Alvin Plantinga, 'Advice to Christian Philosophers', *Faith and Philosophy,* Vol. 1, No. 3, July 1984, p.271. All quotations from Plantinga are from this paper.

3 Flannery O'Connor, *Letters of Flannery O'Connor: The Habit of Being,* selected and edited by Sally Fitzgerald, New York: Vintage Books 1980, p.456.

4 David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order,* New York: Seabury Press 1975, p.7.

5 John F. Wippel, 'The Possibility of a Christian Philosophy: A Thomistic Perspective', *Faith and Philosophy,* Vol. 1, No. 3, July 1984, p.280.

6 I am not denying the possibility that in some instances the philosophical differences may themselves reflect religious differences between the philosophers concerned. Religious belief itself is, after all, a ragged phenomenon.

7 See Nicholas Wolerstorff, 'Can Belief in God be Rational?', in *Faith and Rationality,* edited by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolerstorff, University of Notre Dame Press 1983. I do not claim to have argued fully for my counter-conclusions here. I am only indicating the direction such argument might take. For a fuller account see D.Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism.*

8 This does not commit me to the view that no religious belief can be confused.

9 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel,* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford, Basil Blackwell 1967, 455.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1988.tb01353.x Published online by Cambridge University Press