

CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHER

DAVID R. DILLING
Instructor in Philosophy and Greek
Grace College

INTRODUCTION

In the first centuries of the Christian era, the Hebrew-Christian religious tradition met an "outside world" of thought and culture. The meeting had the force of head-on collision. To be sure, there had been days in Egypt, there had been interaction with the great world empires of Assyria and Babylon, there had been resistance to the Hellenization of the Near East after Alexander; but the collision in the days of the early church was unique. Christianity with a then developing world-mission outlook was dispersed throughout a thoroughly Hellenized Roman Empire.

The net result of the first contact of Christianity with Greek philosophy--especially in the form of Neo-Platonism--was a two-fold development within the Christian church. One new development was the formulation of a systematic statement of doctrine. The other, the development of a systematic apologetic.

It is the apologetic with which I am here concerned. In those early days the church was forced to come to terms with philosophy. The relationship which Christianity will bear toward philosophy was a vital problem in those days; it has been a significant item of discussion through the history of western philosophy; it remains for the church today among its greatest unsettled issues.

Statement of the Problem

In its most simple form the problem with which I am concerned is the relationship between faith and reason. It is an epistemological problem. It has exceedingly far-reaching practical consequences. For example, in trying to straddle the fence one is likely to find oneself in difficulty on one hand with a church that views philosophy at best as a tolerable nuisance, and at worst as a demonic enemy; while on the other hand, ridiculed by philosophers who regard one's theism as outmoded at best, and at the worst as downright anti-intellectual.

The very juxtaposition of "Christian" and "philosopher" as in the title of this paper strikes many Christians and philosophers as odd. I can not believe that the disjunction be-

tween Christianity and philosophy is as radical as either the church or modern philosophy has made it appear. I frankly subscribe to a position which sees all truth as one coherent body, whether derived by faith through properly interpreted revelation, or by reason through properly critical observation.

The Problem in Historical Perspective

Historically, the church developed four classic answers to the problem. In the order of their appearance they may be illustrated by reference to the thought of Tertullian, Origen, Augustine, and Aquinas.

Tertullian

Tertullian emphasized faith at the expense of reason. "I believe," he said, "because it is absurd." He was doubtless afraid to subject his belief to philosophic scrutiny. Representative of his thinking is this example:

The Son of God was born. I am not ashamed of it because it is shameful; the Son of God died, it is credible for the very reason that it is silly; and, having been buried, He rose again, it is certain because it is impossible.¹

Philosophers sometimes speak of Christianity as though this were its only apologetic.

Origen

Origen of Alexandria took the opposite extreme. So concerned was he to make Christianity palatable to the philosophic world that he threw out the baby with the bath water. His Christianity, reinterpreted in terms of Plato, was equally disgraceful to Plato and the church.

Christians sometimes speak as though this is the inevitable result of an attempted reconciliation.

Augustine

The first serious attempt at a synthesis was that of Augustine. Knowledge leads to faith; faith leads to understanding. The two continually cooperate. "Faith is understanding's step; understanding is faith's reward." Faith, for Augustine, is an act of the whole man, including intellectual, emotional, and volitional elements. Augustine believed that all right reason may, by the enlightened mind, be fitted into a framework of Christian philosophy. He encouraged the development of a Christian world and life view--a Christian Weltanschauung. Without endorsing the Augustinian epistemology as such, Augustine's synthesis of faith and reason should certainly be regarded as the starting point on which any contemporary answer will be built.²

Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas thought he was a good Augustinian. He set out to revise Augustine for his own generation. Part of his "minor revision" was a redefinition of faith. Faith, for Aquinas, is mere intellectual assent to that which is revealed, not an existential committal of the whole soul to God. I see in these analyses of faith the major difference between the Roman Catholic and Protestant philosophies of religion. Augustine viewed faith and reason as cooperating at every step in the knowing process. Aquinas separated the two, putting them into two different houses. For Aquinas, human reason is completely competent within its subject limits. These limits include the competency of human reason to demonstrate the existence and essential nature of God, and the freedom and immortality of the soul. Beyond that we are dependent for religious knowledge on revelation and the propositions so received are accepted by faith.³

Contemporary evangelical thought on the subject tends to vary. At the one extreme, some exponents seem to press Augustine into a Kierkegaardian position. At the Thomistic extreme, some so emphasize the unaided powers of human reason as to press toward a Cartesian position. Various gradations appear in between.⁴

Those Christians today who scorn the apologetic task in deference to "faith alone" restate the unacceptable position of Tertullian. Those who would argue men into the Kingdom restate the unacceptable position of Origen.

It is evident that the relationship one posits between Christianity and philosophy is dependent upon one's understanding of the nature of each. I have therefore outlined the task of philosophy, the essence of Christianity, and the necessary relationship between the two. I have concluded the paper with a challenge to every thoughtful believer.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

The Difficulty of Defining Philosophy

Reading the remarks with which writers of philosophy texts preface their definition of philosophy it is not hard to form the opinion that defining philosophy is one of the hardest problems philosophers face. An impression of this sort would not be wholly unwarranted, especially in light of the effort by many contemporary philosophers to redefine completely the scope of philosophic investigation.

The problem is that philosophers have come from such different backgrounds and discussed such a wide variety of topics that if one describes what philosophers have done, the description is likely to be too restricted; someone who wanted to be called a philosopher might be left out. On the other hand if one describes how to philosophize the definition would probably be so broad and vague as to be worthless. Albert Levi takes the position that it is better to be too broad in an analytic definition and then, as by ostensive definition, say, "Here are 35 examples, read them." Accordingly he defines philosophy as "reflection upon experience."⁵

Philosophy's Two-Fold Task

In a well known section of his work, Scientific Thought, C. D. Broad distinguishes two distinct tasks of philosophy. One he calls critical philosophy; the other speculative philosophy. The former is concerned with analysis of the meaning of concepts and criticism of the validity of beliefs. The latter is the systematizing function, the object of which is:

to take over the results of the various sciences, to add to them the results of the religious and ethical experiences of mankind, and then to reflect upon the whole. The hope is that by this means we may be able to reach some general conclusions as to the nature of the universe, and as to our position and prospects in it.⁶

To outline the scope of philosophy in terms of Broad's distinction, one would assign the disciplines of logic and epistemology to the critical aspect; ontology and axiology to the speculative. That is to say, all the interests of philosophers may be seen in terms of two goals: (1) the goal of accuracy and clarity achieved through criticism, and (2) the goal of comprehension and coherence achieved through systematization.

WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY?

There is a convenient refuge to which we all now and again delight to retreat. We betray our withdrawal by such statements as, "Well, my opponent really doesn't understand my position. If he did he would certainly see things my way." In order to show the folly of this escapism I have chosen to define Christianity by citing the analysis of Edwin A. Burt, professor of philosophy at Cornell University--a humanist.

God created the world as portrayed in the book of Genesis, and Adam as the progenitor of the human race; Adam was given the power both of obedience and of disobedience to God's commands. As a result of Adam's sin under the temptation of the devil, all his descendants fell under the control of sin too; all inherited a fleshly, corrupt, and hence mortal nature. When, therefore, God revealed the details of his law to the world, selecting the Hebrew people as a special medium of the revelation, man was unable to be faithful to it. Dominated by his sinful nature, he continued to disobey and to merit still more deeply God's displeasure; all that the law could really do in view of his corrupt inheritance from Adam was to tantalize him with an unattainable pattern of righteousness and thus make him poignantly conscious of his impotence to conform to it.

But God had foreseen this tragic result and being moved by mercy and love as well as by justice, he had prepared a way of salvation for those whom his grace should elect. In the fullness of time Christ Jesus, a divine being and God's agent in the original creation of the world, was destined to appear in human form and carry out this plan of salvation through his death and resurrection. When he did so appear, he gave as wondrous an example of humility and obedience as Adam had given of pride and disobedience; "he

was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." Just then, as in Adam all men sinned and fell under the bondage of corruption and death, so in Christ can all be made alive, replacing their fleshly and mortal nature by a holy, spiritual, and immortal one. To be sure, not all persons are impelled to turn to Jesus in saving faith; only those whom God has fore-ordained to salvation become actual beneficiaries of his redeeming work. But these are drawn from Gentiles as well as Jews, from the poor as well as the wealthy, from slaves as well as free men. There are no distinctions of privilege in Christ Jesus.

Faith is the inward act of submission to the transforming power of Christ; baptism is the external sign of sharing in his death and his resurrection to eternal glory; and participation in the divine nature is often symbolically reenacted in eating the bread and drinking the wine of the Eucharist. Strictly speaking, the Christian no longer lives, himself, at all. It is Christ that lives in him, and his presence is made evident in daily life by the fruits of joy, patience, purity, hope, and especially love toward God and man. To the one who thus lives in Christ all things work together for good here below, and he is blessed with the assurance of immortality in the life to come.⁷

Metaphysical Presuppositions

Given the definition I have cited from Burt, it is clear that Christianity presupposes certain metaphysical ideas. The existence of nature, man, and God are assumed. That man, as we find him, is in some sense to be understood in terms of the effect of sin is further presupposed. Most significant is the interaction which is presumed between the divine realm and the realm of man. In Burt's definition this interaction involves (1) creation, (2) revelation, (3) incarnation, and (4) redemption.

The Truth-Claims of Christianity

In addition to its metaphysical assumptions, Christianity is so addressed as to involve certain epistemological matters. Most obvious of these is that Christianity claims to be true. Its truth-claims extend to all Biblical assertions whether they involve God or man, history or science, miraculous events or supernaturalist doctrines. In other words, Christianity claims to present a revelation from God not only in the sense of a personal communication but as a body of propositional truths.

From this I draw two corollaries. One regarding the nature of Christianity; the other regarding the nature of Christian faith. First, Christianity is not mere fideism. Neither is it mere philosophy. Christianity does not consist of religious experience alone, nor is it to be regarded as a mere system of value judgments à la Ritschl. Rather, Christianity is a religion of revelation and redemption centering in the historic person of Jesus Christ, providing both objective truth and the good life.⁸

Likewise, Christian faith, properly understood, is neither mere emotion on the one hand,

nor is it mere intellectual assent on the other. Faith in the Biblical sense is a committal of the whole personality to a known object. It is neither irrational nor supra-rational but a reasoned and reasonable response. Paul, for example, said, "I know whom I have believed" (II Tim. 1:12). Christians are likewise encouraged to give "a reason for the hope that is in you" (I Pet. 3:15).

The Exclusivism of Christianity

A characteristic of Christianity that has doubtless been the chief factor in making Christianity and philosophy appear mutually antagonistic is the exclusivistic claim. People tend to tolerate other people's views. We even admire a person who "stands up for what he believes." When, however, one claims that his religion is right and all others are absolutely wrong, there is no end to the ill-will. Fortunately a presuppositional and exclusivistic approach need not deter one from the philosophic task. The facts are that no philosopher approaches his task without presuppositions. All the objectivity claims of the philosophers to the contrary notwithstanding, world views are chosen rather than proven. This, however, is no reason to withdraw from the philosophic task; it is all the more reason to be actively engaged in it.

IS THERE A CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY?

Christian philosophy is an intellectual venture which is necessarily undertaken whenever a man who is endowed with philosophical tastes, gifts, and temperament believes the Christian Faith. I use the word 'necessarily,' because such a man cannot believe with the whole of his being unless he believes in a philosophical and intellectual manner. There are indeed diversities of gifts and temperaments, but of all Christians it is true that genuine personal faith must mean the deliberate surrender and dedication of the entire personality to the service of God. The philosophical type of man must thus choose between being a Christian philosopher and not being a Christian at all.⁹

I have tried to define philosophy and Christianity in such a way as to make the opinion of Casserley (cited above) apparent. In the interest of clarity I shall elaborate a bit on this relationship.

Areas of Common Involvement

By definition, Christianity and philosophy are not coextensive. There are, nonetheless, large areas of common involvement. To say that the Christian position has historically been at odds with differently oriented philosophies is of no more moment than to say that David Hume was not in total agreement with the philosophy of Rene Descartes.

Philosophy is concerned with the pursuit of meaning. The concepts of our religious experience are no less worthy as a field of investigation in this regard than our concepts in any other area of experience. Likewise the beliefs of Christianity are to be subjected to the same

critical tests for validity as those of any alternative system. I do not deny that the Christian church has had its share of obscurantist folk; but then no group desires to be judged by the lunatic fringe that becomes attached to it. Rather, the true Christian community has never really forsaken the task of apologetics. It has sometimes proceeded with inadequate tools, unenlightened zeal, or confusion between the task of apologetics and that of evangelism; but in their finer hours Christians have gladly embraced the challenge of submitting their faith to examination with respect to the legitimacy of their presuppositions, the consistency and coherence of their logic, and the adequacy of their conclusions. I not only believe that true Christianity will bear such scrutiny but that it is an essential task of the Christian community to thus criticize its own system.

The greater tension between Christianity and philosophy has not arisen in the area of criticism, but rather in the area in which the presuppositions of Christianity collide with the musings of speculative philosophy. Several observations seem pertinent here.

(1) As suggested above, world views are deliberately chosen. This by reason of their presuppositional nature. An evolutionist, for example, presupposes--among other things--that life originated from non-life. The theist, on the other hand, presupposes that there exists an eternally-living creator of life. At this point one does not prove, he chooses. I might say that my view exhibits greater inner consistency than yours, that my position has a greater degree of workability than yours, or that my theory is more psychologically necessary and satisfying than yours. Such judgments have a place: they certainly do not constitute proof in the sense of a geometric demonstration to which we affix our Q.E.D.

(2) Christianity is not necessarily bound to a particular philosophic framework. To be sure, the Christian will always be a theist; but Christianity is not philosophy, the Bible is not a philosophic textbook, and in point of fact, the Christian church has historically had representatives in quite opposing philosophic traditions. We have already cited Augustine and Aquinas on faith. One could hardly hope for a better example of the adaptability of Christianity than these two as they embraced respectively the philosophic idea of Plato and Aristotle.

(3) An objector might ask, "But is not Christianity a tightly closed system? How can you talk about the development of a Christian view in the same breath with speculative philosophy?" To this I would respond: If you mean that Christianity is irrevocably committed to certain propositions sine qua non, yes, the system is closed. The assertion that Jesus Christ, a theanthropic person, died substitutionally for me in just satisfaction of divine law and that he subsequently rose bodily from the dead and ascended into heaven is such a proposition. It has metaphysical, historical, scientific, and moral implications, and with its denial Christianity ceases to be Christianity, rightly so-called. However Christianity is certainly not closed or static in the sense that it does not admit of development, refinement, organization, clarification or simplification. At every level--liturgy, theology, formal organization, sectarian and denominational development--Christianity has, throughout its history undergone profound change, continually and intentionally. At the same time Christianity, rightly so-called, has preserved those essentials which mark its continuity with the New Testament church. A certain tentativeness therefore attaches to the present status of Christianity as

well as to that of speculative philosophy. A certain harmony also exists in their respective search for organization and systematization of the data of our experience, natural and religious.

Biblical Restriction

In coming directly to the question I have posed, Is there a Christian philosophy?, I would first clarify the question by restatement. To speak of "a Christian philosophy" as if there were one systematic approach to the questions of philosophy that might be called "the Christian philosophy" is contradictory. No such system exists, nor could exist. Christianity is simply not that parochial. On the other hand, to speak of constructing a system which is both philosophically satisfying and in harmony with the Christian position is not only meaningful, but is a valid expression of the ultimate task of every thoughtful Christian.

The Christian community has recognized the Bible as authoritative in all matters of faith and life. Protestant Christianity has expressed this respect in terms of "a final and sufficient authority for doctrine and practice." All branches of Christianity have at least acknowledged the Bible as an authority. Now the Biblical writers were not philosophers, at least not in the technical understanding of the term. Paul had more of the knack for analysis and systematization than others, but even he did not address himself directly to the traditional philosophic problems. Neither was the Bible addressed to a philosophically oriented audience. It contains no systematic statement of a philosophic position, or for that matter even a systematic theology. Nevertheless, the Bible viewed as a whole does exhibit a certain implicit philosophic framework. The Christian therefore acknowledges certain restrictions under which he works by reason of his prior commitment to an authority. For example, in ontology, the Christian commitment demands that one work out a position based on an underlying theism; in epistemology, a Christian may be expected to argue for a dualistic realism, Bishop Berkeley to the contrary notwithstanding; and in ethics, the Christian will certainly argue against relativism. This is not to say that there is not a great deal of work to be done in explicating a Christian view--there certainly is. Neither is it supposed that easy and final answers are available to life's most profound questions. Rather, the Christian philosopher will recognize the bias with which he begins and strive to take that bias into account in his thinking. After all, no one proceeds with strict logical objectivity. The best we can do in this regard is to acknowledge our prejudice and presuppositions frankly and honestly.

Some Recent Examples

A generation ago, when the Christian church in the U. S. was so completely overwhelmed by theological liberalism, it was well nigh impossible to find examples of serious attempts at synthesis between philosophy and what I have referred to as Christianity, rightly so-called. The names of B. B. Warfield, James Orr, and J. Gresham Machen stand out as notable exceptions.

Today the situation is encouragingly different. Not that the church has just produced as Aristotle or Hegel, but then we are not altogether without representatives. This may be illustrated by reference to the late archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple's Nature, Man,

and God; an extensive four-volume work, A New Critique of Theoretical Thought by Herman Dooyeweerd of the Free University of Amsterdam, together with an introduction to that work by J. M. Spier, An Introduction to Christian Philosophy; A Christian View of Men and Things, by Gordon Clark of Butler University, and also his Religion, Reason, and Revelation; Warren Young's A Christian Approach to Philosophy; and E. J. Carnell's Philosophy of the Christian Religion and An Introduction to Christian Apologetics.

THE FUNCTIONS OF A CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHER

Given this possibility of cooperation, what then are the goals of a Christian philosopher? In what areas may he be expected to make a meaningful contribution?

Theology and Apologetics

Above all else the Christian philosopher will contribute to Christian theology. He will also aid the church in its apologetic function. In theology he will employ his skill in analysis and criticism; in apologetics he will use the tools of synthesis and application.

As suggested above, the concepts and beliefs of Christian theology demand the same analysis with respect to their meaning and validity as our concepts in any other area. No theologian begins de novo; he does not work in a vacuum. Rather, he brings to his task a long history of theological and philosophical discussion and debate. Therefore, just as it is with any "pure" philosopher, the basic raw materials for the Christian theologian are the given results of centuries of historical contributions. Furthermore, the point is well taken that "no difficulty emerges in theology which has not previously emerged in philosophy."¹⁰ Therefore, the Christian philosopher will bring to bear on theology that clarity and precision of understanding, that penetration of insight and criticism without which theology will atrophy.

Likewise, for the apologetic task, the skill of the philosopher is indispensable. The task of drawing out the implications of Christian theology for a comprehensive world and life view is staggering. To properly relate the principles implicit in Christianity to the whole range of problems explicit in any given culture demands the very utmost that any man could offer. We have scarcely scratched the surface in this regard. Whatever impact the church will make on the problems of the society in which it functions--exclusive of its evangelistic thrust--will be dependent upon its production of men who, like Augustine in his generation, are able to see the relevance of Christianity to culture and to communicate the same adequately.

Philosophy and Culture

One who is accurately characterized by both substantives, Christian and philosopher, is no less one by being the other. A Christian philosopher will therefore perform the same tasks in philosophy, as such, as would any other philosopher. The only difference is that the Christian proceeds with a fundamental conviction that,

a genuine Christian philosophy is possible, willing to submit itself to the

most rigorously conceived metaphysical tests, and capable of emerging from such an ordeal well ahead of its competitors.¹¹

CONCLUSION

The Challenge

The question of the relationship of faith and reason is one that must be faced by every thoughtful person. We have defined Christian faith as a commitment based, among other things, on rational considerations. For the Christian, therefore, the question is psychologically compelling. Not that every Christian carefully thinks through the problem and writes out a solution. But every one does betray his own conclusion in his actions toward God and the society in which he lives. For the non-Christian philosopher the question is likewise compelling. If he is to explain adequately all human experience he must give some account of the moral and religious experiences of men. If he denies the existence of the God from whom Christians claim to derive such experience, the very denial requires a committal based on personal choice.

It seems to me that the one factor which hinders the successful solution to the problem is fear. Christians are notoriously afraid of the truth. This is sad when Jesus himself claimed to be "the truth." But like all men, whatever truth we have we hold in a bundle of cultural accoutrements--and with what tenacity do we cling to our accoutrements! Non-Christians likewise fear the truth which Christianity claims to possess:

The hedonist fears reduction to a negative, Sunday School manner of a life; the lover of bread the choking off of material rights; the positivist the corrupting of scientific verification; the philosopher the imposition of extra-rational revelation; the humanist the swallowing up of the dignity of man; the finitist the loss of goodness; the universalist the loss of love; the Roman Catholic the loss of authority; and the existentialist the loss of creativity.¹²

Jesus told a group of very religious people that when they knew the truth the truth would make them free. It would seem therefore that to whatever extent we remain bound by prejudice and fear, to that extent the truth has not yet penetrated.

Christ and Culture

Apart from its bearing the act of saving faith, the most relevant implication of the faith-reason question is its bearing on the relation of the church to the society in which it functions. We have indicated that the thoughtful Christian will take as a prime objective the duty of relating the Christian gospel to the problems of his society. A classic study of the positions the church has historically taken on this issue is Christ and Culture by H. Richard Niebuhr.¹³ Five representative attitudes are examined in careful detail. The fifth, "Christ the transformer of culture," is the position of Augustine and is rooted in his view of faith.

Christ is the transformer of culture for Augustine in the sense that he

redirects, reinvigorates, and regenerates that life of man, expressed in all human works, which in present actuality is the perverted and corrupted exercise of a fundamentally good nature.¹⁴

The problem is to convert culture not to replace it. Every area of culture is subject to Christ's transforming power. This is possible because Christ is the supreme ruler over every phase of human activity.

DOCUMENTATION

¹Frank Thilly and Ledger Wood, A History of Philosophy (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1958), p. 167.

Material for Augustine's position on faith and reason is found in The City of God, Bk. XI, Chap. 2; Bk. XIX, Chap. 18; in his essays, "Of True Religion" and "The Usefulness of Belief;" and in B. B. Warfield, "Augustine's Doctrine of Knowledge and Authority," The Princeton Theological Review, Vol. V, #3 (July, 1907), 353-397.

³The Thomistic position on faith and reason is elaborated in the Summa Contra Gentiles, I, 1-8.

⁴Arthur Holmes, Christianity and Philosophy (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1960), p. 25.

⁵Albert William Levi, Varieties of Experience (New York: The Ronald Press, 1957), p. 3.

⁶Cited in Melvin Rader, The Enduring Questions (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 13.

⁷Edwin A. Burt, Types of Religious Philosophy (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), pp. 37-38.

⁸Holmes, op. cit., pp. 12-13.

⁹J. V. L. Casserley, The Christian in Philosophy (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), p. 11.

¹⁰Sir William Hamilton, cited by Holmes, op. cit., p. 35.

¹¹Casserley, op. cit., p. 255.

¹²E. J. Carnell, A Philosophy of the Christian Religion (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), p. 512.

¹³This is available in paperback in the Harper Torchbook Series. H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1951).

¹⁴Ibid. p. 209.