Book review

J Aaron Simmons (Ed.): *Christian Philosophy: Conceptions, Continuations, and Challenges*
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Steve Bishop
City of Bristol College
Bristol, UK

> I beg you, do not let the philosophy of Gentiles be more honest than our Christian philosophy, which (is) the one true philosophy, for its name means the quest or love of wisdom. Augustine, *Against Julian* Book 4 Chapter 14 §42.

Christian philosophy, or at least the term, can be traced back to Augustine. Since Augustine, there have been diverse approaches to what has been called Christian philosophy, as these essays in this collection illustrate. The term is certainly ambiguous. There are many different views as to what constitutes Christian philosophy – though not all of them are reflected in this book. The approaches identified below are obviously, not necessarily exclusive.

1. For many Christian philosophy is an oxymoron; or, according to Heidegger, 'a round square and a misunderstanding' (Heidegger, 2000:8). This is the approach of Maurice Blondel as discussed in the essay by Jean-Luc Marion (chapter 2 in this volume). Schellenberg, in chapter 14, also adopts a similar position; he thinks that Christian philosophy so-called is really theology.
2. Christian philosophy is a philosophy that is done by Christians. This is perhaps obvious; it may be a necessary condition but it is not sufficient. Plantinga (chapter 1) addresses this in his essay:

> In sum, we who are Christians and propose to be philosophers must not rest content with being philosophers who happen, incidentally, to be Christians … (10).

3. Philosophy deals with reason and Christianity with faith. Christian philosophy is then reason illuminated by revelation. This seems to be the approach of Étienne Gilson as discussed in the article in this volume by Marion (chapter 2).

4. For some, it is identical to philosophical theology or philosophy of religion. It then tends to become part of theology. The Roman Catholic philosopher, Fredrick C Copleston SJ. wrote:

   > The most that the phrase Christian philosophy can legitimately mean is a philosophy compatible with Christianity; if it means more than that, one is speaking of a philosophy which is not simply philosophy, but which is, partly at least, theology (Copleston, 1999:558).

   Philosophy becomes little more than a Trojan horse for theology. This is the accusation of Schellenberg (chapter 14). This theologising of philosophy is something that Westphal (chapter 4) sees as a worrying trend.

5. For others, it is a particular method. Hart, who offers a defence of Christian phenomenology (chapter 6) and Dougherty (chapter 11) who advocates analytic philosophy or rather analytic theology, both come close to this approach.

6. It is a tool for apologetics. None of the authors here adopt this approach but it is the case in more popular and non-academic writings. It is a tendency that Westphal in chapter 4 identifies as a concern.

7. Philosophy can become Christian by the topics it deals with. Thus Taliaferro (chapter 7) can write:

   > In recent decades we have seen important, fruitful philosophical work in the Anglophone world on abundant topics of central interest to Christian tradition: the Trinity, the Incarnation, the atonement, the sacraments, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, theosis, prayer, providence, Christian conceptions of life after life. This has been part of what Alvin Plantinga has encouraged in his seminal advice: Christian philosophers should not have their work be so limited by a secular philosophical agenda that they neglect the philosophical exploration of themes that matter very much to those who are Christian philosophers (or who are philosophers who are Christians) (123).

8. Many take the Augustinian model and see Christian philosophy with Augustine as the pursuit of wisdom. This approach is seen, in part, in Ebels-Duggan's chapter.

9. For some Christian philosophy to be truly Christian it must be Christ- and cross-centred. This is the view advocated by Moser (chapter 13).

10. While for others it is a philosophy that arises out of a Christian worldview. This then begs the questions what is the relationship between a worldview and philosophy? Does a worldview shape philosophy or philosophy shape a worldview? Unfortunately, these questions are not discussed in this volume.

This book *Christian Philosophy* is the product of a joint meeting between the Society of Christian Philosophers and the Society of Continental Philosophy in 2014. The provenance indicates two streams in the book: analytic and continental philosophy. The influence of Plantinga is felt in many of the contributions. The book could almost be a *festschrift* for Plantinga.

As the subtitle suggests, this book is in three parts. I will examine each in turn before offering a brief evaluation.

Part 1. Conceptions

This section contains six essays – four of which have previously been published. One of these is Plantinga's ground-breaking essay *Advice to Christian philosophers* (chapter 1) – here Plantinga set the agenda for much Christian philosophy.

> … we must strive to be Christian philosophers. We must therefore pursue our projects with integrity, independence, and Christian boldness (39).

His model of philosophy, often-called Reformed epistemology, has dominated much of what is known as Christian philosophy. The resurgence of Christian philosophy or certainly Christians involved in philosophy has been attributed to Plantinga. No longer do Christians feel, yet have to apologise for their faith when doing philosophy. So, almost inevitably, the shadow of Plantinga is felt in many of the essays, for example, Ebels-Duggan in chapter 3 states:

> I take as my starting point Alvin Plantinga's well-known *Advice to Christian Philosophers* (Plantinga, 1984). Plantinga's advice falls into two parts, a negative part, in which he commends autonomy, and a positive part in which he commends integrity (55).

She (Ebels-Duggan) explores two key facets of Plantinga's directive to ask the right questions: autonomy and integrity. She offers good advice for all philosophers not only Christians:

> … don't inadvertently take on the assumptions of others. Be alert to the natural human tendency to assimilate, unreflectively, the opinions of those around you, to pick them up as one would a contagion. In particular be alert to the tendency

> to assimilate opinions about *which claims may be taken for granted* and *correlatively, which should be called into question, or again, which questions are worth asking*. (56)

Here she defends Plantinga's view against the accusation of dogmatism and in doing so looks at how we understand autonomy.

She then moves on to examine what assumptions we *should* make. She develops the idea that philosophy's guiding idea should be the pursuit of wisdom rather than a commitment to reason. She observes:

> Christian philosophy, rightly understood and rightly executed, is part of one way of living a distinctively Christian life, so the questions that we ask ought to arise from, and be continuous with, the living of such a life. Much of what I say here is an attempt to clarify what I mean by this, largely by contrasting it with other ways of thinking of philosophy in general and Christian philosophy in particular (55).

Jean-Luc Marion in the next essay (chapter 3) places "Christian philosophy" in quotes. Here he examines the debates between Émile Bréhier and Étienne Gilson. He provides a good summary overview.

> [Émile Bréhier's] 1931 thesis can be summarized as follows: Christianity has often used very diverse philosophies, but has never created or assimilated any of them, because there is an 'incompatibility', or at least a radical 'separation', between clear and distinct reason and the mystery of a relationship between God and the human person (40).

And

> Gilson, for his part, often explained that "Christian philosophy" exists whenever revelation makes suggestions to reason, without substituting itself for reason or modifying reason's requirements, in order to broach themes rationally that reason could not handle by itself or even suspect (41).

Merold Westphal in chapter 4 also looks to and draws on and develops Plantinga. Westphal offers some advice: take Plantinga's advice more seriously. Christian Philosophers need to be reminded that they serve both the academy and the church, and that they have their own agenda and assumptions.

> So I, too, shall offer some advice to Christian philosophers, including myself. Put in its most general terms, my advice is that we look back at Al's own advice from 1983 and try to take it even more seriously than we have to this point. I refer to two reminders and an exhortation. First, there is the reminder that we belong to the Church as well as to the academy. Second comes the reminder that by virtue of the former affiliation we have our own agenda (Plantinga, 1984, p. 255) and our own assumptions (p. 256). Finally there is the exhortation to

> greater autonomy vis-à-vis other agendas and assumptions, greater "integrality" in relation to our own, and greater courage, boldness, strength, and self-confidence in pursuing this autonomy and this integrality (74).

He identifies that since Plantinga offered his advice there have been some changes, not least, "the gap between philosophy and theology has been dramatically reduce(d), or perhaps deliberately fuzzied". Is this because Christian philosophy has to be seen as theology to justify it? If so, this is a worrying trend. Westphal is right in that a Christian philosopher should not be seen as an apologist – "we have other tasks we ought not to neglect".

In chapter 5, Bruce Ellis Benson begins his essay with an important point:

> Now I am utterly convinced that our philosophical work *does* matter; I think what we do have deep implications for how we live life. But it is less clear to me exactly how best to articulate what it means for philosophy *to matter*. More important, my concern is particularly how *Christian* philosophy matters, and to *whom* it matters (83).

He thus argues that there is a two-fold task for Christian philosophy: practical and theoretical:

> By "practical", I simply mean: "concerned with action". On the other hand, this emphasis on practical philosophy is in no way incompatible with what we might call "theoretical philosophy". By "theoretical", I mean: "concerned with thinking" (83).

However, shouldn't this be true of all philosophy – what is it that makes it Christian as opposed to Marxist, feminist or fascist philosophy?

Benson makes some interesting observations when comparing analytic (APR) and continental philosophy of religion (CPR). The former claim more about God than can be maintained by human finitude but continental philosophy claims too little about God because of the limits of human reason. He thus observes:

> We could lament this situation, or we could see it for the blessing that it really is. If I am correct that APR and CPR represent tendencies toward inflation and deflation, respectively, then they can actually be seen as complementary and part of the two-fold task of philosophy (96).

Kevin Hart, in chapter 6, examines Christian phenomenology and sees it as a model for Christian philosophy:

> To summarize: unlike most versions of Christian philosophy, Christian phenomenology begins with the testimony of Scripture; it attends to Jesus's preaching of a peculiar phenomenon he calls the Kingdom (112).

He makes an excellent observation regarding analytical philosophy:

> Analytic philosophy can be remarkably self-assured whether it seeks to eliminate religious language as nonsensical (Ayer) or present it as coherent (Alston), to argue for the existence of God (Plantinga) or against it (Oppy), to justify specific claims, such as the resurrection of Jesus (Swinburne) or argue against it and all miracles (Hume and his modern followers), to bolster theodicy (Stump) or to oppose it (Betenson). It is not surprising then that it can easily give the impression of being a series of sharp tools that can make anything or destroy anything (118).

He advocates Christian phenomenology, however, in doing so he comes close to blurring the boundaries between philosophy and theology:

> By contrast, the Christian phenomenology I propose begins by drawing from Scripture, seeks concretion rather than abstraction, and is grounded in the preaching of Jesus and testimony about him. Its context is theology, rather than philosophy; it is an art and does not seek to ape the sciences; and yet it could not begin or develop without continual study of the phenomenological tradition within philosophy (118).

Part 2. Continuations

The first essay in this section by Taliaferro (chapter 7) looks at dedications – those often found in the front of books. Here he seeks following Plantinga's suggestion of widening the scope of themes covered by Christian philosophers.

DeRoo makes an excellent case for seeing the primary task of Christian philosophy is discerning the "spirits" of the age. Utilising insights from Husserl he sees spirit as being similar to the notion of worldview – perhaps better, I would assert, similar to Dooyeweerd's ground-motive. He then, utilising Dooyeweerdian insights, looks at a theological anthropology, in particular being the image bearer of God:

> Indeed, being an image-bearer of God is not a property of humanity at all, but is rather its essential definition: humanity is image-bearing-ness itself and not merely a thing that happens, accidentally, to bear the image of God in some or other particular things it does (138).

He provides a good description of a Dooyeweerdian view of philosophy:

> Where each discipline is tasked with investigating a particular aspect of creation (or, rather, is tasked with investigating creation from the viewpoint of a particular aspect: biology from the biotic aspect, psychology from the psychic aspect, etc.), philosophy is tasked with investigating the integrity of creation:

> how do the different aspects and different disciplines (i.e., the different ways of investigating the world theoretically) hang together? Philosophical conceptions of ontology, anthropology, and epistemology deal with these larger questions, and so are in a unique position to articulate and systematically clarify the larger forces operating within and upon multiple disciplines, multiple aspects (144).

DeRoo sees the role of philosophy as being "uniquely positioned to help with that process of spiritual discernment, clarification, and articulation, and Christian philosophers ought to do so in the service to the Christian community". And I would want to add – especially after reading Moser's essay, in chapter 23 in this volume – "and to do so in the service of the crucified King".

Timpe (chapter 9) compares philosophy and disability advocacy. Developing a quote from Parker Palmer he notes that "we research who we are".

> Christian philosophers should be helping others – whether that be the general public, other philosophers, or other Christian philosophers – see their own lacunas, see where their situatedness shapes, and perhaps misleads, in ways they don't notice (160).

Sullivan, in chapter 10, ponders the issue of teaching/debating the problem of evil.

> Is my stance on the problem of evil similarly akratic? Am I intellectually committed to atheism but simply unwilling to quit my Mass-attending ways (166)?

She identifies a key problem:

> I think theists are in a dialectical mismatch when it comes to the problem of evil, and this explains why it is such a difficult topic to teach and a perennial burden for those of us who would defend the rationality of theistic belief (167).

Sullivan makes some interesting points regarding the use of theological arguments in philosophical debate.

Trent Dougherty (chapter 11) presents an apologetic for analytical philosophy or rather analytic theology. He makes some helpful observations (but these could be applied to any academic subject): don't be bullied, stay current, stay sharp, avoid fads (mostly), know your history and thicken it up. Two others apply to analytic theology: don't worry about what analytic theology is, just do it and do it wherever you are!

Moving on from "continuations" we have "challenges".

Part 3. Challenges

In this section, the essays challenge Plantinga's advice. Simmons (chapter 12) questions the validity of it today. Drawing on his personal experiences he sees Christian philosophy as being much broader than Plantinga contends. This may be because of theological rather than philosophical differences, Simmons has Pentecostal and, like Westphal, open theist sympathies.

He is also a defender of the "theistic possibilities for creative epistemic anti-realism". So, Simmons finds Westphal's epistemically anti-realism to be more consistent with his Christian faith than Plantinga's rejection of it.

> As I see it, Westphal offers a model of dialogical invitation rather than one of oppositional challenge (191).

It is a shame that Westphal's essay (Westphal, 1973) was not reprinted in this volume – it is more difficult to access than Plantinga's which has been republished numerous times.

Simmons is also wary of the triumphalism that could now be associated with the apparent success Christian philosophy has had. Here he develops a warning that Plantinga made. It could become insular, arrogant and potentially socially extremist. This is what Simmons perceives could happen when opposition is eliminated.

Paul Moser (chapter 13) maintains that Plantinga's 'advice' is not Christological enough. Philosophy to be truly Christian philosophy must be Christ-centred. He echoes Kasemann's comment on theology in terms of philosophy:

> No philosophy that does not lead us to the crucified Jesus Christ deserves the term "Christian", however much "advice" its advocates offer to Christian philosophers (226).

He goes on to state:

> We can make this point without collapsing Christian philosophy into Christian theology, given the wider scope of philosophy (226).

Good advice, but I'm left wondering how do we do this? Moser offers no concrete advice and no exemplars of how we should do this. Is a philosophy that opens up and develops the diversity of creation under the cultural mandate not a Christian philosophy? I wonder how Moser would respond.

While Moser questions the lack of Christological focus in Plantinga's advice, Schellenberg goes further in chapter 14 and questions if Plantinga-style philosophy is philosophy. He maintains that it is not philosophy but theology.

Schellenberg argues that Christian philosophy does not meet what he terms the "Communal Condition" (note the capital letters!). It does not meet it because it is not done for the benefit of the broader philosophical community:

> to be doing philosophy one must aim not just to solve certain fundamental problems, or contribute thereto, but to do so together with like-minded others in a shared enterprise leading to informed consensus (232).

He adds:

> To count as doing philosophy one has to consciously be *a member of the human philosophical community and functioning as such* in the manner indicated (232 – italics in original).

This though begs the question, whose community, which community? Who defines the philosophical community? But doesn't Reformed Christian Philosophy (RCP) take place within the philosophical community of the Society of Christian Philosophers? By Schellenberg's own definition RCP would then be philosophy. Also, what about Marxist or Radical Feminist philosophy, on Schellenberg's definition one could question if they are also not practising philosophy. Don't these like RCP have their foundational principles that would not necessarily be shared with all other philosophers? Schellenberg attempts to answer this problem – but doesn't fully succeed in my opinion.

Christian philosophers begin with a belief in God, atheistic philosophers begin with a belief that there is no God. Why should one belief exclude them from the philosophical community and the other not? Why should one mean that the philosophy they practice is theology but for the other it is philosophy not a theology?

Oppy begins his essay (chapter 15) with looking at the so-called golden age for Christian philosophy. He questions the triumphalist narrative. He examines demographic trends, surveys done among academics, as well as articles published in mainstream philosophy journals that mention God and those employed at establishment universities. He finds no evidence of the triumph of Christian philosophy, and thus sees

> … no reason at all for anyone to accept the claim that philosophy has been transformed from a post-war haven for atheists to a contemporary stronghold for Christian philosophy across significant portions of the globe (250).

Ochs, a Jewish Philosopher, welcomes the stimulation given to Christian philosophy by Plantinga. In particular the break from "the hegemony of a particular model of rationality". This opened up the way for other scriptural

traditions. After over 20 years he is hopeful but also disappointed. Disappointed because Christian philosophers seem to have upheld the modern model of logic and promoted a two-valued propositional logic. He provides several examples from Plantinga's work to support his point and maintains that "Plantinga's discourse remains consistent with such a linguistic orthodoxy".

The final essay, chapter 17, by Hasker is a response to the challenges posed in this section. He begins with Ochs's paper as he doesn't regard it as a serious threat to Christian philosophy – Hasker agrees that Christian philosophers need to explore the "resources of multivalued logic".

He ably simplifies the approaches of the other antagonists to what he designates as the "surge" in Christian philosophy thus:

> With apologies for over-simplification, one might cite Graham Oppy as arguing that the surge is more a myth than a reality. Paul Moser thinks that, insofar as there has been something of a surge, the philosophy produced falls short of being properly Christian. John Schellenberg's view is even more ominous: the result of the surge is something that is not really *philosophy* at all; in a sense, then, the surge in Christian philosophy has resulted in the abolition of Christian philosophy, among the relevant segment of philosophers! Aaron Simmons, on the other hand, accepts that a surge in Christian philosophy has occurred: he worries that it may lead to both exclusivism and triumphalism among the philosophers involved in it (287).

Hasker questions Oppy's data and is probably correct in noting that the data is underdetermined – even though it does question the overly extravagant claims of William Craig which Oppy cites. He does note, rightly, that Christian philosophers should be wary of triumphalist attitudes.

He then moves on to consider Schellenberg's "Communal Condition" as the reason behind Reformed Christian Philosophy doing theology but not philosophy. Hasker believes this argument is only effective against the strictest set of Reformed epistemologists. However:

> Suppose we have two articles on some topic in philosophy of religion—one written by a "purist" Reformed epistemologist, and the other by an adherent of the more moderate view endorsed by Plantinga. The articles can be as similar as one could wish in premises, argumentation, and conclusion, yet one article counts as philosophy and the other is excluded from that honor. Isn't this a paradoxical situation? I trust that most readers will share my opinion that whether a particular argument counts as philosophy should not be decided by the author's beliefs concerning some question that is logically unconnected with the argument itself (292)!

He then goes on from looking at the implication of the condition to its status. He observes that we are "nowhere close to achieving, sufficient agreement to establish the 'Communal Condition' as a necessary condition for anyone's qualifying as a philosopher". Such a demarcation principle for philosophy is as elusive as a demarcation principle for the physical sciences.

Moser is next for consideration by Hasker. As Hasker observes, the problem for Oppy and Schellenberg is that Christian philosophy is too Christian, but for Moser it is not Christian enough! Regarding Simmons's objections, Hasker thinks his approach is far too broad brush. Hasker takes an objection/response approach here. Outlining Simmons's objections in turn followed by a response. This is helpfully done. Hasker defends Plantinga well here. Hasker notes that the objection of Simmons to an opposition between Christian and non-Christian philosophers is not between philosophical systems, but between the people of God and the world.

Hasker's penetrating summarising view of Simmons is that

> The upshot of this discussion is that Simmons has read into "Christian philosophy" too much of what is distinctive of Plantinga's own philosophical work, and thus sees an antithesis to his own, continental-inspired approach where no such antithesis need be found. Ironically, then, while promoting an open, invitational style of philosophy of religion he has in fact erected unnecessary barriers (302)!

Evaluation

This is a useful and thought-provoking set of essays. I gleaned something useful from each one, which is unusual in a volume of collected essays. Welcome is the addition of Jewish, agnostics and atheist responses – these help to identify some blind spots we are all prone to.

The essays serve to illustrate the diverse views that claim to be Christian philosophy. They ably illustrate the state of play within Christian philosophy. Even though the essays only reflect a first world northern hemisphere perspective. The divisions are evident between analytic and continental philosophers and between those who see Christian philosophy as a branch of philosophy and those who see it as a branch of theology. The issue remains, what exactly is it when we do Christian philosophy?

The lack of mention of Dooyeweerd, (the exception is by DeRoo), and none of Vollenhoven or Stoker and none of Van Til, or Gordon Clark seems to suggest that these philosophers' work no longer has a place at the Society of Christian Philosopher's table. This, certainly in the case of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, is a real tragedy. Particularly as South African philosophers such as Danie Strauss, BJ van der Walt and Renato Coletto have in their copious published work shown the relevance of, and the insights generated by, Dooyeweerd's and Vollenhoven's philosophy.

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