

1 Is “Christian Philosophy” a Problem?

“Christian philosophy” is not an everyday term; it does not appear in most current dictionaries and encyclopedias of philosophy. When I used the term to register for a year of residential study in Great Britain, I was told by an officer that it was a *funny term*. He knew about Christianity, philosophy, religion, and Christian theology, but “‘Christian philosophy’? Isn’t that a misnomer or contradiction in terms?” If that officer or any other member of Oxford’s Thames Valley Police is reading this, please keep reading.

In this Element, I use the term “Christian philosophy” in accord with books like the *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* by Étienne Gilson and as the term is used by today’s Society of Christian Philosophers (SCP). Broadly speaking, Christian philosophy is philosophical work done mostly by Christians about the nature and practice of Christianity, its justification, its relation to other religions and to secular naturalism, Christian conceptions of good and evil, forgiveness and redemption, justice and mercy, Christian ethical theory and applied ethics (medical ethics, environmental ethics, etc.), belief in the Trinity, the Incarnation, the experience of God, the practices of prayer, worship, social activism, and more. Following the SCP, I shall not assume Christian philosophy is Roman Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, or Eastern Orthodox or that it reflects any particular denomination or communion – unlike philosophy fostered by the American Catholic Association, which is Roman Catholic, or the Evangelical Philosophical Society, which is mostly but not exclusively Protestant. As the term is used in this Element, Christian philosophy is mostly practiced by Christians, but there is no reason whatever why non-Christians cannot contribute to Christian philosophy. This is not merely hypothetical; over many years, non-Christian philosophers like William Rowe and John Fischer have made brilliant contributions to Christian philosophy (perhaps this is why Rowe referred to his own philosophy as *friendly* atheism). A self-identified agnostic (in this case, someone who professes not to know whether God exists), Robin Le Poidevin, has just published an intricate, well-argued case for the credibility of belief in the Incarnation, called *And Was Made Man: Mind, Metaphysics, and Incarnation* (Le Poidevin 2023).¹ This openness to contributing to Christian philosophy by atheists and agnostics reflects today’s (mostly) friendly intellectual climate in which non-Muslims contribute to Islamic philosophy, non-Buddhists contribute to Buddhist philosophy, and so on. Actually, the history of

¹ This Element will not be heavily laden with terminology and hyper-analytical definitions, but I note that while the term “agnostic” is often used today to refer to persons not committed to affirming or denying X (say, Christianity), it can apply to persons who affirm a position but do not claim *to know with certainty that the position is true*. On such a definition, persons may be agnostic and practicing Christians on the grounds that they believe (perhaps for good reasons) that Christianity is true, but do not profess to know that it is true.

philosophy itself is far more porous than it may appear on the surface. During the medieval era, there was a great deal of mutual influence and interaction between Jewish, Christian, and Islamic thinkers, especially over their engagement with ancient and classical Greco-Roman thought. Today, there are many projects involving dialogues with diverse religious and secular philosophers.²

Why care about Christian philosophy? Christianity is diverse with multiple communal traditions, but its common vision of God as the limitlessly powerful, loving, omnipresent, good creator and redeemer of the world has captured the imagination and energy of abundant philosophers since the beginning of Christianity in the first century. One Christian philosopher has even argued that there is reason to hope that the God of Christianity exists.

Why hope that there is a God? Because of compassion for those who have suffered innocently; because of desire that their suffering not have been useless and terminal, i.e., redeemable after death. As long as it is logically possible that evil be defeated, that innocent suffering is not meaningless and final, it seems to me that we have a moral obligation to hope that that possibility is actual. Therefore, we have a moral obligation to hope that there is a God because, if there is a God, then innocent suffering is not meaningless or final. (Creel 1986, 149)

Philosophically exploring the possible meaning(s) of life can naturally lead us to reflect on the plausibility of such religious conceptions of reality. One contemporary philosopher sees the role of philosophy in thoroughly secular terms: “There is exactly one overriding question in contemporary philosophy . . . How do we fit in? . . . How can we square this self-conception of ourselves as mindful, meaning-creating, free, rational, etc., agents with a universe that consists entirely of mindless, unfree, nonrational, brute physical particles?” (Searle 2007, 4).

Good question. But then there is also this question: is it possible or even reasonable to believe that reality is more than our view of “mindless, unfree, nonrational, brute physical particles”? I suggest that the many tasks of philosophy are incomplete unless they include engaging the great theistic traditions of the world, including Christianity.³

Because this Element is on *the problem* of God and Christian philosophy, I offer some reflections on the term “problem.” I suggest that not all of what we call a problem is bad or undesirable. For example, writing this Element started out as a huge problem for me (in the undesirable sense) as I began the writing while in

² The diversity of Christian and non-Christian philosophy is evident in the recent four-volume *Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Religion* (Goetz and Taliaferro 2021).

³ Other theistic traditions include Judaism, Islam, theistic Hinduism, Sikhism, the Bahai, and some Indigenous traditions in Africa. For an overview of world religions, see my book *Religions: A Quick Immersion* (Taliaferro 2021).

a hospital for two weeks, facing four operations. Writing a philosophy book under those dire circumstances did not become easier despite the surprising enthusiasm for philosophy among the hospital staff – one of my nurses even had a philosophical tattoo (her arm had a graphic, colored tattoo depicting Plato’s allegory of the cave)!⁴ Authorship continued to be onerous until I was released from the hospital to take on a different sort of problem. Then, in a library unfettered by constant medical attention, I had to squarely face up to the problem of writing this Element with the arduous, forbidding goal of ensuring it is intellectually stimulating and enlivening for you, whether you are a Christian, a secular critic of Christianity, a practicing Buddhist, or simply not religiously affiliated (“spiritual but not religious”). Moreover, in order to reach the goal of publication, I had the problem of satisfying my officious yet noble editor and a band of anonymous (perhaps even ruthless) philosophical reviewers. This was decidedly (as my students would say) not easy-peasy, but it was and is a problem I welcomed and hoped to meet.

I concede that very often in English the term “problem” is used to refer only to undesirable obstacles. If you email me that you have five problems with this Element, at first I will assume the worst. But such negative usage is not always the case. In his famous book *The Problems of Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell identifies as philosophical problems those important quandaries that launch the very practice of philosophy.

Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it? This question, which at first sight might not seem difficult, is really one of the most difficult that can be asked. When we have realised the obstacles in the way of a straightforward and confident answer, we shall be well launched on the study of philosophy – for philosophy is merely the attempt to answer such ultimate questions, not carelessly and dogmatically, as we do in ordinary life and even in the sciences, but critically, after exploring all that makes such questions puzzling, and after realising all the vagueness and confusion that underlie our ordinary ideas. (Russell 1912, 1)

I cite Russell’s *The Problems of Philosophy* not just as evidence that what are called problems can be beneficial but also to endorse his view that philosophical problems should be addressed with care, without dogmatism, and it sometimes involves questioning the assumptions we make in ordinary life. While I will part company with Russell later in this section on a different matter, I agree with his view that certain kinds of problems (questioning our ordinary claims about what we know about ourselves and the world) can launch philosophy – a task that (in my view) often requires imagination, time, and patience.

⁴ For those interested in the philosophical significance of tattoos, see “Tattoos and the Tattooing Arts in Perspective” (Taliaferro and Odden 2012).

To summarize: while this work brings to light problems, some will be tagged undesirable while other problems may be thought desirable, perhaps providing occasions for creative philosophical developments. In what follows, let us consider some of what may be undesirable problems about the idea and practice of Christian philosophy.

1.1 Three Reasons to Be Suspicious about Christian Philosophy

Let us consider three claims that Christian philosophy is a vexing problem: (A) Christian faith does not appeal to evidence, whereas philosophy does. (B) The Bible is opposed to philosophy. (C) Christian philosophers are not really philosophers because they claim to know the answer to philosophical questions (like “Does God exist?”) quite independent of (and perhaps prior to) engaging in philosophy. Some philosophers, including Russell, contend that true philosophers should not be constrained by independent answers to philosophical questions. At their best, philosophers should begin their practice by asking questions when they do not yet claim to know the answers to those questions

(A) *Faith and Evidence*. It has been claimed that Christianity is a matter of blind faith, whereas philosophy is not. Christians as well as non-Christians have described Christianity as a matter of having faith as opposed to relying on evidence or even having faith despite significant evidence against its truth. Separating religious faith from matters of evidence is not a merely marginal opinion, but seems to be officially adopted in the National Academy of Sciences and Institute of Medicine (now the National Academy of Medicine) statement on the relationship between science and religion:

Science and religion are based on different aspects of human experience. In science, explanations must be based on evidence drawn from examining the natural world. Scientifically based observations or experiments that conflict with an explanation eventually must lead to modification or even abandonment of that explanation. Religious faith, in contrast, does not depend only on empirical evidence, is not necessarily modified in the face of conflicting evidence, and typically involves supernatural forces or entities. Because they are not a part of nature, supernatural entities cannot be investigated by science. In this sense, science and religion are separate and address aspects of human understanding in different ways. Attempts to pit science and religion against each other create controversy where none needs to exist. (NASIM 2008: 12)

At least at first glance, this statement appears to be conciliatory, aimed at defusing tension between religion and science, but it also may suggest that religious faith is inimical to both science and philosophy insofar as the latter are governed by evidence and reason.

The idea that Christianity is not a matter of evidence is sometimes advanced by hostile critics (I once heard an Ivy League philosophy professor remark that Christian faith involves people believing something that they know is false), but those sympathetic to Christianity have taken note of how much religious language does not function as though it involves a hypothesis based on evidence. For example, when Christians recite Psalm 23, they say, “The Lord is my shepherd,” not “The Lord is probably my shepherd.” The Christian creeds begin with a claim about what is believed but not a statement such as *we think it highly likely there is a God who created heaven and earth*.

Some argue that Christianity is more of a form of life in which people find meaning rather than adherence to a philosophical ontology (an account of what exists) or a scientific hypothesis. British philosopher of religion D. Z. Phillips contends that religious talk of the soul and religious practices such as prayer are best not thought of as people believing there are immaterial, ghostly substances called souls or that they are addressing an all-powerful bodiless person. According to Phillips, such language is better understood as ways that people express their love for one another and their solidarity in living with reverence. This may involve a kind of evidence – demonstrating in words and deeds that there is real love and solidarity – but not evidence for a hypothesis about the supernatural.

(B) *The Bible and philosophy*. There are biblical passages that suggest a negative view of philosophy. “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” (Colossians 2:8). “And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual” (1 Corinthians 2:13). “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge’” (1 Timothy 6:20).

While Christians differ (as we shall see) on the nature and interpretation of the Bible, it seems to many that the Bible has a highly authoritative role as a source for the knowledge (or awareness) of God. In the New Testament, we read that “All Scripture is inspired by God and beneficial for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). According to Romans 15:4, “For everything that was written in the past was written for our instruction, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.” In 2 Peter 1:20–21, there is this affirmation: “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture comes from one’s own interpretation. For no such prophecy was ever brought forth by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” In light of these claims, shouldn’t the Bible have primacy over philosophy or, more radically, shouldn’t Scripture be the sole source of awareness of God as opposed to philosophy?

Some philosophers describe the task of philosophy as very much a matter of the free use of inquiry in which there is a reliance on our own reason rather than any traditional authority like the Bible or church tradition. Here is Immanuel Kant's famous account of what it is to be enlightened:

Enlightenment is man's leaving his self-caused immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to use one's intelligence without the guidance of another. Such immaturity is self-caused if it is not caused by lack of intelligence, but by lack of determination and courage to use one's intelligence without being guided by another. *Sapere Aude!* [Dare to know!] Have the courage to use your own intelligence is therefore the motto of the enlightenment. (Kant 1784, 481)

While some Christians see the Bible as a primary, wise source of illumination, Kant contends that philosophers should engage in mature, courageous reflection themselves without relying on the guidance of others, including the guidance of the Bible itself. When we are immature children, the guidance of others is inevitable, maybe wise or prudent, but becoming mature involves thinking for oneself.

(C) *A philosophical problem with Christian philosophy.* Some philosophers contend that Christian faith stifles or subverts the practice of philosophy. Russell offered the following negative view of the philosophical standing of thirteenth-century Christian Thomas Aquinas, widely recognized by many Christian philosophers today, especially Roman Catholics, as an ideal philosopher.

There is little of the true philosophic spirit in Aquinas. He does not, like the Platonic Socrates, set out to follow wherever the argument may lead. He is not engaged in an inquiry, the result of which it is impossible to know in advance. Before he begins to philosophize, he already knows the truth; it is declared in the Catholic faith. If he can find apparently rational arguments for some parts of the faith, so much the better; if he cannot, he need only fall back on revelation. The finding of arguments for a conclusion given in advance is not philosophy, but special pleading. I cannot, therefore, feel that he deserves to be put on a level with the best philosophers either of Greece or of modern times. (Russell 2009, 267; for a similar, more recent objection see Schellenberg 2019)

Let's now consider some replies to these objections.

1.2 Some Reasons to Welcome Christian Philosophy

Rely to A. First, some terminology. The notion that faith alone is key to Christianity has sometimes been referred to as *sola fide* (Latin for "faith alone") and some religious philosophers adopt what is called *fideism* (which might be called "faithism"). The opposite of fideism is often called *evidentialism*. According to a stringent version of evidentialism, it is always wrong to have a belief without

good evidence. Here is the classic example of evidentialism by William Clifford in 1877: “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.”

The simplest reply to this first objection is that not all Christian philosophers adopt *sola fide* or fideism. In fact, many Christian philosophers, historically and today, are evidentialists; they argue that there is good, sufficient evidence on behalf of Christian beliefs. Some of this evidence is based on observations of the cosmos (its existence, stable natural laws enabling galaxies with their virtually uncountable stars and planets, the emergence of life, including the emergence of conscious, sentient beings who have free will, moral experiences, and so on). Some evidence is especially conceptual (as in the ontological argument, which takes as its starting point the idea of God as maximally excellent) while other evidential elements are experiential (widespread testimony about the ostensible experience of a divine reality across cultures and times).⁵ In short, Christian philosophers from Thomas Aquinas to John Locke (eighteenth century) to today’s Richard Swinburne and Andrew Loke do not rely on “blind faith.”⁶

On religious language and practice: it would indeed be odd to say, “The Lord is probably my shepherd” or to introduce evidential language into creeds or reports of religious exchanges. But that does not mean that evidence is not involved. You would probably not tell someone “It is highly likely that I love you,” even if you were not absolutely sure of your feelings and, in truth, you simply thought it very probable that you love the person. Christian language and practice often reflects trust in a relationship or what is believed to be affective responses to God involving worship, praise, veneration, petition, confession, and a variety of emotions like love, desire, fear, awe, dread, anger, and so on. Such acts and emotions would make little sense if the practitioner was convinced there is no God. Phillips has a point that often Christian language about God and the soul are about expressing love for, and solidarity with, others, but this talk is often predicated on the belief that there actually is a God and that persons are or have souls (some spiritual dimension).

As an aside, some critics of traditional Christianity use the term “supernatural” to refer to God and souls, but this term is not always helpful for three reasons: (i) “supernatural” refers to poltergeists, witches, goblins, and similar phenomena, and its use since the seventeenth century suggests “superstition”;

⁵ For a survey of this ostensible evidence, see the free, online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry “Philosophy of Religion” (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/philosophy-religion>).

⁶ What should be recognized, though, is that these Christian evidentialists include as evidence sources that go beyond the natural sciences. For example, they may appeal to philosophical arguments (not constrained by only empirical observation), the appeal to explanatory power, moral experience, values. For a superb book on the role of evidence in philosophy, see William Lycan’s *On Evidence in Philosophy* (Lycan 2019).

(ii) according to much of traditional Christianity, God is natural (God has a nature), indeed God is the creative ground of the natural world (the cosmos); and (iii) many Christians see our souls as part of nature, the created order, and thus “natural.” The traditional term for the God of Christianity in English for the past 350 years is *theism* (or its cognate, *theistic*).

A secondary reply to the first objection is also worth noting: evidentialism has itself been subjected to suspicion by both secular and religious philosophers. It has been difficult to arrive at a consensus about what counts as what Clifford refers to as “sufficient evidence.” He cites an example of insufficient evidence (deeming a ship seaworthy on dodgy evidence, if any), but he does not provide a clear guide of when evidence is sufficient for a responsible belief. One of his critics, William James, pointed out how many of life’s most important beliefs (e.g., the belief that life is worth living or that we have free will) are passionate in nature and do not leave us with decades to dispassionately weigh theoretical possibilities. The effort to restrict evidence to the empirical sciences alone has met with stiff resistance. Arguably, the empirical sciences seem not to account for mathematics and logic, subjective, conscious states and introspection, normative values and experiences involving ethics, aesthetics, and religion.⁷ It has been further argued that some of our basic beliefs (belief in our existence, our awareness of each other and the world around us) may be justified or warranted even if not backed up by what people can produce as evidence.⁸

Whatever you think of this last claim, the idea that “evidence” is a clear and simple matter in philosophy is not itself universally evident. Some secular philosophers today are considered *anti-foundationalist* insofar as they reject the ideal of establishing a universally agreed-upon foundation for all legitimate claims of knowledge. The result need not be an *anything-goes anarchy*, but a realization that the (legitimate) reasons we have for some of our beliefs may be complicated, involving a cumulation of different experiences, shaped by culture and education. This can make the task of philosophy itself more complicated, but a massive amount of philosophical literature is evidence that there is still plenty of room for critical reflection, weighing the reasons that may warrant Christian faith or Buddhist teachings or making a case for secular atheism, radical skepticism, and so on.⁹

Reply to B. The few passages in the Bible that warn readers about philosophy may be interpreted as warnings about philosophies that are deeply hostile to

⁷ I argue for this in multiple publications, beginning with *Consciousness and the Mind of God*. See also Goetz and Taliaferro (2008).

⁸ This is a central claim in what is called Reformed Epistemology. Its leading advocate is Alvin Plantinga. For an accessible introduction, see his *Knowledge and Christian Belief*.

⁹ See the four-volume *Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Religion* (Goetz and Taliaferro 2021).

Christian faith. Philosophies that relentlessly promote tyranny, vanity, and the love of personal or imperial glory may well be damaging to the virtues of humility, justice, mercy, and reverence for what is sacred, and may even be antithetical to the root meaning of “philosophy” itself. The term “philosophy” is derived from the Greek terms for “love” (*philo*) and wisdom (*sophia*) and is often translated as “the love of wisdom.” It is hard to see that the worldviews of the Roman caesars in the first two centuries (think of Nero and Caligula) as celebrating the love of wisdom. On the other hand, the Bible contains many texts that extol the love of wisdom (including Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, the Wisdom of Solomon); in the New Testament, Paul is in a vibrant debate with philosophers (Acts 17, see especially verses 26–28), and many biblical passages have been used historically to promote the practice of philosophy by Christians (Psalm 19:1–6, Proverbs 5:6–11, Romans 1:19–20). There is reason to think that the Bible itself incorporates philosophy (the term *logos* in the Gospel of John is probably inspired by Platonic or Stoic sources). Some of the early Christians were identified as philosophers (Justin, Clement, Origen), and some of the first philosophers to publish in English were Christian philosophers (the Cambridge Platonists in the seventeenth century).

On the authority of the Bible, I have not (yet) observed an overt form of circular reasoning about the Bible being self-authenticating. The following exchange would be unhelpful:

- Pat: The Bible is the Word of God.
 Chris: How do you know that?
 Pat: The Bible proclaims that it is the Word of God.
 Chris: But how do you know that the Bible is reliable?
 Pat: God would not lie or deceive.
 Chris: I’ll concede that if there is an all-good God, God would not lie or deceive, but how do you know that the Bible is the Word of God?
 Pat: I know it is because the Bible proclaims that it is the Word of God.

Pat’s reasoning is circular because Pat does not provide an independent reason for thinking that the Bible is the Word of God or reliable. Rather than such circular reasoning, it is common, historically and today, for a Christian to claim that the Bible is revelatory (or is the Word of God) on the basis of appealing to religious experience (many persons have testified that they have experienced God through the Bible; for a classic case, see Augustine’s *Confessions*), historical evidence of the miraculous (the resurrection of Jesus Christ), or other forms of historical evidence (prophecies appear to be fulfilled or an argument that the development of the Christian tradition has a coherence and integrity that provides some evidence of providential guidance). Even if you find none of

these reasons convincing, they at least do not have the circularity of asking you to believe the Bible on the grounds that “the Bible tells us so.” That would be what Kant depicted as immature or abrogating the importance of courageously exercising your own intelligence. Alternatively, if exercising your own reason, you came to think the Bible was (or can function as) revelatory of the divine, it would seem as immature to reject it because of your freedom of intellect as it would be to reject the evidence available to you that some nonhuman animals can reveal their thoughts and emotions (perhaps through language or some other mode of communication) because of your freedom of intellect. I suggest that it seems to be an unhealthy bias to assume that, in principle, philosophers should reject all possible sources of divine revelation. At the same time, I suggest that it would be an unhealthy bias for “believers” in divine revelation (the Bible, the Quran, the Vedas, and more) to rule out, in principle, the evidential value of independent philosophical reflection.¹⁰

Pausing from the task of assessing whether Christian philosophy is a good or bad problem, let us take note of the variety of ways Christians view the Bible. The view of the Bible that is probably best known to Christians and their critics is the “conservative” position that the Bible is inerrant or free from error (at least in its original autographs/the original deposit of revelation). Inerrancy is usually held to be plenary – applying to the whole of the Bible – rather than, say, limited to matters of faith and morals but not (necessarily) in terms of historical accuracy (whether Jesus made only one journey to Jerusalem or multiple ones). Biblical inerrancy is sometimes defended on the grounds that a provident, omnipotent, all-good God would not allow errors in a revelation of God.

Seeing the Bible as revelation need not be a matter of reading the Bible “literally” insofar as it seems that significant biblical material can or should be read as metaphor or analogy. Most Christians historically and today have interpreted anthropomorphic language of God (references to God’s hands and eyes) as metaphors. Some Christians treat the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, Jonah and the fish, Job, and the conquest narratives of Joshua as parables. One may treat the Adamic (or Edenic) narrative as a parable, on the grounds of the evidence of evolution, while yet maintaining that the narrative

¹⁰ The relationship between philosophy and claims of religious revelation is a huge topic in the history of ideas. For a history of this debate in modern, Western philosophy, see my book, *Evidence and Faith* (Taliaferro 2005). As I stated in footnote 1, I seek to avoid overly technical definitions in this Element, but I note here that for philosophies that take into account divine revelation, the boundary between what is labeled as “philosophy” and “theology” is fluid. For example, a new movement in the English-speaking world called “analytical theology” employs philosophical analytical tools in reflecting on theological claims. For those interested in definitions, see the second edition of *A Dictionary of Philosophy of Religion* coedited by myself and Elsa Marty.