**Christianity and Theism**

In this essay I raise a question that I have not seen often discussed, i.e., “What is the relation between Christian faith and researches in the philosophy of religion?” By this I mean to ask: what is the import of researches in the philosophy of religion for the belief of ordinary Christians? After briefly reviewing the history of the philosophy of religion in the latter half of the twentieth century, a topic I have dealt with at length elsewhere,[[1]](#footnote-1) I will present an argument against the current view of the relation between Christian faith and the results of researches in the philosophy of religion. I shall conclude that these researches, while far from valueless, nevertheless have no serious implications for the faith of ordinary Christian believers, and shall briefly illustrate this result by reference to the problems of divine hiddenness and evil.[[2]](#footnote-2) I shall end by suggesting that the relation between Christian faith and the philosophy of Religion needs to be re-examined.

**The Current Understanding of the Relation**

Most subdivisions of philosophy that deal that call themselves “philosophies of” are second-order investigations that take as their starting-point some other branch of human activity or theoretical inquiry about which more general questions can be raised. The methods, practices, and substantive claims made by practitioners of these other activities or fields are taken as *data* from which, properly philosophical questions arise and can be investigated. These questions, in turn, though regarded as “foundational” in regard to these activities or investigations, are nevertheless seen as capable of being examined independently of the details of those activities and regarded as having little if any contribution to make to the activity or investigations that fill in the blank following “Philosophy of \_\_\_\_\_\_.” Thus, we have philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of (natural) science, philosophy of social science, philosophy of law, philosophy of education, philosophy of history, as major forms of “philosophy of.” Indeed, just about any human activity or pursuit can become the subject matter of its own “philosophy of” – witness studies on the philosophy of physics, economics, geography, sport, and even food, some of which have associated groups that sponsor sessions at the APA. These branches of philosophical investigation concern themselves with some other, non-philosophical activity that, it is thought, raise questions or issues that their own methods of inquiry provide no purchase on, but which at the same time concern at best the proper *interpretation* of that activity and in no way implies or is intended to affect the way in which established practitioners of those activities or modes of inquiry go about doing their work. More than this, the notion that philosophical investigations of this sort could cast either doubt on the validity of these enterprises, their methods, or their results in such a way as to require their abandonment or reform is not only eschewed, but denounced as irrelevant encroachment on the prerogatives of these other fields.

However, not all “philosophies of” fall into this sort paradigm. Philosophy of Language, for example, appears to be a first-order investigation of certain general aspects of language, such as the nature of (substantive) meaning, the criteria for meaningfulness for utterances, the relation between meaning and use, the nature of truth and its modes, the analytic/synthetic distinction, and so on. Discussions of these questions seem unconcerned either with language as a set of linguistic practices (the subject matter of anthropological linguistics), or with the formal grammar and syntax of spoken language (the subject matter of formal linguistics), or with the historical origin and development of language (the subject matter of historical linguistics). Indeed, given that neither spoken language itself nor the scientific study of language is of much concern to philosophers of language, it is not quite clear what philosophers of language are even referring to when they use the word “language” or how the questions it raises belong to philosophy rather than one of the special sciences that deals with language. In a similar way, what is nowadays called Philosophy of Mind seems to be a collection of questions and problems covering a wide range of traditional philosophical concerns: metaphysics, epistemology, the theory of cognition, the nature of consciousness, perceptual experience as such, freedom of the will, and so on. While many philosophers of mind would like be counted as “cognitive scientists” and loudly declare their allegiance to the all-sufficiency of science to investigate the nature of mind, their motives for adopting these views seem to have far less to do with what neuroscientists have discovered or are likely to discover about these topics than prior, extra-scientific philosophical commitments for which they are hoping to find scientific confirmation and support. Philosophy of mind thus retains the character of a first-order branch of inquiry, sharing with the philosophy of language the difficulty of specifying its subject matter in a way that gives it something distinctive to talk about, something not properly the subject of wholly empirical inquiry.

Philosophy of Religion seems to be another kettle of fish altogether. Unlike second order “philosophy of” disciplines, it does not take religion as practiced as its subject matter, as that about which it raises philosophical questions. Indeed, religion as such appears to be of no interest whatsoever to philosophers of religion. This suggests that Philosophy of Religion is a kind of first-order philosophical investigation. However, it differs from philosophy of language and philosophy of mind by having a very specific, albeit somewhat artificial, subject matter. The philosophy of religion is the branch of philosophy that deals with the existence and nature of God considered from the purely rational point of view. Unlike theology or apologetics, the philosophy of religion presupposes no substantive religious views or any commitment to any specific religious system or beliefs. Anyone, can be a philosopher of religion, whether believer, agnostic or atheist. Furthermore, within the context of the philosophy of religion, only recognizably philosophical theses can serve as premises of arguments for or against the existence of God. Appeals to specific religious or theological claims, such as that Jesus rose from the dead, that the Bible is divinely inspired, and so on, are out of bounds, lacking both the generality and the rational credentials necessary to serve as premises of philosophical arguments.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The primary focus of philosophers of religion is the philosophical thesis known as *theism*. Theism is the thesis that there exists a personal God possessing such attributes as omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and necessary existence and who designed, created, and providentially governs the created universe. Theism, so characterized, is a metaphysical, not a religious thesis. At the same time, it is a thesis that clearly seems to be presupposed or implied by substantial number of religious systems. Theism is clearly an element in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but is not limited to them; certain Eastern schools of thought, such as Nyaya, Yoga, Dvaita Vedanta, and Chinese “Pure Land” Buddhism are also theistic, at least in some versions.

The current understanding of the relation between research in the philosophy of religion and Christian belief is based on the highly plausible claim that Christianity cannot be true unless theism is true. Christianity asserts, among its many other truth-claims, the existence of the theistic God, and this is an indispensable element of the faith, without which it lacks any substantive metaphysical content. While the rejection of theism, and with it, any substantive metaphysical core, suits the perspective of some contemporary theologians, views such as these are far from Orthodox and have been resisted, both by the major theistic sects and by the vast majority of the faithful. Given this, the relation between theism and Christianity seems fairly straightforward. Since Christianity entails theism, then if theism is false, then so is Christianity. This makes the implications of research in the philosophy of religion both direct and important with respect to religious belief. In fact, they are life and death, for unless the truth of theism can be defended from atheistic critique, then Christian religious belief must also be dismissed as unfounded, without the necessity for even so much as a hearing. Thus, the standard strategy of those philosophers opposed to Christian religious belief is to argue that theism is false and hence that Christianity is as well. More formally:

1. If Christianity is true, then theism is true.

2. Theism is false.

3. Christianity is false.

On such a view, then, the rational refutation of theism is tantamount to a refutation of Christianity as well.

I shall argue that this current understanding of the relation is mistaken. The current understanding treats unadorned theism as though it were the definitional consequent of Christian theism, somewhat as being unmarried is a definitional consequent of being a bachelor. Since there can be no bachelors unless there are some people who are unmarried, if we were to discover that, in some human population, that there were no unmarried persons, we could infer by *modus tollens* that there were no bachelors among them either. However, despite a plausible historical explanation for why philosophers have fallen into this picture of things, at picture of the relation is neither necessary nor even the most plausible way of envisaging the relation between theism and Christianity, even if we hold (as I think we ought) that theism is a basic metaphysical commitment of the Christian religion. The relation between them is more complex than the current understanding of the relation supposes and is one that reflects more closely the manner in which theism is discussed in current philosophy of religion. In order to better apprehend this point, let us first review some of the history of the philosophy of religion from latter half of the twentieth century down to the present day.

**The Philosophy of Religion since 1950**

There can be no doubt that there has been a great deal of change in the philosophy of religion during the last 60 years. In the 1940’s and 1950’s, the only organized and prominent school of theistic philosophy was neo-Thomism, composed largely but not exclusively of Catholic philosophers. Although there were a number of distinct strands within what was called Thomism, the mainstream position, in line with the teachings of the First Vatican Council (1870-1871) was what we might describe as *Deductivist*. According to these Thomists, among the truths revealed to us by God there are some that can be known with certainty by unaided human reason, and one of these is that God exists. According to the typical neo-Thomist presentation of the Five Ways of St. Thomas dating from this period, God’s existence can be known scientifically in the Aristotelian sense, i.e. it can be deduced as the conclusion of a valid syllogistic argument from first principles that are either undeniable (“something exists”) or knowable a priori (such as the Principle of Sufficient Reason). On this view, the claim that God exists is rationally demonstrable, indeed, apodictically so. As such, no one who understands the five ways, as properly reconstructed, can fail to find them rationally compelling, regardless of his or her prior theoretical commitments.

The first major school of atheistic philosophers of religion, the analytic school influenced by Hume and Logical Positivism, and which arose in the1950’s, evinced this Deductivist slant. Since it is the theist who makes the positive claim that God exists, the burden on proof is on the theist and carrying that burden requires giving a valid and sound deductive proof for God’s existence. The major task of the analytic philosophers of religion was to critique the traditional proofs for God’s existence. This they did, and from this they concluded the falsity of this belief and the irrationality of believing it. Moreover, they revived and revamped the problem of evil, now called the argument from evil, along Deductivist lines. According to the earliest presentations of this argument, the propositional set consisting of the claims that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent forms an inconsistent set when combined with the claim that evil exists. Since the conjunction of these propositions entails a contradiction, it is not possible for all these claims to be true at the same time. Since it is utterly implausible to deny that evil exists, one of the other propositions must be sacrificed: in any case, the sort of God affirmed by traditional Christian belief must be given up. Hence, the verdict of reason is that the Christian God does not exist.

Nelson Pike refuted the latter claim in 1965. The formal consistency of theism could be preserved simply by adding a third proposition to the foregoing set, i.e. “God has a good reason for permitting evil.” The argument from evil thus fails as a formal disproof of theism. Although atheistic philosophers quietly dropped the argument from evil, Pike’s article was hardly the word on the subject – more on this as we proceed. Nevertheless, by about 1970 there seemed to be more or less universal consensus among philosophers of religion on two points. First, there was no universally compelling rational proof for God’s existence. Second, the argument from evil does not prove that God’s existence is logically impossible. Neither side had prevailed, though atheism appeared to have the upper hand. At any rate, however, the Deductivist approach seemed to have reached a standstill and even gave the appearance of being played out.

The field was ripe for a paradigm-shift, and it was not long in coming. Where previously the focus had been on the truth or falsity of theism *vis-à-vis* its demonstrability, the failure of the Deductivist approach now led philosophers of religion to discuss the issues in terms of the rationality of religious belief. This concern initiated what we might call the Post-Deductivist era in the philosophy of religion, where talk of proof and disproof was replaced by talk about the nature of reasonable belief in relation to the claims of religion generally, of which theism now becomes just one component. The natural retort to Pike’s defense of theism, for example, was to claim that in abeyance of any account of what the good reasons might be that justify God in permitting evil, that the existence of evil provides sufficient inductive evidence for denying God’s existence, i.e. enough to convict the theist of irrationality if not logical inconsistency. Over time, this developed into the evidential problem of evil, which proposes that the quantity, variety, and distribution of evil in the world is such as to make it highly improbable that God exists, at least so improbable that it cannot be rationally believed.

This, in turn, evoked two responses on the part of theistic philosophers of religion. The first, represented among others by Richard Swinburne, attempts to provide a full-scale theodicy of the traditional type, sketching plausible reasons for God to permit evil and which admits that, while the quantity, variety, and distribution of evil is (and to some extent remains) strong *prima facie* evidence against theism, from the perspective *ultima facie* it is not so strong so as to convict the theist of irrationality. The second, more hard-nosed approached, initiated by a comment in Pike’s article and favored by Plantinga, Alston, and their many followers, is to deny that evil is even *prima facie* evidence against theism. According to the so-called skeptical theists, there is no acceptable, rationally binding rule of inference or probability theory that justifies the claim that the quantity, variety, and distribution of evil we observe in the world makes the existence of God improbable at all, let alone highly improbable, nor any reason to suppose that if God had good reasons to permit evil that we should have any idea at all what those reasons might be.

Both approaches have been generalized, of course. Swinburne attempts to build a positive case for theism based on Bayesian probability theory, in which many different and diverse pieces of evidence are woven together into a cumulative case for the existence of God, conferring probability on that belief sufficient to overcome the counterevidence represented by evil, thus making theism on the whole rational or reasonable to believe. For their parts, Plantinga and those influenced by him embrace *reformed epistemology*, according to which belief in God is properly basic for theists, the product of a special faculty called the *sensus divinitatis*, whose deliverances the same warrant for us as that possessed by any other basic cognitive faculty. As such, theistic belief in particular need not be justified by rational argument; it is sufficient for the theistic philosopher simply to critique the atheist’s claim that belief in God violates some epistemic obligation we possess in such a way as to qualify that belief as irrational. In this way, reformed epistemologists attempt to shift the burden of proof to the atheist, arguing that there is no universal, binding basis in the ethics of belief from which we can successfully conclude that theistic belief is irrational, hence that the atheist’s charge to that effect cannot be sustained.

Regardless of which view is correct, contemporary philosophy of religion operates within a Post-Deductivist framework, one in which the emphasis is on the rationality of theistic belief rather than on the traditional arguments understood as apodictic proofs for God’s existence. Theism is treated either as an hypothesis to which something like a probability can be assigned relative to evidence or as a basic belief possessing warrant similar to that possessed by any other belief derived from ordinary sense-perception or memory. Atheistic philosophers of religion argue that the theist has it wrong, and that theism is not probable relative to whole body of evidence that bears on the question, especially the evidence from evil in the world, and that there are important difference between the deliverances of the so-called *sensus divinitatis* and our other cognitive faculties. My interest here is not to resolve these disputes, but instead to argue that within this new dispensation in the philosophy of religion we need to reconceive the relation between theism, conceived of as a metaphysical thesis, and those systems of religious belief that contain theism as an element, such as Christianity. My contention is that within this new paradigm, the relation between theism and Christianity, and thus between researches in the philosophy of religion and religious belief and practice generally, becomes radically altered in such a way that the standard view about the relation of faith and reason is no longer appropriate to the subject matter of the philosophy of religion. Indeed, I shall contend that it never was the case, though due to historical accidents it was very natural to fall into this way of thinking. The result will be that researches in the philosophy of religion are much less significant for religious belief than previously has been thought.

**Christianity and Theism: Their Relation Reconceived**

Under Deductivism, it was thought that, since Christianity entails theism, the refutation of theism was sufficient to refute Christianity as well. After all, theism is the metaphysical core of Christianity, as it is for the other major Western religious systems, so that if theism cannot be maintained neither can any religious system that presupposes its truth. However, it may be that this seemingly plausible assumption rests on a false presupposition, i.e. that the truth of theism can be successfully evaluated on its own, independently of the religious systems from which it is extracted. If this is not the case, then the fact that theism fails to constitute a reasonable belief when considered on its own, *in abstracto*, is of little importance from the point of view of religious belief.

Even where the claim in question is a deductive consequence of the other view, it need not follow that this raises any doubt or difficulty for the truth of that view. To use an example that I have used elsewhere: It cannot be true that all triangles have three sides unless it is true that all triangles have at least one side, so this claim will be a deductive consequence of the claim from which we began. However, if we restrict ourselves to this deductive consequence of full-blown triangularianism – call it “austere triangularianism” – we will discover that many of the claims that we make about triangles as such will not be rationally justifiable. For example, we will not be able to prove that the interior angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles or the Pythagorean Theorem from austere triangularianism alone. However, this does not cast the least bit of doubt on either of these claims, provable as they are from with apodictic certainty from full-blown triangularianism. Austere triangularianism simply lacks the resources to prove much of anything about plane figures generally, let alone triangles, and to discuss austere triangularianism as though it was the foundation for the geometry of plane figures would be a great mistake. At any rate, the defense of such a thesis is far from life and death for the science of geometry. In the same way, Christian theism may have resources that unadorned theism may not relevant to the defense of the faith of believers from atheistic challenges like the problem of evil. For this reason, the failure of unadorned theism in this regard need not carry with it any serious implications for Christian religious belief. Like austere triangularianism, unadorned or philosophical theism may fail simply because it is too abstract and impoverished with regard to its conception of God, a defect that Christian theism supplements and, by doing so, corrects. Since it is at least possible that this is the case, we cannot conclude that the failure of unadorned theism necessarily imperils the prospects for Christian theism; this simply does not follow, even if unadorned theism is a deductive consequence of Christian theism.

This is even more clearly the case if we consider this relation from within the Post-Deductivist perspective. At first glance, the alteration needed to correct the current understanding of the relation between the results of research in the philosophy of religion and belief in a religious system like Christianity may seem simple and straightforward, requiring only a superficial shift from Deductivist to Inductivist terminology that leaves everything else essentially unchanged, e.g.:

1. Christianity entails theism.

2. Theism is improbable (relative, e.g., to the fact of evil).

3. Therefore, Christianity is improbable.

In this case, however, the formal invalidity of the argument is much easier to see. Let G and H be two rival predictive hypotheses related in the following way. G consists of a set of propositions, which we may refer to as its theoretical elements. H contains all of the theoretical elements of G but embeds them in a richer theoretical framework containing other theoretical elements plausibly and naturally added to those of G but not entailed by them. In this situation, we can say that H entails G in the following sense: every theoretical element of G belongs to H, such that H cannot be true unless every theoretical element of G is true as well.

Since G is simpler than H, it would it would ordinarily be preferable to H on grounds of simplicity, all other things being equal. However, let us suppose that all things are not equal. In virtue of some of the theoretical elements of H not shared with G, H predicts that we will observe phenomenon P in circumstances C, while G does not. Indeed, for all we know, it may predict the opposite: the non-occurrence of P. So, then, if P is observed in circumstances C just as H predicts, that confirms H and not G, in which case we might well judge H to be better than G, despite its greater complexity.

Now, consider the following argument:

1. H entails G.

2. G is improbable relative to P.

3. Therefore, H is improbable.

However, the premises of the argument are true while the conclusion is false, so the argument is clearly invalid. The same will be true with regard to the argument considered above. Within the Inductivist paradigm, then, a theoretical view can fail for other reasons than simply by being false. In this case, G fails because of its lack of explanatory power relative to the richer, more detailed theory H, which actually predicts the evidence that apparently disconfirms G.

Having made the foregoing logical point, the implications for the relation between Christian religious belief and researches in the philosophy of religion should become clearer. Within the Inductivist paradigm represented by (e.g.) the evidential argument from evil, even if unadorned theism, theism as an abstract philosophical thesis, proves to be improbable relative to the fact of evil, this implies nothing with regard to the credibility of Christianity as such simply because Christianity entails theism by entailing all of its theoretical elements. Thus, even if atheistic philosophers of religion were able to establish that the evidential argument from evil did, in fact, disconfirm unadorned theism, this might well leave Christian theism completely untouched.

In that case, the hope for Christian religious belief, or Christian theism, lies (as with hypothesis H above) in the possibility that, being a richer theoretical framework than mere unadorned theism, it contains elements derived not from metaphysic but from revelation, not only capable of explaining the observable facts of evil but, in a sense, predicting them in such a way that those facts serve as evidence for its truth. In that case, we would be able to conclude that unadorned theism fails, not because one of its metaphysical commitments (the existence of God) is false, but simply because of its lack of explanatory power. In that case, despite the fact that Christian theism entails all of the theoretical elements of unadorned theism, it is not necessarily made improbable, or improbable on the basis of the same evidence, that makes unadorned theism improbable. Of course, for now, this must merely remain a tantalizing possibility that I hope to discuss on another occasion.

**Conclusion**

If the foregoing is in fact the case (as I hope to show elsewhere) then the answer to the question with which I began this essay, “What is the relation between the results of researches in the philosophy of religion and Christian religious belief?” is, apparently, “Not much.” For, even if Christian religious belief entails unadorned theism, and unadorned theism is found to be improbable given the existence of evil in the world, it does not follow that Christian religious belief is improbable as well. Quite the contrary, if the Christian doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin are true, then we ought to expect quite a lot of evil, suffering, and even tragedy in the world rather than little or none, evil for which God is in no way responsible. As such, regardless of how things come out with regard to unadorned theism as discussed by philosophers of religion, the faith of Christians remains relatively unaffected with regard to its probability relative to that evidence, which may even serve to confirm, rather than disconfirm, that belief. Given that the existence of evil in the world seems to be only compelling evidence available to the atheistic philosopher of religion, this will place Christian religious belief beyond the atheistic philosopher’s critique. I conclude, then, that given this account of the relation between researches in the philosophy of religion and Christian religious belief that the ordinary religious believer need not worry him- or herself about the philosophy of religion beyond the extent that talent and curiosity may occasion him or her to take an interest in it. It is no longer in any sense life or death for religious belief, at least a religion like Christianity.

The reason for this is that Christianity is not primarily based on any merely abstract, purely philosophical theses arrived at by reason but rather on concrete, historical claims received by faith on the basis of scripture and tradition, such as the doctrines of the Fall, the Atonement, and the Resurrection. These are empirical, factual claims that philosophy *qua* philosophy has no special competence to judge.[[4]](#footnote-4) Thus, on the view adumbrated here research in the philosophy of religion has no more import for Christian religious belief and practice than does the philosophy of science or the philosophy of mathematics for working scientists and mathematicians.

This does not mean that Christian philosophers ought to ignore or abandon the field of the philosophy of religion. To the extent (which I believe to be fairly substantial) that theism can be justified by purely rational arguments, we show that faith and reason are not incompatible and that Christians are not irrational or indifferent to truth. More than this, a successful rational defense of theism can help to dispel prejudice in some minds and even serve as *praeambula fidei* for others, removing the apparent rational difficulties with belief in God, and so help in some small way to win souls for Christ. More directly, it can help to repair the damage done to the faith both by its contemporary atheistic critics and by modern theologians who no longer believe or teach the saving truth. Given human sinfulness, Christian philosophers ought not to be overly optimistic about these prospects, but neither should they shrink from making the best case they can. Something can be important and worth doing even if it is not a matter of life and death.

1. See my *Analytic Philosophy of Religion: Its History since 1955* and its shorter cousin, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, both published by Humanities e-Books, Terrill, UK, 2007 and available from Troubador in paperback. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I have discussed these more fully in two other essays, “God is NOT Hidden” and “Sin and Evil,” also on this website. Another essay, on the topic of suffering, is in preparation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See George Mavrodes, “The Stranger,” in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality*, Notre Dame, IN, Notre Dame University Press, 1983, 94-102. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. That is not to say that these claims cannot be challenged, only that the appropriate forum for such a discussion lies outside of philosophy proper, in such areas as history, archaeology, and so on – the sorts of topics discussed in Christian apologetics. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)