

Christianity and Philosophy: Five Misunderstandings

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The relationship between Christianity and philosophy has a chequered history. And because it is such a complex relationship, misunderstandings easily arise. I want to look at five such misunderstandings, or clusters of misunderstanding, of which some are found mainly among religious believers, and others mainly among philosophical critics of religion, while yet others are spread evenly throughout both groups.

Firstly, among some Christians, particularly those of a fundamentalist stripe, there is often a perception of philosophy as something dangerous and potentially subversive of religious faith. Frequently cited in this context is St Paul's letter to the Colossians: "Watch out that no one carries you away through philosophy and empty trickery, answering to human tradition and the principles of the world, and not answering to Christ" (2:8). But there is a paradox here. The very apostle who stresses faith in Christ as the key to salvation was himself a maestro of verbal argumentation, who engaged in complex debates with Stoic and Epicurean philosophers at Athens (Acts 17:18). And as Tom Wright's magisterial *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (2013) has shown, the intellectual world that shaped Paul's outlook was an intricate mix of Judaic religious thought and Graeco-Roman philosophical teachings.

More generally, Christianity has always had an ineradicable logical and philosophical component. *Logos*, word, intelligence, reason, is directly identified with God in the famous opening of the Fourth Gospel. The Christian worldview is one in which the world *makes sense*: rationality, meaning, is at the heart of things. Obviously you do not have to do philosophy in order to live a good Christian life; but authentic Christianity nevertheless sees reason (*logos*) together with love (*agape*) as the principal attributes of the divine, reflected, albeit dimly, in our human nature.

Secondly, and closely connected with the first point, there are often misunderstandings among believers (and indeed non-believers) about the relationship between reason and faith. I don't want to get into denominational disputes here, for since the Reformation there have been endless debates about the Protestant doctrine of *sola fide* (by faith alone we are saved). But even for those who accept this doctrine, it doesn't follow that faith is *opposed* to reason. Reason takes many forms. In the middle ages many supposed the existence of God could be demonstrated philosophically by watertight logical arguments. That view has faded, but reason doesn't therefore disappear altogether. Some religious philosophers today (like Richard Swinburne) don't claim to offer demonstrative proofs but still think they can show that God exists on the balance of probabilities. And even if this doesn't work, there may still be other reasons to believe in God.

Atheist philosophers like Daniel Dennett tend to sneer at faith as something that flies in the face of evidence, or lacks all evidence. But the true story is more complex. The philosopher Alvin Plantinga has argued that certain basic religious beliefs can be *warranted*, even though they are not derived from evidence. I have myself argued, by contrast, that there is a *kind* of evidence relevant to religious belief, though it is not scientific evidence. It does not qualify as what Paul Moser has called "spectator evidence" – capable of being detected by any impartial rational observer or experimenter. On the contrary, it may be evidence that requires a certain kind of openness, receptivity or "porousness", to use Martha Nussbaum's term, in order to be discerned. In many areas of human life (consider personal relationships),

by remaining always detached, cold and impartial we may be cutting ourselves off from the possibility of change and growth that might allow certain truths to become manifest to us. And the same may apply to religious truth (see my *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach*, 2014).

A **third** misunderstanding, found among many religious believers and also among many philosophical critics of religious belief, is the idea that God has the function of providing an *explanatory hypothesis* about the origins of the world and of our human existence. Richard Dawkins and his followers speak of “the God hypothesis”, and complain that it does no real explanatory work compared with the magnificent achievements of modern science. On the other side, we have the defenders of “intelligent design”, who think it is an explanation to say that DNA molecules were configured by an invisible incorporeal spirit. In my humble opinion, both groups are barking up the wrong tree.

If we look at the Judaeo-Christian scriptures we find that although God is spoken of as the maker of heaven and earth, there is very little material that emphasises the explanatory role of this claim, or attempts to demonstrate its theoretical power and scope. Instead, what we often find is language about the creator whose import we would probably classify (in our somewhat impoverished modern vocabulary) as “aesthetic” or “moral”, as in the following verses from a well-known Psalm (96):

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice: let the sea roar, and all it contains.
Let the field exult, and all that is in it: then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy
Before the LORD, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth: he will judge the world in
righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness.

God is here not an immaterial force that is supposed to *explain* the behaviour of the oceans and fields and the woods; rather the vivid beauty and splendour of the natural world is that which *makes manifest* the divine. The world is understood *religiously* – not as a blank impersonal process, not as A. E. Housman’s “heartless witless nature”, not as a manifestation of “blind, pitiless indifference” as Dawkins characterizes it, but as “charged with the grandeur of God” to quote the first line of the famous poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

A **fourth** misunderstanding is to construe Christianity and the other theistic religions as fundamentally “otherworldly”. God is thought of as some kind of “supernatural” entity – whatever that much overused term is supposed to mean. And this has led to a wholesale dismissal of theism by the growing number of philosophers who subscribe to the doctrine known as “naturalism” – that the entities studied by physics are the only ultimate constituents of reality. Among many contemporary Anglophone philosophers, the word “spooky” has become an almost routine term of abuse for beliefs involving immaterial spirits, souls, and the like; and this list of course is taken to include God.

There is a nest of misunderstandings involved here. In reality, mainstream Christian theology is by no means wedded to dualistic doctrines about immaterial entities. The Apostles’ Creed speaks of the resurrection of the body, not the survival after death of an incorporeal Cartesian spirit. Bodily resurrection may have problems of its own, but immaterial “spookiness” is not one of them. And as far as God is concerned, if we take the writings of the great Christian philosopher Thomas Aquinas as representative, so far from being understood as an immaterial entity, God is not regarded as an “entity” at all, but is rather taken to be the ultimate source of all being, whose nature our finite human minds cannot fully grasp.

A **fifth** and final cluster of misunderstandings concerns the relation between religion and morality. Philosophical critics of religion often target the idea of divine commands as the supposed source of morality, arguing that a mere arbitrary command cannot in itself make something right (else a morally repugnant act would be right if commanded). But to suppose

that God might issue arbitrary or morally abhorrent commands ignores the fact that in mainstream theism goodness is inseparable from the divine nature. Failing to grasp the necessary link between God and goodness is a source of frequent confusion, as in those fundamentalists who appear to think they will get a special ticket to heaven because they belong to a particular religious group, and that atheists and those of other faiths or denominations are automatically doomed to perish. It is as if by placating God and signing up as believers we can secure benefits for ourselves. But again this misunderstands the central Christian message, proclaimed separately by both the founders of Christianity, Peter and Paul, which is that “God does not show favouritism” (Acts 10: 34, Romans 2:11). The teachings of Christ make clear that calling “Lord, Lord” does not cut any ice if one fails to feed and clothe those in need (Matthew 25). Just as God is not an explanatory hypothesis, so the God of traditional theism is not like an idol: idols are supposed to be placated or manipulated by acts of allegiance, but the God of the mainstream Judaeo-Christian tradition accords absolute primacy to justice and mercy.

We live in an age of simplification, where instant verdicts are tweeted in 140 characters or less. In today’s polarized debate about religion, many participants nail their colours to the mast, defending rigid dogmas, or dismissing religion out of hand. But if my analysis has been on the right lines, what the participants on either side of the debate so furiously attack or defend may bear little relation to authentic religious belief. What they hurl overboard, or fiercely cling to, may turn out to be nothing more than an idol of their own making.