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CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY
AND CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHERS:
RESPONSE TO GUTOWSKI

My thanks to Piotr Gutowski for his sympathetic, insightful, and on the whole accurate remarks on my views about Christian philosophy and Christian philosophers (this issue, 7–23). In view of this accuracy, I will not recapitulate the main points that he has summarized, but will instead confine myself to some matters of elucidation and clarification. Gutowski is correct that, while I do not reject the term “Christian philosophy,” I view it as one to be used carefully and with attention to context. Gutowski’s reflections about the philosophy department in Lublin nicely illustrate how the appropriateness of this term can depend on the external context, even the political context. At the time when Poland was under communist control, the Lublin department may well have welcomed the designation, Christian philosophy, even though that designation was imposed by an external authority. At that time, the natural assumption would be that, in a country with a communist government, the philosophy being taught at a university would be one congenial to the Marxist assumptions of the ruling party. In view of this the designation, “Christian philosophy” was helpful in order to counter that assumption. Later on, when communist rule was no longer in effect, the department itself elected to drop the modifier “Christian” in order to avoid the impression that the department’s philosophical endeavors were parochial, inward-looking, and of interest only to other Christian thinkers. In effect, the department was signaling that it was open for business, ready to engage with

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all comers, of whatever philosophical persuasion. And all of this without any overall change in the stance of the department itself and of its professors.

A possible misunderstanding reveals itself in Gutowski's remark that "some Christian proponents of natural theology, who cannot be described as continuators of Cartesian methodology, also reject the term 'Christian philosopher'" (8). Now, persons can reject that term for a variety of reasons, reasons which I have no need to object to. But there is no incompatibility between natural theology and "Christian philosophy" as I understand it. A possible source of misunderstanding may lie in my remark that "we simply have no option except to do philosophy as the people we are, believing the things we actually do believe." This should not be taken to imply that just any of one's beliefs can properly be taken as a premise for a further argument, regardless of context. Permit me an illustration. Suppose I am an attorney, charged with defending someone charged with a serious crime. The prosecution has assembled a body of evidence, most of it circumstantial, that tends to suggest that my client is guilty of the crime. As a result of my coming to know my client, I have come to believe that he simply is not the sort of person who would have committed such a crime. I also have come to have a high regard for his integrity and truthfulness, and I believe him when he says he did not commit the crime. However, these beliefs of mine, about his character and truthfulness, are not premises in an argument I could present to a jury. For that purpose, I had much better find credible witnesses that could attest to the presence of the accused at a remote location at the time the crime was committed. Similarly, the natural theologian who is a Christian will have a number of beliefs concerning the nature and existence of God that are derived from the Christian faith. But they will not include these beliefs in the premises of their arguments in natural theology. There is no conflict between being a Christian philosopher and a natural theologian.

Gutowski focuses the majority of his attention on my recommendation that we combine "creative and imaginative thinking about religious questions" with respect for "the identity and integrity of the Christian faith we are interpreting." In the writing he cites, I left the nature of this "respect for the identity and integrity of the Christian faith" without further definition. This naturally leaves a number of questions open, which he proceeds to pursue.

First let me say something about this identity and integrity. I am not proposing that we seek to define the boundaries of orthodoxy, as may be done in a church confession of faith. Any church, or, for that matter, any

organization which has as its mission to proclaim the Christian faith, needs to have some understanding, formal or informal, of the boundaries of what is permissible teaching within its auspices. This, however, is not my concern here. Rather, I am thinking of the individual Christian philosopher, as he or she is seeking to define a perspective on what is taken to be Christian truth. As noted, this leaves a great many specific questions open. Gutowski, however, is generally in accord with my thinking when he says that for me, “a Christian philosopher cannot reject the principles of faith: about the triune God the creator of the world, who takes care of this world (this thesis also includes the concept of the deity of Jesus), about the human immortal soul, or about human guilt and divine redemption” (15). Still, even on these central topics I am happy to allow for a broader range of explorations than he may suppose. I certainly do not suppose that “Christian materialists” such as Peter van Inwagen, Timothy O’Connor, and Lynne Rudder Baker—Christian thinkers who believe that human persons are wholly composed of material stuff—are thereby failing to respect the integrity of the Christian faith. I do, to be sure, regard this view of theirs as mistaken and inadequate; I do not think it is possible to give an adequate explanation of how persons are able to exist after bodily death, or even of how humans have a unified realm of conscious experience, given the assumption that humans are purely material beings. But these are philosophical questions that are deeply controversial; there is much to be said on both sides, and the discussions are nowhere close to being resolved. In maintaining my own side in these discussions, however, I by no means intend to imply that philosophers who oppose my views are failing to maintain the integrity of the Christian faith. In general, I do not take my own philosophical views as the standard by which to judge whether the integrity of the faith is being upheld!

What then are the limits? I disclaim any personal authority in this matter, but I do think that Christian philosophy, properly so called, must not advocate positions that make it impossible for the Christian message to be what most Christians, throughout most of the centuries since the time of Christ, have taken it to be. Previously I mentioned Hegel and Tillich as thinkers whose versions of philosophy and theology exclude the possibility that the Christian message as Christians have understood it is true. Among the options mentioned by Gutowski, Unitarianism faces serious challenges if it is to retain anything approximating the Christian gospel, though I do not say that a Unitarian cannot be a sincere Christian.

It is indeed the case that I set a high value on maintaining a libertarian concept of free will, but here also I do not claim that a Christian philosopher cannot make a contrary choice. I am all too aware that many important Christian philosophers and theologians have been determinists! And I have personally engaged in a cordial dialogue with Paul Helm, in spite of our profound disagreement over the issue of free will. Gutowski, however, is especially interested in my suggestion that we take a contemporary understanding of what makes a “great leader,” in developing our account of God’s attributes. Which, I ask, is more consonant with being such a leader: that the leader minutely controls everything that goes on in the enterprise they are leading, or that space is left for other agents to make their own spontaneous contributions, making these agents real co-workers in the enterprise, but also opening the door to sub-optimal results if their decisions are not the best that could have been made? Clearly, the latter supposition is more congenial to libertarian free will and to open theism. It is also, I dare to say, more readily compatible with our actual experience of how things go in the work of God’s kingdom, in which imperfect human agents often make imperfect decisions that have unfortunate results. According to William Abraham, one of my favorite theologians, open theism resembles a theological trip to Las Vegas, where “we run into a conference of Evangelical theologians who have become addicted to gambling because they are convinced that divine foreknowledge and human freedom are incompatible. God, of course, is better at card-playing because of his better memory of past hands. And God can think more quickly than human creatures, but the future is open; so he cannot but take risks once he creates genuinely free creatures.”¹ Abraham apparently finds it more fitting to suppose that God stacked the cards in advance, so that, if things turn out badly, as they sometimes do, this is the result of the divine card-stacking and not just because creatures responded differently than God desired.

But we need to return to the theme of a “most admirable” leader of an enterprise. Gutowski has reservations concerning my use of this notion. He admits that scripture, with its insistence that humans are “in the image of God,” thereby lends support to conceiving of God in the light of admirable human attributes. But he points out that, in our unimaginably huge universe, there may very well be other rational creatures, some of which might be radically different from us. In that case, human attributes, no matter how

¹ William ABRAHAM, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, vol. 3, *Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 145.

appealing, might not be a good way to understand the greatness of God. Gutowski is also concerned about the historical relativism that infects our ideas of human greatness. He seems to acknowledge that, based on current standards, the “open” God who invites creative participation may score higher than the all-determining God of classical theism. But he states, “Advocates of deterministic theism might agree with Hasker’s proposal as regards forming the concept of God, but would probably state that it is necessary to focus on the images held by the people of the time when the Revelation took place and when the Christian doctrine was being formed” (18).

These reservations about my procedure are extremely interesting but not, I think, decisive. As for our extraterrestrial neighbors and the non-anthropomorphic conception of God they might favor, we must keep in mind that we have as yet no empirical evidence of their existence, let alone of their nature and their similarities and dissimilarities from us. It would certainly be fascinating to join them in a conference on comparative theology, but we had best wait until we have discovered each other’s existence before sending out speaking invitations!

Historical differences in conceptions of human greatness are of course undeniable. I don’t think we can rely solely on the comforting assumption that “successively revised historical conceptions of God tend toward an account that is ever fuller and more adequate” (18). This may be true, taken broadly, but it will be necessary to say, on each occasion where a significant revision has taken place, whether the revised conception is another step forward in the historical progress, or whether it will lead to a dead end and the need for back-tracking.

I wish to suggest a different way to approach these issues. First of all, as Christians we simply cannot avoid the need to conceive of God in terms of idealized human attributes. There is not only the biblical description of humans as made in the image of God, but there are also the extremely numerous descriptions of or references to God in terms of creaturely realities of various kinds. God is a king, a judge, a warrior, a potter, a counsellor, and so on. In some instances (God as a Rock), the intended divine attribute may be readily apparent, but where the item compared to God is more complex, so will be the inference concerning the character of God. In particular, where God is compared to a human being of some description or other, the model for our understanding of God is normally a highly excellent human of this sort. So here is our problem: What are we to do when the prevailing standards for judging the merits of a person of a certain description have

changed significantly over the time since the biblical writings were inscribed? The New Testament was written in the time of the Roman Empire, when the prevailing expectations of a ruler were considerably different than at present, when many consider liberal democracy to be the best form of government. (Note however that the Bible expresses many reservations about “absolute” human rulers; see especially the book of Revelation.)

Here we cannot rely simply on the naïve assumption that the present is bound to be better than the past. Neither, of course, can we take refuge in the notion that everything was better in the good old days! I believe our only recourse, in this situation, is to consider seriously, in the light of our best overall perspective, and in view of the knowledge that is available to us, what *really is* the best way for a ruler, or the leader of an enterprise, to be? We are engaged here in a serious business; we are seeking to discover the best way to describe our Lord and God, in the light of a comparison with a human being who occupies in an excellent way a particular role of some sort. It should not ultimately be determinative what our contemporaries think about this, or on the other hand what people thought about it at some period in the past. Our concern is and must be with what is *true*, and this matters because it is a means to a *truthful description of God*, which we as philosophers and theologians desire above all to achieve. And if it is pointed out that our judgments about this will still be somewhat subjective and fallible, the answer must be, “Of course!” Anyone claiming to put forward an algorithm that will give unerringly correct answers in such matters, can be dismissed out of hand.

In the final section of his paper, Gutowski has something to say about his own preferred view of God, which he says “can be placed somewhere between open theism and process theism.” (20) This does not sound like a bad thing at all, but I have some difficulty in seeing, from the little he has to say in limited space, just how his views are in conflict with open theism. He mentions “the idea that God chose to create a world in which his interventions consist in suggesting to created beings one of the possible courses of action. This does not involve accepting the full process orthodoxy including God’s limited omnipotence, the rejection of creation *ex nihilo* and the rejection of human objective (rather than subjective) immortality” (20). If God’s interventions must consist *exclusively* of such suggestions, this might be a problem. But short of this, the idea that God works in the world by “nudging” individuals to act in certain ways is both plausible and attractive. If we don’t think God simply takes control of human agents, thus negating their

free will, the sort of notion Gutowski suggests seems almost inevitable. The points on which he differs from process orthodoxy are, of course, also points on which he agrees with open theism. And on the other hand, if we are not going to limit God's omnipotence, we may still have a difficulty with "God's non-intervention in situations in which we might expect Him to intervene" (20). As for miracles, if omnipotence is retained it will be difficult to come up with a principled reason why miracles are impossible. However, I do think there are good reasons why miracles should not be expected on a routine, everyday basis.

All of this points to the need for further discussion, which is as it should be. Good philosophy, especially good Christian philosophy, need not and should not be static and boring!

REFERENCES

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Summary

The essay is a response to Piotr Gutowski's *Creative Thinking about God and Respect for Christian Identity*. The author clarifies his understanding of the Christian integrity and responds to some criticisms formulated by Gutowski.

Keywords: Christian Philosophy; Piotr Gutowski.

FILOZOFIA CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKA I CHRZEŚCIJAŃSCY FILOZOFOWIE: ODPOWIEDŹ GUTOWSKIEMU

Streszczenie

Esej jest odpowiedzią na tekst Piotra Gutowskiego *Twórcze myślenie o Bogu i szacunek dla tożsamości chrześcijańskiej*. Autor doprecyzowuje w nim swoje rozumienie tożsamości chrześcijańskiej i odpowiada na niektóre ze sformułowanych przez Gutowskiego zastrzeżeń.

Słowa kluczowe: filozofia chrześcijańska; Piotr Gutowski.