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# Theoretical Virtues and Theological Construction

by

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**ABSTRACT**: Theist and critic alike typically assume rather traditional, Medieval, understandings of God, thereby masking certain complexities in their disputes. Drawing on the practices of both scientific and theological theory construction, it is argued that traditional theologies should be seen as negotiable in certain ways. In the light of this, standard attempts at refutations of Christianity have significantly less force than is usually appreciated. Some pitfalls of both strong and weak commitments to any particular theological framework are discussed.

# Theoretical Virtues and Theological Construction*

In his presidential address to the Society of Christian Philosophers, Alvin Plantinga gave the advice that Christian philosophers should, at least some of the time, address issues that are important to those within the Christian community, whether or not those issues are important to those outside of that community.[1] In this paper I will address issues that concern Christians and non-Christians alike. I motivate and provide a rationale for a particular perspective on and an attitude toward the theological enterprise, drawing on the philosophy of science. This attitude points the Christian community toward a strategy for coping with both internal disagreement and external criticism. This perspective bears on the question: "How much stock should we have invested in traditional theology?"

## I

Occasionally someone tries to disprove the existence of God with the intent of undermining traditional belief and practice. One way to succeed in this task is to show that the divine attributes cannot be exemplified. If no being could exemplify this set of attributes, then God *could* not exist and by implication, God *does* not exist. Showing this requires some determinate set of attributes that are supposed to characterise God. Western theists typically ascribe omnipotence to God. So, if there is an unsolvable paradox of omnipotence, for instance, no being could be the way theists say God is. In response, theists typically try to dissolve any appearance of paradox and demonstrate not only that it is possible for someone to be omnipotent, but that a being can jointly possess all of the standard divine attributes.

Alternatively, a critic might argue that there is inconsistency in the joint supposition that God exists and that the world is the way it happens to be. In Mackie's classic paper, the fact of evil is presented as something incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God.[2] Adherents of some religious traditions, perhaps, can embrace such an

inconsistency and use it, in conjunction with the (presumably justified) belief in such a God as sufficient reason for denying the existence of evil. This strategy, however, is not open to Christians. If there is no evil, then there is no sin and if there is no sin, then there is no need for redemption, forgiveness, and grace. If there is no need for these, then much of Christian thinking about the person and work of Jesus is misguided at best. Christians, then, cannot in good conscience allow that evil is incompatible with the existence of God. Thus, various defenses and theodicies have been proposed to show at least the compatibility of the existence of God and evil.

In these debates, theist and critic alike assume traditional understandings of God. Theists seem to assume that revising one's account of God's nature exhibits intellectual laziness and a lack of religious tenacity. Critics seem to assume that revising one's account of God is having one's cake and eating it too. In this paper I will argue that too little attention has been given to the dialectical option of relinquishing traditional theological doctrines as part of the process of finding a more suitable theological package. I will *not* argue that traditional theology is in fact inferior to alternatives or even that there presently is a pressing need to search for alternatives. I intend only to expose several reasons for thinking that traditional theology is negotiable in certain ways and that the failure to recognise this masks certain complexities in disputes between theist and critic. In short, aligning Christian theology with certain Medieval doctrines has sometimes had the effect of making refutations of Christianity appear much easier than they really are. In section II I will bring to bear on the enterprise of theology construction some general issues regarding theory construction and evaluation. In section III I will cite reasons from within the practice of constructing Christian theology that warrant a somewhat loose commitment to philosophical formulations or explanations of elements of Christian belief. In section IV I will return to typical atheological strategies, such as attempts to refute Christian theism via paradox or conflict with our experience of evil, and suggest that they are limited in value in the light of a looser commitment to traditional theology. In section V I will discuss some pitfalls of both strong and weak commitment to any particular theological framework.

## II

By 'traditional theology' I understand philosophical statements of doctrines and explanations of these doctrines that come to us from the early Church Fathers and the Medieval doctors. This theology emphasises God's absolute perfection, infinite power and knowledge, and complete unchangeableness. Two paradigm examples of traditional theologians are Augustine and Aquinas. In more general terms traditional theology is a general theory or, better, a family of closely-related theories about the nature of God, humanity, and some of the important dealings between them. Many of those involved in the recent resurgence of philosophical theology count themselves as (relatively) theologically conservative and traditional theology enjoys a central place in their thinking about the nature of God, the human condition, and the Gospel. Many deem misguided "Bultmann's" project of demythologising the New Testament in order to square it with a secular framework and, thus, make the Christian faith credible in "this age of electric light and the wireless."[3] Many would argue that demythologised Christianity cannot make sense of typical Christian practices and is unrecognizable as the faith of the Church. Hence, whatever it is, they say, it is not a proper theory of the Christian religion.

The process of theory construction provides a framework for recognising the negotiability of traditional theology because traditional theology is not the only theory. Church history is rife with debates over many issues of belief and practice. If we take seriously the distinction between truth and falsity, accuracy and error, then failed religious theories are no more surprising than failed physical theories. Why, then, is the commitment to traditional theology so strong in some circles that it provides a basis for acrimonious ecclesiastical debate and division and (as I will argue below) makes the defense of Christian theism more difficult?[4] Perhaps because it is deemed the only *acceptable* general Christian theory. Though I will not argue to the contrary here, let us turn our attention briefly to what makes a theology acceptable.

Good theology construction, like any good theory construction, is the attempt to reach a consistent theory that possesses an optimal balance of explanatory power, informational content, simplicity, and perhaps other theoretical virtues. These virtues can sometimes pull in

different directions so that a gain in power and content may involve a loss of simplicity. A gain in simplicity may force us to leave certain data unaccounted for or may force us to deem certain observations inaccurate or certain beliefs false. These general theoretical virtues provide our first reason for entertaining the prospect of relinquishing traditional theology because they provide no simple, straightforward, algorithm for constructing an adequate theory. They do not entail, for instance, that there is a *uniquely* adequate theory. The concept of an optimal theory permits different realizations because two theories may reach the same balance of theoretical virtues in different ways. One might be heavy on explanatory power, but light on simplicity; another heavy on informational content and light on power. Even if there is some absolute minimum level of justification any theory must possess before it is intellectually respectable, there may be a multiplicity of theories that are equally above this minimum threshold, with no competitor placed above them.

If more than one religious theory can, in principle, reach the same degree of theoretical virtues, we must entertain the possibility of some non-traditional theological theory about the nature of God and God's plan for humanity that is at least as good as traditional theology. There might be well-informed readings of the Biblical texts that undermine the claim that God is immutable, simple, or in possession of knowledge of counterfactuals of human freedom. Philosophical considerations might warrant the claim that God is not, after all, omnipotent. *A priori* there is no reason to think that an Augustinian conception of sin and redemption or a Thomistic conception of God is the only one that can be incorporated under the umbrella of acceptable Christian theologies. To a certain extent we recognise these possibilities when the doctrines in question are not those that have found their way into the historic creeds of the Church. However, these general remarks apply to creedal statements as well as to later theological developments.[5]

The second reason for the negotiability of traditional theology derives from the process of evaluating exiting competing theories. Apparently Jesus claimed to be the God of Old Testament history.[6] One way to understand this is in terms of Jesus and YHWH being one substance, but there are others. Jesus is supposed by many to be divine in order to explain his power to work miracles, teach perceptively, obey God perfectly, and secure our salvation.

Many within the Christian community proclaim that so-called cults not worthy of the title 'Christian' typically deny that Jesus is any more divine than we are or will be. Such a denial of Jesus' divinity certainly makes the resultant theory non-traditional, but determining whether this makes it unacceptable requires an examination of the entire alternative theoretical package rather than just a single component. A "cultish" theory departs from tradition in some ways, but it does not follow that it is thereby less satisfactory overall. It may realise theoretical virtues at least as well as typical members of the family of traditional theories that we received from the scholastics.

When assessing whether it is rational for an agent to hold a certain belief or theory, appeal to the truth of the belief is not particularly useful. What is useful, among other things, is the *justification* the agent possesses for holding that belief in those circumstances. Acceptability is sometimes at least as important as truth, since justification is our guide to the truth. Certainly we might be in the unfortunate circumstance of being justified in believing what is false. Sensible theories of truth and rationality admit this possibility. Nonetheless, from the "inside," our only way to evaluate what, if anything, we ought to believe in our circumstances is to look at the justification we possess for our beliefs.[7] There may be more than one theory we are (most) justified in believing. Thus, the complexities of *constructing* an optimal theory lead us to the complexities of *assessing* theories with the same consequence for treating traditional theology.

The question I raise at this point, whether there is a uniquely acceptable way to construct an optimal Christian religious theory, must be distinguished sharply from the question of whether a unique theory is *true*. I am concerned here not with the truth of a theory, but with the acceptability or justification of a theory. Nothing I have said so far shows that truth is unimportant, that truth makes no difference, that incompatible theories can all be true, or anything else of the kind. Truth, however, is not always the only thing that matters.

Our third general reason for a loosened grip on traditional theology comes from the possibility of theoretical progress. Theoreticians, be they physicists or theologians, hope to make progress. This may be achieved either by the further application of a general program to new situations and new problems or it may be achieved by the revision of older theories and

even the wholesale replacement of the old by the new. Theologians engaged in original theological research do so, presumably, in the hope of making theological progress, some of which involves improving on what has gone before. Those who think that Augustine and Aquinas made theological progress are likely to think that they made progress precisely because they replaced old, less adequate theories with newer more adequate theories. On the modest assumption that traditional theology is not perfect, the possibility and hope of making theological progress by replacement justifies a less-than-complete commitment to traditional theology.

Thus, the nature of general theoretical virtues, the assessment of an array of theories, and the possibility of theoretical progress partially warrant the recommendation that we should not be too wedded to traditional theology. Since traditional theology is a family of closely-related theories about God and the world, it is possible for other theories to score at least as well on the index of theoretical virtues, thereby being at least as acceptable as the bequest of tradition. If we attempt to choose rationally between competing theories, we must limit ourselves to justification for our beliefs which is transparent to us at the time of choosing. This may underdetermine our theory choice. We might be no less justified in believing a competitor. If so, we may hope to improve on the theological theory we currently possess, which may involve relinquishing some traditional ideas.

## III

I turn now to the task of constructing an acceptable *Christian* theory. In this section I shall argue that the relation between Biblical hermeneutics and theology provides two further elements of support for the negotiability of the traditional theological framework and that the philosophical background of traditional theology provides another.

Among classical Christian doctrines are those about the nature of God: divine omnipotence, omniscience, immutability, simplicity, etc. Beyond strictly theistic doctrines there are peculiarly Christian doctrines regarding God as a Triune being, one person of which became incarnate in the historical person of Jesus. Doctrines that pertain to the relationship

between God and humanity are those of original sin, forgiveness and redemption by grace, and atonement by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Chief sources of these doctrines are Biblical texts, Church history, and philosophical reflection. Surely one requirement of an acceptable Christian theology is that it faithfully systematise and explain the recorded experiences of the people who figure in the Bible, as well as the experiences of later Christians. However, no student of the Bible can be unaware that Biblical interpretation is, at times, rather dicey. For the major Western theistic doctrines there are passages of the Bible that lend support. The Psalmist regularly speaks of God as one of majestic power from whom all worldly power derives and in whom perfect righteousness is found. God is said to know our very thoughts, to be so reliable as to warrant our complete trust, and to be beyond the limitations of spacetime.

What do we make of such passages? While they certainly constitute part of the Christian religious heritage, Biblical assertions do not even apparently take us all the way to the doctrines of omnipotence, omniscience, immutability, and simplicity. The Bible does not unambiguously assert that God is omnipotent, a being not only of actually unsurpassed power but also of unsurpass*able* power. Nor does it clearly assert that God is a being of not only unsurpassed knowledge but also of unsurpass*able* knowledge[8] or an immutable being eternally unable to change or be affected from without.[9] So, first of all, taking the Bible seriously does not commit us to these sophisticated doctrines in philosophical theology.

Secondly, Biblical interpretation is just a special case of theory construction of the sort mentioned above and, thus, subject to revision. Competent interpreters pursue an interpretation of the whole Bible that does justice to each part while rendering the whole consistent and intelligible whenever possible, set within the framework of other things the interpreter believes. One might hope that this involves simply taking each passage at its face value.[10] Face value, though, is elusive. It is elusive because, unlike reading yesterday's newspaper, reading the Bible is reading a collection of ostensibly historical accounts, liturgical songs of praise and confession, exhortations to change the ways of society, and instructions in faith and practice. Many statements seem to involve straightforward declarative sentences while others contain obvious uses of metaphor and poetic license. If these are the extremes, then there are

many statements that fall into the category of the doubtful, i.e., the category of statements that are not obviously metaphorical and not obviously non-metaphorical. Determining how to treat these statements is a chief concern of the interpreter.

Face value is elusive also because none of the passages were addressed to us; they were addressed to people of different cultures, of different historical contexts, and with different sets of religious and moral questions. Sacrificing the first born to Baal was a live option for the Patriarchs, but not for us. The structure of a just system of political representation is a live issue for us, but was not for the New Testament Church. Sometimes the precise questions being addressed by Biblical writers can be inferred only indirectly and tentatively. Yet, knowing exactly what was at issue for that writer makes a significant difference to the way we interpret various passages as well as to the way we evaluate that writer. If the Apostle Paul was making certain assertions in response to a given situation, his injunction that wives must *submit* to their husbands while husbands must *love* their wives is difficult to take seriously in an age sensitised by feminism and his remarks make him appear rather sexist. If Paul asserted different propositions with those same words in response to a different situation, then his teaching would be a great deal easier to take and he would not appear sexist.

To the extent that textual comparison and historical investigation involve issues that are not easily resolved because we lack important information and because conclusions thereon are revisable in the light of further textual and historical research, the theological superstructure resting upon them is likewise revisable. Reasons of historical and linguistic distance from the Old and New Testament writers make our best current interpretations of these texts subject to future revision. Thus, the practice of Biblical hermeneutics, which serves as a basis for theological affirmations, provides another reason for being wary of identifying some portions of traditional theology with what is acceptable Christian theology.

The philosophical background of traditional theology also undermines wholesale devotion to traditional theology. This background is quite pervasive. Hermeneutics is not logically or historically prior to the philosophical aspects of theology. Part of what the interpreter does, if at all sympathetic, is find the renderings of the text that are fairly plausible. Even in books like the Bible, which apparently assert what some modern readers find ludicrous, a proper

interpretation requires that in at least the “non-fantastic” portions, the writer should be taken as asserting something sensible. A reader’s idea of what is sensible, however, will be subject to what that reader has reason to believe. Part of what the reader has reason to believe involves certain philosophically-loaded beliefs about the structure of the cosmos and good and evil. The philosophically relevant information we get out of a text is subject to the philosophically relevant material we bring to the text when we read it for what is sensible and what is not. As with the historical foundations of interpretation, the philosophical and theological assumptions of the readers affect what they can “read off” the pages of the Bible for the purposes of self-consciously constructing a theory about the nature of God.

This factor makes the processes of interpretation and theory construction a context-relative matter. Some erroneously take the dependence of the reasonableness of doctrine on factors like context and prior assumptions to warrant the rather distinct claim that the truth or applicability of such doctrines is likewise dependent or relative. Many non-academic believers are reluctant to admit to such relativities for fear of the (supposed) ensuing relativism about the nature of God or the way of salvation. Yet, God’s nature may be as objectively determinate as one likes while it is still true that what, in part, explains why it occurs to me that God is omnipotent are certain powerful historically- and contextually-relative matters. While God may, indeed, have a certain highly specific nature I may, for any number of reasons, be in a poor position to have much confidence that I have understood that nature. The fact that I am unlikely to perceive God’s hand in history unless I work with a theory in which God’s activity is both possible and discernible makes it no less true (or false) that God has indeed worked at some particular point in history. Likewise, one can sensibly affirm that Jesus either is the second person of the Trinity or he is not, while also affirming that the plausibility of the divinity of Jesus is subject to factors of the relative justification of other beliefs. As a specific application of the general features of theory construction and theory choice, the issue is one of our relative certainty about such doctrines and what turns on them. It is not an issue of what is true; it is a matter of what we have sufficient justification for believing to be true. Such can be said for many affirmations and is certainly not peculiar to theological affirmations.

Applying these ideas to our present concern suggests that we should scrutinise the philosophical background of traditional theological claims. The theologians who formulated many of these doctrines were in the grip of certain philosophical programs. Augustine's theology was heavily influenced by his contact with Manichaeism and Neo-Platonism as it came to him in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries. If it can be shown that his thinking about sin and redemption is inordinately affected by the philosophically-motivated view that matter is intrinsically evil and spirit is intrinsically good and if it can be further shown that the best rendering of the Bible gives a view of body and spirit that is incompatible with this, then there is at least one reason to think that Augustine's views are negotiable. Perhaps a rather different view, even one advocated by others in early Church history, might be a better part of our overall theological package.[11]

Along similar lines, it is a commonplace that Aquinas' theological project was to reconcile the two dominant sources of truth as he saw them: the Bible and the corpus of Aristotle. In light of the gap between the Biblical affirmations about the character of God and the Medieval doctrines of the divine attributes, perhaps we should carefully examine the extent to which the Thomistic views are a function of Aristotle's doctrines of perfection, actuality, and changelessness rather than prior Christian teaching and practice. If Aristotle's Unmoved Mover is not a God who can love, be moved by the prayers of the faithful, or act in history and if the God of the Old and New Testaments can and does, then this is good reason to be skeptical that Aquinas's project will be fruitful. What was reasonable for him to trust is not for us. We no longer think of the corpus of Aristotle as one of the factors with which we must reconcile Christian teaching. So, there is no overriding reason to make our theology acceptable to an Aristotelian. We are free to take or leave the framework of Aristotle as best suits our other theological purposes, especially when the issues before us are rather different on the front of metaphysics, science, and ethics. We should, therefore, at least be willing to consider the possibility that the old frameworks, as reasonable as they were for their advocates and as instructive as they may be for us now, are hindrances to progress in understanding the nature, ways, and intentions of God. While the fact that Augustine and Aquinas were influenced by

secular philosophical ideas does not entail that the resulting theologies are faulty, it is at least reason to seriously consider the adequacy of those ideas and the relevant theologies.

What is true of Augustine's and Aquinas's models is true quite generally. To the extent that a model is formulated in terms of a negotiable theoretical framework, the resultant model is negotiable. To the extent that Augustine and Aquinas formulated their ideas about God in terms of then-contemporary ideas heavily influenced by Plotinus and Aristotle, and to the extent that Plotinus's and Aristotle's philosophical assumptions are not part of, or even strongly suggested by, the basic Christian data, the theologies built by Augustine and Aquinas are optional. To the extent that they are optional, we should not invest a great deal of stock in them.

Thus, the practice of Christian theology provides several reasons to warrant reluctance in uncritically adopting traditional theology and branding as heretics those who choose another general framework within which to "work out [their] salvation with fear and trembling." These reasons concern the possibility of theological progress, the process of hermeneutics, and the philosophical presuppositions of traditional theology. These reasons, however, do not yield the verdict that working out the details of the traditional theological program is misguided. On the contrary, such effort might well bear fruit and bring greater understanding. 'Traditional' does not mean discredited; 'new' does not mean worthy of consideration. I mean to suggest only that we are well-advised to consider whether some of the problems that confront contemporary philosophical theologians are merely artifacts of the philosophical context in which the original doctrines were formed. If immutability and simplicity are completely a function of Aristotle and none of the Bible, then perhaps there are theological problems that Aquinas needed to address, given his project, that we are under no obligation to resolve. It is permissible for us to leave them as historical artifacts to be learned from, but not to worry about.

## IV

Let us now return to the issues with which we began. Given the perspective on theology defended here we can begin to see how a rigid adherence to traditional theology oversimplifies

the issues between the theist and the critic and that typical arguments that purport to show the falsity of theism in general, or Christianity in particular, are misguided. Theist and critic alike mistake certain negotiable elements of thinking about God for the essence of religious thinking.

A critic alleges that there is a paradox of omnipotence. So what? Unless it is crystal clear that Christianity requires that God is omnipotent rather than merely almighty, that God is a being of unsurpass*able* power rather than of merely great unsurpass*ed* power, then no central tenet of Christianity is thereby refuted. If the doctrine of omnipotence is not demanded by a serious treatment of the Bible and later Christian experience, and if its source is something like an Aristotelian concept of perfection, then perhaps Christian thinkers can, in good conscience, respond to the paradox by giving up but not giving in. They can admit that while no being can be omnipotent, God need not be omnipotent anyway. If so, then not only is Christianity not refuted by the paradox, Christian thinkers could thank the critic for enabling them to make theological progress. If God need not be omnipotent to perform the actions commonly attributed to God by Christians, e.g., God need not be omnipotent to be the creator of the world, the sender of Jesus, and the healer of Paul, then the critic has inadvertently brought greater understanding to the Christian community about the nature of God and, perhaps, about God's relation to humanity.

Even if Christianity really requires that God is omnipotent and paradox strikes at the heart of Christian theology, again, what of it? Christianity is refuted, but, for all the paradoxes of omnipotence purport to show, there may still be a triune creator of the physical world who has repeatedly interrupted the natural flow of history to accomplish goals that otherwise would not have been. Jesus might still be the incarnate(d) member of that triune being. Christianity is refuted, but something so close to it stands untouched that no self-respecting atheist should think that the paradox facilitates any kind of irreligion. The greatest possible success of any paradox of omnipotence is really rather minimal. Its proper impact on the life of the ordinary believer and its significance to the atheist who believes in only atoms and the void is the same: nil.

Likewise for the problem of evil. Unless some fairly specific ascriptions regarding divine power, knowledge, and moral perfection are essential elements of Christian theology, the problem cannot even arise. But, even if these ascriptions are essential and all defenses and theodicies are doomed to failure, then Mackie was right all along, but what of it? First, our theology would need to be re-cast. Either the one called 'God' is not the perfect being we thought, or being a perfect being is not what we thought. What is the harm in being pushed to this conclusion? Divine omnipotence and omniscience are underdetermined by Biblical data. Much of our textual evidence for these doctrines comes from places that could easily be read as passages given to rhetorical flourishes that are intended not as sober statements of theological doctrines but as inspirational tools that might serve to encourage the dispossessed, strengthen the weak, and fortify the wavering.

Second, those that sympathise with Mackie should not be encouraged too quickly with such a victory. If a position is contradictory, then that position is most assuredly false. But, in the case of Christianity, the position is a complex position involving several propositions. At least one of these must be discarded in favor of its negation to yield a consistent set and consistency can be regained in ways that provide no comfort to the atheist. If God is not omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good, there may still exist an extremely powerful being who created the physical universe *ex nihilo*, helped Moses part the Red Sea, spoke judgment through the Old Testament prophets and who was in Jesus Christ reconciling the world. Such a being must be one of great power, great (fore)knowledge, and remarkable moral character. This being would be worthy of devotion, gratitude, and worship. It would make sense to pray to such a being, seeking direction and forgiveness, offering repentance and sacrifice, giving praise and honor. In short, justified belief in the existence and actions of such a being still warrants the traditional Christian practices and is arguably compatible with an acceptable reading of the Old and New Testaments. Thus, what's the problem with the problem of evil?[12]

The lesson to be learned in this section is that little or nothing crucial to the Christian faith, as it may well have been understood by its early practitioners, is lost by admitting that some traditional doctrines must, ultimately, find their end on a theological scrap heap. There could still be a God who creates, saves, hears and answers prayers, and bring the machinations of

fallen humanity to an end in a reign universal of peace. A robust atheism that warrants the neglect of religious practices is not even nearly exonerated.

Some might object that I have construed “traditional theology” too narrowly. Traditional theology is not to be contrasted with non-Medieval approaches. It is, rather, to be contrasted with approaches that do not save the basic phenomena of Christian belief and practice just noted. Two remarks bear on this objection. First, if this is all traditional theologians and philosophers are concerned to defend, it is more than a bit surprising that the preponderance of the philosophical responses to the theological paradoxes and the problem of evil make no mention of the negotiability of the underlying theological doctrines. The doctrine of a finite God is commonly perceived as an unacceptable substitute for the more traditional doctrines of God. This is at least puzzling, if the practical phenomena were the only things at stake in philosophical debates over religious belief. Second, if this is what someone thinks is crucial to the practice of traditional theology, then I am in complete agreement. These considerations serve to show that a particular theological framework is not fundamental to Christian theology. The fundamentals are much less theory-laden and much more in touch with historical events than are systems meant to enable a fuller understanding of those events. What is crucial to Christian theology is not what I have been calling “traditional theology” but the more mundane historical claims about the activity of God and the experiences and practices of various people. Clearly, then, traditional theology is negotiable and typical atheological arguments are almost completely beside the point.

So, arguments that purport to show the falsity of theism in general, or Christianity in particular, are typically misguided. Even in the face of unanswered atheological arguments, one can sensibly and responsibly remain a Christian believer. Obviously, the crucial issues are left untouched by such arguments and an atheism thus defended is no atheism at all. This point has been obscured, in part, because some theists simply begin their discussions with the affirmation that God is omnipotent, omniscient, etc.[13] This is simply given, without any indication that there is room for maneuvering on such claims. It is not surprising that critics follow suit, apparently oblivious to the permissible nuances.[14] The debate over the existence of God is a good bit more complex and subtle than either side lets on. Ignoring this complexity

has made the atheist's task of arguing for the non-existence of God too easy. It is much more difficult to prove atheism than successfully producing a paradox or the problem of evil. For this reason Christians should be much *less* interested in identifying acceptable theology with traditional philosophical theology than their critics. While adequate theistic arguments are not easy to come by, adequate atheistic arguments are at least as hard to come by.[15]

V

I will close with a brief discussion of the dangers of the various orientations toward theological orthodoxy and disclose some of my motivation for taking up these issues in these ways. Those wedded to orthodoxy are sometimes accused of being closed-minded and intolerant.[16] Sometimes this is a fair criticism of those confident of their own orthodoxy. Intolerance, though, is not a necessary result of justified certainty of one's correctness. My knowing the truth does not essentially involve my persecuting those in error. Christians, in particular, have good reasons to practice tolerance. According to them, God has proscribed revenge for the Christian community. So, being fully convinced of the truth of the Christian message is a powerful inducement to be, above all, tolerant of those that do not accept that message. If Jesus was not only tolerant but willing to suffer at the hands of those in error and Christians are called to imitate his example, then tolerance should be the result of a properly understood and implemented certainty of the Christian faith. I have argued not for a weak commitment to the Christian faith, but for a weak commitment to the somewhat more theoretical philosophical theologies that are sometimes closely identified with the faith itself.

In contrast, there are at least two genuine dangers of the apparently easy-going attitude about theoretical questions I have espoused in this paper. A believer is likely to raise the first concern. This attitude might lead one too easily to think that "anything goes" in theology. The danger is that over time the beliefs, practices, and institutions associated with the Church may have so little in common with what has been considered Christian for nearly two millennia that the essence of the faith will become lost. If there is anything to the faith to begin with, this is a genuine possibility. Though I will not attempt to specify exactly when one has gone beyond the pale, Christian thinkers should give serious attention to discerning the crucial phenomena

to be saved by any satisfactory Christian theology. Perhaps there is no unique set of phenomena and the phenomena one finds crucial may be wedded to the framework within which one chooses to work. This may be unavoidable, but confronting these issues may give us a clearer understanding of the proper task of philosophical theology.

A critic is likely to raise the second concern. If the theoretical structure of Christianity is so loose and subject to change, then what is the content of the religion? Is there any cognitive significance to a religion which can be endlessly interpreted and revised that it may fit with any development in philosophy and science? Yet, if there is a "hard core" to Christianity, then it is not endlessly revisable. Plausibly, if there is no God who is responsible for the existence of the world, no sin and no means of salvation for humanity, then the Christian tradition is sorely misguided. If God is only to what I (we) care most deeply about, then, indeed, there is no Christian God. In such circumstances, Christianity might still be good for something, but it would be no good for informing us of the nature of the world and our place in it.

The concerns of the believer and the critic go hand in hand and show that a significant project for research is to determine the hard core of Christianity. In the end, there may be no algorithm which yields the conditions of refutation for a sophisticated religious theory like Christianity and thinkers may well need to use their good sense in determining the conditions under which it stands and under which it falls. If so, as unsatisfying as this may be, it is no different from any other sophisticated theory of the world. Scientific theories are subject to precisely the same slipperiness.[17]

Finally, my motivation for taking up these issues in the ways I have. First, I am struck by the way in which current Christian practice seems to differ from that of the New Testament Church. Many segments of the contemporary Church place such a great deal of emphasis on details of theological affirmation that many Christians appear to have the impression that correct belief is essential for salvation. Going the wrong way on free will/predestination or transubstantiation/consubstantiation might have disastrous consequences for one's soul, they fear. I do not suggest that this is an explicit portion of the beliefs of all, but a great deal of weight is placed on theological correctness. Specific teaching and instruction are certainly not absent from the Gospels and the Epistles, however it is fair to say that some of the doctrines

that are the center of philosophical theological debates are those that are given no explicit New Testament formulation. There is some justification in a complaint of some critics: the Christian faith as we know it was invented by the early Church Councils. To be sure, the councils responsible for "inventing" noteworthy Christian doctrines did not work in a vacuum. They were aware of the Biblical data as well as the later experiences of the Church. The doctrines they handed us are a product of their efforts to best theorise about God and the world. My arguments suggest only that there might be other ways equally faithful to the Biblical texts and the experience of the Church. Salvation seems to be only tangentially a function of propositional assent. To be sure, one cannot have faith in God, if one doesn't even so much as believe in God. One would be hard pressed, though, to argue successfully that belief in God's knowledge of the counterfactuals of human freedom is necessary for salvation.

My second, and most important, reason for pursuing these lines is a somewhat pastoral thread. Jesus prayed that his people would be united and that their unity might be a powerful component of their witness to the world of God's grace and love.[18] I have witnessed theological differences generate ill will at both the professional and the non-professional levels. Some seem to identify too closely with a particular reading of the Bible or a specific theory about the way God acts in history. Paul never mentions correct belief as one of the desirable fruits of the Spirit,[19] but concern over correct belief (usually in others) has often led us to give these fruits a back seat to doctrinal correctness. According to the tradition, the Christian faith is by no means a game. If we take Christians at their word, it not only cost Jesus his life, but it also costs us ours. However, constructing an adequate theology is much closer to a game than we sometimes allow ourselves to admit.

Notes

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[1]Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1984), pp. 253-71.

[2]J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955), pp. 200-212.

[3]I am not concerned with how faithful this characterization of "Bultmann's" theological project is to that of the historical Bultmann. Even if the historical theologian's views were more subtle, sophisticated and in-tune with traditional theological projects than the position I have portrayed, what I have described is a position which seems to be in the background of the way many handle the historical doctrines.

[4]I do not suggest that concern for doctrinal correctness is the only factor in intra- and extra-Church strife, only that it is one. I hope that this paper will provide some reasons for pausing whenever doctrinal correctness is an apparent cause for such disputes.

[5]That creedal statements are subject to these considerations does not prohibit them from comprising the most insulted portion of Christian theology, however. There may be powerful reasons for revising creedal doctrines only under extreme theoretical duress and for thinking that such duress is not imminent.

[6]John 8:58 and 17:11, 21-22.

[7]Furthermore, not just any old justification is relevant to theory choice. Merely being justified in believing the relevant components of a theory is insufficient to warrant choosing it over competitors. One must also have reflective access to a sufficient amount of justification in

order to adequately appraise competing theories. Thus, there is the possibility that some kinds of justification will render a belief acceptable and at the same time be useless in the conscious evaluation of competing theories because the justification is inaccessible to the one possessing it. One might be justified in believing something but not justified in believing that they are so justified. If I am justified in holding a particular belief because it arises from certain generally reliable belief-forming mechanisms but I also have no epistemic access to the fact that these mechanisms were operative *and* that their operation was sufficient to generate justification, then my justification does me no good when I raise the question of whether I am justified in holding this belief. We have no choice but to limit our attention to the relative merits of competing theories with respect to "internal" justification. This requirement can be affirmed by both internalists and externalists regarding the nature of epistemic justification. The internalist can affirm it because according to internalism all justification is accessible in this way. An externalist can affirm it so long as there are, for example, reliable belief-forming mechanisms that properly generate the second-order belief that I have a particular amount or kind of justification for a first-order belief. What is crucial here is not so much the *source* of the justified belief as it is the *object* of the justified belief. If the object of the justified belief is a belief about being justified in believing something, then one must possess justification for the first-order belief that is sufficiently transparent to enable one to engage in the process of evaluating the relative merits of its justification.

[8]Even unsurpassable knowledge does not trivially take us to omniscience. Suppose there are some true propositions that are intrinsically unknowable. If omniscience is the property of knowing all true propositions, then it is not possible for a being to be omniscient. Alternatively, if omniscience is the property of knowing all that is possibly known, then a being could be omniscient, but still ignorant of some true propositions. Quantum uncertainty does not, strictly speaking, give us facts that are intrinsically unknowable. It gives us conditional unknowability. *If* one knows certain things, then one is prevented from knowing some other things. I will not discuss the implications of quantum theory to divine knowledge

here. I raise the case simply to show that the existence of intrinsically unknowable facts is not altogether farfetched and that we should not summarily dismiss this possibility.

[9]It is worth distinguishing two different senses of 'character' when speaking of God's immutability. If 'character' means essence, then immutability is an uncontroversial doctrine, since divine immutability is simply a special case of universal immutability—the fact that nothing can change its essence. Change involves only the gain/loss of accidental properties, not the gain/loss of essential properties. If 'character' means simply the collection of attributes that a being possesses, then divine immutability is much more subject to criticism from the front of biblical hermeneutics, since various passages give credence to the claim that God does on occasion change attitudes and intentions.

[10]I do not mean the concept of taking a passage at face value to be the same as taking it literally. Sometimes the face value of a passage may be a literal reading. The stories of Jesus' walking on the water and feeding five thousand from a few loaves and fishes might well have a literal reading as their face value. On the other hand, Isaiah's claim that the trees will clap their hands with joy has a metaphorical reading as its face value. Determining the face value of passages of discourse might be a very difficult and assumption-laden activity. However, I take it as obvious that the face value of at least some passages is relatively unproblematic.

[11]Richard Swinburne, for example, gives an account of these matters which diverges from Augustine's and has its roots in the thinking of Irenaeus, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa in *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

[12]These points apply not only to Mackie's attempt to show that the existence of evil is incompatible with the existence of God, but also to more recent attempts to show "merely" that the existence and nature of evil constitute substantial evidence against the existence of God. These more recent formulations of the problem of evil still rely on the same assumptions about the nature of God.

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[13]For example, Richard Swinburne begins his article "Could There Be More Than One God?" *Faith and Philosophy*, 5 (1988), pp. 225-41, with the sentence "I understand by a God a person necessarily necessary, eternal, essentially bodiless, omnipresent, creator and sustainer of any world there may be, perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and a source of moral obligation."

[14]For a recent example of this, cf. Quentin Smith, "Atheism, Theism and Big Bang Cosmology," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 69 (1991), pp. 48-66, esp. p. 53 where he takes as a basic theological premise "God is omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly benevolent."

[15]For a more comprehensive treatment of related issues cf. my "Atheological Apologetics," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 26 (1989), pp. 1-17.

[16]Gordon Kaufman makes related claims in "Evidentialism: A Theologian's Response," *Faith and Philosophy*, 6 (1989), pp. 35-46. For a fuller reply to Kaufman's points, cf. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Theologically Unfashionable Philosophy", *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990), pp. 329-339 and my "Evidentialism and Theology: A Reply to Kaufman," *Faith and Philosophy*, 9 (1992), pp. 249-58.

[17]Imre Lakatos makes such claims about science in "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 91-196.

[18]John 17:21.

[19]Galatians 5:22-23.