

*Philosophical Theology and  
Christian Doctrine*

Brian Hebblethwaite



# Contents

---

<i>Series Editor's Preface</i>	viii
<i>Preface</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<b>1 Philosophy of Religion and Theology</b>	1
<b>2 Revelation</b>	16
<b>3 Creation</b>	35
<b>4 Incarnation</b>	57
<b>5 Trinity</b>	75
<b>6 Salvation</b>	91
<b>7 The Consummation of All Things</b>	108
<b>8 Other Themes in Christian Doctrine</b>	127
<i>Notes</i>	146
<i>A Brief Guide to Further Reading</i>	169
<i>Index</i>	171

## *Series Editor's Preface*

---

Philosophy of religion is experiencing a kind of renaissance. From the last quarter of the twentieth century to the present, we have witnessed remarkably vigorous activity among philosophers interested in religion. We are likewise seeing college and university students seeking courses in philosophy of religion at an unprecedented rate. To reach this point, philosophy of religion had to weather the harsh and hostile intellectual climate that persisted through most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Absolute Idealism depersonalized deity, naturalism supplanted a religious worldview, and positivism deprived theological claims of cognitive status. Yet, partly because of incisive critiques of these viewpoints and partly because of new, first-rate studies of religious concepts and beliefs, this field of inquiry has once again come to the fore.

The Exploring the Philosophy of Religion series, then, comes into a very exciting arena. The books it contains treat some of the most important topics in the field. Since the renewal of interest in religion has occurred largely among Anglo-American philosophers committed to the best in the analytic tradition, these works will tend to reflect that approach. To be sure, some helpful general introductions and anthologies are available for those wanting a survey, and there are many good cutting-edge monographs dealing with technical issues in this burgeoning area. However, the books in this series are designed to occupy that relatively vacant middle ground in the literature between elementary texts and pioneer works. They discuss their stated topics in a way that acquaints the reader with all the relevant ideas and options, while pointing out which ones seem most reasonable. Each volume, therefore, constitutes a focused, intensive introduction to the issue and serves as a model of how one might actually go about developing an informed position.

Philosophy of religion is dynamic and growing. The issues it addresses are of primary significance for understanding the divine, ourselves, and our

---

place in the universe. With this sense of magnitude, the present series has been conceived to offer something to all who want to think deeply about the issues: serious undergraduates, graduate students, divinity and theology students, professional philosophers, and even thoughtful, educated lay persons.

Michael L. Peterson

## *Preface*

---

My aim in this book is to survey and comment on recent work by Anglo-American philosophers of religion in the analytic tradition on the doctrines of the Christian creed. There are good reasons for restricting the book's scope, for the most part, to this tradition, as I trust the first chapter will make clear. The principal reason is that philosophical analysis is really no more than a tool for exploring and clarifying a set of ideas. It does not in any way attempt to impose an alien system on Christian theology. It simply takes a given subject matter, in this case, the doctrines of the creed, and examines them for their meaning and plausibility. The skills and methods of philosophical analysis have been applied to these doctrines, in the work surveyed here, chiefly in order to probe and explain their coherence. Whether or not they are true is another matter. But their truth or falsity cannot be fairly assessed until we have as clear and profound a picture as possible of what it is that they are claiming to be true.

The central chapters of the book, chapters 3–7, are devoted to discussion of the way in which philosophical analysis has been applied to the five core doctrines of Creation, Incarnation, Trinity, Salvation and Eschatology (the ultimate future of creation, as Christianity envisages it). But these chapters are prefaced and supplemented by chapters on revelation and providence (or special divine action), since these themes are pervasive themes, presupposed and exemplified throughout the Christian creeds. Moreover the themes of revelation and providence have been subjected to just as much philosophical scrutiny as the core doctrines themselves by the philosophers of religion whose work is under examination here.

The great virtue of the work surveyed in this book is its clarity. I hope that, when readers see how Christian doctrine can be, and has been, scrutinized in this way, they will be encouraged to explore these matters further for themselves.

## CHAPTER ONE

# *Philosophy of Religion and Theology*

---

### 1.1 The Changing Scene in the Philosophy of Religion

When I began the study of the philosophy of religion in the 1960s, the subject had two main emphases: a historical element, largely devoted to the interaction, sometimes positive, sometimes negative, between western philosophy and the Christian religion, certainly from Plato to Kant, but then very much in the British and later Anglo-American, empiricist tradition; and a topic-oriented element, where we learned to wrestle with the standard problems of the philosophy of religion: arguments for the existence of God, the concept of God, miracle and providence, the problem of evil, the soul and immortality and the relation between faith and reason. At that time, the subject was dominated by the need to respond to the logical positivist critique of metaphysics and theology as basically meaningless. Inevitably, much of the work was defensive in character, typified by attempts to counter Antony Flew's challenge, in his article 'Theology and Falsification',<sup>1</sup> to show what detectable difference religious language made. Did not talk about God 'die the death of a thousand qualifications'? The meaningfulness of religious language was one of our principal concerns.

But already the whole subject was beginning to be lifted out of this rather narrow, dry, empiricist context, not least through the influence of the later Wittgenstein.<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein is very hard to interpret aright. But his insistence that we should look not for the meaning but for the use of key words and phrases in fields we are interested in, and his insistence on taking account of the contexts in life and practice of what we say, have been enormously influential on the philosophy of religion as on many other areas of philosophical concern. One way in which this has been applied is typified by the work of D. Z. Phillips,<sup>3</sup> who has urged a complete break with empiricism and an exploration, rather, of the forms of life in which religious language is

embedded. But Phillips has done this in a way which has led him to be accused of fideism and of a basically non-cognitivist analysis of religious language that refuses to face up to the old questions of sense and reference, certainly where the reality of God is concerned. And whether Phillips himself is to be understood this way or not, there has unquestionably been a marked growth in what has come to be called anti-realist or non-realist approaches within religion itself. This is typified by the work of my former colleague in Cambridge, Don Cupitt, and his *Sea of Faith* network.<sup>4</sup> The realism/anti-realism debate, itself of great importance in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, is one of the key issues in the philosophy of religion today.

A second major development, stemming from the late 1960s and early '70s, has been the way in which philosophy of religion has come to be pursued in the context of the comparative study of religions. This development, associated with figures such as Ninian Smart<sup>5</sup> and John Hick,<sup>6</sup> has made it impossible to restrict one's interest to the debate between western philosophy and the Christian religion. The data for philosophical scrutiny and analysis now come from the study of religion worldwide. And issues such as the conflicting truth-claims of the religions and the possibility of developing a philosophy of religious pluralism, and critiques of this, have also become central topics in the discipline today.

But at the same time a third major development has been the huge increase in the application of the techniques of philosophical analysis to the central doctrines of the Christian faith. This may perhaps be called, in a stricter sense than was customary earlier, philosophical theology. It was already exemplified in the 1960s by the later work of Austin Farrer in Oxford;<sup>7</sup> but one of the most striking features of the discipline in more recent decades has been the quantity and quality of this kind of work on both sides of the Atlantic. In England this is most prominent in the work of Richard Swinburne, who has moved on from his well-known philosophy of religion books,<sup>8</sup> via his Gifford Lectures on the soul,<sup>9</sup> to a series of four major books on philosophical theology.<sup>10</sup> Swinburne's work has raised the level of sheer philosophical professionalism in handling theological themes. But there has been a comparable and much more extensive development in the United States through the extraordinary growth industry of the Society of Christian Philosophers, with their numerous regional meetings, often held in conjunction with the American Philosophical Association, and their first-rate journal, *Faith and Philosophy*, where much of their best work is to be found. Senior figures there include William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff and George Mavrodes; and a younger group includes T. V. Morris, William Wainwright, William Hasker and many others.

It is the third of these recent developments in the philosophy of religion that forms the subject matter of this book. I intend to offer a survey of the contributions being made by Anglo-American philosophers of religion to the analysis and explanation of the central doctrines of the Christian creed. The survey is bound to be selective, but I hope that it will demonstrate the continuing usefulness of philosophy for theology today. I shall also, of course, be attempting some evaluation of the diverse material surveyed here. My own understanding of the doctrines of the creed will inevitably emerge.

## 1.2 Tensions Between Philosophy of Religion and Theology

A number of felt difficulties with the whole project must be considered and discussed before we get down to business. In the first place, it has to be admitted that philosophical analyses, and even defences, of Christian doctrine are often not welcomed with open arms by systematic theologians in theology departments or Church seminaries. At times, the latter suggest, in the spirit of Blaise Pascal,<sup>11</sup> that the God of the philosophers has little or nothing to do with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Theologians voice the suspicion that the philosophers are applying their analytic tools to an idol, a reification of their own construction. Conversely, they hold the living God simply not to be susceptible to analytic scrutiny. The mystery of God, as worshipped and adored in the community of faith, is beyond the capacity of the human, philosophic mind to analyse. This tension has been noted between the theologians and the philosophers in Oxford and in Notre Dame, and I have witnessed it myself at the American Academy of Religion, where outright hostility was expressed to members of the Society of Christian Philosophers.

Two recent published instances of this tension may be cited. A debate took place between 1989 and 1995 in the journal *Faith and Philosophy*, initiated by the liberal theologian Gordon Kaufman, over just this question of whether theologians should take any notice of, or show any interest in, the work of philosophers of religion such as Plantinga, Wolterstorff and Swinburne. Philosophers working on the meaning and truth of Christian doctrine, so Kaufman avers, are simply presupposing traditional theistic conceptions and formulations. They lack sensitivity to the significance of religious pluralism, to the symbolic and culturally relative nature of all talk about the mystery of God, and to the at least partial responsibility of traditional Christianity for the great evils of the twentieth century. The philosophers appear to be just fiddling while Rome burns.<sup>12</sup> In their reply,



Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, while repudiating the last of these claims, point out the inconsistencies in Kaufman's dogmatic espousal of pluralist, relativist claims. Questions of rationality and truth are implicit in Kaufman's own agnosticism. So Stump and Kretzmann urge the liberal theologians to return from their wanderings and take seriously the traditional doctrines of the Christian faith.<sup>13</sup> James Keller responds with a defence of Kaufman, urging the practical priorities of Christian faith, and defending the theologians' right to concentrate on how religious belief contributes to the transformation of life rather than on the details of Nicene trinitarianism or Chalcedonian Christology.<sup>14</sup> William Hasker replies to this defence by pointing out how Christian understanding of such transformation ('salvation') is itself bound up with Christian doctrine and cannot escape the questions of truth and rationality that exercise the philosophers. He also comments on the fact that many centres of theological study are dominated by the more liberal types of theology, while the Christian philosophers tend to be more orthodox.<sup>15</sup> To this comment we shall return. James Keller returns to the fray with an irenic defence of the theologians' right to focus on how people live as Christians.<sup>16</sup>

An English version of this tension is to be found in chapter 8 of Maurice Wiles's book, *A Shared Search*.<sup>17</sup> The chapter is entitled, 'The Reasonableness of Christianity'. It articulates Wiles's perplexity about how work in the philosophy of religion and work in theology ought to be related. One aspect of the philosophical approach criticized by Wiles – and this is the aspect of particular concern to us here – is the excessively rationalistic approach of writers such as Swinburne. Swinburne is accused of an over-literal approach to the doctrine of God, a failure to do justice to the analogical nature of all talk of God and to its rootedness in long traditions of experience and interpretation.

We need to be aware that Wiles, like Kaufman, is a liberal theologian, though not such an extreme one; and it might be thought that the tensions under review are felt most strongly by theologians who have come, for a variety of reasons, to adopt a revisionist approach to the traditional doctrines of the Church, as both Wiles and Kaufman have done to the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation. Equally we might suppose that the early Swinburne (and Wiles considers here only his *The Coherence of Theism* and *Faith and Reason*) is at the extreme end of the spectrum of rational approaches to the analysis of Christian doctrine. In his later philosophical theology books, Swinburne shows a greater sensitivity to history and tradition and to the analogical nature of religious language, as we shall see. Again, we note that Wiles speaks much more warmly of the work of Basil Mitchell, the philosopher of religion with whom Wiles held for many years a seminar in

Oxford on the relationship between philosophy and theology, and also of the work of Keith Ward, the philosopher of religion who succeeded Wiles as Regius Professor of Divinity in Oxford. Mitchell's own view on the relation between theology and philosophy will be considered later in this chapter; and, in the next, we shall be examining the debate between Wiles and Mitchell over whether Christianity needs a revelation. The work of Keith Ward will also feature prominently in the surveys of philosophical reflection on Christian doctrine that form the bulk of this book.

But it would be a mistake to suppose that the tensions between philosophy of religion and theology are most acutely felt by liberal theologians. As Hasker notes, the dominance of liberal theology in centres of theological education is on the wane. Recent decades have seen a marked recovery of traditional trinitarian theology in both Catholic and Protestant schools. But this has not led to much in the way of a rapprochement between the philosophers and the theologians. This is largely due to the influence of Karl Barth, the recovery of whose powerful, revelation-based, theology lies at the heart of recent developments. Barth's strong opposition to natural theology and to any 'points of connection' between theology and philosophy has reinforced and sustained the theologians' suspicion of the Christian philosophers, even where they share a commitment to mainstream Christian doctrine. This comes out most clearly in the influential work of Thomas F. Torrance, the Scottish Barthian dogmatician, who, in his *Theological Science*, insists that a theology that is true to its proper object – God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ – will have its own logic, inaccessible to the natural human mind.<sup>18</sup> But this is an extreme position. It is one thing to insist that the nature of the object under discussion be allowed to determine our approach to it and to control our knowledge and experience of it. It is quite another to suppose that, in the case of our knowledge of God, this means a private logic internal to the response of faith. Theology cannot be protected from debate and criticism in this way. However much we must indeed respect the mystery of God, what theologians say and what creeds affirm are expressed in human language and are the result of human rational reflection. As such, they can and ought to be discussed, as Wolfhart Pannenberg puts it, 'without reservation, in the context of critical rationality'.<sup>19</sup>

So, while philosophers of religion must indeed be careful to do justice to what theologians say about the context and the traditions out of which their doctrines come and about the special nature of their primary subject matter, God, theologians, for their part, must be prepared to listen to and argue with philosophical comment on, and critique of, what they say. A major purpose of this book is to encourage both sides to respect each other and learn from each other.

### 1.3 Historical and Linguistic Sensitivity

A little more may be said here about the need for historical and linguistic sensitivity on the part of philosophers attempting to examine and reflect on Christian doctrine. Of course, theologians themselves can manifest historical and linguistic insensitivity. Wedded to a particular school – say, that of Thomism (the systematic theology derived from St Thomas Aquinas) – they may attempt to teach a rigid, inflexible ‘orthodoxy’ that ignores the medieval background, the particular factors shaping St Thomas’s thought, and the difficulties of appropriating a system of ideas and a technical vocabulary across eight centuries of development and change. Students of religion, too, can manifest comparable insensitivity. Attempting to apply the methods of phenomenology, by bracketing questions of truth and reality and comparing and classifying key elements in religious life and thought across the globe and throughout recorded history, they can fail to appreciate the historical embeddedness and particularity of the phenomena under scrutiny. Pannenberg has criticized both theologians and phenomenologists for just such historical insensitivity.<sup>20</sup> But remember that it was Pannenberg who insisted on Christian theology being discussed ‘without reservation in the context of critical rationality’. Historical sensitivity must not be used as a device to block philosophical analysis.

After all, philosophers are well placed to combine history and analysis. Students of ancient philosophy, for example, are used to using all the methods of historical research in order to explore the distant worlds of Plato and Aristotle in their own setting, and at the same time to using all the methods of conceptual and metaphysical investigation in order to appropriate what is of lasting significance in the thought of the ancient philosophers for philosophy today – and that includes the philosophy of religion. In a similar manner, philosophers explore the later worlds of medieval thought for what is of enduring import in the synthesis of ancient philosophy and the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. (We shall be considering the work of such scholars as Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann in this connection in subsequent chapters.) The critical philosophies of the Enlightenment may also be scrutinized and assessed for what still illuminates contemporary understanding of the world and human life. Only if historical sensitivity is held to shut off past worlds from present appropriation completely, as seems to be the case in Denis Nineham’s work, for example,<sup>21</sup> does there arise an insuperable gulf between history and philosophy. The work surveyed in this book will provide a clear refutation of this overly sceptical and pessimistic view.

Linguistic sensitivity is something that is also needed by theologians and philosophers if the subject matter of Christian doctrine is to be explored appropriately 'in the context of critical rationality'. Philosophers trained in the analytic tradition ought to be well placed to show such sensitivity. Mid-twentieth-century analytic philosophy was known as 'linguistic philosophy'; and attention to ordinary language and its nuances of meaning is the hallmark of this school. But such attention misses the mark if religious language, especially talk about God, is treated as operating at the same level as everyday talk about the natural and human worlds. Justice has to be done to the unique nature of the transcendent object of theological enquiry. Both Wiles and Swinburne, in the debate described in the previous section, refer to and accept the analogical nature of human speech about God. In the chapters that follow we shall again and again come back to the 'way of analogy', by which, it is claimed, just because human beings are made in the image of God, language that has its home in the human context may be used, albeit in a stretched and undoubtedly inadequate way, to speak about God and God's relation to the world.

#### 1.4 Problems of Accessibility

Some further reflections on the question of the accessibility of Christian doctrine to philosophical scrutiny may be called for at this point. Can the view that these matters should be discussed 'without reservation in the context of critical rationality' (and that must mean by scholars and students of any faith or none) really be sustained? Did I not dismiss too readily Torrance's insistence that reflection on these matters can only be a matter of faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum* – to quote St Anselm's phrase<sup>22</sup>)?

No one will want to deny that religious doctrines come out of communities of faith. The doctrines expressed in the Christian creeds are the result of centuries of reflection and debate by bishops and teachers committed to the Christian faith and schooled in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. These doctrines were and indeed are the fruit of faith seeking understanding. But it does not follow that they are wholly unintelligible to those outside the circle of faith. They are not expressed in a purely private language. They put forward a whole worldview that claims to make better sense of the universe and of life than any other worldview; and they can be pondered and examined critically by anyone interested in questions of meaning and truth. Up to a point, at least, they can be considered hypothetically and their inner rationale explored.

After all, if the rationality of Christian belief – and that of any religious belief – were a purely internal matter, presupposing faith and commitment to the religious tradition and community in question, there could be no such thing as the comparative study of religions, the phenomenology of religion or the philosophy of religion. There could be no dialogue or communication between religions, or between believers and unbelievers. Yet all these things take place and make some progress. Human beings share a common nature and live in one world; they have developed, over time, standards of critical rationality that are being applied increasingly to all spheres of life and interest. Alasdair MacIntyre, in his book *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?*,<sup>23</sup> has certainly brought out the diversity of traditions, each with its own developing standards of rationality, but he exaggerates their incommensurability, and even he allows that some succeed better than others at coping, both theoretically and practically, with life together in the world of today. This is obviously the case where science and technology are concerned; it is increasingly the case with politics; and the necessity of ‘a global ethic for economics and politics worldwide’<sup>24</sup> is being forced upon our attention by the irreversible establishment of a global market. The religions, of all spheres of human life, tend to resist such globalization; but the idea that they must for ever remain incommunicable ‘umbrellas of meaning’,<sup>25</sup> each for its own devotees, is belied by what is actually achieved in the study of religion, in the philosophy of religion and in the dialogue of religions.

No doubt it helps to have some sympathetic interest in the world of religion, including the Christian creeds, if one is to attempt, from outside, to explore the meaning and plausibility, say, of the Christian doctrine of Creation. Dogmatic atheism is not an ideal starting point for critical reflection on the claims of any religion. But, then, dogmatic Christian fundamentalism is no more ideal as a starting point for serious philosophical theology. What is required is a combination of open-mindedness, genuine sympathy, and intellectual rigour. Given these qualities, there can surely be fruitful dialogue across the borders of belief and unbelief and across the borders of the different religions. Christian theologians have nothing to fear, and everything to gain, from allowing their subject matter to be discussed and scrutinized in such an open context.

For all that, it has to be acknowledged that the vast majority of authors and works surveyed in this book do come from within the Christian communities and do constitute examples of faith seeking understanding. The Society of Christian Philosophers in the United States is precisely that: a body of *Christian* philosophers dedicated to the philosophical investigation of specifically Christian themes. But just as the Society was, from the start,

open to any who considered themselves both a Christian and a philosopher ('no questions asked on either score'<sup>26</sup>), so both the Society and its journal have taken the step of 'inviting honest, open dialogue with those who do not share our Christian commitment'<sup>27</sup>. The work under scrutiny in the chapters that follow, though written for the most part by Christian philosophers exploring the logic and the scope of their own traditions, is unquestionably offered for critical reflection by all. It is to be discussed, that is, to quote Pannenberg yet again, 'without reservation in the context of critical rationality'.

### 1.5 The Analytic Tradition

The question may well arise why attention is restricted, in this book, almost entirely to the analytic tradition of Anglo-American philosophy and the contribution it has made, and is making, to the critical study of Christian doctrine. In part this reflects my own interests and experience. I regard the Anglo-American analytic tradition as by far and away the most important strand in contemporary philosophy of religion. I admire it for its clarity and logical acumen and for the help it gives to anyone interested in pursuing, in depth but without obfuscation, the search for meaning and truth in the world of religion. It does not subordinate religion to philosophy, as do the traditions stemming from Kant, Hegel or Whitehead. The views of these philosophers on religion and on Christian theology are wide-ranging and profound, and time is well spent studying them. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, such study is part of the staple diet of the philosophy of religion. But the philosophical theologian, certainly if he or she is operating from within the Christian tradition, is likely to spend more time arguing with them than using them for clarification and progress. A good example of such argument is Alvin Plantinga's criticism of Kant in his *Warranted Christian Belief*<sup>28</sup>. An earlier example was Austin Farrer's criticism of Whitehead in his *Faith and Speculation*.<sup>29</sup>

Nor does the analytic tradition restrict its attention to the sphere of authentic human – or Christian – existence, as Kierkegaard and Bultmann did. Existentialism too is well worth study by Christian philosophers and theologians, as the work of John Macquarrie has shown.<sup>30</sup> But concentration on the human individual and on human authenticity fails to satisfy for long. Existentialism's inability to give an account of nature and history or even of human community, to say nothing of its obfuscatory style, at least in its twentieth-century philosophical forms (e.g. Heidegger and Sartre), renders it less than ideal as a vehicle for philosophical theology.

The continental tradition has itself moved on, through structuralism, into post-structuralism and postmodernism, schools whose bearing on philosophy of religion has been found curiously attractive to some, but of which I remain deeply suspicious. For one thing, such writing suffers from an even greater degree of wilful obscurity than was the case with Heidegger. This is bound to offend anyone schooled to think and to write clearly and precisely on important topics. For another, the post-structuralists and deconstructionists, as they are sometimes called, betray a tendency to impose wildly implausible generalizations on the history of ideas that make serious engagement with particular problems and issues raised by religion and theology very difficult to pursue. Let me cite a few examples. The first goes back to Heidegger, who proclaimed the death of metaphysics.<sup>31</sup> Metaphysics is the study of the ultimate nature of things, but, according to Heidegger, the whole western tradition of metaphysical thinking, from Plato to the twentieth century, is held to have run into the sand. Philosophy requires an entirely new start. Another example is the view of Michel Foucault that western thought invariably betrays a hidden agenda, the rationalization of interest and power.<sup>32</sup> Such generalizations become a kind of device for inhibiting serious reflection on the metaphysical implications of theism and of Christian doctrine, thus preventing us from learning anything from the philosophers and traditions so easily dismissed.

Or consider the question of postmodernism itself. What does this term really mean? To speak of postmodernism, we have to give the term 'modernity' a restricted range of meaning. Instead of using it in its natural sense of the relatively recent past, say, since the scientific revolution up to the present day, historians of ideas take 'modernity' to mean the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and its impact. This allows them to suggest that the Enlightenment project has run its course, broken down, even collapsed, leaving us in the condition known as postmodernism. What was 'the Enlightenment project'? What is it that is supposed to have broken down? Allegedly, it was a question of the human race having reached maturity and put its confidence in unaided human reason, and having achieved autonomy in all the spheres of life, ethics and religion included. What we are supposed to be witnessing in the twentieth, and now the twenty-first, century is the collapse of this universal idea, and the recognition of many different 'rationalities', incommensurable worldviews, different forms of life, different moralities, with no way of arbitrating between them. I have already mentioned Alasdair MacIntyre's version of this thesis. MacIntyre, unlike the continentals, writes lucidly and almost persuasively, as he paints a dark picture of the loss of a common framework within which moral disputes can be settled. But, as I say, he exaggerates and overgeneralizes, and fails to

do justice to elements in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and in nineteenth-century liberalism, from which we can still learn.

I remain suspicious of the ‘masters of suspicion’ and their followers, who see a hidden, often political, agenda behind the clear, perspicuous, professional work of the analytic philosophers. All the latter are doing, I would claim, is critically examining (ideally in cooperation, not conflict, with the theologians) the central themes of Christian belief for their meaning, grounds and truth. And I hope that the quantity and quality of the work surveyed in this book will demonstrate the wisdom and benefit of staying with this main strand in philosophy of religion and philosophical theology today.

The vice of implausible and unjustified historical generalization has infected some theologians too, in both the continental and the Anglo-American traditions. It is sometimes urged<sup>33</sup> that modern atheism is a reaction not to the God of the classical Christian tradition, but to a post-eighteenth-century philosophical idol that has nothing to do with the true and living God. They even hijack the term ‘theism’ to refer to this construct or projection, and then suppose that they have warded off the atheistic critique. I hold that to be no way at all of arguing with atheism. Atheism means the rejection of any belief in God, ancient, medieval or modern.

Arguing with atheism is not the subject of this book, however. But the same point holds concerning the alleged irrelevance of ‘the god of the philosophers’ to which reference was made earlier on. In my view, there is no such thing as the god of the philosophers. Philosophers of religion in the analytic tradition are doing no more than singling out, for close scrutiny and analysis, aspects of, and implications of, the concept of God to be found in the great theistic traditions, some of these being common to all those traditions, others – the ones of special concern to us here – being peculiar to the Christian religion, shaped as it has been by the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity.

One final word in defence of the analytic tradition – this time addressed to the modern theologians – is perhaps required, if further suspicions are to be allayed. I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter the legacy of logical positivism’s aggressive rejection of all theology as meaningless. Theology was put on the defensive. Theologians retreated into their own shells, and ceased to think of philosophers as allies. This was quite understandable at the time; but it is a great mistake to tar the analytic tradition with the same brush as logical positivism. Sometimes theologians give the impression that Anglo-American analytic philosophy is simply an extension of logical positivism. Nothing could be further from the truth. Of course there are still many philosophers in this tradition who remain hostile to theology and metaphysics. One of the tasks of the philosophy of religion remains that of



arguing with such folk. But there are also many philosophers, schooled in the techniques of philosophical logic and analysis, who, as we shall see, are now applying those techniques, in a thoroughly constructive fashion, to the clarification, articulation and defence of mainstream Christian doctrine. And if there are points at which they find themselves driven to challenge certain long-standing elements in classical theism, for example, over God's absolute timelessness, this is usually done in the interests again of constructive and helpful revision. So modern theologians have nothing to fear from these philosophers. Of course, there will be disagreements between philosophers and theologians, just as there are between different theologians and between different philosophers. We shall see many examples of such disagreements in the course of this book. But the scope for fruitful dialogue and mutual enrichment between philosophers and theologians is very great. No one should be afraid of reflection on Christian doctrine 'in the context of critical rationality'.

### **1.6 Faith and Reason**

In order to illustrate the merits of such interaction, let us consider the eirenic example of Basil Mitchell, the philosopher of religion whose joint seminar in Oxford with Maurice Wiles on the relationship between philosophy and theology has already been mentioned. Mitchell contributed an essay on 'Philosophy and Theology' to the *Festschrift* for Frederick Copleston,<sup>34</sup> in which he argued that, whether he likes it or not, a theologian is bound to be, for much of the time, a philosopher. Granted that he requires his own specialist skills for the study of the Bible and the Christian tradition, nevertheless the task of interpreting that tradition for today, in respect of its meaning and import for contemporary life, is essentially a philosophical task, calling 'for familiarity with moral philosophy and the philosophy of mind' and, we may add, philosophical logic. For questions of coherence are at stake, as we shall repeatedly see in the present book.

Mitchell is equally clear that the theologically trained philosopher is not simply applying to the theological agenda philosophical methods that have worked well in other areas. The special problems of analogical discourse in talk of God have to be reckoned with. But the fact that the theologians use human language in ways that need careful scrutiny if they are to be understood in today's world, and the fact that religious language has metaphysical implications that have to be explicated and defended, show that the theologian is already something of a linguistic philosopher and something of a metaphysician. Philosophy can be overly critical, as with the logical

positivists, and it can be overly imperialistic, as with the Hegelians, the Heideggerians and the Whiteheadians. But it can also help to make the issues clear and aid the process of resolving them.

In much of what follows we shall bear the work of Basil Mitchell very much in mind. Mitchell's own book, *Faith and Criticism*<sup>35</sup> contains an excellent defence of the interdependence of faith and criticism. 'Without faith in an established tradition', he writes, 'criticism has nothing to fasten on; without criticism the tradition ceases in the end to have any purchase on reality.'<sup>36</sup> This could be read in a purely 'internalist' way as a defence of the use of critical methods within a faith stance, seeking its own inner rationality. But that Mitchell is in fact appealing to standards of critical rationality intelligible to any careful enquirer is quite clear from his account of the discussion that he once had with a Hindu philosopher, who at one point remarked, 'I am surprised to hear you say that. I should have thought that from your point of view, you would have said something more like this . . .'. He then went on, so Mitchell tells us, to develop his, Mitchell's, position in directions that Mitchell had not thought of, but acknowledged to be right.

It is in this respect that Mitchell's approach is to be preferred to that of Diogenes Allen in his book, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*.<sup>37</sup> In many ways, this is an extremely useful book. Allen shows how elements in all the schools of philosophy, from Plato to the present day, can be, and have been, used in order to appreciate more deeply the meaning of virtually every major Christian doctrine. But, for Allen, this is entirely a matter of faith seeking understanding. This is not just a question of the theological agenda controlling the selection and use of philosophical concepts. *Faith* is the precondition of the whole enterprise. One learns from philosophy, but only from a standpoint already adopted within the Christian religion and its theology. Much insight can certainly be achieved this way, as we shall see in the course of the present book. And Allen's very brief treatment of analytic philosophy in his concluding chapter contains some fascinating hints on the way in which the application to theology of the skills of linguistic philosophy can enable a religious object 'to emerge and to exhibit itself, so to speak'.<sup>38</sup> But Allen, apparently, does not agree with Mitchell's conviction that such insights can be shared across the borders of the different religions and across the borders of belief and unbelief.

## 1.7 Philosophers and Theologians

Most of the work considered in this book is by philosophers rather than by theologians. In the course of an interesting programmatic essay on the

condition and prospects of Christian philosophy at the end of the twentieth century, Alvin Plantinga included a short section on philosophical theology, which he defined as 'a matter of thinking about the central doctrines of the Christian faith from a philosophical perspective; it is a matter of employing the resources of philosophy to deepen our grasp and understanding of them'. He drew attention to the excellent work that had been done in this area in recent years, but remarked that, unlike in the Middle Ages, theologians today 'don't seem to be doing the work in question'. 'I therefore hope I will not be accused of interdisciplinary chauvinism', he continued, 'if I point out that the best work in philosophical theology – in the English speaking world and over the last quarter of a century – has been done not by theologians but by philosophers.'<sup>39</sup>

Curiously, this is not so true of the German-speaking world in the period in question. One of the most encouraging aspects of post-Barthian theology in Germany has been the readiness of scholars such as Wolfhart Pannenberg,<sup>40</sup> Ingolf Dalferth<sup>41</sup> and Christoph Schwöbel<sup>42</sup> to show an interest in and to use Anglo-American philosophical analysis as well as their own continental resources. It is true that Pannenberg's work on the metaphysics of time, not least his retention of simultaneity in his attempt to articulate a more dynamic concept of eternity,<sup>43</sup> is open to serious philosophical criticism. But the possibilities of dialogue and debate and mutual illumination between theologians and philosophers are nevertheless evident from the work of these scholars. And from the English-speaking world, while Austin Farrer's paradigmatic contribution dates from the 1960s, the more recent work of the American Lutheran systematic theologian, Robert Jenson,<sup>44</sup> is also, in his case perhaps surprisingly, sympathetic to the philosophers. There is no hostility to philosophy on Jenson's part. He recognizes that theology entails metaphysics. It resists dependence on philosophy, of course, especially on a particular philosophical school. Rather, in conversation with philosophy, theology seeks the truth and coherence of the gospel. Two examples of the fruitfulness of this conversation may be given: Jenson's welcome stress on temporal infinity in talk of God (his criticism of Pannenberg is highly pertinent at this point<sup>45</sup>), and his wise retention, against both John of Damascus and Jean-Luc Marion, of suitably qualified talk of *being* where God is concerned.<sup>46</sup> However, this does not preserve Jenson from a certain lack of philosophical perception at other points. In a footnote in his second volume,<sup>47</sup> he accuses the present author of denying, in the course of treatment of the problem of evil, that God is both omniscient and omnipotent. Nothing could be further from the truth. The point – and this a point brought out by many contemporary philosophers of religion – is that the concepts of omniscience and omnipotence have to be reinterpreted in terms

of what it is logically possible to know and of what is compossible (i.e. jointly possible) given the purposes of creation. Much more will be said about these matters in what follows.

To return to Alvin Plantinga: Plantinga himself has concentrated more on negative apologetics and on the epistemology of Christian belief than on the philosophical analysis of Christian doctrine,<sup>48</sup> although his work on the concept of God<sup>49</sup> is important and will be referred to from time to time here. But his advice to Christian philosophers,<sup>50</sup> to devote their attention and their energies to a specifically Christian agenda, has certainly borne fruit in much of the work I shall be surveying. A good example of this, and one that will provide much material for reflection in subsequent chapters, is the volume edited by R. J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement*.<sup>51</sup> It is interesting to note that this volume was the fruit of cooperative work by philosophers trained in theology and theologians very much aware of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. It was issued, the editors tell us in their introduction, 'in the hope that it will encourage cross-fertilization of ideas between analytic philosophers and theologians by displaying some of the fruit such efforts can yield'.<sup>52</sup> A similar hope informs the present book. Admittedly the work surveyed here comes more, as I say, from the philosophical than from the theological side. The theologians are respectfully invited to take note and to reciprocate.