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What Counts as Christian Philosophy? A Reply to Tedla Woldeyohannes

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Abstract: According to Tedla Woldeyohannes, “the work of Christian philosophers on the project of natural theology should count as work on Christian-God-centered philosophy.” I pose some problems for this forceful and persuasive view.

This volume is an exercise in the philosophy of religion. It concerns theism in general, and Christianity in particular.”¹ Thus begins Keith Yandell’s wonderful book *Christianity and Philosophy* (IVP, 1984). Yandell is an exemplary Christian and an exemplary philosopher; indeed, he’s an exemplary *Christian philosopher*. The striking thing about the book, however, is the seeming “disconnect” between its title and its contents. In the introduction, the reader is told that Christianity involves such *general claims* (GC) as these:

- (1) God created the world;
- (2) God is holy;
- (3) God providentially governs the world;
- (4) God loves all persons;
- (5) God has the omni-attributes;
- (6) Human beings are created in God’s image;
- (7) God judges sin;
- (8) God has revealed himself in human history;
- (9) Religious knowledge is primarily revelational;
- (10) Salvation is the solution to sin; it can’t be earned by human effort.²

It’s a good list, I think; nothing on it is false (at least on my view), and it has a fair degree of specificity. And yet, says Yandell, it does “not descend into the particulars of Christianity.”³ For it leaves out the *sine qua non* of the Christian faith—it’s *core claims* (CC), which he identifies as these:

¹ Keith E. Yandell, *Christianity and Philosophy* (InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. vii.

² See *Ibid.*, pp. vii-ix.

³ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures (1 Cor 15: 3-4).

Now according to Yandell, (CC) logically presupposes (GC), which in turn provides a larger context in which to situate the core claims. And that certainly seems right. So far, then, so good.

But here's the rub. The book isn't, to my mind, actually about (GC) or (CC). It doesn't try to prove the core claims of Christianity, nor even that any of (1)-(10) is true. What it does instead (successfully, I think) is to demonstrate that the general claims have a truth value, and that they can be rationally assessed. That's where all the philosophical effort is spent. (We might call these Christianity's twin *rational preconditions* [RP, for short].) And so we find chapters dealing with various noncognitivist challenges to theism and morality, as well as assessments of the evidences for and against generic theism.

Now as much as I respect and admire *Christianity and Philosophy* (it's the sort of book you wish you'd written yourself), I'm afraid I cannot say that it's an example of Christian philosophy. (In this respect, it is in good company, since much of the work produced by Christian philosophers these past fifty years or so falls into this category too.) What, then, is it? It is a rigorous, carefully argued philosophical *prolegomena* to Christianity—not that there's anything wrong with that! If I understand Tedla correctly, however, I don't think he will agree. I suspect he'll say that Yandell's work on (RP) is indirectly work on (CC), and so *does* count as Christian philosophy. In private correspondence, I suggested that this line of thinking might well commit him to something like the following general principle: for any individual S and propositions *p* and *q*,

(GP) If *p* implies *q*, and S does philosophical work directly on *q*, then S has indirectly done philosophical work on *p*.

As Tedla notes, I think (GP) is overly permissive. Take the case at hand. On Yandell's view—and I certainly wouldn't dispute the point—(CC) implies (RP). But then given (GP), we must say that when Yandell torpedoed Ayer's noncognitivism, he's indirectly doing Christian philosophy.

But can that really be right? There is no reference to Jesus in any of Yandell's arguments, which isn't necessarily a bad thing, of course, since it's simply not germane to his purpose. Still, if an argument **A** makes no mention at all of Christ, doesn't so much as hint in his direction, how can we sensibly say

that it is about him? And if it's not, then in what sense is **A** a piece of Christian philosophy? Or again, consider what the Apostle Paul says in Romans 1:18-20. It's plausible to think (I do, at any rate) that what we have there are the broad contours of an (implicit) argument for a Creator of the world.⁴ Is Paul thereby doing *Christian* philosophy as well? This isn't at all clear. For what Paul says in those verses isn't uniquely Christian by any stretch. That God can be known through the created world of visible things isn't something either al-Ghazali or Maimonides would have disputed. Just think of al-Ghazali's *kalam* argument—an early progenitor of the version Bill Craig now defends. Does Tedla really believe—say, on the back of (GP)—that since Christianity implies the world has a beginning, and al-Ghazali gave philosophical proofs for the finitude of the past, that the great Muslim philosopher was actually producing works of Christian philosophy unawares? Surely not.

Now Tedla is sensitive to this sort of worry. It suggests, he says, that “[i.e., Tedla] need to be more careful about what counts as Christian philosophy.”⁵ To that end, he comments as follows:

I'm not implying that any piece of writing a Christian philosopher produces should be counted as an example of a work of Christian philosophy. The *content* of the work, the *motive* for writing it, and the *intention* or the *purpose* for the writing will be among crucial factors to determine whether a work is an example of Christian philosophy, directly or indirectly.⁶

Here is one way to interpret Tedla's remarks. Following Paul Moser, I maintain that cosmological, design arguments, and the like are not examples of Christian philosophy. They aren't *about* Christ; he isn't part of their proper content. To counter this claim, Tedla introduces the idea of a philosopher's motive or purpose in presenting an argument. Whether an argument **A** is about Christ isn't determined solely by its content as I have suggested. If **A** explicitly mentions Christ, then of course **A** is about Christ—*directly about* him, we might say. But an argument can also be about Christ (and hence an example of Christian philosophy) *indirectly*. How so? Well, there are other factors, says

⁴ See Richard Davis and Paul Franks, “What Place, then, for Rational Apologetics?” in *Loving God with Your Mind: Essays in Honor of J. P. Moreland*, eds. Paul Gould and Richard Davis (Moody Press, forthcoming).

⁵ Tedla G. Woldeyohannes, “A Missed Opportunity: Reply to Moser,” p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Tedla, that we must consult in determining whether **A** is about Christ. We must ask, for instance, what the *purpose* is for which **A** is being employed. If **A** is being used as part of a case for Christ, or, more generally, to simply honor and glorify him, then **A** is indirectly about him—even if there are no facts or references to him in **A**'s propositional content.

Of course this line of argument is not without its problems. To be sure, it allows Tedla to say that Bill Craig's work on the *kalam* argument is Christian philosophy, while al-Ghazali's work on the same is not. But now a deeper problem emerges. For what if al-Ghazali *does* have a purpose for expounding the argument, and that purpose is to glorify Allah and not Christ. Then it looks as if we shall have to say that the *kalam* argument is about Allah. More exactly, it's about Christ when used by Bill Craig, and it's about Allah when employed by al-Ghazali. In itself, however—apart from being used for one purpose or another—the argument is about neither. Here we seem to have landed in a strange Protagorean perspectivalism, where I am the measure of whether a given bit of natural theology is Christian philosophy or not. And then, too, what are we to do with theistic proofs co-authored by theist *and* non-theist—say, Pruss's and Gale's “A New Cosmological Argument”⁷? Do we say that it simultaneously both *is* and *is not* Christian philosophy—Christian because Pruss intends it for those purposes, but also not Christian because Gale does not?⁸ That strikes me as wholly implausible.

There is, nevertheless, a more promising way forward for Tedla. Perhaps the desired *indirect aboutness* can be secured by way of a certain theological identity claim.⁹ Thus Tedla remarks:

⁷ See Alexander Pruss and Richard Gale, “A New Cosmological Argument,” *Religious Studies* 35 (1999): 461-476.

⁸ Perhaps Gale's ultimate purpose is actually agnostic, as it would be if he were trying to show that there are good, counter-balancing arguments on either side of the question, so that we ought not to declare as either theist or atheist.

⁹ In addition to his remarks about content, motive, and purpose, Tedla identifies three additional reasons why (GP) “does not present a serious problem to the view of Christian philosophy I suggested” (p. 8). Here I think we can safely ignore the second and third. The second is actually patterned after the one we're now considering in that it trades on an *a priori* identity claim: that “The God of Rom. 1:20-21 is the Christian God” (p.9). My strategy for dealing with Tedla's first argument, therefore, can also be applied to his second. Tedla's final reason amounts to the observation that theistic arguments based on general revelation aren't “intended to provide redemptive knowledge of God” (Ibid). This is no doubt true; however, it isn't strictly relevant to showing that philosophical work on natural theology is a species of Christian philosophy.

to the extent that arguments of natural theology are successful in the sense that they establish the existence of God with *some* of the attributes of God as understood in Christianity, the success of such arguments indirectly applies to Jesus Christ as well since Jesus Christ *is* God...¹⁰

So suppose, after considerable philosophical effort, I succeed in establishing

(a) God has created the world.

Then if I am also entitled to

(b) Jesus Christ is God

(where the ‘is’ in (b) is that of identity), I can neatly infer

(c) Jesus Christ has created the world,

a proposition indisputably about Christ. Now just to be clear: I *happily* endorse the validity of this argument; I think it’s dandy. What I fail to see is how it shows that philosophical work on natural theology “should count as work on Christian-God-centered philosophy”¹¹ For in this case, none of the philosophical work I’ve done to support (a) will automatically carry over to (b); in fact, it won’t carry over at all. For *that* sort of work—say, reflecting on the contingency of things, or fine-tuning, or the finitude of the past—isn’t going to show that (b) is true. Here it is obvious, I believe, that you can’t use natural theology *alone* to show that Jesus Christ is God. But (b) is supposed to be the mediating bridge between (a) and (c). Without it, we’re not in a position to conclude that philosophical work on natural theology is *ipso facto* Christian philosophy.

The reply, of course, will be that this inference goes through provided that we also have philosophical support for (b). But isn’t there a problem here? Whatever philosophy I muster in favor of (b) certainly won’t be derived from the general features of the cosmos typically showcased in cosmological and design arguments. It won’t be inherited from (a)—a proposition whose content *in and of itself* doesn’t include Christ. So if (b) does enjoy philosophical support, it will be independent of that possessed by (a). More than that, whatever my

¹⁰ Woldeyohannes, “A Missed Opportunity,” p. 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

argument is for (b), it will have to contain at least one premise that is directly about Christ. Otherwise, (b) couldn't be directly about Christ, which it most certainly is. But then it follows that my argument for (b) will actually be a piece of Christian philosophy, in which case it is *that*—and *not* my work on natural theology—that is driving the inference, and justifying my claim that I'm doing Christian philosophy whenever I'm engaged in natural theology. Natural theology is the impotent, silent partner in this logical transaction.

The upshot, I believe, is that Jesus Christ, quite appropriately, turns out to be our argument's Alpha and Omega, its Beginning and End. "He is before all things" (Col 1:17)—even our Christian philosophy. Having said this, I want to conclude with a note of appreciation. We owe a debt of gratitude to Tedla—and before him to Professor Moser—for helping us to think much more clearly and deeply about what it means to be a Christian philosopher. Without a doubt, these are truly exciting times in which to be doing philosophy in service to Christ.¹²

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¹² I am very grateful to Paul Franks and Tony Kostroman for delightful conversation and insight on these matters. I am especially indebted to Prof. Franks for his unstinting inspiration and support.