

Christian Philosophy

A Systematic and Narrative Introduction

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Baker Academic

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bartholomew, Craig G., 1961–

Christian philosophy : a systematic and narrative introduction / Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-3911-9 (pbk.)

1. Christian philosophy. I. Goheen, Michael W., 1955– II. Title.

BR100.B25 2013

230.01—dc23

2013017852

13 14 15 16 17 18 19 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*To Bob and Elaine Goudzwaard:
good friends and scholarly examples,
always ready for a stimulating
philosophical discussion.*

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Preface

Mission—real mission—involves a deep encounter of the gospel with our culture(s). In our view, one indispensable element in any such encounter is Christian philosophy. We are thus delighted to present this book and hope that it will inspire you to take philosophy seriously even if you are not called to be a philosopher.

While *Christian Philosophy* is a separate book in its own right, it is also a companion to our *Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* and *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview*, both published by Baker Academic.

Readers and professors should note that we have kept references to a minimum. Secondary sources and teaching resources can be found at www.biblicaltheology.ca and www.paideiacentre.ca/resources/teaching/christian-philosophy.

Our thanks go to Jim Kinney and his team at Baker Academic for their sterling work. In addition, we are grateful to Elaine Goudzwaard-Botha, Bob Goudzwaard, Harry van Dyke, Bruce Ashford, Heath Thomas, Robert MacLarkey, Josh Walker, Adam Harmer, and others who have read the manuscript and helped us improve it. Defects remain, of course—our responsibility! Craig is grateful to Redeemer University College for the exhilarating opportunity to teach Christian philosophy as the occupant of the H. Evan Runner chair, and we are both grateful to The Paideia Centre for Public Theology for its support in our writing of this book.

Introduction

Readers of *The Drama of Scripture* will remember that at the outset of that book we introduced Abby and Percy, who were just starting to get to know each other. Much water has passed under the bridge since that momentous encounter, and we wish we had time to tell you the whole story. To cut to the chase, they have now been going steady for a year and are deeply involved in their local church. Shortly after their memorable coffee together, a new pastor took over at their church, and his ministry has turned their lives around.

He has introduced them to a life-changing way of reading the Bible as the true story of the whole world. Whereas before they had known the Bible piecemeal, now they have a growing sense of its unity and of how they are called to indwell the story and to live it out. Their pastor loves to quote Eugene Peterson's saying that "we are all in holy orders," and Abby and Percy have come to see that they too are full-time servants of Christ and that discerning their vocation and training for it is serious business.

After lots of soul-searching and long conversations with their pastor, their parents, friends, and each other—to say nothing of a lot of prayer—Abby has registered at a prestigious Christian school named Long Obedience College and is majoring in psychology, and Percy thinks he may be called to medicine and has enrolled at Brighton Secular University, internationally known for its sciences and premed training. Alas, pursuing their vocations seriously has meant that they are now separated by some seven hundred miles. Email and Skype have been a great help, as we will see. During the Christmas break, each having survived the first semester, Abby and Percy were comparing notes about what lay ahead. Abby had really enjoyed the first semester but wondered about the value of some of the core courses she had to take in the second semester. "Next semester," she sighed to Percy over a glass of hot cider, "I'm signed up for Introduction to Philosophy! Why on earth as a psychologist would I need to do that?"

Percy was sympathetic but pointed out that he too had to do a course in philosophy, and he decided to see if he could also take it in the next semester

so that he and Abby could do it at the same time and compare notes. A quick check online confirmed that he could and that it would fit well with his schedule. Abby felt much better. “But still,” she said to Percy, as they went for a walk in the snow, “what possible value could philosophy have to our ‘holy orders’?”

To answer Abby’s question, we think there is great value in philosophy. There are different ways to introduce philosophy. Our approach is a combination of systematic philosophy and close attention to the history of philosophy. After two introductory chapters looking at the value of philosophy and its relationship to faith, in the next several chapters we attend to the narrative of philosophy as it has unfolded since its origin among the ancient Greeks. As we will stress repeatedly, the way you tell the story of philosophy is never neutral, and our goal is to tell the story from a Christian perspective. Having a sense of this narrative is indispensable to studying philosophy.

In recent decades there has been an astonishing renaissance in Christian philosophy, particularly in the United States of America. We will tell this story, examine contemporary Catholic philosophy, and then look in more detail at the work of two (Reformed) Christian philosophers who have made major contributions to this renewal—namely, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff.

In the twentieth century, another Reformed Christian philosophy, commonly called *Reformational philosophy*, developed out of the work of Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd. We are most in tune with this tradition of philosophy, and in conclusion we will explore its contours and note the many areas of agreement with the Reformed epistemology of Plantinga and Wolterstorff.

Part 1

**Approaching
Christian Philosophy**

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1

Why Philosophy?

Introduction

In many Christian circles today, philosophy gets bad press or, even worse, is simply ignored. Abby’s response to hearing that she needed to take a course in philosophy is far too common. There have been times in the history of the church when a good knowledge of philosophy was regarded as indispensable, but now is not such a time. Bible study and knowing how to evangelize are indispensable, but it would be regarded by many Christians as strange indeed if their local church announced a course in philosophy as a vital part of the church’s mission.

However, we believe that a working knowledge of Christian philosophy *is* a vital ingredient in mission, if by mission we mean facilitating a deep encounter of our culture with Christ. Philosophy, from our perspective, is the attempt to discern the structure or order of creation, and to describe systematically what is subject to that order. The difference that a *Christian* philosophy makes is that the whole of life, apart from God, is studied as *creation*. The Apostles’ Creed sums up the biblical doctrine of creation when it states, “We believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” As Genesis 1:1–2:3 and the creed inform us, creation involves God not just ushering the world into existence but *ordering* it in a particular way so that there is heaven and earth; night and day; seasons; earth, sea, and sky; and plants, animals, birds, and human beings. Much of the order in creation we simply take for granted. We just know that it is normal for human beings to walk upright, and we would be astonished and disturbed if someone came into church doing the sort of leopard crawl that soldiers learn in their training. We can pretend that gravity

does not exist, but step out of the window of a high building and the order of creation will manifest itself in no uncertain terms.

But God's ordering of creation is more complex than this kind of natural order. Genesis 1–3 teaches us that God's order extends to things like gender (male and female), marriage, farming, and how we relate to God and to the animals. Indeed, the doctrine of creation teaches us that just as the whole of creation comes from God, so it is *all* subject to his order for it. As Abraham Kuyper, the nineteenth-century Dutch prime minister, theologian, journalist, and churchman, saw so clearly, “there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”¹ Although curiosity is a major motive in philosophy, the primary emotion driving Christian philosophy will be wonder. The mind-blowing implication is that with creation comes God's order for things like

- what it means to be human;
- history and historical development;
- culture, in the sense of how we organize the societies we are part of;
- art;
- business and economics;
- politics;
- sport and leisure;
- friendship;
- and so on.

As if this comprehensive range of God's order were not challenge enough, the fall into sin opened up the catastrophic possibility of humans *misdirecting* God's good order for creation. The possibility of family life is a great gift written into the fabric of creation, but we know from Genesis 4 that outside of Eden brotherly love can become fratricide. Humans have the God-given ability to build cities, and these can be places of delight and human flourishing and full of God, but they can also be like Babel, monuments to idolatry (see Gen. 11).

Despite being fallen, humans retain the God-given ability to shape God's world in which we live in accordance with the complex order of creation; constant misdirection means that in many areas of life, hard work is required to understand God's order for his creation today. The Bible, as we will see,

1. Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488. At about the same time C. S. Lewis wrote, “There is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counter-claimed by Satan” (“Christianity and Culture,” in *Christian Reflections* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967], 33).

gives us indispensable clues to such a journey of discovery—but it gives us the *clues*, not all the answers! The great twentieth-century missiologist Lesslie Newbigin perceptively noted that “Jesus is the clue to history, its goal and source.”² We commit the worst sort of folly if we *ignore* that clue which is Christ, but we are also fools if we fail to *pursue* that clue in all areas of life as God has made it. Take any of the above topics and you will see that the Bible addresses these issues, but in not one case does it provide us with a detailed analysis of the sort we need if we are to live effectively for God in his world today. Philosophy is precisely the quest for that *detailed analysis* of the order of creation as it relates to the many different aspects of life under the sun.

The Importance of Philosophy for Christian Mission

Apologetics

The minute we come to Christ and start to live for him, we find our neighbors asking questions about our faith. This has always been so, and it is why Peter tells us that we need to be ready to give an account of the hope within us (1 Pet. 3:15). Such an account will range from the narrative of our conversion and what Christ has come to mean to us to a rigorous defense of the faith. So it was with the early church: as their numbers and influence grew, accusations were leveled against them and questions asked. In order to respond to these, early Christians had of necessity to give an account and defense of their faith in terms that their non-Christian neighbors could understand. Inevitably early Christian thinkers reached for concepts from the philosophies of the day in order to provide a robust articulation of their faith.

Increasingly in the West today, Christians are in a minority amid an often hostile culture, and in this situation it is vital that we are able not only to live out our faith but also to account for it. We should never underestimate the compelling power of a life lived in Christ and of a conversion narrative, but the credibility of our faith will still depend to an extent on our being able to provide a logical account of it.

Apologetics cannot by itself convert a person to Christ; that is the work of the Spirit. But it can be used by God to clear the ground for conversion in what is sometimes called preevangelism. One thinks of the long process whereby C. S. Lewis came to faith in Christ. The final step was experiential and not as a result of having Christianity proved true to him. In *Surprised by Joy*, the story of his conversion, Lewis movingly describes how he got on a bus in Oxford not a Christian and disembarked a believer. His actual conversion

2. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 123.

was *far more* than logical, but a great deal of thinking and discussion with Christian friends preceded his conversion.³ And Lewis of course went on to become one of the greatest Christian apologists of our time. It is less well known that Lewis took a first in philosophy at Oxford University, and he used this to great effect in developing his apologetics.

Francis Schaeffer, who with his wife founded L'Abri in the tiny village of Huemoz in Switzerland, exercised an international ministry as Christian and non-Christian students flocked from around the world to ask their questions and seriously discuss them with Schaeffer and his coworkers. The extraordinary story of L'Abri is told by Edith Schaeffer in her book *The Tapestry*. At the heart of Francis Schaeffer's ministry was a welcoming community and apologetics. Schaeffer's preevangelism and evangelism necessitated that he immerse himself in the culture of his day and in philosophy. Many came to Christ through L'Abri's ministry, and many Christians awoke to the need to take culture and philosophy seriously.

Clearly there will be a variety of levels of apologetics, ranging from witnessing to what Christ means to you, to answering a neighbor's queries, to academic defense of the Christian faith at the most rigorous level. A robust apologetic requires Christians to operate at all levels. An example of academic defense of the faith at the highest levels is Alvin Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*, the third volume in his magisterial trilogy on epistemology. Of course not all Christians are called like Plantinga to be a philosopher, and even among those who are, few can rise to his level of excellence. But a basic introduction to Christian philosophy will help in answering your neighbor's queries, and those like Plantinga who are called to be Christian philosophers have a crucial role in making the case for the credibility of Christianity at the highest academic level.

Missional Cultural Engagement

Once we see that mission involves an engagement of the gospel with the whole of our culture and that mission takes place at the crossroads of the biblical story and our cultural story, it becomes clear that serious mission requires a deep understanding of our culture(s).

Here again philosophy can be an enormous help.⁴

Take the issue of homosexuality for example. In our opinion it is clear from Scripture that homosexual practice is unbiblical and not according to

3. Whenever asked about his conversion, Lewis always stressed its strongly philosophical component. We are indebted to Adam Barkman, Craig's colleague in philosophy, for this information.

4. Augustine's *City of God* and Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* were both written in response to requests from missionaries. See Curtis Chang, *Engaging Unbelief: A Captivating Strategy from Augustine and Aquinas* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 13–18.

God's design for human life. In this we are in wholehearted agreement with conservative Christians. But how does one engage *society* from this perspective? It is one thing to believe that homosexuality is clearly wrong, but what does this mean for our diverse societies? What sort of legislation should Christians push for, and how do we actively protect the civil rights of homosexuals while preserving the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman? These are crucial but complex issues, and many Christians are lost when it comes to engaging them. Such engagement requires far more than an understanding of the biblical view of homosexuality; it requires a *philosophy* of society, an understanding of the role of politics (philosophy of politics), and gracious but determined resistance to political correctness in a variety of ways.

Many orthodox Anglicans who are being forced to face up to the direction of mainstream North American Anglicanism find themselves wondering how on earth they got to the point where church leaders are moving away from the gospel. It is a good question. To answer it, one needs to know what has happened in Western culture and the philosophies that have shaped it over the past several centuries and the philosophies shaping Western culture at present. Only in this way will we be able to understand what time it is in our culture and the forces manifesting themselves in issues like homosexuality and many others. And only from such a deep understanding will we be able to discern the spirits at work and how to engage them missionally.

Lesslie Newbigin tells the story of attending a major conference on mission, where he was sitting next to an Indonesian general. At a certain point in the conference Newbigin heard the general mutter under his breath, "Of course, the number one question is, Can the West be converted?" After spending some forty years as a missionary in India, Newbigin and his wife returned to the United Kingdom. In the remaining years of his life, Newbigin did his best to rouse Western Christians from their slumber to attend to the mission on their doorsteps. The problem with culture is that it is like the water the fish swims in: we get so used to it that it appears normal, until we enter a very different culture and start to see that what we assumed was normal and "Christian" is not necessarily so.

Western Christians urgently need a deep understanding of the culture they live in with all its strengths and weaknesses. Newbigin worked to provide such an understanding, and a cursory perusal of his important writings will indicate the central role of philosophy in such a missional approach to and analysis of Western culture.

Philosophy and Christian Scholarship

Universities play a formative role in preparing students for their life's work, whatever form that may end up taking. Central to modernity is the view that

universities provide neutral, objective scholarship and teaching. Despite this view being savaged in recent decades, it remains dominant in popular culture among Christians and non-Christians alike. What modernity calls a neutral, objective approach to academia is anything but. In any discipline, as you go deeper and deeper into a subject, finally you reach those really fundamental questions that we usually take for granted. That is philosophy. At the foundation of *every* subject are foundational questions like:

- How do we go about knowing in this subject area such that we can trust the results to be truthful? This is the question of *epistemology*.
- What does it mean to be human? This is the question of *anthropology*.
- What is the nature of the world around us? This is the question of *ontology*.

These are foundational philosophical questions. We like to call them *launchpad questions* since they are the base from which any subject is launched. And the answers to them are normally taken for granted. Indeed, modernity has had a vested interest in concealing these questions and the impact of modernity's answers on scholarship. It doesn't take much reflection to realize that the gospel has major implications for how one might answer these three fundamental questions, and a Christian answer will shape a subject differently than non-Christian answers.

Of course, once we see this, the hard work begins. How *does* a Christian view of the person shape a contemporary psychology? And what does the gospel mean for economics or law or medicine or education or, for that matter, religious studies? The university was a Christian invention of the Middle Ages, but along the way something major happened to most Western universities: they became thoroughly secular in line with cultural developments. In the typical Western university there *may* be a place for faith in the religion department, but it is generally considered absurd to want to engage with other disciplines from a Christian perspective.

It is not surprising therefore that several years ago the church historian George Marsden wrote a provocative book with the title *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*. It is not that Marsden thinks Christian scholarship is outrageous, but he knows only too well that most scholars do. If we are serious about mission and genuinely concerned that Christian students are trained for a lifetime of service to Christ in whatever area of life he calls them to, then we urgently need to recover a vision for Christian scholarship. Sending the best and brightest young Christians to study at the feet of the best secular scholars of the day simply will not do.

We need top-rate Christian scholars in every discipline, and we need students to study at their feet—or at least to be prepared for the secular university so that they can excavate the big questions operating in their subjects—and

take the good while leaving the bad and developing a Christian understanding of their chosen field. Christian philosophy alone will not produce this, but it is a fundamental ingredient in the recipe for such cultural engagement. Philosophy attends precisely to the sort of fundamental questions noted above, and a Christian philosophical framework will go a long way toward inoculating a student against secularism and provide a basis for developing a Christian perspective in his or her subject area. A university subject is like an iceberg. Generally what is taught is what lies above the water, and few professors have the expertise or inclination to alert their students to the formative mass under the water. Christian philosophy is a great help in learning to spot the launchpad questions—and answers—informing a subject and the way it is taught.

Philosophy and Christian Life

Some people say that philosophy is not practical. Nothing could be further from the truth.⁵

As we noted above, not everyone should become a professional philosopher, just as not every Christian should become a professional theologian. But just as a basic knowledge of Christian doctrine is indispensable, so a basic understanding of Christian philosophy is of enormous practical value. Our societies are shaped according to particular philosophies, and the result is that, no matter what areas of life we serve in, an understanding of philosophy is helpful.

Take nurses and doctors, for example. In countries like Canada and the United Kingdom where there are national health systems, medical professionals are being stretched to the limit and becoming increasingly mechanical and impersonal. How is it that Western health care has become this way, and how should Christians operate within it? What does a doctor do when his or her Christian faith conflicts with a course of treatment a patient wants and perhaps demands? A Christian *philosophy and history of health care* are key elements in beginning to orient oneself in this system. At the very least, they will alert one to the fact that it does not have to be this way.

Athletics and sports are great gifts, and many of us enjoy the entertainment they provide. But in our world they are also locales of idols, and many young people find themselves pushed into living for their sport and making winning everything. A *philosophy of sport* will provide a healthy orientation toward the values and limits of sport and orient the Christian healthily in what is often a distorted area of our world.

5. Phil Washburn, *Philosophical Dilemmas: Building a Worldview* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 11.

An energetic youth pastor is wondering how best to develop the youth ministry in his growing church. Numbers at Friday night meetings range from fifteen to sixty. Does he try to compete with alternative entertainment, or what exactly does he do to build a lasting youth ministry? A *philosophy of the institutional church* and its distinctive characteristics, as well as its relationship to other spheres of society, will help this youth pastor in discerning the biblical focus of youth ministry.

Some recent converts are worried about their children, who are attending a local government school. The children's language and behavior are becoming more and more uncontrollable. What should the parents do? Again, a basic understanding of *philosophy of education* is of enormous help to such parents as they seek to form the lives of their children.

As a professor of philosophy, Craig is often asked by students why they should consider a major in philosophy. What will they do with it, and how will it help them get a job after university? It is unfortunately true that philosophers are not in great demand in our societies. In ancient Greece, the sophists were like the rock stars of the day and could charge considerable sums for their instruction. How times have changed! Of course, if you plan to become a philosopher, then a major in philosophy is essential, but a good plan for other students is to pursue majors in their subject of choice and minors in philosophy, provided they have access to a good, Christian philosophy department. Jean Vanier is world renowned for his founding of L'Arche, whose communities are now spread throughout the world. It is less well known that Vanier holds a doctorate in philosophy on Aristotle and well into his L'Arche work published a book on the value of Aristotle's philosophy.⁶ We have also found that students who go on to graduate school with a grounding in Christian philosophy tend to cope better than those without such training.

And so we could continue. Because God is the Creator and because his order is comprehensive in that it relates to all of life, there is not an area of practical human life for which a Christian philosophy will not provide helpful insight.

The Way Ahead

We hope this has made you excited about the potential of Christian philosophy. It certainly had that effect on Abby. Back at Long Obedience after the short Christmas break, Abby wrote excitedly to Percy, explaining how her philosophy prof addressed the importance of philosophy head-on in the very first lecture. The prof's emphasis on apologetics had not surprised her, but

6. Jean Vanier, *Made for Happiness: Discovering the Meaning of Life with Aristotle*, trans. Kathryn Spink (Toronto: Anansi, 2001).

seeing philosophy within a missional context was a revelation. “The gospel just keeps getting bigger and bigger,” she wrote to Percy. “Now I’m starting to see how indispensable philosophy may be for my work as a psychologist. The most obvious connecting point for me was anthropology, the view of the person. Clearly, how we think of the human person impacts one’s psychology, but I had never thought that Christian philosophy could help me develop a honed view of anthropology that can help orient my psychology and counseling in the right direction. This stuff really matters!”

Having sent her email off to Percy, Abby took a sip of her piping hot coffee and pressed the refresh button on her email, reflecting on how much she missed Percy. What—a reply from him already? No, not a reply but a new message headed “HELP!” Abby hurriedly clicked on the email. What could be wrong?

Percy too had just had his first class in philosophy, but what a different experience than that of Abby. His prof had started out by explaining the difference between philosophy and religion. Religion was based on faith, but philosophy was a science based on reason alone. In philosophy you are justified in believing something only if it can be established by reason. The prof acknowledged that many in the class might be believers, but in his class they were to leave their faith at the door—only reason was an acceptable criterion in their discussions. The prof went on about the importance of rational, human autonomy in the quest for truth and explained how philosophy emerged as certain ancient Greeks abandoned belief in the gods and sought natural explanations for the state of the world. One brave student asked if religion had no place in philosophy, to which the prof replied, “It does as a subject for analysis, but it is valid only if it can be shown to be true by reason.”

“What do you make of this, Abby?” wrote Percy. “I was quite shaken when I left the class. It all sounds so logical, but as I reflect upon it, isn’t human autonomy the great temptation to which Adam and Eve succumbed in Genesis 3? This is going to be one tough class. Any suggestion as to how to survive this course, or do you think I should just drop it for now? I’m not sure my faith is ready for this.”

Abby quickly replied: “I see my prof again on Thursday. Let me get his advice and see if he can help.”



In the next chapter we will examine the relationship between the Bible, a Christian worldview, and a Christian philosophy, making sure that we take the authority of Scripture with full seriousness. This will enable us to examine the far-too-common view that Percy was encountering in his introduction to philosophy.