Correctness, not truth

Approaches to a religious way of thinking

JAMES ORR

Paul Draper and J. L. Schellenberg, editors

RENEWING PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION
Exploratory essays
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Fiona Ellis, editor

NEW MODELS OF RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING
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More than half a century has passed since philosophy of religion first began to manoeuvre itself into the guild of anglophone philosophy. While to some extent philosophical interest in the divine has never been absent from the continental tradition, most of its contemporary practitioners recognize (and often lament) the "theological turn" in phenomenology, which has now recovered its place, once lost to existentialism and hermeneutics, as continental philosophy's central field of interest. The persistent growth of enthusiasm for philosophy of religion on both sides of the God debate across Europe and North America has been a puzzling and disquieting development for philosophers in other fields. This was not how the story was supposed to unfold. The task of academic philosophy in the modern world was, its high priests had assured us, to help us put away childish things before guiding us into the bright light of positivism – a light that would, once and for all, not only expose the obvious falsity of religious belief but also illuminate the comprehensive scientific explanations underpinning other sorts of mischief-making in philosophy, most notably those that arise in metaphysical debates about mind, morality, modality and mathematics. The unexpected success of philosophy of religion has, it seems, ushered it into a phase of what Iris Murdoch once termed "whithering". Newly conscious of the subject as a settled and flourishing field – albeit one that can never quite decide if its institutional home should be located in the suburbs of Athens (standing for secular reason) or Jerusalem (revelation) – many contemporary practitioners are now busily mapping out its future prospects.

The collections under review offer a series of rewarding extracts from these conversations. Paul Draper and J. L. Schellenberg's volume assembles an impressive variety of specialists from both philosophy of religion and the study of religion, an unusual disciplinary mix and, in the hands of less cautious and skilful editors, one liable to have generated serious methodological confusion. The line-up encompasses contributions from thinkers sympathetic to the intrinsic philosophical value of exploring religious truth-claims, and figures for whom religion is to be analysed as a form of human behaviour best glimpsed through the prism of anthropology or sociology. Standing consciously athwart this disciplinary divide, Yujin Nagasawa offers a usefully programmatic contribution early on. Lamenting the preoccupation among philosophers of religion with the divide between metaphysical theism and atheism, especially in the context of the truth-claims of Christianity, he makes the case for a "global" philosophy of religion that treats the many and various philosophical legacies of the world's religions neither as mere objects of anthropological curiosity (as Ninian Smart once proposed) nor as an implausibly pluralist melange in which the distinctive insights of each inevitably vanish without trace (an approach commended by John Hick and others).

Nagasawa's own proposal is to develop a "globalised" philosophy of religion that engages challenges confronting both Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religious traditions. What precisely those common challenges might be he does not say, but it is clear enough that there is an ample array of fundamental philosophical topics – transcendence and immanence, idealism and materialism, good and evil, soul and body, re/incarnation (to name but a few) – that would benefit greatly from collaboration between philosophers of religion working in disparate religious traditions. Disciplined philosophical work of this kind may also provide some insurance against well-meaning but unconvincing attempts by some theologians and scholars of religion of late to shoehorn plainly irreconcilable dogmatic commitments into a single theoretical framework.

Still, the worry persists that the more religions are viewed as an exotic appendage of sociology and anthropology, the less convincing their claims to unravel reality's riddles appear to be. From Lascaux to Londonderry, the religious reflex has for as long as we know been an intrinsic and ineliminable ingredient in the human condition, however misguided most social scientists tacitly presume it to be. If the metaphysical claims of a religion are taken to be nothing more than curious spandrels in our evolutionary development, it is inevitable that religious belief systems will come to be construed in purely instrumental terms. In the reductive climate of anthropology or sociology, philosophy of religion risks turning into a tool for therapeutic efficacy, or inculcating virtue, or motivating ecological awareness. Such an approach would transform religion beyond recognition into a wellspring of warrants for transient secular shibboleths, when in fact it could more usefully advance cogent philosophical challenges to them. Something like this conception animates the contribution by Robert McKim that the goal of philosophy of religion should be "religious progress", where progress is measured not by the internal coherence, theoretical parsimony, explanatory strength, or existential resonance of religious truth-claims, but rather by the extent to which belief in them makes its adherents better global citizens.

The range and diversity of usefully prospective insights from leading practitioners makes this volume an important contribution, even if the collection lacks a unifying rationale: the reader is helpfully reminded that there is more to religion than believing propositions, but we are not told what implications this might have for philosophy of religion as a field of cognitive inquiry. After all, it is no more surprising to find – as in the fascinating and fine-grained empirical analysis of Wesley J. Wildman and David Rohr – a disproportionate degree of commitment to God's existence among philosophers of religion than that disproportionately many philosophers of science cleave to the view that truths are scientific truths. In each case, the commitment in question is highly contestable and, in each case, those who hold it are perfectly capable of recognizing it as such in their teaching and research. It is not at all clear, moreover, that every philosopher of religion is in the business of encasing antecedent religious commitments in philosophical armour; among prospective professional philosophers, lengthy and sophisticated scrutiny of a religion's claims very often precedes adherence to it.

In her editorial introduction to *New Models of Religious Understanding*, Fiona Ellis lays out a compelling justification for a collection that showcases a range of established and emerging voices in contemporary philosophy of religion. In keeping with the editor's stated ambition of developing and sustaining a mutually generative relationship between the analytic and continental traditions of philosophical inquiry, it also demonstrates the field's facility for engaging anglophone philosophy with skill and confidence while remaining intelligently receptive to continental contributions from phenomenology (Levinas) and hermeneutics (Heidegger) to existentialism (Kierkegaard) and French Spiritualism (Félix Ravaisson).

The opening pair of essays by Ellis and Edward Kanterian aims to rehabilitate metaphysical naturalism, reconciling consistency with the natural sciences with a realist stance towards normativity (including belief in objective morality) in nature and those dimensions of reality that legitimately evoke a religious response. Given how quickly debates between theists and naturalists in recent decades descend into a dialogue of the deaf, the conviction that the dross of "bald" naturalism could be transmuted into the gold of an "expansive" naturalism represents a tantalizing way forward. To some extent the attempt to recover a metaphysically enriched account of nature resonates with the renewal of interest among contemporary Catholic philosophical theologians in dissolving the longstanding divide between a "natural" domain free of divine presence and a "supernatural" one from which the divine unpredictably erupts.

The challenge for expansive naturalism is that while it may imbue the believer's view of reality with a sacred dimension that cannot be reduced without remainder to the deliverances of the natural sciences, it must in the end be forced to part company with those religious traditions that refuse any metaphysical identification of nature and divinity. It is hard to see, at any rate, how naturalism so construed could ever be expansive enough to accommodate Abrahamic monotheism's foundational claim that created reality is metaphysically distinct from its creator and wholly dependent on a divine sustaining agency. But expansive naturalism does at least lend support to the many religious believers' intuition that the natural world affords glimpses of divinity that complement positive revelation more than they contradict it, or that it is freighted with layers of moral and spiritual significance that are disclosed rather than imposed.

Very few of the essays in this collection do

not repay an attentive reading, but one or two are strikingly original. Silvia Jonas, for instance, sketches an intriguing comparison between modal structuralism in the philosophy of mathematics and the philosophy of religion. Just as modal structuralism seeks to preserve the truth values of mathematical propositions independently of ontological commitment to mathematical objects, so, too, could it offer a way of treating statements of religious belief as true while remaining agnostic about God's existence. In particular, it aims to do this by delineating the structural relations connecting human beings to God – love, prayer, contemplation – without attempting to capture God's essence independently of these connections. The attraction of this view is that it provides a semantics for construing theistic statements as objectively true while accommodating the atheist's metaphysical quietism. The difficulty is that both theist and atheist *are* respectively committed to affirming and denying that such statements as "God exists in himself" or "God knows all truths" successfully refer to states of affairs that obtain even in the absence of a structure in which we are embedded. Each is committed to a particular ontological inventory of reality: one includes God, the other does not. Better, perhaps, to bite the anti-realist bullet and describe theistic statements as trafficking in *correctness* rather than truth, roughly in the sense intended by the fictionalist who claims that the statement that Sherlock Holmes lived at 221B Baker Street is correct even though it is not true. Whichever of these two strategies is pursued, however, one might be forgiven for thinking that neither qualifies as a version of theism.

The volume abounds with equally suggestive and perceptive contributions: drawing on Peter Sloterdijk and Ravaisson, Clare Carlisle sets out an incisive account of religious habit and desire that, like Ellis's expansive naturalism, aims to remain intelligible in naturalistic terms; John Cottingham underscores the indispensability of action and narrative in attaining religious understanding and the inadequacy of purely theoretical models; and Charles Taliaferro deftly deploys Cambridge Platonism to highlight the virtues of charity and caution when contesting the philosophical basis for religious beliefs.

In sum, while the value of edited collections does not always exceed the sum of their various contributions, of this one it can be said that it achieves its aspiration of forging new models of understanding pressing religious questions. It does so, moreover, in ways that push the discussion past parameters too often fixed by fashionable criticisms of religious belief from austerely reductive varieties of naturalism. And careful as it is not to underplay the motivations behind naturalism's contemporary appeal, it also suggests fresh paths ahead for theists and atheists who insist that religious claims are metaphysically substantive claims.

For all the methodological minefields that lie ahead of those seeking to leave behind a strictly theoretical conception of philosophy of religion, both these collections will be welcomed very warmly by those who have long insisted that it has invested too much in elaborate metaphysical parlour games at the expense of exploring those dimensions of human experience – habit and ritual, community and culture, embodiment and materiality – that lie closest to the heart of the everyday lives of religious believers.

Revolve around the church

Female writers and their faith

A. N. WILSON

Judith Maltby and Alison Shell, editors

ANGLICAN WOMEN NOVELISTS
From Charlotte Brontë to P. D. James
288pp. T & T Clark. Paperback, £26.99.
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The first figure you look for in a book entitled *Anglican Women Novelists* is surely Jane Austen, but the editors tell us that she is "peripheral within the historical trajectory which has shaped this ... collection". Its focus is the imaginative impact of Anglicanism between Tractarian times and the present.

The preface sets out to answer three questions: Why Anglican? why Women? why Novelists? In a work where thirteen quite different writers are considered , with necessary brevity, by thirteen separate critics, it is not surprising that no firm answers emerge, but this does not stop the book from being both entertaining and enriching. I found the essays on novelists who were unknown to me – Charlotte Mary Tucker (by Nancy Jiwon Cho), Evelyn Underhill (Ann Loades), Monica Furlong (Peter Sherlock), and Margaret Oliphant (Alison Milbank) among the most interesting in the whole collection.

Charlotte Mary Tucker (1812–93) was a bigoted evangelical who, under a pseudonym, "A. L. O. E. ", wrote fervently anti-Catholic books. In *Pictures of St Peter from an English Home*, Clarence St Clare, the nephew of a "Romanist peer", is rescued from the horrible fate of following his uncle's faith allegiance by spending the school holidays with a born-again evangelical called Lady Laurie, who persuades him, from reading the biblical book of Revelation, that all true believers – including women – are priests. (Tucker subsequently became a missionary in India, having taught herself Hindustani.)

Milbank's exposition of Mrs Oliphant's Carlingford novels very nearly persuades us that they might be worth reading. ("Mr Proctor, the incumbent of *The Rector*, who has left the comfort of All Souls College, Oxford, for a parochial ministry, for which he is wholly unprepared ...") Charlotte Mitchell reminds us of the quiet pleasure to be derived from the novels of Charlotte Mary Yonge; Ann Loades does not convince me that Evelyn Underhill was a good novelist, but, those who enjoy her books on mysticism might at least give her fiction a try, especially *The Lost Word* – which apparently concerns the contrast between a high-church mystic and the muscular Christianity of a manly cathedral dean.

On the other hand, with only a limited amount of reading time, why read novels which are clearly of no literary value, when one could be reading or rereading Jane Austen? And reverting to Austen makes one wonder whether she would have recognized the religion on display in many chapters of this book as her own quiet, dignified religion. Many of the concerns of Rose Macaulay, for example – whether, and how often, to go to confession; the claims of the Church of Rome; the swooping pitfalls and intellectual torments of Doubt with a capital D – would have been, for Jane Austen, either beyond her ken or, more likely, not quite the thing a lady or a gentleman would talk about, never mind write novels about. Similarly, Austen would surely have deplored another of my favourite Anglican novels, Iris Murdoch's *The Bell*, with its free discussions of atheism and homosexuality. Murdoch is included in the book, which seems only right, in spite of her being a professed atheist, because her oeuvre is steeped in Christian themes. In the Murdoch chapter, Peter S. Hawkins quotes a letter she wrote to a nun of Stanbrook Abbey in 1993: "A pal (A. N. Wilson as it happens) said ... that Christianity [in the twenty-first century] will only be in the Roman church. (This can seem plausible)".

Be that as it may, by this stage in the book, one has, mysteriously, built up a sense of something these writers all have in common. By the time we are reading Jane Williams on Barbara Pym, Jessica Martin on Dorothy L. Sayers, and Alison Shell on P. D. James, the flavour is unmistakable, even if it is difficult to define. Williams perhaps sums things up with reference to Pym's account of the distinctiveness of parish life. "There do not have to be ties of work or class or leisure activity, and that means the assortment of people can be richer, stranger and more unlikely than would be found in any more natural setting."

Alison Shell's exploration of the theology of P. D. James is especially interesting. It is good that, before she comes to an examination of James's novels, Shell allows herself a quick backward look to the Golden Age of detective fiction, with an acknowledgement of Agatha Christie's faith. As Miss Marple says, "In my own village, St Mary Mead, things do rather revolve round the church". James sat in the House of Lords, took the Tory whip, and regarded her Anglicanism as part and parcel of her political viewpoint. The Book of Common Prayer not only provided her with some of her titles, such as *Devices and Desires*, but, much more fundamentally, with the entire world view of her books. The fact that her detective, Adam Dalgliesh, is the agnostic son of a clergyman is no accident. The only thing missing from Alison Shell's excellent essay is a comparison with Ruth Rendell. Rendell, too, was a practising Anglican for much of her life, but said to me at one point that she had reached a stage where she could worship no longer. She and P. D. James respected one another's differences, and one another's work. Rendell told me she felt it was "only polite" to go into a church and tell God she no longer believed in him, and that she could not forgive him for the injustice of the planet. Dostoevsky would have understood – Jane Austen would not.

Ich bin doch kein Centrefold

I
They had been told to bring winter coats although it is summer.
Because of travelling by moonlight,
which makes them strange to one another,
or it could be the slow narcotic slap of the waves,
they find themselves talking of him in elevated tones,
phrases like, "it should come as no surprise" or
"shatteringly". Oh no, thinks Nutria,
did I really say that?
The funny thing is,
they each believe they are in love with him,
the way the blind men believed they knew the elephant.
On the return trip
nobody speaks,
one remembering his two completely black front teeth,
another his "I started eating too much when my son was murdered".
Oars lift the waves like upturned hands.
Risky little boat this, thinks Nutria.

II
Post-interview regret: you
the largish infant, Dad
looming over the cot. At least you
kept Dad out of it. At least you
gave them tea, some quotes and
the long plaintive paragraph
about taking the lids off jars will stay
(is the hope) in their minds as a metaphor. You watch
the boat bob away. Smash smash
go the waves on shore. Night
paces back.

ANNE CARSON