

BOOK REVIEWS

An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion

William J. Abraham

Englewood Cliffs: Prentiss Hall, 1985

258 pages. \$16.95 (p.b.)

HARD FACTS OR SOFT RATIONALISM

There was a time in the course of the intellectual history of the Western World when philosophy was seen as the handmaiden of theology. Its function was to aid in the process which Anselm called "fides quaerens intellectum" - faith seeking understanding. Nowadays, however, philosophy seems to have a rather different job description altogether.

Few and far between are the Alvin Plantingas or Thomas Morris or John Hickses who see philosophy and religion as still having a vital relationship to one another. They still see that an essential task of philosophy is to expand and expound upon theological concepts such as sin, evil, freedom, incarnation, predestination, and others. In the post Wittgensteinian age of doing philosophy, however, one is much more apt to find a philosopher who: a) is interested in linguistic analysis and theories of meaning per se; b) fundamentally is a logician; c) sees it as his chief task to explore the presuppositions and epistemologies of various modern schools of thought; or d) is interested in the interface between philosophy and various other academic subjects such as science or history. Philosophy, then, has come a long way from the days in the Middle Ages when it was so preoccupied with the "rational" proofs for the existence of God.

In our post-modern era, philosophy of religion has often been looked upon, both by philosophers and theologians, as more of a step-child than a handmaiden and thus has been seldom embraced. At best, philosophy of religion has been seen as a small subset of the general subject called philosophy - and set aside for those with antiquarian interests and tendencies.

The reasons for this state of affairs is complex. It is due in part to the widely accepted judgement that religious language is not cognitive, that is, that such language may tell us reams about the subject which speaks such language, but it tells us little or nothing about objective reality, never mind the 'absolute' or ultimate reality.

Into this foreboding environment, William Abraham has launched an ambitious primer entitled, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. This book is ambitious not only because of the intellectual climate into which it has been thrust, but also because for some time now students

of philosophy have cut their teeth on John Hicks' *Philosophy of Religion*, now in its third edition. Further, Abraham seeks to say a little something about most every major topic philosophy of religion has ever dealt with, as a scan of the chapter titles will show: 'Religious Language', 'Natural Theology', 'Religious Experience', 'The Problem of Evil', 'Religion and Morality', 'Miracles', 'World Religions', 'Life After Death', 'Christianity and Marxism', 'Grace and Freedom', etc.

As one might expect, herein lies the strength and weakness of this book. Sometimes the morsel is so small that instead of whetting the appetite, it simply frustrates the taster. Can the reader really be properly introduced to the philosophical questions involved in a discussion of world religions in 13 pages? There is some virtue, though, for the beginner to have a relatively complete menu before them at the start even if the presentation of the entrees is more evocative than descriptive. On this score, Abraham is more useful than Hicks in showing the range of subjects involved in the discipline.

In the beginning (p. xiii) Abraham admits that he will follow a somewhat eclectic procedure - sometimes surveying an issue, sometimes discussing one argument, sometimes commenting on one author's argument. This leads a certain unevenness to the book and a lack of thoroughness at some points. It also becomes apparent that there is a troika of authors who will serve as a foil for Abraham's comments on various subjects - namely, Hicks, Plantinga, and Richard Swinburne. In some cases, the book begins to read like a running critique of one or the other of these three scholars. This is necessary at some points because Abraham is trying to give an apologetic for his own approach to philosophy of religion or to one of its major topics vis-a-vis his closest colleagues in the field.

What then are Abraham's aims besides introducing philosophy of religion to the beginner? Clearly one aim is to show the value and validity of philosophy in general and philosophy of religion in particular to an otherwise skeptical audience. Abraham is sensitive to the suspicion philosophy labors under especially in the Christian community and in particular among evangelicals. Thus, Abraham wishes to show that philosophy of religion can be profitable study even for the orthodox. It should not be surprising then that Abraham admits at the outset that he will focus on questions that the Christian faith has found crucial. A more appropriate title might be 'An Introduction to the Philosophy of the Christian Religion'. The actual title is a bit misleading.

Another aim is apparent as one works through the various chapters. Abraham, in contradiction to Plantinga, is taking an Arminian approach to various important issues such as the relationship of grace and human

ability, God's sovereignty, and human free will. It should then not be surprising that John Wesley's name appears frequently in this work on philosophy of Christianity.

Several salient features remain with the reader. First, this book is much more readable than many of the analytical and arid tomes now available on the philosophy of religion. Thus, Abraham's style helps to achieve his aims. Further, Abraham has presented a useful case for the view that philosophy of religion can still serve as a handmaiden to theology in four regards: 1) as a sort of *preparatio evangelici*, clearing away unnecessary intellectual roadblocks to hearing and responding to the Christian faith on its own terms (as such it can serve as an apologetic tool); 2) it can aid in drawing out the logical implications of and work out the contradictions in a particular Christological world view; 3) it can help provide an epistemological foundation for discussions between Christianity and other religions and various other forms of truth seeking; 4) it can aid Christianity in its ongoing task of self-definition.

Abraham has done a useful job of arguing for the value and validity of religious language, the possibility and importance of revelation and miracles, the necessity of dealing with the problem of evil, as well as with all the hard facts of reality if one's world view is to be adequate. On the other hand, his treatment of the traditional proofs of the existence of God is much too cursory, especially in regard to the ontological argument and especially so since this has been in the past a central and vital part of any study of philosophy of religion. It would have been useful also if there had been bibliographies at the end of each chapter to guide the student into further reading.

All in all, this book may be termed an exercise in soft rationalism even as it tries to deal with hard facts. The book has a cumulative effect, so that the weaknesses in some parts of the study do not detract from the worthwhileness of the work as a whole. Likewise, Abraham shows that the case for Christianity must be made cumulatively using a variety of data and arguments. Certainly this is a book with more strengths than weaknesses and should be applauded for its clarity and variety.

Long ago, Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, relegated the great philosophers of the pre-Christian era to the first circle of Hades, a dungeon from which they and their subject have never entirely escaped in the minds of many believers. It may be hoped that this book may go some way toward rehabilitating philosophy, if not particular philosophers, as an important subject for the religious community. If it achieves no more than this it will have still served a very worthwhile purpose.

— The Editor

Woman in the Bible

by M.J. Evans

Downers Grove: I.V. Press. 1983. 160 pages

\$5.95

EQUALITY AND THE EVANGELICAL WOMAN

The author of the Book of Ecclesiastes said more than he realized when he remarked, "Of the making of books there is no end..." At least for the last two decades this particular remark could quite easily be applied to one particular topic - women in the Bible. The sheer volume of material on this one subject is staggering and indicates the keen interest in women's roles in the church and Christian community. Clearly, the sexual revolution of our age has had its impact on the church. The weight of material written on women in the Bible, however, is not proportionate to its worth, and so perhaps there is some reason for yet another book.

Mary Evans has attempted to provide an overview of the relevant biblical data in 160 brief pages and for this reason alone it is worth reading. In an age of specialized studies this book is for those who want a study that is conversant with most of the scholarly work in the field, but also succinct and conversational in style while still being comprehensive in its coverage. The reader looking for an attempt to apply the data to today's church situation will go away disappointed, but the person who wants an introduction to what the relevant data is may find this book very useful.

The book is divided into five chapters of varying length and quality. We get a scant 11 pages of background material to help set the social milieu in which the NT material was written. When we contrast this with some 54 pages of Paul's epistles alone, we see that the stage was set very quickly so that major players can appear as soon as possible. Unfortunately, this leads to a caricaturing of much of the background material so that it is pitted over against the 'more enlightened' views of Jesus and Paul at almost every point. It is also unfortunate that the Jesus material gets an all too brief 13 page treatment. Once again, one is left with the impression that it is Paul, and not Jesus, that is the real bone of contention. A more balanced approach would have been more helpful. Nevertheless, it is in the Pauline material that the author in fact sheds some light and so helps to advance the discussion. The chapter on the OT is of moderate usefulness, as are the sections of chapters four

and five that deal with non-Pauline material, but, unfortunately, the non-Pauline material is much too speedily dispatched (6-7 pages). In this case, less is not more.

In one regard this book may be compared to other semi-popular treatments on this subject by L. Swidler, the Staggs, or J. Danielou, but a more fruitful point of analogy lies in the other attempts by Evangelical scholars to deal with this subject. Clearly Ms. Evans writes from, and to some extent for, a conservative audience and so should be compared to the attempts of P.K. Jewett, G.W. Knight, J.B. Hurley, S. Foh, or V. Mollenkott, to name but a few. For those not of an Evangelical orientation, Evans' treatment of both the OT and Gospel material will appear to be either pre- or non-critical. Then too, the author's failure to use inclusive language (she repeatedly refers to man and mankind in generic terms) will alienate even some of her own Evangelical audience. This is unfortunate because she has many useful things to say from a more egalitarian point of view within the Evangelical camp.

Ms. Evans presents a carefully reasoned (and reasonable) apology for the basically egalitarian orientation of the early church and its major founders, Jesus and Paul (provided one accepts her conservative presuppositions). She does, however, strain credulity at points when she tries to argue that Paul himself was *not* a supporter of the traditional family structure in which the husband's headship implied a certain authority and role. Further, is it really believable that Paul did *not* intend his readers of I Corinthians 11 and 14, I Timothy 2, and Ephesians 5 (if the latter texts are Pauline) to deduce that there was a creation order structure to male-female relationships that was to be *reaffirmed* in Christ and had implications for both appearance and behavior? Whether or not one agrees with Paul, it is more than a little difficult to make him appear to be egalitarian in all his utterances. Nonetheless, Ms. Evans is to be commended for not taking the easy route out and simply writing off certain texts, or the Apostle himself, as hopelessly contradictory on the issue of women and their roles in the Christian community. Her approach is consistent, even-handed, and avoids majoring in minors.

Without doubt there will yet be more books written on this subject and undoubtedly there will be better ones. There are few, however, that have come forth from Evangelical writers that are more readable or useful than *Woman in the Bible* from a generally egalitarian point of view. Evans avoids stereotyping women into the Eve or Mary camp, and makes clear the new freedom and sense of equality those first female converts must have sensed in the early church. In this and several other regards she has helped the ongoing discussion.

— The Editor

Advertisement — The Brethren Encyclopedia

The first volume in a series of monographs related to Brethren history has just been released by the publishers of *The Brethren Encyclopedia*. The initial monograph, written by Hedwig T. Durnbaugh, is *The German Hymnody of the Brethren, 1720-1903*.

The series will include books of interest to all five Brethren bodies: The Old German Baptist Brethren, The Brethren Church, The Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches, The Dunkard Brethren, and The Church of the Brethren.

According to William R. Eberly, editor of the series, titles to be published will be of special benefit to reference libraries and scholars but will have some appeal also to the general reader. The monograph series will feature well documented studies of various aspects of Brethren life and thought, reflecting the common heritage of the Brethren movement that originated in Schwarzenau, Germany in 1708.

Distribution of the new series will be facilitated by denominational sales offices of related Brethren groups and by direct mail from the Brethren Encyclopedia office, 313 Fairview Avenue, Ambler, PA 19002.

Now available for distribution is a comprehensive study of German language Brethren hymnbooks, written by Hedwig T. Durnbaugh, librarian for special collections and cataloging at Bethany Theological Seminary in Oak Brook, Illinois. Her book, entitled *The German Hymnody of the Brethren, 1720-1903*, examines the hymns in eight major German hymnbooks and several smaller collections. The author identifies the hymn writers, analyzes the theology of the texts, and describes unique threads of Brethren faith and witness.

The main body of the study consists of nine chapters which deal with the eight hymnals in chronological order, plus a chapter on smaller hymn collections. Each chapter provides a description of the hymnal under discussion, with special attention given to possible or definitely Brethren-authored hymntexts. The greater portion of the monograph consists of lengthy indexes providing access to the individual hymns under a variety of aspects: 1) first line index of all hymns appearing in all the hymnbooks; 2) publishing record of texts; 3) index of melodies; 4) index of hymnwriters.

The editor of the Brethren Monograph Series is William R. Eberly, professor of biology at Manchester College, North Manchester, Indiana. His interest in Brethren history has been reflected in several years of leadership in the Brethren Historical Committee and the Fellowship of Brethren Genealogists, in the publication of a history of the Church of the Brethren in Northwestern Ohio, in the compilation of a genealogy

of the Whitehead family, and in his personal collection of Brethren hymnals and songbooks.

Overall direction of the Brethren monograph series is under the supervision of the Board of Directors of *The Brethren Encyclopedia*, Fred W. Benedict, president. Following the publication of the encyclopedia, a three-volume reference work that appeared in 1984 and 1985, the Board of Directors decided to consider the publication of other materials in interest to all five Brethren groups.