

A SHORT COURSE IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

George Pattison

London: SCM, 2001, 227 pp., £16.95

This book by George Pattison, Dean of Chapel at King's College, Cambridge, is misleadingly titled. At over two hundred pages it is not particularly short; it is not a course for examination so much as a set of ten lectures (most originally delivered to students of the St Andrew's Biblical-Theological Institute in Moscow); and it is not so much in philosophy of religion as in meta-philosophy: a set of musings on the nature and purpose of philosophy as a whole. Certainly there is no effort to treat major topics of the philosophy of religion such as the concept of God.

In the first six chapters (the ones adapted from the lectures he gave in Moscow) Pattison treats the philosophical tradition from Plato to Derrida, with particular reference to 'the rise of the historical consciousness', 'the turn to the subject', 'the linguistic turn', reductionism, and hermeneutics. The last four chapters consist largely in an effort to read, but, explicitly, not to answer, the problem of evil in the light of the currents of thought discussed earlier. Pattison treats not only philosophers, particularly, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger, but also literary figures, especially Dostoevsky.

The book is not easy to read: the style is opaque and Pattison eschews reasoned argument in favour of oracular pronouncements. It is also hard to tell where he is merely expounding others and where he is giving us his own thoughts. Here is a sample of Pattison's prose:

For Sartre, nothingness is inseparable from our very identity as centres of freedom in the midst of the otherwise impermeable viscosity of Being-in-itself (173).

Pattison might respond that in this case the obscurity is all Sartre's, but this raises the question of why one should bother expounding a thought if one cannot make it clear. At other points his sentences are so obscure that they cease to be grammatical:

Whatever is, therefore, is by virtue of the mere fact that it 'is' at all is in

accord with God's creative intention (145).

Facing up to the situation that in an age in which the measure of knowledge is determined by natural science such a hope can never be an object of knowledge, but only what it is: a *hope* (199).

These quotations at the very least show that a firmer editorial hand should have been exercised over Pattison's manuscript.

Pattison's book will probably not be of interest to the readers of *Themelios*, as a quotation from page 136 demonstrates:

The philosopher is unlikely to end up saying 'This religion is true', but may well say of several religions that 'These religions provide for the possibility of living a religious life that is not in contradiction to [sic] the best attainable understanding of life open to contemporary humanity'.

Pattison gives his own understanding of religion only near the end of the book:

Rather, religion seems to be articulating the commitment to or search for a way of representing our human way of being in the world – a word, an image, or meaning-event – that would enhance the possibility of historical action, in solidarity with and on behalf of others, and sustain the belief that our world, whatever else it may be, is a humanizable world, a potential home for beings such as ourselves (201).

He also describes himself as a non-realist in the tradition of Don Cupitt concerning the afterlife: 'it is not a matter of speculating about some post-mortem state of affairs' (200). His non-realism seems to extend a lot further than just the afterlife, however:

To sum up: the question of religion – the question of salvation and belief as focused through the struggle to maintain hope in the face of evil – is nothing other than the question as to who we ourselves are, the question of

the human person (201–202).

The blurb on the back cover claims that it is 'aimed at introductory students and general readers interested in thinking about God'. In fact, it will prove of interest only to those engaged in grappling with non-realism or post-modernism in its literary and religious manifestations.

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THANKSGIVING: AN INVESTIGATION OF A PAULINE THEME, NSBT 13

David W. Pao

Leicester: Apollos, 2002; 212 pp., £12.99

This is Number 13 of the 'New Studies in Biblical Theology', edited by Don Carson. Several volumes in this useful series are being published each year and I suggest that students should become aware of those already published and keep abreast of future publishing developments.

You need to look at the actual books, not just a list of them, for the precise theological area with which each deals is not always immediately evident from their titles, although this is obviously not the case with this one.

David Pao believes his chosen theme has been neglected and that only certain aspects of it have been given the study they deserve. This fine volume seeks to remedy this and it is hoped that it will encourage others to explore this important and profitable topic. It is truly a study in Biblical Theology, and the Pauline theme is related very fully to the OT, especially the Book of Psalms and other OT poetical material.

Chapter 1 deals mostly with matters of terminology, and the author handles particularly the relationship between thanksgiving, praise and giving glory. Chapter 2 shows that the grounds of thanksgiving are the acts of God which evoke faithful response to the experience of God's grace. It explores thanksgiving within the covenantal tradition, demonstrating that it relates to the past, the present and the future. This then becomes a structure shaping the remaining chapters in the book, although the writer stresses that, in Paul's thought, the three are closely connected.

In Chapter 3, thanksgiving is viewed as remembrance and it is clear that thanksgiving

and proclamation of the acts of God are united, as we see in Paul's comments on the Lord's Supper, which focuses on Christ's death in which the OT covenant promises were fulfilled.

Chapter 4 is particularly rich and it deals with the Christian life as a life of thanksgiving. The importance of the theme for Colossians becomes very clear but the exploration of it in the Pauline epistles is broad, with a strong emphasis on the link between thanksgiving and the Lordship of Christ. In Chapter 5, David Pao shows that the eschatological songs of the OT emphasise the faithfulness of God, which forms the basis of the people's confidence concerning the future and therefore of their thanksgiving. This is true also for Paul. The final chapter is about ingratitude, a major ingredient in human sin.

There is an appendix on Pauline thanksgiving and the Greco-Roman benefaction system, in which the author argues that, despite some formal similarities, the main interpretative framework for understanding Pauline thanksgiving must be the OT.

The book at once reveals that this study of a theological topic is grounded on first-class exegesis, and yet at the same time it is a heart-warming volume. Don Carson rightly says:

His study is not only the stuff of biblical theology and grist for many sermons, but will prove to be the occasion for self-examination, repentance and a new resolve to be thankful.

This is true, and it demonstrates clearly how profitable Biblical Theology is for all the practical disciplines of Christian life and work and how important it is that it should never again suffer neglect.

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JESUS THE SAVIOUR. THE MEANING OF JESUS CHRIST FOR CHRISTIAN FAITH

William C. Placher

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William C. Placher, Professor at Wabash College in Indiana, has produced a number of