

on to the next episode in our story. I find this kind of comment overly homiletic in nature given the context of an argument on philosophical theology, and I am afraid to say that it is the kind of thing I find Crowe does rather often in his writing.

After reading 'The "World" from Anthony of Egypt to Vatican II' I was left wondering if there is not more philosophy and theology can offer by way of reflection upon the reality of the recent history of religious life in the west, beyond the rather neutral conclusions at which Crowe arrives. That reality has been the widespread collapse of religious life in the west in the last few decades and yet the now well-documented revival taking place in new religious orders and in those older orders which are again attracting vocations.

Despite these criticisms and reservations I would recommend this collection of essays to those interested in Lonergan's thought and ways in which it might be applied. Even in the speculative essays with which my disagreement is most comprehensive I find that Crowe never fails to come up with valuable insights into Lonergan's writing and its implications for current theological debate.

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NATURAL SIGNS AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOD: A NEW LOOK AT THEISTIC ARGUMENTS by C. Stephen Evans, *Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, pp. x + 207, £45.00*

A very beautiful cock pheasant comes often to feed in our garden. One evening Beatrice, contemplating its complex beauty, discovered that she could not deny the existence of God. That is an example of what Evans, in his thought provoking book, calls 'a theistic natural sign' leading to a conviction that God exists. Natural signs are not proofs. He discusses, in Chs. 3, 4, and 5, three traditional proofs, cosmological, teleological and moral, and holds that at their core are natural signs – cosmic wonder, observed order, and 'the sense of being obligated or bound by moral obligations and our awareness that human beings as human beings possess an intrinsic worth or dignity' (p. 149). It is not always clear if the natural sign is the person's response (the experience of cosmic wonder) or what evokes a response ('the purposive order that can be observed in nature is also a natural sign'). Evans understands our experience of being morally obliged as incoherent unless emergent from authoritative command external to the agent because 'a self-given law lacks binding force' (p. 127) which is a common, but I think mistaken, understanding of human action. They are not the only natural signs that point to the reality of God: 'a deep sense of thankfulness for [our] lives' may be another (pp. 149–50).

In the second chapter Evans examines the principle upon which his argument depends. From Reid's concept of natural signs in everyday knowledge, he develops theistic natural signs for God: events 'connected both to God and to a human disposition to conceive of God and believe in God's reality'. Clearly, the hypothesis that there are natural signs for God rests on the hypothesis that God exists (p. 35). That there is a 'disposition . . . to believe in God's reality' is an assertion to which Evans returns in Ch 6 (pp. 155–56). Within an atheistic context, the propensity to construct an idea of supernatural agency may well be accepted as 'culturally derived from an innate cognitive schema' (p. 156, quoting Atran) but must be thought of either as aberration or as skueomorph, so that natural signs become those experiences to which the abberant or now useless propensity responds. Evans acknowledges that position but argues that ' . . . if religious beliefs are based on natural signs, then such a natural propensity to believe in God cannot be evidence *against* the reality of God' (p. 157). But the same is true of

a propensity to deny the existence of God in the face of evil; that, too, is not evidence against his nonexistence. Hideous evil seems to many to be a sign of God's non-existence. Evans discusses evil in several places but does not, I think, sufficiently deal with what can be the spontaneous response of the good person confronted with horror. It remains true that evil can be genuinely a sign of God's non-existence only if God does not exist; but the spontaneous response remains.

If God – God as thought of by Christians, Jews and Muslims – does exist, then it is unsurprising that the natural world evokes feelings of mystery and puzzlement distinct from the wonder that gives rise to science, and from more everyday questions that look for practical solutions. Being overcome by the beauty of the world or something in it may move one 'towards the wide sea of Beauty itself'. That experience of the mystery of things Evans calls 'cosmic wonder': '(i)n some way we sense that the world should make sense, that there should be a reason why things are the way they are, even a reason that gives us a sense of meaning and an understanding of our place in the universe' (p. 72). He writes of Camus' assertion that 'what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational [world] and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart'. Camus, '... cannot believe in God, and thus finds no answer to his questions' (p. 72). More precisely, it is not that Camus cannot find an answer but that he is convinced that there is none. Between not finding an answer and the conviction that there is none there is a crucial difference. For Camus we are beings condemned to raise a question to which, absurdly, there is no answer. For many contemporary atheists the question is specious: a non-question to which 'God' is the irrelevant answer.

That world order – whose intrinsic governing principles science would discover – is not the outcome of unintelligible chance seems to many to point to the existence of an intelligent intentional origin independent of the experienced order. That sense of mystery in the face of the sheer givenness of things, gave rise to Leibniz' question as to why there is something rather than nothing, and to Wittgenstein's conviction that "it is not *how* the world is that is the mystical but *that it is*" (*Tractatus* 6.44). To others, that sense of mystery is merely a delusion.

Theistic natural signs exist and are widely accessible (pp. 14–17, 37, 38) yet easily resistable (pp. 15–17, 64, 157–60, 170, 178), but Evans does not hold that failure to come to knowledge of God's existence is necessarily culpable. The 'signs are widely available "pointers" ... (that) point to God in such a way that allows those who do not wish to believe in God to reinterpret or dismiss the sign' (p. 17). The apparent suggestion that only those who do not wish to believe in God do not do so, does not take sufficient account of cultures – classical Confucian, and swathes of the modern western are examples – and upbringings from which belief in, and even the idea of, God, is effectively absent.

If God creates us 'restless until we rest in Thee', it is reasonable to hope for signs pointing to God's existence, but the belief that overcomes one who experiences the world as sign is not the fruit of scientific or practical enquiry for which such experience is not evidence. The way of being in the world of one who so reads the world is transformed; the response to the pheasant's beauty is radically other than it was; which points to a surprising omission – what Francis Thompson wrote of in *The Hound of Heaven*: God seeks us.

If in fact the Spirit guides us into all truth (John 16:13) through the experiences that evoke belief, then the character of the experience and evidence that lead to belief are radically transformed. To be reminded of God on seeing the pheasant is grace. Few, I suspect, hold that God exists – or does not – because they have been convinced by a proof.

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