

# Reviews

**WITTGENSTEIN ON ETHICS AND RELIGIOUS BELIEF, by Cyril Barrett. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1991. Pp.xiv + 285. £45.00.**

Readers of this book may feel that they can form some opinion as to what its author thinks about Wittgenstein's views on ethics and religious belief. But the book is not intended as a critical discussion of Wittgenstein. Nor does it purport to offer a moral philosophy, or a philosophy of religion, based on what Wittgenstein said, or is reported to have said. Its purpose is chiefly exegetical, and it states and defends three main theses.

The first is that Wittgenstein's views on ethics and religious belief formed a consistent whole, which can be expounded as such. The second is that Wittgenstein regarded matters of value (including religion) as the most important. The third is that Wittgenstein's views on value remained the same throughout his life. In presenting these theses, Fr Barrett, who edited Wittgenstein's *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Oxford, 1970), also argues that, according to Wittgenstein, ethics and religion 'cannot be expressed in factual statements and propositions, much less explained theoretically' (p.251). On Fr Barrett's account, Wittgenstein held that, though questions of value are of primary importance, they can only 'be described obliquely in parables, analogies and metaphors that defy and elude literal translation' (*ibid.*).

Most modern philosophers do not think of Wittgenstein as a writer on ethics and religious belief. And that is not surprising. For Wittgenstein said comparatively little about these matters. Fr Barrett's book may be read as an explanation of this fact. Alternatively, it can be read as an attempt to show that the way in which most modern philosophers think of Wittgenstein is based on a mistake. In a letter to Ludwig von Ficker (published in 1967), Wittgenstein says that the 'sense' of the *Tractatus* is 'an ethical one'. Taking his cue from remarks like this, Fr Barrett gives us a picture of Wittgenstein as someone who seems to have little to say on ethics and religious belief because his philosophy shows them to be matters about which we must be silent.

With the exception of Fr Barrett's volume, there are few books in English devoted to serious exposition of Wittgenstein's views on ethics and religious belief. With respect to Wittgenstein and ethics, one might mention B.R. Tilghman's *Wittgenstein, Ethics and Aesthetics* (London, 1991), and Paul Johnston's *Wittgenstein and Moral Philosophy* (London, 1989). With respect to Wittgenstein and religious belief, there is W. Donald Hudson's, *Wittgenstein and Religious Belief* (London, 1975), Alan Keightley's, *Wittgenstein, Grammar and God* (London, 1976), and Patrick Sherry's, *Religion, Truth and Language Games* (London, 1977). But there is not much else to which readers can be referred. And the three volumes last mentioned are now out of print. For this reason alone, the present book may be welcomed. It fills a gap.

But there is more than an absence of comparable volumes to recommend it. In trying to expound what Wittgenstein thought, Fr Barrett often seems to find clarity where others might find matter for puzzlement. But he pays enormous attention to detail. Again and again, he brings us back to paragraphs, phrases, and words, many of which are discussed at considerable length. The result is a comprehensive and well documented account of Wittgenstein on ethics and religious belief. It is also one presented with great humility. Fr Barrett is aware that his interpretations of words ascribable to Wittgenstein are sometimes open to challenge (cf., for example, his discussion of *Tractatus* 6.43 on pp.32 ff.). He does not claim to have sorted everything out so as to leave no room for doubt about what Wittgenstein meant in saying certain things (either directly or as reported). He often highlights the fact that readers may have grounds for opting for interpretations different from his own. Given the material concerning which Fr Barrett is writing, such reserve is judicious and commendable.

Are Fr Barrett's interpretations of Wittgenstein accurate? I find many of them persuasive. His third thesis as indicated above will seem the most controversial to readers with a knowledge of writings about Wittgenstein. But he deals very well with the most likely objections to it. Terms used by Wittgenstein in his early period do not reappear in his later period. But Fr Barrett gives reason for thinking that their equivalents do. He also shows that Wittgenstein's early and later accounts of value are not incompatible, and that it is not clear that Wittgenstein abandoned his early picture analogy as a way of describing propositions, though he used it in a different way. Fr Barrett also shows that there is nothing in the notion of language games which is

incompatible with Wittgenstein's early distinction between the expressible and the inexpressible.

But a short review is not the place for me to add more than this. Any verdict on Fr Barrett's interpretations will need to be supported by detailed discussions of particular texts. Suffice it, therefore, to say that, in *Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Belief*, there is a lot of sensible and detailed discussion of many different texts. The book should certainly be read by any serious student of Wittgenstein. I hope that those who read it may be led to think of him as someone less 'untraditional' in his views on ethics and religion than some of his supporters and critics present him as being.

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**A CONCISE DICTIONARY OF THEOLOGY** by Gerald O'Collins, SJ and Edward Farrugla, SJ. *Harper Collins, London, 1991, pp. 268 £10.99.*

It is not only lazy students or busy teachers who find dictionaries of theology useful. They are a good starting point for inquiry, and they are also precious monuments to the theological self - understanding of an epoch, as interpreted by their authors. What, then, of this dictionary? Both authors are Jesuits teaching in Rome, Australian and Maltese respectively by birth, although much travelled since. Their dictionary is firm in its grasp of traditional Roman Catholicism, yet with horizons that are not only ecumenical but, inter-faith. Within Christianity, there is a marked stress on Orthodoxy and the Eastern Churches in communion with Rome.

Indeed, the treatment of '*communicatio in sacris*' is rendered lop-sided by its neglect of the position of Anglicans and Protestants. Internally and externally, European Catholicism is moving eastwards. The entries on irenecism and the hierarchy of truths are good pieces, indicative of how an open mind is not an empty mind.

In their short compass, the entries are generally reliable and informative. The new horizons for theology can be glimpsed in the entries for such topics as black theology, option for the poor, liberation theology, ecology, feminist theology, basic communities and political theology. The dictionary concentrates on words or phrases rather than individual authors, although some are considered. Once or twice this is done in unexpected ways, as when we are told that over the centuries outstanding contributions to