

# Reviews

**MARTIN HENRY, ON NOT UNDERSTANDING GOD (Maynooth Bicentenary Series), *The Columba Press, Dublin, 1997, 320pp, IR£14.99.***

This very interesting book considers the incomprehensibility of God, a doctrine that stands at the heart of Judaeo-Christianity. The fact that God cannot be perceived in any straightforward, unmistakable way is a condition of, rather than a threat to, human freedom. At the same time God's otherness means he can be present within creation in a unique way. For the Hellenistic world the Christian God is full of tensions: 'What no one seems to have achieved is a view of God that holds on to the personal, biblical language about God while retaining the classical philosophical insistence on the divine absoluteness, immutability and perfection' (p.109). Such an achievement is, of course, ruled out by the thesis of the book.

In spite of Henry's declaration that he does not intend to develop a progressive argument, the book's third part, where he does precisely that, is its clearest and most satisfying part. He charts the progress of the modern debate about God from its Enlightenment beginnings, through the work of Schleiermacher, Hegel and Feuerbach, to its end in the thought of Nietzsche.

The Enlightenment project, because of its strict intellectual and ethical demands, is self-subversive whereas Christianity can survive even when understanding is weak. This is because the God-question involves all aspects of the human condition, moral and aesthetic as well as intellectual. The theology of Schleiermacher, with its emphasis on feeling and subjectivity, was generally received negatively on the grounds that it dealt only with the psychological basis of religion and side-stepped the scandal of Christianity, the uniqueness of Jesus.

For Hegel theology contains the most profound truth about the human condition, a truth which he seeks to translate, without remainder, into conceptual form. Belief in a personal, transcendent being causes alienation from which the human being is freed only when he values himself as a facet of the Absolute. Hegel's theology, Henry argues, fails to address adequately the problems of evil and suffering, and neglects the central Christian doctrine of grace. He saves the phenomena of Christianity while abandoning its essence.

Feuerbach, for whom theology is anthropology and humanity is the only Absolute, 'sowed undying suspicion' about the existence of the Christian God. Individualism and selfishness are encouraged by the Christian doctrine of divine transcendence, he argued. Only a rejection of that doctrine will lead to the humanisation of earthly existence. Feuerbach remains within the Judaeo-Christian tradition, however, never considering God without reference to the human condition and vice versa.

The same is true of Nietzsche who criticises Feuerbach for failing to

see that God's demise evacuates humanity of its traditional meaning. Nietzsche 'demands to be heard' and Henry's account of his thought—'inescapably religious' and 'tormentedly close' to Christianity—is very moving. Nietzsche rejects the possibility of hope and rejoices in whatever happens. His affirmation of the world must include an endorsement of what Christian faith calls 'evil' and yet he continues to operate with the tacit assumption of a good God. Like Hegel he lacks a doctrine of grace so that from a Christian point of view there is no appreciable difference between the atheism of the one and the pantheism of the other. For Christianity, on the other hand, the transcendence of God means that the worth of life in this world is established from beyond this world and that Jesus' victory, far from being the humiliation of humanity which Nietzsche feared, is its affirmation and redemption.

Henry adds a useful account of postmodernism which emerges with the collapse of modernity's convictions about progress, rationality and the autonomous self. No self or system provides a secure foundation for any final meaning or truth about the human condition. Henry shows how postmodernism illuminates aspects of the theology of creation (pp. 281–82, 307) so that postmodernism too belongs intrinsically (albeit parasitically) to Judaeo-Christianity. Why regard the world without God as meaningless? If there is no God, there is no 'evil', only Nietzsche's 'innocence of becoming'. Henry admits that the problem of evil remains an embarrassment for theistic belief and faced with its reality Christianity has no intellectual message to offer. The moral argument for the existence of God is at best inconclusive, he argues, and at worst double-edged.

Henry's concern is intellectual and pastoral, recognising that there are intellectual aspects to the fact that belief in Christianity's God has become elusive or has faded altogether for many people, anxious at the same time that intellectual concern with religious questions not replace religious practice. There are traces throughout of humour and scepticism, an echo in the author's thinking of his belief in God's 'unavailability'. Christianity's healthy agnosticism should help it not only to remain intellectually modest but to distance itself from the more belligerent forms of modern religion, absence or darkness being potent signs of the presence of the true God.

VIVIAN BOLAND OP

**THE RELIGION OF BEING**, by Don Cupitt (London: SCM, 1998). viii + 181pp. £9.95 paper.

It is somewhat inevitable that a book entitled *The Religion of Being* will have something to do with Heidegger. Don Cupitt's latest addition to his ever growing corpus certainly fulfils that expectation, albeit in a rather loose sort of way. Heideggerian scholars will no doubt complain that a 'religion of Being' would have been anathema to Heidegger, and that Cupitt's reading is highly selective and creative.

Such charges are by no means unfamiliar, since Cupitt has frequently been said to have 'misread' many of the great philosophers. It might be said, however, that to accuse Cupitt of 'misreading' these past masters