

PHILOSOPHY, RELIGION AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE, edited by Michael McGhee, Cambridge University Press, 1992. Pp.lv + 257.

This volume is a collection of papers given at the Royal Institute of Philosophy's conference at Liverpool in 1991. In his introduction the editor, Michael McGhee, complains of a prevalent way of doing philosophy of religion:

The philosopher slides from 'religion' to 'religious belief' and from that to 'belief in God', and the latter becomes, imperceptibly, 'belief in the existence of God', so that philosophical reflection about religion is transformed without a pause into reflection on the existence of God, and questions about the rationality of belief, the validity of the proofs, and the coherence of the divine attributes cannot be far behind. (p.1).

One of the aims of this collection, according to McGhee, is to move away from this perhaps more familiar way of doing philosophy of religion, centring around religious belief and proofs for the existence of God, and to encourage another, hopefully more fruitful, approach, one which does not seek after the rational foundations of religion but rather explores its basis and expression in human life:

If a new focus of discussion is to emerge in the philosophy of religion, it may be necessary to displace, not just the familiar manoeuvres around 'belief in the existence of God', but the very idea of *belief* as its central concern: (we are not interested in what people *believe*, but in what *insights* are manifested in their lives). This is not a proposal in support of a kind of spiritual non-cognitivism, or a 'religion without doctrines', however, but, on the contrary, a proposal in support of a vision of philosophy as the articulation, the intellectual mapping, of the epistemic inquiry which is an essential strand in the also conative and affective trajectory of the 'spiritual life', a tracking of its transformations and discoveries, in a way which seeks to retrieve the *application* of religious language.

These dissatisfactions and aspirations are not altogether new. A number of philosophers, some taking their cue from Wittgenstein, have taken a similar approach; D.Z. Phillips is an obvious current example. Nevertheless, the essays in this volume certainly have their contribution to make to this general approach. One aspect of the philosophical approach to religions exemplified here is that it makes it natural to eschew 'philosophy of religion in general', and to look instead at cases. Thus there are papers here which concern themselves with what adherents of different religions actually say and do. Christianity is best represented: for example, there are papers which refer to *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Gregory Palamas (Sarah Coakley), Descartes and Augustine (Stephen Clark) and St Bernard (Rowan Williams). But there are also essays on aspects of Islam (Oliver Leaman) and Tibetan Buddhism (Paul Williams). Because of this kind of attention to the reality

of religion, almost all of the papers in this volume are informative and thought-provoking. But if it is good to look at cases, we have to face the fact that we will necessarily be more familiar and more comfortable with some cases than with others. I am sure that I will not be alone in finding Paul Williams's paper on controversies in Tibetan Buddhism particularly hard to digest.

One concern of some of the writers here is to show how what may be termed a religious attitude can arise out of the concerns and perceptions of everyday life. If religion is to do with reality (or Reality), one might do worse than seek the beginnings of religion in an attention to the ordinary but real things and people that make up our lives. More than one contributor makes reference to the paintings of Chardin, with their interest in and attention to the details of everyday reality, their concern to show us, attract our attention to, the commonplace things around us. Anthony O'Hear's piece is devoted to an appraisal of Chardin and a comparison between him and Rothko, Chardin's patient observation of the details of the real being favourably contrasted to the emptiness and rhetoric with which Rothko ends up at the end of his quest for the Real. For O'Hear, Chardin is to be valued not because he leads us into another spiritual world, but because of the way he opens our eyes to the beauty of the reality around us, makes us see the ordinary, domestic world as having a value and beauty we may not have suspected, at the same time undermining a false ideal of beauty which O'Hear describes as one 'constrained by grandiosity and sublimity', an ideal which needs to be undermined because it reinforces

the tendency—so prevalent in the contemporary world—to treat the mundane as disposable; to fail to cherish it, to let it grow old and so become touched with humanity through use and familiarity; to fail to design it with care for its conformability to our sensibility, but to crush all that with a brash and ultimately impersonal dehumanizing aesthetic of function. (p.48)

Janet Soskice, unlike O'Hear, writes from within the Christian tradition, but for her too love of and attention to the ordinary world is of primary importance. She engages with a recurrent theme of Christian spirituality, that of withdrawal from the world in order to contemplate God. Her starting point is with Gregory of Nyssa's praise of virginity. For him, the life of the virgin is far preferable to that of the married woman, whose life is full of troubles: a married woman may die in childbirth, and if she does not her children will be a constant source of worry. In looking after her family she will be constantly distracted and will be unable to find that tranquillity and recollection which are necessary for the contemplation of God. The only remedy is to avoid family life. Mrs Soskice, a Catholic and a mother, reacts to Gregory in perhaps a surprising way:

The striking thing about Gregory's analysis is that it is so convincing. He is simply right, and while we in the affluent west may be spared many of terrors of deaths in childbirth, we have no difficulty enumerating other vexations which erode time and energy

and would take us from contemplative quiet in the way Gregory describes. (p.63)

But, while accepting what Gregory says, she goes on to adumbrate a Christian spirituality more accessible to harassed parents. For Gregory, the spiritual life is a matter of attending to God, because God is the object of the Christian's love. Love and attention go closely together. But Christianity also enjoins love of, and therefore attention to, people. Indeed, Soskice argues convincingly, this love and attention is not merely a precept of one religion, but enters into the constitution of human nature. The example she develops is that of a mother with a young child. The mother does not attend to her baby because she is following a precept of morality or religion, but because of beliefs she has about her child and the world around it. Given these beliefs, it is natural to her, at this stage in the child's life, to act as she does:

. . . at this early stage simple beliefs, such as the belief that it is my baby that is crying, affect simple attentive response to the newborn . . . The process of attending to the child's needs on the basis of parental beliefs is continuous with the simple, involuntary response by which the mother produces milk when she believes her baby is crying. (p.70)

For the mother, unlike for Gregory's virgin, 'the object of attention is not a changeless truth so much as a moving target'. Nevertheless, attention to them is attention to the real. Soskice's approach clearly has kinship with that of O'Hear. For both, loving attention to changing domestic reality is a valuable and important element of human living, one of the things that enables us to live properly in the world we inhabit. Both of these writers seem to me to be saying something true and significant. But the question arises: Why should this loving attention to the world be thought of as a *religious* quality? Their aim is, after all, to make a contribution to the philosophy of religion. Soskice writes from within a Christian context, and her remarks can therefore be seen as a contribution to a specific religious spirituality. But it seems to be the context that gives it its religious character. Would we recognise her loving attentiveness to the transient real as a religious attitude were it not for that context? Need we think of Chardin's paintings as religious? Would we even be likely to, were we not ourselves already religious, viewing and reacting to the paintings from a religious point of view? Some might be inclined to give an affirmative answer, but it is an answer that needs to be argued for, and here it is assumed. Similar assumptions are made throughout the volume. Thus, Fergus Kerr, in his excellent introduction to Girard, points out the prevalence of the scapegoating mechanism in human societies, referring to the examples of Hitler's treatment of the Jews and Amin's of the Ugandan Asians. He goes on:

Thus there is no point in arguing over whether there are good reasons for going in for religious behaviour and belief. If Girard is right, religion is always with us—if by religion we understand the sacrifices which repeatedly ensure the peace of this or that society. (p.164)

But, surely, that is not what we understand by religion. We would not normally speak of Hitler's genocidal policy or of Amin's expulsions as religious activities. It may well be that one can find mechanisms, such as scapegoating, common to religious and non-religious spheres of human life, but that does not turn the non-religious into the religious. The articles of O'Hear, Soskice and Kerr, among others, thus raise the whole question what we actually count as religion and how far we are ready to expand the limits of the religious. One complaint that McGhee has against the older approach to philosophy of religion which begins with the question of the existence of God is that it tacitly restricts religion to Christianity, or at least to the Abrahamic family of faiths. It thus rules out non-theistic Buddhism from the beginning as an object of study. But it is a genuine question why we should want to call this form of Buddhism a religion at all. Why should we think of Buddhism as a religion and not, say, marxism or fascism? This volume is a worthwhile read, from which one may learn much, but it leaves unanswered questions.

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'GATHERED UNDER APOSTLES': A STUDY OF THE CATHOLIC APOSTOLIC CHURCH by Columba Graham Flegg. *Clarendon Press Oxford, 1992. 524 pp. £50.00.*

Father Flegg, who was honorary Orthodox chaplain at Cambridge University from 1988 to 1991, has elaborated an Open University doctoral thesis into a very well documented and sensitively written analysis of the nineteenth-century Catholic Apostolic Church, whose last apostle died in 1901. One very unusual feature of this body was that, unlike other adventist groups, it refused to try to perpetuate itself. Father Flegg accurately places the movement, whose origins he dates to a period between 1832 and 1835, as a part of the early nineteenth-century upper-middle class 'tory' reaction against social disorder, religious doubt and the French Revolution. The Catholic Apostolic Church was no secular or common 'toryism', however, but incarnated a passionate conviction that Roman Catholic Emancipation, the 1832 Reform Bill, 'democracy' in general and then Chartism in detail were all signs of demonic activity which was bound to end swiftly in the second advent of Christ. The Scottish Presbyterian, Edward Irving, whom Father Flegg does not regard as directly the founder of the new body, could even say (like Newman), 'the one thing which I have laboured at is to resist liberalism by opening the word of God'. The new body was not only anti-liberal, however, but also anti-evangelical, and, in virtue of its ecclesiology, anti-Tractarian as well. Dr Flegg incidentally rejects any suggestion that the Catholic Apostolics had much in common with twentieth-century charismatic movements: late Apostolic survivors compared what they saw as emotional excess unfavourably with the dignity of their own liturgy.

Although Dr Flegg stresses that the group was predominantly well-educated, there was a lack of intellectual sophistication here similar to