

BEING REASONABLE ABOUT RELIGION by William Charlton, *Ashgate*, London, 2006, pp. 170, £45 hbk.

In order to be reasonable about religion, we need first to be clear what counts as religion, and indeed what counts as being reasonable. William Charlton's exploration of these questions unsettles many of our conventional assumptions in a way, he suggests, that undermines some of the standard criticisms of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Charlton's early chapters examine the basic terms. He argues that the meanings of 'religion' and 'god' are not self-evident, and indeed can only be understood by their relation to the Judaeo-Christian paradigm. The Greek and Roman civilisations, for example, had no single concept of what we class as 'religion' and what they called 'gods' ('*theoi*', '*dei*') meant something rather different from what we mean by 'God'. An incisive analysis of the words 'magic' and 'superstition' leads Charlton to the refreshingly unfashionable claim that religious ideas and practices develop within not primitive but increasingly sophisticated societies. His reading of anthropological data in the light of that claim, though unavoidably brief, is unexpectedly convincing.

Charlton goes on to ask what kind of reasonableness we should expect religion to have. He distinguishes three fundamentally different types of explanation: teleological, in terms of reasons and purposes; mathematical and logical; and physical. Scientific explanation, he argues, which began as physical, has more recently tended to fuse the physical and mathematical, and mistakenly come to be seen as the model for all genuine reasoning. Therefore religious reasoning, which is of its nature teleological, dealing as it does with the purpose of the Creator for his creation, has been illegitimately sidelined, or at the least distorted. In fact, religious and scientific explanations cannot be in conflict precisely because the first explains purpose, the second causation.

Charlton's overall picture depends on two conclusions: that there is no such thing as non-physical causation; and that purposive activity does not call for further explanation. On the basis of these, he examines three phenomena: the origin and the existence of the universe, and the mind, concluding tentatively that none of these three have a causal explanation, and therefore cannot be explained by science. The first two can, however, be explained teleologically, as there for God's loving purposes. (I found his argument that the third cannot also so be explained unpersuasive.) Such a conclusion cannot be proved in the way that scientific conclusions can: to hold that the world has a Creator, Charlton suggests, is comparable to believing that your spouse loves you. There can be no irrefutable evidence for that position, but it may well be the only reasonable one to hold.

Charlton's preferred model for the Trinity, which he has already explored in *New Blackfriars*,¹ is that of three modes of rational agency: the Father is God acting 'as an agent alone', the Son God acting 'as a social being' and the Spirit God acting in a way 'comparable to the altruist's'. This allows him to interpret salvation and the sacraments in terms of God's gift of communion with him. That is possible because, through the incarnate Son, we can share in the divine life both socially, in the Church, and also organically, as a branch grafted onto a vine, through the Eucharist, in which, Charlton suggests, our eating of the consecrated bread turns *our* flesh into Christ's.²

In order to think clearly about religion, one needs the tools of philosophy; however, not every philosophical doctrine that Christianity has embraced has proved helpful. In particular, Charlton identifies two theories that he thinks have distorted

¹ 'McCabe on Aquinas on the Trinity', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 80, pp. 491-501

² See 'The Real Presence', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 82, pp.161-74.

Christian teaching. The first is the 'Platonist' belief that the soul is naturally immortal, by contrast with the New Testament view that we may be raised bodily from the dead by the power of God, in a way that transcends what is natural. Charlton argues that the Platonist view has been dominant since early in the history of Christianity and is responsible, among other things, for belief in eternal damnation rather than mere annihilation for those who are not 'saved'. The second allegedly distorting import is the Stoic theory of natural law, which Charlton identifies with the teaching that there are exceptionless moral rules and intrinsically good and bad kinds of act.

Leaving aside philosophical questions, this double claim requires detailed historical substantiation. Everlasting punishment is taught, on a straightforward reading, by the Gospel of Matthew at the very least, while so influential a figure as St Augustine was very clear about the difference between the Platonic survival of the separated soul and Christian bodily resurrection. (When exactly the popular consciousness became 'Platonist', if that is what it is, is an interesting question.) Augustine again when he (unlike the Stoics) argued for the controversial thesis that lying was always wrong, based his argument on scriptural texts and on Christology.

Even where one disagrees, this book is always thought-provoking and fresh in its ideas. Another couple of examples: in a chapter on the spread of Christianity, Charlton asks why historians do not take seriously the idea that rulers welcomed the new faith because they were persuaded of its truth; because Christianity genuinely did encourage social stability and welfare; and because sometimes the powerful were capable of looking beyond their own interests to that of their people. Again, Charlton links the ideas of original sin as socially inherited, and the immaculate conception of Jesus's mother, with the thought that the Jewish people, through their living of the covenant, might have progressed to the stage where one of their members could live in a way capable of being open to life that was more than human.

Being Reasonable about Religion is lucid and witty in its style and never wastes words. Sometimes, indeed, the reader will wish that its arguments were spelt out or developed more fully, or concluded less tentatively. Its author would not perhaps be disappointed if the effect of his book is to stimulate further, rather than conclude, intelligent and attentive discussion of the issues in question.

MARGARET ATKINS

THE DOMINICANS AND THE POPE: PAPAL TEACHING AUTHORITY IN THE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN THOMIST TRADITION by Ulrich Horst OP, translated by James D Mixson with a foreword by Thomas Prügl, *University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame IL, pp. 168, £21.50 pbk.*

In 2002 Ulrich Horst was invited to give the first Conway Lectures at the Medieval Institute of the University of Notre Dame; the lectures are here published in book form. In a condensed but well-documented and readable form the three chapters, 'Thomas Aquinas on papal teaching authority', 'The medieval Thomist discussion' and 'Papal teaching authority in the school of Salamanca', present topics which the author has investigated in more detail in a number of works published in German over the years.

The mendicants relies on a strong understanding of papal jurisdiction to legitimise their activities; but, as Horst makes clear, this did not necessarily result in a strong doctrine of the Pope's personal dogmatic authority.