

RELIGION AND HUMANISM by Ronald Hepburn, David Jenkins, Ninian Smart, Howard Root and Renford Bambrough. *B.B.C. Publications, 12s 6d.*

This interesting symposium amounts to a discussion of the thesis of Professor Hepburn that talk about God, though intellectually and morally stimulating and enshrining treasures of human experience, is at bottom incoherent.

Now it is a demonstrable fact that any metaphysical category whatever, when looked at in the abstract and outside the framework to which it belongs, can be made to look paradoxical. The conscious subject, for example, can be made sense of only in so far as he is conscious of something which exists apart from himself; on the other hand, it is difficult to make sense of such a thing except in as far as it does or might conceivably enter the experience of such a conscious subject. It seems to me that Professor Hepburn has applied the same destructive technique to the concept 'God'; and that he goes astray by considering the term *in abstracto* rather than in its proper contexts. He spotlights the oddness of saying that God transcends the world, yet is active within it; that he is rather Being itself than any particular being; that he is outside space and time, and yet that his deeds are events within space and time. Now it seems to me that the right way to approach analysis of the concept of 'God' is not to start, as Hepburn does, from the mysterious and baffling attributes which were derived from ordinary discourse about God by centuries of refined speculation; but to begin from this ordinary discourse about God, see what sense it makes (if any), and then to try to understand what it is about God as so conceived which has made men, as Whitehead remarked, pay metaphysical compliments to him.

The relationship of sub-atomic particles to space and time is often expressed in pretty curious terms; and in order that discourse about them should be seen to make sense, it has to be related to particular observations and experiments which take place in space and time. Then the appropriateness of the odd properties which are attributed to these particles may be seen to follow as a matter of course. Now the Bible uses the word 'God' in a strictly comparable way, as subject of active

verbs whose object is particular events in space and time. God is that which delivers the Israelites from their enemies, which causes the cycle of seasons and the success or failure of harvests, which punishes defection by chastisement. As far as ancient Old Testament usage is concerned, 'God' is correctly used as the subject of active verbs whose object is any event whatever; in the later Old Testament period, events may be alleged not to be the work of God in as far as they are the work of demonic or rebellious human wills. Thus the Book of Kings can say that *God* tempted David to the evil act of numbering the people; while the parallel passage in the Book of Chronicles, written centuries later, attributes the temptation to Satan.

Thus God, as far as the Old Testament is concerned, is roughly equivalent to what Spinoza calls *natura naturans* – nature regarded as an active principle, as that of which the *deeds* are everything that happens, rather than the totality of everything that happens. Reality, in other words, is being construed by the Bible on the model of an agent and his actions, rather than on that of a collection of infinitesimal scraps (as in the physical atomism of Democritus or the logical atomism of Russell) or on that of a single somewhat whose qualities are always actually or apparently changing (as in the absolute idealism of Parmenides, Shankhara, or Bradley).

It is from this fundamental conception of God, as the agent of which all events whatever (except perhaps in as far as they are the responsibility of rebellious inferior wills) are acts – from the fact that God is, as it is perhaps confusingly put from the contemporary point of view, First Cause of the universe – that all those attributes to which Hepburn takes exception derive. And it is this conception of God to which all the Five Ways of proving the existence of God presented by St Thomas Aquinas (even the Fourth) clearly point. As construed within this conceptual framework, the universe is identical with the totality of acts themselves, as distinct from their agent; this excludes

the pantheist identification of God and the universe. Space and time are essentially relationships between the events which constitute the universe; hence it may be seen that God himself cannot be within space and time, though his acts are so. God is 'outside' space and time, not of course spatially (since to be spatially outside anything is *ipso facto* to be within space), but in the sense that he is not a part of the universe to which space and time are intrinsic. And God plainly enjoys an existence different from, though to be sure analogous to, that of other beings – so that it may indeed be suitable to say that he is being itself rather than a particular being – since he is that agent to whose activity all the events in the universe are to be attributed, as opposed to those beings – such as galaxies, stars, planets, plants, animals or electrons – each of which may be said to cause events only within a certain comparatively narrow range. And related to every event as agent to act, yet outside the universe in the sense that he is not himself any of these events, it is indeed true that God both infinitely transcends us, and is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

Renford Bambrough asks whether it is 'conceivable that God should not exist, and yet that everything else should remain exactly the same as if he did exist', and adds 'it seems to me that transcendental theology has given no adequate answer to this challenge'. Well, here goes. From the conception of God which is derived from the Bible that his non-existence would make, literally, more than all the difference in the world. Nothing would remain the same, since nothing would exist at all. The world consists of the acts of God, and real action on the part of a non-existent agent is inconceivable. Certainly the exaggerated conception of God's transcendence fashionable in some theological circles leads to nonsense, in the way that Bambrough has suggested, as surely as the

exaggeration of his immanence, against which this was, historically speaking, a reaction, issues in triviality.

Whether the best of the older metaphysical proofs of God's existence (typified by Aquinas' Five Ways) are valid as such or not, they are useful (as Hepburn hints) in giving sense, and (if I am right as against Hepburn) can actually be seen to do so, in that they show how talk about God is related to talk about the events which constitute the world with which we are acquainted, and hence how this discourse makes as much sense as any other sort of discourse. Hepburn is quite right in suggesting that, if we forgo these proofs as so many modern Protestant theologians have done, we will never be able to anchor our discourse about God, which is admittedly largely metaphorical, in anything literal; and thus theism will merely amount, in the last analysis, to one among several available pictures of the world, comparable to the others in the moral insight or aesthetic satisfaction it provides, but not conceivably true as a matter of fact.

Hepburn observes that Christians do in fact differ from other people in that they believe particular historical propositions, for example that Jesus physically rose from the dead, to be true. It is worth adding that they also believe that certain events, like the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, will happen in the future. If these characteristic Christian beliefs and expectations about past and future are false, perhaps it would be better to use some term like 'evolution' or 'nature' (in the sense of Spinoza's *natura naturans* as against his *natura naturata*) to refer to the First Cause, instead of 'God'. But in fact they are true – though this appears to be a well-kept secret among the more diehard of contemporary Christians.

Hugo Meynell

CHRISTIANITY VERSUS VIOLENCE by Stanley Windass. *Sheed and Ward, 10s 6d.*

Reading this book was an experience of increasing sadness and disappointment. It is subtitled 'A social and historical study of war and Christianity',

and the opening pages seemed to promise a clearly presented analysis of the Christian's predicament as a member of human society, faced