

Reviews

WHAT IS FAITH? — ESSAYS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION by Anthony Kenny, *Oxford University Press*, 12, .vii +125.

This short collection of essays falls into two parts. The first addresses Alvin Plantinga's proposal that belief in the existence of God may be "properly basics." (such that it can rationally be held independently of evidence). This part of the book was first published in 1983 by Columbia UP under the title *Faith and Reason*. The second part comprises four essays. The topics addressed here include the conceivability of God and the relation between the problem of evil and the argument from design. The treatment of these various topics is not technical, and Kenny's style is characteristically clear and precise. So this book will hold the attention not only of specialists in the subject but also of readers who would like an introduction to philosophical discussion of these questions.

Kenny shares with Plantinga the belief that one standard (until-recently *the* standard) philosophical account of rational belief is defective. According to this account a belief is rational only if it is self-evident or evident to the senses (or incorrigible, in some formulations), or such that it can be derived from beliefs which belong to one or other of these categories. The criticism of this account, the proposal of a substitute, and the application of this substitute to the case of religious belief are in turn the concerns of the first part of Kenny's book. The upshot of his argument is that the rationality of religious belief is tied to the viability of natural theology: if natural theology succeeds in establishing the existence of God, then religious belief will be rational and even (for some) properly basic, but it will not be rational otherwise.

In this last point Kenny disagrees with Plantinga. It was not to be expected that Plantinga would revise his position in the light of Kenny's argument, and indeed he has not done so. For Plantinga is clear that the construction of a criterion of proper basicity (and of proper belief more generally) must be inductive. That is, we should begin with particular beliefs and decide whether or not they are properly basic; only then can we proceed to the task of formulating a general criterion which any belief must satisfy in order to count as properly basic. Since Plantinga finds that the belief that God exists can be properly basic independently of any conclusion drawn from natural theology, his criterion will of course differ from Kenny's. Rather than as a rebuttal of Plantinga, Kenny's proposal is best viewed as a development of the traditional view which marks an improvement on that view in meeting more clearly its own standard of

rational belief and in acknowledging that there are circumstances in which religious belief would be properly basic.

Although Kenny writes as an agnostic, theists of a traditional (and above all Thomistic) persuasion will find themselves in sympathy with a lot of his discussion. Here I think of his account of the nature of faith (p. 46 f.); his scepticism about the idea that we might know God by means of something akin to sense perception (p. 38 f.); his affirmation of the importance of natural theology (see again his criterion of rational belief); and his reluctance to see God as a member of our moral community (p. 87). However, it seems to me unfortunate that in his discussion of faith (which he distinguishes from belief in the existence of God), he fixes exclusively upon the account according to which faith must be "certain". It is this assumption in particular which leads him to conclude that faith is (very likely) vicious, since it makes claim upon our adherence which is out of proportion to its real epistemic standing.

However, Kenny's agnosticism on the question of whether God exists is tentative. He observes that he does not know whether his position is more rational than those of the theist and atheist. In part this is because he acknowledges the importance of firm belief in such matters (p. 60). But he suggests that the agnostic need not be separated altogether from the practice of religion; in particular, prayer presupposes only the possibility that God exists (p.120). One is left wondering how far the author is willing to make his own the plea of the poet Arthur Hugh Clough whose words he cites in concluding the book:

Be thou but there,— in soul and heart,
I will not ask to feel thou art.

MARK WYNN

PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY IN THE MIDDLE AGES by G.R. Evans. London; *Routledge*, 1993 x + 139 pp.

Readers might well fear that a book with a title so general and weighty as *Philosophy and Theology in the Middle Ages* will be long, technical and forbidding—especially when they discover that it was originally part of a series published in German! Yet Gillian Evans has produced a slim volume, written with elegant verve; an easy afternoon's reading. Wisely, Dr Evans chooses not to follow a chronological plan (which, in the space allowed, would have become a gallop through the centuries). Rather, she divides the book into two parts: the first examines the aims, sources and techniques of medieval philosophers and theologians, whilst the second examines some of the main topics they discussed.

Evans is at her best in setting out the context of medieval thought in