Booknotes

Shortly before his sudden death in 2006 D.Z.Phillips had prepared for the press a book based on the 2005 Claremont conference on the philosophy of religion. This has now appeared under the title *Whose God? Which Tradition? The Nature of Belief in God* (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008). It cannot be said that the book is easy to read or to disentangle, consisting as it does of somewhat unconnected papers, followed by notes on the ensuing discussions which were transcribed by Phillips himself. Nevertheless what lies behind it is interesting and significant, and not just as Phillips' *opus ultimum* (if indeed it is that).

What we can see from his editorial introduction is that as late as 2006 Phillips was still extremely irritated by the charge levelled at him from the start of his distinguished career, that he somehow misrepresented religious belief in general and Christian belief in particular. This irritation was, of course, not new. What seems new in this book is Phillips' enlisting of a group of (neo) Thomists as allies, against an assorted band of American philosophers of religion (Plantinga, Pike, Wolterstoff, Hasker and Stephen T. Davis) and British analytical philosophers, such as Richard Swinburne and his followers. It is perhaps unfortunate that of the opponents, only Davis contributes to the book. Still what becomes clear is that the Thomists and the Phillips group of Wittgensteinians represent themselves as having a clearer sense of what cannot be said about God than their Reformed and Swinburnean opponents. Thus, for the Phillips camp, God is not an individual, nor can he suffer or change, nor is he part of the world of space and time, nor is he a thing among other things, nor is he a moral agent, nor can he be informed of anything, as if he were ignorant of them.

No doubt the critics of this position would riposte that quite a lot of positive knowledge is actually contained in the list of what cannot be said, particularly with respect to God's impassivity and changelessness. For the critics, as Davis points out in his contribution, the impassive, changeless God looks too close to the distant and absent God of the Epicureans and the deists of the eighteenth century for comfort. Is God not a person? Does he not change and learn? Is he the source of *all* that happens, including my sins? Theologically and biblically the 'reformed' and Swinburnean God might well seem closer to religious belief and practice than the God promulgated

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by the Wittgensteinians and the Thomists. It would be a neat irony if at the end of his life Phillips is to be seen as expounding the God of the philosophers rather than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

But perhaps in fairness it would be too neat. As Davis points out, what both sides are caught up by is the essential tension surely present in all mature religious thought, that between the transcendence of the divine and its immanence. It is surely an essential tension, as both poles are intrinsic to serious religious practice and experience. There will always be strain and a tendency to emphasise one pole at the expense of the other, and in the ensuing discussions there will be strange and unexpected alliances and oppositions, as we see in Phillips' book.

Essential tension sounds fruitful (and certainly there is a lot of incidental interest in *Whose God? Which Tradition?*, quite apart from the discussion of its central opposition). But what if religious thought is actually based on a contradiction or conceptual incoherence, precisely at the point where believer will want to say that God is *both* immaterial, simple and eternal *and* a mind and a person who designs and controls the universe? In his recent Royal Institute of Philosophy lecture, Anthony Kenny raised that very possibility, resting the possibility of the reasonableness of religion in assigning a metaphorical, non-literal sense of at least some of the propositions of religious faith. This lecture, which was published in *Philosophy* in July 2007 (pp 381–98), is contained in Kenny's latest collection of articles, entitled *From Empedocles to Wittgenstein* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

As the title suggests, the collection is a wide-ranging one, covering topics from the creation to the after-life (or not), and from Matthew Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna* to a fascinating account of the travails surrounding the Wittgensteinian *Nachlass* (written from a position of some authority, since Kenny has been a trustee of the *Nachlass* since 1990). There are also a number of papers covering topics in Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas and Wittgenstein. Kenny tells us in his introduction that these four, together with Descartes and Kant, make up his list of the very greatest philosophers, and had done so even before he started writing his multi-volume history of philosophy in 2001. One wonders how constant have been the allegiances of others over the years, and also the extent to which Kenny's pantheon is common ground among the majority of philosophers to-day.

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