Reviews

Recent Theology: Divine Simplicity

Many good philosophers, themselves Christian believers, would agree with William P. Alston, one of the finest philosophers of religion in the Anglo-American analytical tradition, in finding Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of divine simplicity 'a lot to swallow' (*Divine Nature and Human Language* , 1989, page 183). Even granted that there need be no incompatibility between the doctrine of God as Trinity of persons and this notion of the total lack of complexity in the divine nature, it seems difficult to say that there cannot be any real distinction between one essential attribute and another in God, and still more puzzling that there can be no real distinction in God between essence and existence.

As everyone knows, the unmoved mover, first cause, etc., the existence of which the Five Ways are held to prove (*Summa Theologiae* 1a. q2 article 3), might actually be spatially extended and corporeal (q3 article 1). The distinctiveness of the Christian God, however, as Aquinas contends, citing John 4:24 ('God is spirit'), resides in absolute simpleness (q3). 'God is not composed of extended parts, since he is not a body; nor of form and matter; nor does he differ from his own nature; nor his nature from his existence; nor can one distinguish in him genus and difference; nor substance and accidents' (q3 article 7). Nor does God enter into composition with created things (article 8), as *anima mundi* , or form-giving principle of everything, or indeed prime matter. The last was the view of David of Dinant (who probably survived the burning of his writings by the bishop of Paris in 1210) — a 'really stupid thesis', Thomas says, in an unusual display of contempt, uncharacteristically naming the authors whose doctrines he here rejects. Nowadays, one not uncommon way of undermining the doctrine of divine simplicity is, of course, to maintain, with process theologians, that the biblical doctrine of God as working through creation and history must mean that God himself is developing through his interaction with our evolving world. The notion of God as *actus purus* — radical *energeia* , as we might say, going back to the Greek — seems, to the opponents of 'classical theism', to deliver a picture of God, paradoxically, as an unacceptably static entity. It cannot be, they think, that there is, for example, no potentiality— no growth — in the divine nature. There must also be a difference between God's essence and God's existence — God's nature cannot yet be fulfilled or exhausted in his ongoing *life* .

Aquinas is not alone in insisting on the lack of all *compositio* in the divine nature. On the contrary, his account is clearly indebted to Jewish and Islamic theologies as well as to Augustine, and others. God *is* what he *has* , as Augustine says, in a famous passage (*De Civitate Dei* XI, 1). On the other hand, Duns Scotus, insisting on our being able to distinguish among the divine attributes, and, more particularly, arguing that some terms can be applied to God and creatures univocally, initiated, perhaps inadvertently, a certain trend towards the modern rejection of the doctrine

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of divine simplicity.

The question is discussed, compactly and with her customary incisiveness, by Eleonore Stump in ***A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*** edited by Philip L Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Blackwell, Oxford 1997, pp 639, £65), only one of dozens of splendid articles in this superb collection. Her exposition and rebuttal of the arguments against divine simplicity are what should most concern philosophers, of course; if she has got those wrong, then it does not matter about the benefits of the doctrine in other connections. If it is coherent, however, as she shows, it allows us to escape the supposed choice that we have to make in theological ethics: either the right and the good are whatever God wills (so they could have been quite different) or the right and the good are inscribed in the created order (as if God has to fall in with standards now existing independently). There is no need to decide between morality grounded in divine decrees (external to us) and morality as built into nature, and especially human nature (and so external to a mere spectator God). On the simplicity doctrine, God's nature *is* perfect goodness: the standard for moral goodness is not external to God. On the other hand, God's will *is* God's nature, which in turn *is* perfect goodness: 'not just anything could turn out to be moral'.

Secondly, Eleonore Stump suggests, the modern (Leibnizian) argument for the existence of God — that unless we admit the existence of a necessary being we have no reason for the existence of anything — depends on the principle of sufficient reason: nothing is without a reason for its being, and for being as it is. (Heidegger's brilliant and often very funny lecture course *Der Satz von Grund* , 1957, one of his richest texts, takes off from, and takes off, precisely this highly contestable theology.) We are left, as the schoolboy said, with a God who is just a brute fact — so we might as well stick with the brute fact of the world itself. But if, as Aquinas argued, divine simplicity is entailed by the very idea of God (in the three monotheistic faiths), then God is a being whose necessary existence is self-explanatory in the sense that the explanation of it is supplied entirely by the nature of the being. The doctrine of simplicity simply ('simply'!) *is* that God's being is its own reason for being, and for being as it is: perfection (q4), which means goodness, *bonitas* , bounty (q6).

The *Companion* is far too rich even to summarize. Philosophical issues in the world religions; philosophical theology since the preSocratics (e.g., Scott MacDonald on the Middle Ages, David Burrell on medieval Islam, Merold Westphal on Kant and Hume); ten contemporary varieties (pragmatism, personalism, process theology, existentialism, Wittgensteinianism, Thomism, etc.); the linguistic turn (treated by J.M. Soskice, Michael Martin, and Roger Trigg); the divine perfections (e.g., C.J.F. Williams on being, Paul Helm on goodness, Patrick Sherry on beauty); theistic arguments; challenges to theistic belief (by Kai Nielsen and Antony Flew); theism and science; theism and ethics (divine command theories, natural law, virtue ethics, etc.); philosophical reflection on Christian doctrines (e.g., David Brown on the Trinity, Philip Quinn on sin, Eleonore Stump on petitionary prayer, Basil Mitchell on tradition); and

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finally three essays on 'new directions' (Sarah Coakley on feminism, John Hick on pluralism and Paul J. Griffiths on comparative philosophy of religion). The forthcoming paperback edition makes this the most accessible invitation to the whole range of the history and present relevance of issues in philosophical theology — a splendid addition to Blackwell's already valuable series of *Companions to Philosophy.*

In *From Existence to God* (1992), reviewed (favourably) by David Braine (*New Blackfriars* April 1994, pp 228-230), Barry Miller argued for the existence of a creator of the universe, leading another distinguished reviewer, not however himself a Christian, R.W. Hepburn (in *Mind* , 1993, pp 674-76), to conclude that the cosmological argument may have been shown to be free of 'what looked like some serious obstacles'. Hepburn added, however, that there remained some way to travel 'from uncaused cause to the worship-worthy God of Christian religion'. As Miller tells us in his new book ***A Most Unlikely God: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Nature of God*** (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame and London, 1996, pp. 175), he now wants to fill this gap.

The difficulty Miller seeks to remove is what he tells us is now known as 'perfect-being' theology (never mentioned under that label in the Blackwell *Companion*): the notion that God is 'simply the greatest thing around, some kind of super-being that would be quite capable of evoking admiration and wonder, but who could scarcely be described as being absolutely transcendent, or as being worthy of worship'. Perfect-being theologians, whom (a trifle arcanely) Miller also labels 'Anselmians', hold that God is like some of his creatures in being powerful, knowing, good, etc., unlike them however in having these properties to the maximum degree. The opposite of this is the negative theology that Aquinas found in Moses Maimonides: terms applied to both God and creatures are simply used equivocally. There is no need, Miller contends, to think we have to choose between a theology in which God is conceived so anthropomorphically as to be describable by predicates which remain basically human ones, even if maximally prolonged, and a theology in which God is concealed or even lost in the systematic denial of all human significance in the terms that we use. The third way lies in Aquinas's doctrine of the divine simplicity.

Of course, the doctrine is widely regarded as unbelievable. Miller cites distinguished philosophers: Anthony Kenny ('sophistry and illusion'), Alvin Plantinga ('flouting the most fundamental claims of theism'), and others. He is, however, not happy with the attempt to divert such hostility that he finds exemplified by Brian Davies (in the *festschrift* for Herbert McCabe, 1987), as well as by David Burrell (in *Aquinas: God and Action* , 1979) and by Keith Ward (in *The Concept of God* , 1974). In slightly different ways, Miller thinks, they attempt to save the doctrine of divine simplicity by interpreting it as meaning that we can say nothing positive about God at all — but only something about what he is *not.* On the contrary, Miller argues, when we recognize God as *actus purus* we break free of the illusion of God's being 'a human being writ large', but we need not go to the other extreme and find God 'devoid of anything bearing the faintest resemblance

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to creatures of any kind, whether human or non-human'. In effect, for Miller, as expounded by Brian Davies, Aquinas's doctrine of divine simplicity is so apophatic that it is indistinguishable from the negative theology of Maimonides that Aquinas rejected (q13, article 5).

However that may be, Barry Miller, speaking explicitly for 'classical theism' (page 160), has made out a good case for the viability of Aquinas's doctrine of God as *actus purus* — neither 'the alien void offered by negative theologians', nor 'the putatively perfect being that proves to be made in the image of man'. This 'most unlikely God', Miller insists, in his final challenging footnote, is certainly the God of the Bible — 'To the objection that the Bible not only makes no mention of his simplicity but speaks of him in a thoroughgoing anthropomorphic way, I reply that this is scarcely surprising, for the Bible is no more a philosophical treatise than it is a scientific one. We have no more right to expect it to describe God in philosophical terms than to describe the origin of the Universe in scientific terms'. Philosophical theology, as elegantly practised as it is in this slim book, cuts right to the centre of theology.

FERGUS KERR OP

FRANZ OVERBECK: THEOLOGIAN? RELIGION AND HISTORY IN THE THOUGHT OF FRANZ OVERBECK, by Martin Henry. European University Studies, Series XXIII (Theology), vol. 536, Frankfurt am Main-Berlin-Bern-New York-Paris-Vienna: *Peter Lang,* **1995. £36.**

Franz Overbeck, professor of New Testament and Early Church History at Basel from 18 70 until his early retirement in 1897, is not well-known, and even sometimes confused with Johann Friedrich Overbeck, the founder of the 'Nazarene' school of nineteenth-century German painters, as Martin Henry tartly points out in the very first footnote of this book (culprits include André Malraux and Hans Küng). It is Dr Henry's conviction—and that of David Tracy, in his justly warm endorsement of this book—that Overbeck deserves to be better known, indeed is an indispensable figure for our understanding of the plight of theology in the modern world. There are, however, formidable obstacles in the way of this deeper understanding. Although renowned for his learning, Overbeck published very little, and the selection from his *Nachlass,* published by his pupil and friend, C.A. Bernoulli, as *Christentum und Kultur,* is, as Henry demonstrates, inadequate and sometimes actually misrepresents Overbeck. Further, his thoughts are expressed in tortuous German. It is, in fact, easier to appreciate the historical significance of Overbeck, than to approach the man directly. While still a student, Overbeck experienced the dissolution of his Christian Protestant faith under the corrosive acids of modernity and modern critical scholarship. He never recovered his faith, and had nothing but contempt for liberal theology, which, in his view, failed to take the measure either of modernity or of the essentially ascetic nature of classical Christianity. In the case of Harnack, contempt turned to scorn for the self-important, and self-deceived, liberal *Hoftheologe.* This outright rejection of liberal theology was grist to Karl Barth's mill in his attack on liberal theology

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