

# Reviews

**VIRTUE ETHICS AND SOCIOLOGY: ISSUES OF MODERNITY AND RELIGION** edited by Kieran Flanagan and Peter C.Jupp, *Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2000, Pp.xiii+267, £47.50 hbk.*

These papers, drawn from the 1997 conference of the British Sociological Association's Sociology of Religion Study Group, are—unlike so many post-conference concoctions—impeccably edited and, in some cases, extensively rewritten. They occupy the fertile borderlands between sociology, theology and philosophy, and should do much to reduce the mutual demonizing and boundary-maintenance disputes that so often plague relationships between these disciplines. They also have a strong and specific thematic focus. At its core lies a broad-based (perhaps *too* broad based?) concern not only with what one co-editor, Kieran Flanagan calls 'the setting of virtue and its recognition' but also with the belief systems that govern what is to be read as virtuous and 'how are ideas of virtue grounded, recognised and realized?' (pp.240-1). Inevitably such large questions elicited a large response. Forty papers were presented at the conference, of which thirteen are published here, drawn chiefly, if not exclusively, from sociologists working within the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Unsurprisingly two 'neo-classical' theorists receive early and specific attention. Indeed they permeate the work of many contributors. One, predictably, is Alasdair MacIntyre and his key text, *After Virtue* (1981). His central contention, succinctly summarised by Keith Tester, is that in the present there prevails a multiplicity of different, various and competing ethical systems each of which possesses its own criterion of the excellent and the good, where it is impossible to appeal to any existent universal standards in order to judge between these different positions (p.41).

Another contributor, Peter McMylor, despite one horrendously simplistic soundbite (MacIntyre is 'an Aristotelian Thomist and a convert to Catholicism', p.21) expounds MacIntyre's position with subtlety and clarity, successfully rebutting the now familiar sociological critique of this as no more than historicist nostalgia for a lost age, not least because 'Aristotelian virtue ethics should not be seen as the distant endeavour recently resuscitated by MacIntyre from long-dead sources' but rather 'a live tradition which has had many distinguished exponents in the twentieth century' (p.31). Regular readers of *New Blackfriars* will not need reminding of this, but one suspects that a number of contemporary sociologists and theologians will!

Max Weber too, like MacIntyre after him, was also preoccupied with the contemporary sources of private and public morality. Indeed Keith Tester's memorable aphorism that 'Weber might not know if virtue is possible, but he is sure that it is necessary' (p.46) surely applies to both men, although for Weber, as Tester convincingly argues 'the problem is one of how to recover reason, the freedom of humanity and the possibility

of subjective meaningfulness while also accepting the fate of these times of disenchantment and meaninglessness' (p.42). Precisely. Tester also (rightly) points us towards Weber's wonderful essay 'Science as a Vocation' with its strongly ethical subtext, that 'science requires a certain virtue: the virtue of the duty to reason and to human freedom' (p.44) although he makes no attempt to modify critically Weber's position in a world which is now irretrievably post-Hiroshima and post-Heisenberg. There follows a cluster of specific attempts to characterise the nature, status and role of 'virtue' in explicit religious traditions and as acted out within the current cultural contexts of modernity and postmodernity. Here, although eclecticism predominates and quality varies, not unlike in contemporary moral discourse itself!, some highly illuminating ethnographic contexts for virtue are explored. Rohit Barot, like Weber before him, points to the connections between religion, sexuality and celibacy, and identifies the latter as doubly virtuous both within the Hindu tradition of self-renunciation and also as something that is integral to the dynamics of Hindu social organisation. Both are, he fears, threatened by modernity, especially in the cities, where Rupert Murdoch's satellite transmissions from Hong Kong bombard with graphic erotic images of material self-gratification and pleasure (p.150). The same charge could no doubt be levelled at 'Bollywood' also. Paul Heelas, too, contributes a characteristically informed appraisal of what he calls the New Age 'Ethic of Humanity' (itself perceived as a 'spiritual' truth) and the utopian strain that accompanies this, while *Pink Dandelion* (*sic*), writing from within his own tradition, sees 'no necessary connection' between Quaker theology and Quaker ethics. Indeed he jolts at least two stereotypes cherished by non-Quakers (including this reviewer) even further when he admits that today it is hard to identify a normative set of theological beliefs among group members, and argues that nowadays their 'ethics of social justice...can be nurtured in ways other than the spiritual' (p.171).

Equally challenging, and certainly the most empirically grounded contribution to this volume, is Sylvia Collins' enquiry (drawing upon a structured survey of over a thousand 13 to 16 year-olds in the South of England) into how, precisely, young people's ethical choices are informed by their faith. Her research shows, incontrovertibly, that for them 'the transcendent...was an addition to, not a replacement of, trusted human relationships as a source of meaning, identity, hope and purpose' and that 'whether God was regarded as good, good did not necessarily refer to God' (pp.94-5). There are also some accompanying surprises—not least that environmental and nuclear destruction anxieties (particularly identified by Giddens, for example, as primary sources of late modern existential angst) are barely mentioned by any of Collins' respondents. More important perhaps is that this enquiry is more than just a footnote to on-going secularization and modernity debates. It also indicates that on this evidence at least, for the next generation, moral decision-making remains related, albeit tangentially, to faith, but 'primarily in an immanent rather than a transcendental form' (p.100). If so, then the pedagogic as well as the

credal implications are clear enough. As Collins herself warns us religious educators face a difficult task if they are asked to re-establish a model for ethical decision-making that is based on religious authority' (p.101). There is much else to savour in this collection. Not least is Jessica Lindohf's alert, and theologically sophisticated account of the role of Judeo-Christian apocalyptic in popular cinema ('in an era when the Church is now turning its back on the apocalypse the challenge is being taken up by popular culture' p.199) and Kieran Flanagan's dazzling demolition of Giddens' *Transformations of Intimacy* where 'as relationships become purified in calculation, the need to let go in love is undermined' (p.113).

Nonetheless, good as many of these essays are, some broad caveats remain. One is that the precise relationship between so-called 'virtue ethics' and public and private morality (itself a component of post-modernity) is not always clearly delineated. The whole question of what moral absolutes should be retained, and by whom, in a morally relative universe, is not *directly* confronted by any of the contributors. Another is that a strongly documented case could be made for the recent emergence of 'human rights' as a kind of globalised virtue ethic, serving of only as the secular theology of secular global institutions such as the U.N., but also as something which has become increasingly salient within the in-house theologies of religious bodies themselves. Above all, and perhaps inevitably, papers originally delivered in 1997 and finally published prior to 11 September 2001 have a certain *déjà vu*, even unreality, about them. Indeed it could be argued that the present macro-scenario (where polarization has displaced globalization) puts metaphysics in general, and virtue ethics in particular, firmly back into the public, and private, domains.

Behind the banality of phrases like 'the axis of evil' and the incapacity of elites to ask 'but who is terrorizing *whom?*' lies a highly traditional debate about the ethics of a just war. The vocabulary may be archaic, even arcane, but the consequences are not, especially for virtue ethics themselves. To adopt Max Weber's well-known remarks (cited by Tester p.42) in his 1918 lecture: 'I do not know how one might wish to decide 'scientifically' the value of Judeo-Christian and Islamic culture: for here...different gods struggle with one another and for all times to come'. A chilling prospect for all of us.

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**A BRIEF GUIDE TO BELIEFS: Ideas, Theologies, Mysteries and Movements** by Linda Edwards. *Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2001. Pp 578, £12.99 pbk.*

A throng of books has appeared in recent years claiming to tell you within one volume all you basically want to know about the world's religions. In fact, none of them can meet everybody's needs—some are dictionaries of religion, some anthologies, some introductory guides to the six or seven major faiths, some interfaith guides, some social or historical surveys. However, Linda Edwards bravely sets out to meet all our fundamental requirements in 578 pages. She tells us in her first sentence that her book

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