

Reviews

THE MORAL CASE AGAINST RELIGIOUS BELIEF by R. A. Sharpe
SCM Press, London, 1997, pp x + 102 £7.95 paperback

This short and passionate book is a model of clear prose and presents a serious challenge to religious belief, in particular Christianity. Indeed, I would not be surprised if some religious believers were to lose their faith in consequence of reading it. In an obvious sense this possibility would be welcome to the author, though I suspect he might want to urge such a person not to give up too quickly. He is scathing, however, about educated converts, "the Gadarene rush of Anglicans to join the Roman Catholic Church", whom he regards as exhibiting "irrationality with a vengeance, and either dishonesty or self-deception" (p. 95).

Sharpe does not think that the attitudes cultivated by sincere Christians — such as trust, gratitude and love — are bad in themselves; in fact he celebrates their importance to living well. Rather his repeated claim is that such attitudes are misapplied in religion and thereby are corrupted. Religion, or at least central aspects of it are a kind of moral perversion. In and of itself morality is good; indeed it is essential to human flourishing. Better, then, that it flow clean and clear, free of the murky pollutants of God-worship. Sharpe seeks not only to liberate morality from slavery to religion but to enlist it in overthrowing its would-be master.

The author is Professor of Philosophy at St David's University College Lampeter. Hitherto he has written mostly in aesthetics and in philosophy of psychology. The present work is not philosophical as such, though only someone philosophically knowledgeable could have written it. Not because of the references to figures such as Wittgenstein, or Kant, but because of the style of argument. Again and again subtle distinctions are made and fine lines of intelligibility are traced, the usual purpose being to show that religious appropriations of moral concepts produce empty, incoherent or corrupt formulations. The *modus operandi* is reminiscent of Bernard Williams and of the late Peter Winch. It is tempting to add 'and of Wittgenstein'. As Sharpe recognises, however, his argument is somewhat at odds with Wittgenstein of whom he writes that an "unappetising sentimentality was liable to come over him when he thought about religion". (Wales being something of a Wittgensteinian enclave I suspect there may be trouble in the valleys over that).

For the most part the standard of argument is high but in the Epilogue rhetorical excess defeats good judgement. Sharpe writes: "Nobody now supposes that the arguments once thought to show the existence of God actually work ... Hume destroyed arguments [from cause and effect] ... the argument from design was disposed of by Darwinian theory [of] evolution working through natural selection ... the place of religion in our lives ... has largely vanished ... religion has lost its confidence ... believers are on the defensive" (p. 92). These claims are at best contentious, and arguably false. Philosophical theology has

undergone a renaissance; ironically, one product of which is a family of new-style design arguments building on a position which Sharpe himself is keen to maintain, namely, the reality of teleological and intentional explanations. In the US a new alliance of orthodox-minded Catholics, Lutherans and Jews is gaining ground in intellectual circles; and in Paris a million well-educated young people attended Mass celebrated by the unmistakably orthodox and confident John Paul II.

Sharpe's concluding, ill-aimed swipes are all the more imprudent since they are inessential to, and distract from the interesting case presented in the six preceding chapters: Religion and Morality; Worship; Faith and Trust; Love; Sexual Morality; and Immortality. The general form of his argument is as described above, showing that human concerns lose their meaning or are corrupted when relocated in a religious framework. I do not underestimate the care and attention needed to refute Sharp's points. I would say, however, that just as they exhibit the common merit of probing beneath the surface of familiar claims, so they are liable to the same deficiency of not going deep enough. For example, in relation to the idea that God constitutes a *telos* of human activity, Sharpe tends to read this as rendering activity instrumental; but that misses the idea that an end need not be distinct from the activities specified in terms of it, nor should it be thought of as rendering further activity pointless.

In general Sharpe's references to religious sources consist mostly of quoting from hymns and the shorter catechism. I do not criticise either, but I do think that if one is going to launch an attack on a tradition that can lay claim to having produced some of the most profound writings in human history then one is obliged to consider these. Where is the evidence of having considered the teachings of such giants of the spiritual life as Gregory the Great, Thomas à Kempis, Julian of Norwich, François De Sales, John Wesley, Jean-Pierre de Caussade, and so on? And if catechetical works are to be cited why not engage the subtleties of the 690 page *Catechism of the Catholic Church*?

I would encourage readings of this book, but add that one should take care not to be swayed by its evangelical fervour. A good exercise for the religiously-inclined would be to read it and refute it. That exercise is not easy, but once completed it is sure to have deepened and strengthened one's faith.

JOHN HALDANE

LIBERATING CONSCIENCE: Feminist Explorations in Moral Theology by Anne E. Patrick; SCM Press, £14.95.

The thesis of this book is that the modern world is "turning a corner", undergoing a Copernican revolution, in theories of knowledge, that has profound implications for Christian ethics, and that the teaching office of the Catholic Church is in danger of being badly wrong-footed by the change of direction. The author believes that this change, and indeed the Church's eventual adjustment to it, are inescapable, but that much harm may be done in the meantime by the attempts of an authoritarian