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Reviews

THEOLOGY AFTER WITTGENSTEIN by Fergus Kerr. *Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, 202 pp. £22.50.*

This book is a pleasure to read and well worth reading—scholarly, refreshingly clear and often droll. While particularly important to the philosophy of religion and the 'philosophy of theology', its implications fan more widely into dogmatics, ethics and spirituality. Those who already are familiar with Wittgenstein's writings will find much to interest them, and those who are not may soon be looking for a copy of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

Fergus Kerr does not attempt an account of everything Wittgenstein said that might have bearing on religious belief but concentrates instead on a few central and related themes; the attack on Cartesianism in philosophy, the mentalist-individualist theories of knowledge to which that gives rise, and Wittgenstein's response in terms of his own particular version of 'Lebensphilosophie' (the bustle of life). These themes are developed in a leisurely, almost narrative way, interwoven with biographical comment, which is one of the attractions of the book. The reader is lured into seeing as puzzling that which previously seemed straightforward, and as straightforward that which previously puzzled. The result is a good introduction to how it *feels* to do philosophy with someone who could say, 'My aim is to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense'. (P. 1., §464)

The first chapter introduces us to the enemy; the modern conception of the self, the Cartesian 'ego' which, even when stripped of all previous beliefs, the senses, the body, confidence in the external world, is discovered as a pinpoint of consciousness. Although

this language-less, asocial individual no longer has many friends amongst the philosophers, Kerr's contention is that the 'self-conscious and self-reliant, self-transparent and all responsible individual which Descartes and Kant between them imposed upon modern philosophy may easily be identified ... in the work of many modern theologians' (p. 5). Karl Rahner, with his 'obsession for epistemological preliminaries', is an important target, but Hans Küng, Don Cupitt, Schubert Ogden and Peter Chirico come in for criticism, too. Indeed, these are just a few of those Kerr might have mentioned who seem to assume that modern theology should be characterised by a 'turn to the subject'. Existentialism pure is no longer theologically fashionable but its legacy remains in the isolated individual who, with little regard for language or the society of others, finds God and chooses moral convictions.

About Wittgenstein's personal religion little can be said with certainty, although Fr Kerr has culled what he can from the enigmatic remarks to Drury. Despite this personal elusiveness, Wittgenstein commented more on religion than almost any other modern philosopher of distinction. Clearly he took religion *seriously*, if he was not himself in an orthodox sense religious. Indeed Kerr goes farther and suggests that the fundamental problem with which Wittgenstein concerned himself was a theological one.

The *Philosophical Investigations* open with a quote from St Augustine, self-consciously invoking 'the decisive representative of that interweaving of metaphysical anthropology and Christian thought that remains the background of modern western thought,' (p. 39) Kerr convincingly links Augustine's account of infant language acquisition (like an immigrant from a far country who can already speak but not *this* alien tongue) with Neoplatonic remnants in Augustine's anthropology (whereby man in the world is lost in a far country with only dim remembrance of a previous, noncorporeal existence). Here in the *Confessions* is the origin of epistemological solitude, 'the "I" in the sight of God which remains the paradigm for the self even where the theology has been abandoned.' However orthodox the "I" of the *Confessions* may be, the later "I" of Descartes' imaginings is a gnostic creature, essentially bodiliness and merely trapped for a time in the flesh out of which it peers as through a mask. The persistent tendency in western philosophy to regard bodiliness as the source of epistemological limitation is just one more residue of the gnosticism; 'The aim of Wittgenstein's "spiritual essence" is to liberate us from that disseminated antipathy to bodiliness which is the last remnant of heretical theology...' (p. 141).

Nevertheless, the reader may have qualms—if this picture of the self is to go, what will happen to the soul? to mystical theology? to personal conversion experience and private prayer? Kerr's suggestion is not that these will be abolished (or rather shown to have had only a spurious reality anyway) but rather that they may need to be quite radically re-understood. The rest of the book quietly takes one through a range of Wittgensteinian arguments and preoccupations—'forms of life', other minds, 'pain', private language. Wittgenstein is cleared of the charge of being an idealist, with the concomitant scepticism that might involve, and also of the charge of being an ordinary realist. Realism and idealism as traditionally conceived both overlook *das Leben*, the 'bustle of life' of which we are part. It is our acting which is primary, not some interior 'act' of meaning by which items in the world are matched to items in our minds.

All this, Kerr claims somewhat controversially, would mean an end to metaphysics. Theology without the mental ego must see faith as embedded in the whole of life. The starting point cannot be the lonely, disembodied self (pace Rahner) for we have no access to the divine apart from our life and language, and therefore no access to God without each other. Chapter 7, in which these points are developed, should be indispensable reading for any philosopher of religion interested in Wittgenstein.

Yet Kerr's concern is not really with philosophy of religion, at least not as conceived in analytic philosophical circles, but with the 'philosophy of theology'. The last chapter, in case the reader was beginning to think the book misnamed, returns explicitly to some areas in

which doing theology after Wittgenstein might call for changes; the concept of prayer, volition and intention in ethics, the status of the embryo and of the soul, Christology. Each is only lightly touched on, but enough to make the point that theology after Wittgenstein will not be a bringing of new arguments into old debates so much as a real 'change of the subject'.

Much remains to be developed. Kerr is better at criticising the modern self than in describing the 'Lebensphilosophie' which will free us of this ghoul—the phrase 'bustle of life' is underexplained for the weight it carries. The realism/idealism debate is discussed as though definitely over—Kerr notes but does not develop the attempts of some contemporary philosophers like Sabina Lovibond to develop realist arguments fully informed by Wittgensteinian concerns. The emphasis on bodies gives, to my mind, an impression of great physicality to what may be more modest observations about the kind of creatures we are.

It is a sign of the success of the book that the reader is left at the end feeling unsettled, feeling the need for more theological comment. (Rereading the first chapter at this point is worthwhile.) No doubt Fr Kerr has not said his last words on these subjects. In the meantime we may console ourselves with his barbed compliment:

Theologians have great scope for philosophical work inside the practice of theology. More than this, they are in an advantageous position to take part in excavating the foundations of a religious myth about the self that continues to imprison much modern philosophy. (p. 186)

JANET MARTIN SOSKICE

THE COUNTRY PARISH by Anthony Russell, *SPCK*, 1986. Pp. 296. £9.50

'For generations, people have tended to look upon the life of a country clergyman as quiet and uneventful, slow paced and undemanding.' So writes Anthony Russell in a book, the thesis of which is to explode many of the romantic suppositions about the English village and its parson—suppositions commonly held at the present time. The author, who has already made a useful contribution to studies on the work of clergy in *The Clerical Profession* (1980), speaks with the experience of running three rural parishes in Warwickshire. Nevertheless, only one-third of the book is devoted to the changes in village church life over the centuries. The author, as Director of the Arthur Rank Centre in Warwickshire, has interests which extend to the study of the village as a social entity rather than the church as an integral part of it and perhaps the centre of its identity.

What he has to say about rural life both in the past and the present is an excellent sociological review and constitutes the most fascinating part of the book. He shows the many fluctuations which have taken place in village life due to changes in agricultural economy and does not hesitate to point to the appalling poverty and dire social conditions which have frequently dogged rural life. Relatively new changes have been brought about by the introduction of the railways, the cycle, the motor car and tractor. It is easy for the non-rural person to have simplistic or idealistic notions of country life, especially as today many of the more affluent move in from towns and cities to convert cottages, build bungalows or erect palatial houses for the purposes of retirement, week-end relaxation or commuting. These invaders are not very sensitive to the older village folk and often take over the public affairs of the village. Farmers and locals who form different groups within the village react in an ambivalent fashion. On the one hand they resent the pushing, know-all, middle-class leadership and on the other, they see the benefits for the village of the new-comers. What the new-comers fail to see is that the village as a whole, divisive-free community they imagine it is or should be. Their concept of a village community is frequently very different from that of the local inhabitants and small though a village may be it is at best a community of communities, where each community pursues its own interests.