

grief, sinfulness and need. Again, the observance of food customs has always been a powerful way of marking the boundaries of a community. Although Christianity began with a decisive rejection of the Jewish refusal to share meals with outsiders, it too quickly learnt to regard eating as a way of marking the boundaries between heresy and orthodoxy, sometimes by insisting that members abstain from, at other times that they partake of, certain foods. So, for example, the same Christians whose liturgy celebrated the courage of the Maccabean martyrs could (under the Spanish Inquisition) break into private homes to ensure that lard rather than oil was being used for cooking: thus the pork-avoiding 'Judaizers' could be eradicated. The memory of Jewish practices is relevant also to a theme that is discussed here with great sensitivity and sympathy, that of animal sacrifice. Grumett and Muers bring out the way in which sacrificial or ritual slaughter, which has endured in certain Christian traditions, embodies realism and reverence in a way that contrasts strikingly with modern meat production. The person who takes the victim's life is chosen in part for his compassionate nature, the ritual is regulated to minimise suffering, those who consume the animal share in its killing and preparation, prayers of gratitude acknowledge the seriousness of what has taken place.

Within the vast variety of eating practices on display in Christian history, can we detect any kind of continuity? Or should the pluralism that Grumett and Muers reveal lead us to ethical indifference about food? First, and fundamentally, all eating has been seen as meaningful, in ways that appeal to health, friendship, social structure, and even political considerations. Secondly, this range of overlapping reasons has reinforced rather than weakened the ethical and religious significance of meals. One of the lessons of this book is that moral seriousness is compatible with both flexibility and nuance. Thirdly, fasting and abstinence have been practised almost everywhere that Christianity has flourished, and where they have been suppressed, they have soon recurred in a different form. Finally, for most of Christian history, these issues have been important to communities, not simply matters of private choice.

Grumett and Muers deliberately begin with practice, arguing that just as the *lex orandi* rightly shapes the *lex credendi*, so the practices of abstinence properly generate reflection upon their (often multiple) meanings. Whereas individual dietary choices must be self-conscious, the customs of a community may contain hidden and inarticulate wisdom. For this reason, it makes sense to scrutinise tradition as a resource for interrogating current practices, alerting us to ethical questions to which we may have become insensitive.

Is there any chance, one might wonder, that the Western Church could recover a communal sense of the significance of what, and how, we eat? We could begin by restoring the regular saying of grace. Perhaps the carnivores among us would like to add a specific prayer of thanks for the lives of the animals they are about to consume: thus both reverence and realism might return to the common table.

MARGARET ATKINS OSA

ABSENCE OF MIND: THE DISPELLING OF INWARDNESS FROM THE MODERN MYTH OF THE SELF by Marilynne Robinson *Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2011, pp. xviii + 158, £10.99 pbk*

With his characteristic blend of wit and deceptive simplicity, G.K. Chesterton once defined philosophy as 'thought that has been thought out'. He followed up this pithy definition with an account of why philosophy, so defined, is indispensable: 'It is often a great bore. But man has no alternative, except between being influenced by thought that has been thought out and being influenced by thought

that has not been thought out. The latter is what we commonly call culture and enlightenment today' ('The Revival of Philosophy – Why?' in *The Common Man*, London and New York, 1950, p. 176).

Chesterton would surely approve of the ambitious project undertaken by Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Marilynne Robinson in *Absence of Mind*. Based on the Terry Lectures given by Robinson at Yale University in 2009, *Absence of Mind* inveighs against a fashionable species of bad philosophy – of 'thought that has not been thought out' – seen by many as inseparable from the cause of 'culture and enlightenment'. Robinson's target, however, is not so much a system of philosophy as it is a literary genre embodying a philosophical outlook hostile to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. 'Parascientific literature' – the name Robinson gives to the genre in question – refers to a kind of popular polemical writing in which a radically reductionist picture of human nature is defended by invoking the authority of modern science. These days, of course, there is no shortage of writers working in this genre; and the most successful of them – 'New Atheists' Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, as well as Steven Pinker, E.O. Wilson, and Antonio Damasio – have won fame well beyond the walls of the academy. Now whatever we may think of these self-styled iconoclasts – and Robinson herself thinks very little of them – there are two things that we absolutely must not say: first, that they have invented the genre in which they are working; second, that what they have to tell us is fundamentally new. As Robinson points out, parascientific literature has been around since the mid-nineteenth century; and the most influential of its early practitioners – Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, T.H. Huxley, and Sigmund Freud – defined its essential, modernist message once and for all. And just what is that message? Simple, says Robinson: we are given to understand that 'the Western understanding of what a human being is has been fundamentally in error' (p. xiii). Far from being a creature made a little lower than the angels, or a soul intuitively attuned to truth, beauty, and goodness, each of us is nothing more than a poor, bare, forked animal whose self-understanding is inherently untrustworthy, even delusional. Love and compassion, remorse and forgiveness, terror and pity, inspiration and grace: none of our intensely significant experiences are what they seem from the first-person perspective; and all of them can be explained away with the aid of evolutionary biology, neuroscience, psychology, and anthropology. Since science has now shown that everything which Western civilization has traditionally regarded as 'higher' is in truth a mere mask of something 'lower', it follows that our religion, our morality, and our art can no longer be taken at face value. Such things can be seen rightly only when viewed from a detached or external perspective; and when we look at human beings from this objective point of view – rather in the way a clinician coolly scrutinizes a hypochondriac – we discover that there is much less to human experience than meets the eye (or mind) of the credulous non-scientist.

This, then, is how Robinson understands the popular philosophy at which her polemical shafts are aimed. Here are four of her main objections to it: (1) Parascientific literature claims to speak with the authority of science, and yet the intellectual virtues for which science is renowned are conspicuously absent from parascientific tracts. For when we open bestsellers belonging to this burgeoning genre, what do we find? Instead of curiosity, complacency; instead of wonder, glacial knowingness; instead of the bread of evidence, the stones of anecdote; and instead of theory answering frankly to fact, fact tortured and forced to serve theory. (2) Parascientific discourse is apt to present itself as wholly disinterested and objective: that is, as uncoloured by culture, unconditioned by history, and uncontaminated by the subjectivity of its practitioners. However, a closer acquaintance with the classics of this genre – Freud's works, for example – indicates that this is far from true. (3) Parascientific arguments are typically based on the science of

the moment. However, any philosopher who builds on this foundation may well be building his house on sand, because the history of science teaches us that no theory ever loses its hypothetical character. Science progresses, forever criticizing and completing and correcting itself, and today's fresh fact often becomes tomorrow's stale fiction. (4) Parascientific discourse has the deck stacked against religion from the very beginning. How? Through epistemological legerdemain. Once we have granted that nothing counts as evidence except what is accessible to scientific observation – in other words, once the voice of subjectivity has been silenced and excluded – it is not terribly difficult to depict “religion” as a vestige of a pre-scientific worldview, akin to magic and superstition.

Despite a certain amount of repetition (excusable, perhaps, in a lecture series) and occasional longueurs, *Absence of Mind* is an admirable work: lucid, forceful, and refreshingly impatient with fashionable cant. Like Robinson's novel *Gilead* (2004) and her nonfiction work *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (1998), this slender volume – a thoughtful critique of ‘thought that has not been thought out’ – is simultaneously a celebration of the mysterious gift of mind and a demonstration of that gift's nuanced powers.

DOUGLAS McDERMID

ADORNO AND THEOLOGY by Christopher Craig Brittain, *Philosophy and Theology Series*, T. & T. Clark, London, 2010, pp. x + 238, £16.99 pbk

The forms of Marxism which so dominated sociology, politics, and philosophy in the United Kingdom during the late 1970s and mid-1980s were marked by scholastic skirmishes around theories of the state as derived from the imported texts of Althusser and Poulantzas. In these forms, religion was subsumed under ideology and stamped as irrelevant in a secular ethos that brooked no self-criticism on that matter. With the translations into English of the works of Adorno, Benjamin, and Horkheimer, who dominated the Frankfurt School, considerable surprise was generated in the mid-1980s at the theological baggage attached to these thinkers, all the more so as it was decidedly Jewish in shape and origin. Benjamin occasioned deeper bafflement with his interest in the writings of the kabbalah, his fascination with the painting of *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee, his fixations on allegory and the baroque, and his frets over naming that had unexpected roots in Genesis.

Cast as idiosyncratic in the United Kingdom during the 1990s, this form of Marxism was never really assimilated into sociology and theology but was deposited in the left luggage section of the history of ideas and was marked as ‘unclaimed’. But as Brittain indicates, with the ‘return’ of religion, again, the shrill cries of the ‘new’ atheists, and the angst of post-secularity, times are ripe for a re-appraisal of that unspent Marxist legacy, which he supplies well in relation to Adorno.

Usually treated as a self-declared atheist, with whom Christian theologians did (p. 189) or did not (p. 171) engage, some might be puzzled that Adorno exhibited any interest in theology. Brittain gets around this difficulty by concentrating on what he terms an ‘inverse’ theology in his writings, which extend over the culture industry, politics, and music. Adorno's route into theology is confused and divided in origin. Rightly, Brittain stresses the influences of Jewish theology in shaping his orientation, but also notes that Adorno's doctoral thesis was on Kierkegaard and that his supervisor was Paul Tillich. From this study, Adorno emerges more as an agnostic than as an atheist.

The study, divided into seven chapters is well sectioned and sub-headed and traverses a lot of ground with considerable economy. There are three prime