

## Book reviews

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John Clayton, *Religions, Reasons and Gods: Essays in Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion*, prepared for publication by Anne M. Blackburn and Thomas D. Carroll (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Pp. xix + 372. \$100.00; £55.00 (Hbk). ISBN 0521 42104 7.

The late Professor John Clayton gave the Stanton Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion in Cambridge in 1992. He was working them up for publication towards the end of his life; but, as the editorial preface explains, with the onset of two serious illnesses before his death in 2003 he came to realize that his plans for remodelling the work were too ambitious. What we have here, therefore, is a collection of seven of his published articles, and the texts of a lecture, a paper, and a sermon delivered by him, all of which parallel the material of the Stanton Lectures, together with two chapters based on the lectures themselves. The editors have also added appendices to three of the chapters giving further material from Clayton's notes and from an unpublished lecture.

The subtitle explains the nature of the book. In fact all the essays are concerned with natural theology, so one might be tempted to label it as 'comparative natural theology'. But this is not natural theology as it has been practised in Anglo-American philosophy in recent decades; for Clayton is concerned with its role within different religious traditions and with the variety of purposes it may serve.

Some of the chapters discuss particular writers and arguments, notably chapters 5–7, which cover respectively Hume's and Ramanuja's contrasting attitudes to the knowability of God (especially with reference to the argument from design, of which both are sceptical, but for different reasons), al-Ghazali's and Udayana's versions of the cosmological argument, and the context of St Anselm's ontological argument. Three other chapters (8–10) discuss the use of natural theology in early modern philosophy in France, Germany, and Britain. But even in the more detailed chapters certain general arguments surface which are also found in the other chapters, and which explain the rationale of the book.

In the first place, Clayton thinks that the arguments of natural theology have often become 'disembedded', that is to say that they have been torn from their original context and used for alien purposes. This was particularly true in early modern philosophy, where they became part of the 'Enlightenment project' of

providing a minimum rational religion for all people. In chapters 2–3 (his inaugural lectures at Lancaster University and Boston University respectively) Clayton mentions Thomas Jefferson as exemplifying this tendency. More recently, he sees many contemporary discussions of the *ratio Anselmi* (a description he prefers to ‘the ontological argument’) as ignoring the monastic context of Anselm’s thought and drawing it into a modern foundationalist context.

The more positive part of Clayton’s thesis is that the arguments of natural theology have been used for many purposes, and that providing a grounding for a generalized ‘theism’ in answer to atheistic attacks is only one of them. Again, he emphasizes this throughout the book, but especially in chapters 4 and 6 (previously published in this journal in 1987 and 1990 respectively). He tells us that ‘To understand an argument is to understand what it is used to do’ (169). Now in pre-modern times theistic proofs were used for many purposes: to reassure people of other religions that one’s own concept of God was theirs too; to purify the concept in order to correct deviant views within one’s own community; hermeneutically (i.e. to assist the interpretation of sacred texts); and for edification, especially by using teleological arguments to draw attention to apparent design in nature. Sometimes different purposes may coexist: for example, Clayton sees what he calls an ‘apologetic-justificatory’ strand interlaced with an ‘expressive-explanatory’ one in uses of teleological arguments in early modern British philosophy.

Of course, Clayton cannot and does not deny that the arguments have been used apologetically and polemically. But here he shows a preference for cases where there has been debate, both between two different religions and within one religion, to post-Enlightenment arguments between atheism and a rootless ‘theism’. In particular, in chapter 2 he contrasts Jefferson’s minimal ‘rational religion’ with the Indian tradition of public contestation, e.g. between Hindus and Buddhists on the nature of the self; and in the following chapter, entitled ‘Common ground and defensible difference’, he again contrasts Jefferson’s approach, which seeks to eliminate difference and otherness, with the more complex debates of earlier centuries, in which the reasoning used was more like legal argument than mathematical-experimental reasoning, and where the debates served rather to sharpen up points of difference. Here, he instances Muslim debates on interpreting *shari’a* and disputations in Brahmanical circles in India well before the beginning of the Common Era, but also debates between the three Abrahamic religions in mediaeval Spain. He sees contemporary discourse about human rights as the modern version of justifying and contesting competing values.

As my summary may suggest, the discussions in the book are mainly historical, so that Clayton rarely considers the validity of theistic arguments. This is perhaps a limitation in it. Of course, he is trying to get away from the familiar debates of modern textbooks, and to emphasize the varied roles that the arguments have

played in history. But one may still ask what makes an argument a good one, even in the more limited context of, say, edification. Moreover, there are still today people like Richard Swinburne who wish to use traditional types of argument, revised in the light of modern philosophical developments, apologetically, if not polemically; and there have been recent published debates between e.g. John Haldane and J. J. C. Smart or Antony Flew and William Lane Craig. Clayton does not discuss such examples; and in his final chapter, 'Beyond the Enlightenment project', he argues that today we should follow one strand in Kant's thought and see the proofs as exercises in conceptual analysis that purify our concepts of God, and thereby create a discourse in which religious matters can be discussed and which clarifies individual religious traditions. Yet his earlier recommendation about 'public contestation' might suggest something more robust here. But we are not told what that might be.

I suspect that the reason for Clayton's reluctance here is that some of the historical periods he surveys, especially eighteenth-century France, show the barrenness of much disputation between theists and their opponents. He mentions some recent writers here who see this natural theology as a theological 'own goal': for if the arguments are not found adequate to ground theism they may tempt people to scepticism. I notice that he seems much more sympathetic to early modern British natural theology in which philosophical discussion of teleological arguments was closely linked to scientific discovery or to appreciation of nature.

Incidentally, with reference to such appreciation, I am not sure that Psalm 19 ('The heavens declare the glory of the Lord'), which Clayton quotes several times, should be put under the rubric of 'natural theology'. He gets it right in his Hulsean sermon, published as an appendix to the book, where he points out that the Psalmist is praising 'the glory of God as manifested in the natural world and in the revealed Law', neither of which 'is here laid out as *grounds* for belief in God' (312, 314). The Psalmist is expressing awe and wonder, and hence a sense of presence. Earlier on, however, Clayton labels it as a 'proof', even if not one designed to establish God's existence (172), and he subsumes it under 'natural theology' (84, 97). The trouble with this is that it assimilates the Psalmist to, say, F. R. Tennant, who did indeed appeal in his *Philosophical Theology* to the world's beauty as part of his re-presentation of the argument from design; whereas, I think, the former is more akin to Gerard Manley Hopkins, who begins his poem 'God's Grandeur' by exclaiming 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God./ It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.' Such approaches should, I think, be labelled rather as 'theological aesthetics'.

There are one or two other places where I would have wanted to press the author to clarify his argument or to make some distinctions. For instance, he lists a few differences between Indian and Western logic, and concludes that the former is less easily separated from 'rhetoric' or the art of persuasion than is the

latter (113). But this brief discussion is not pushed further. More generally, he refers sometimes to ‘localized rationalities’. Thus, with reference to the Indian tradition of public debate, we are told that thereby traditions constituted themselves and ‘rationality constructed itself’ (37); moreover, people could use reasons specific to groups or traditions in such debates. From here he goes on to his general thesis that philosophy of religion should move away from the pretension that reason can provide a common foundation for religious claims towards the more modest aim of providing a common discourse in which the nature of religious difference can be clarified.

Here, I would have liked Clayton to pursue much further than he does the differences between the ways in which rationality is manifested in debates *within* traditions, e.g. in interpreting the Vedas and the Qur’an, where there are certain ‘givens’, and those *between* traditions, e.g. between Buddhists and Hindus in India. He recommends the public contestation of religious claims, and criticizes Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion for abandoning it, but fails to say how it should operate in his third category of debate, namely those with unbelievers. Moreover, is it true that the main aim of his other two categories of debate should be the clarification of differences?

But in general I greatly appreciated this book, which is an important one, and deeply regret that this voice is now silent. Clayton’s proposal to contextualize the study of theistic arguments would, if adopted, change philosophy of religion in the English-speaking world for the better. Moreover, the book is a pleasure to read, reminding us of its author’s characteristic wit and urbanity.

The editors have made a good job of preparing the work for publication. There is a certain amount of repetition in subject matter, probably inevitable, and occasionally in wording, e.g. on 40 and 56–57. There are few misprints: I noted only ‘ideological’ for ‘teleological’ (83, 94), and ‘Bee’ for ‘Bec’ (159).

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John Bishop *Believing by Faith: An Essay in the Epistemology and Ethics of Religious Belief*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007). Pp. xii + 250. £35.00; \$65.00 (Hbk). ISBN 978 0 19 920554 7.

William James’s ‘Will to believe’ essay originated as lectures delivered to philosophy clubs of Yale and Brown. First published in 1896, James’s essay received much early criticism, but is now a staple of introductory textbooks in philosophy. John Bishop’s important book is a rigorous retooling and defence of James’s contention that one can ‘adopt a believing attitude in religious matters,