

morality is the least impressive, not because John Paul's positions are not at times open to serious questioning, but because Curran's approach is seen to be driven by current fashions rather than investigation of the theological tradition.

Paul VI in *Octogesima adveniens* was on to something important, however incomplete his vision and however open to abuse. As for Curran, though at times he deplores John Paul II's very reasonable contrast between the culture of life and the culture of death, he is also – and more reasonably – inclined to suggest, especially in the social realm, that the pope was too optimistic. Again that brings out a similar problem both with some of John Paul's ideas – which, not least about war, the development of peoples and religious freedom, may often appear naïve – and with Curran's response: an unwillingness to look in more detail, in what Augustine called the 'darkness of social life', at how we arrived at the present stage of theorizing about moral theology. Both John Paul and Curran talk much of the Catholic tradition; neither spell out its historical nature and growth in adequate detail. Clearly in encyclicals such a project would be extremely difficult of achievement, but the problem is starkly revealed by the tendency of much recent papal documentation to cite only texts from the more or less current magisterium. If you do not acknowledge where you come from, it becomes harder to carry conviction that you are leading where you should be followed.

JOHN M. RIST

THE POSSIBILITY OF DISCUSSION: RELATIVISM, TRUTH AND CRITICISM OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS by Hugo Strandberg, *Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Philosophy* (Aldershot, Hampshire, UK and Burlington, VT, USA: *Ashgate Publishing*, 2006), vii-199, Hardback \$89.95 / £45.00.

This is an engaging, interestingly written, mostly well-argued revision of a mature doctoral dissertation in the philosophy of religion, recently submitted at the University of Uppsala. Although the book announces that the primary architect of the structure is Wittgenstein, in fact Strandberg carefully engages with a wide range of philosophers past and present. He does so, however, not as one labouring under submission to weighty authorities, but in his own clear voice with the conviction that 'philosophy is primarily the activity of *thinking for oneself* in a thorough way about certain kinds of question.' (p. 8) Although this can be done on an individual basis, Strandberg stresses both the self-critical and the conversational character of the discipline. In a commendable way, form and content come together in this study as Strandberg actually practices what he preaches: namely, 'the possibility of discussion.'

He thus thinks through several issues so that we might think about them for ourselves, instead of just accepting his ineluctable conclusions. Strandberg's approach means that philosophy is not analogous to science, since 'there cannot be any presupposed methods of determining the correctness of different solutions to the problem.' (pp. 10–1). This indeed opens up the possibility of relativism, or at least insoluble differences, since most philosophical ideas 'are correct in some respects, highlighting some important aspect' of what they seek to understand (p. 11). His open-ended, non-dogmatic understanding of what he is about leads him to directly address the reader: 'In the end, it is you as a reader who must determine whether what you have read has in any way helped you in your thinking about problems you find troublesome.' (p. 10)

The troublesome problem Strandberg sets out to think through in this text is: 'How is fruitful discussion of religious beliefs possible?' This, he maintains, is closely linked to another question: 'How is criticism of religious beliefs possible?' (p. 4). These are not just philosophical but also intensely *practical* problems in our

increasingly pluralistic world, a world where religious differences are often settled – not by discussion or criticism – but through violence. Strandberg is convinced that Wittgenstein has much to offer here, but to maintain this position he must defend Wittgenstein from common accusations of both relativism and fideism. In short, then, his book is a sustained argument against Kai Nielsen's famous charge of 'Wittgensteinian fideism,' although Strandberg takes the reader through several stages of preparation before addressing the crucial issue.

He begins in Chapter 1 by showing the limitations of what he calls the 'rationalistic' treatment of religious belief. His prime example here is Richard Swinburne. The rationalistic approach – widely thought by friend and foe alike to be the *only* way to settle the questions given above – holds 'that we should start from certain putative universal norms and rules for argumentation, and show from these that certain religious beliefs are rational... or irrational.' (p. 17). One of the many problems Strandberg identifies with this approach is that it is insufficiently attentive to the actual character of *religious* belief, as the entity supposedly derived from or denied by its arguments is not identical to the God of actual worshippers. Nor are religious beliefs merely certain peculiar propositions. Rather, a religious belief 'must be understood in the different ways it shows itself in the lives of religious believers' (p. 18). In Chapter 2 he further develops this perspective by arguing that one distinctive feature of religious beliefs is that they are 'characterized by commitment and devotion' (p. 27). They are thus contrasted with scientific beliefs, which are – officially, if not actually – held tentatively or probabilistically on the basis of hypothesis and evidence.

He then offers his primary exposition of Wittgenstein's contribution to philosophy in general and this debate in particular. This contribution is not found in specific conclusions or substantive theses, but rather in that Wittgenstein 'has formulated and given examples of a certain way of doing philosophy.' (p. 29) Drawing largely from *Philosophical Investigations*, but ranging much more widely, Strandberg concludes that there are, in fact, very many beliefs generally agreed to be rational that are not based on 'hypothetical reasoning.' Thus, religious beliefs are not unique in this regard. More strongly, there is not just *one* way to distinguish between truth and falsity, rationality and irrationality, or even to define these terms. These are still meaningful concepts, however, and it is not immediately obvious that a given religious belief is either true or rational. It may be neither. But the question cannot be determined rationalistically, as defined above.

This leads into the middle three chapters, which deal with relativism (Chapter 3), universality (Chapter 4), and truth (Chapter 5). Throughout, Strandberg is at pains to show that 'commitment, embodiment, upbringing and being situated in society and history is not an obstacle to, but on the contrary a condition for knowledge, true beliefs, rationality, and the like, in the role they play in our lives' (p. 60). Although he clearly identifies himself with a Wittgensteinian approach, these chapters interact more explicitly with Heidegger, Gadamer, Rorty, Davidson, Putnam, and MacIntyre. Chapter 6 is an interesting excursion into broader-than-philosophical considerations that influence belief, as well as concise discussions of the critiques of religion raised by Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, and Sartre.

Strandberg finally turns to the question of fideism in Chapter 7. Here, he approaches the charge of fideism indirectly by first 'discussing a question which is closely related... namely the question of conservatism: is a critical attitude to the status quo compatible with Wittgenstein's philosophy?' (pp. 149–50). Acknowledging that Wittgenstein may well have been a cultural pessimist, Strandberg nevertheless argues that Wittgenstein's political views were ambiguous and diverse, and hence not easily characterized as either conservative or radical. Facing Marcuse's accusation that Wittgenstein's 'therapeutic' method 'merely makes it possible for the patient to function normally in a sick world' (p. 162), Strandberg

replies that Wittgenstein himself would not limit his engagement with society to *philosophy*.

So far, while these themes and conclusions are not new to those familiar with current discussions in the philosophy of religion or Wittgensteinian interpretation, Strandberg has argued his case with care, a fresh eye for the material, a thorough grounding in various primary texts, a wider-than-usual engagement with the issues, and with a sure grasp of his overall argument. It is thus somewhat disappointing that his conclusion is so abrupt. The actual discussion of fideism is only three pages long, as he maintains that 'the question of Wittgensteinian fideism has been answered implicitly in the above discussion of conservatism. ... Wittgenstein does not preclude the possibility of criticism, and hence not criticism of religion' (p. 168). And the very brief final chapter, 'Philosophy of Religion and Enlightenment Thinking,' attempts in seven pages to ally Wittgenstein's method with Kant's famous definition of enlightenment as thinking for oneself. Against interpretations of the Enlightenment as preoccupied with a concern for only one narrow form of rationality, Strandberg instead argues that Enlightenment thinking should rather be seen as 'an insistence on the importance of improving oneself and others' (p. 177). Thus, the real conclusion of this book is that 'rejecting the rationalistic way of critically discussing religious belief is not to reject enlightenment thinking' (p. 179).

This volume will obviously appeal to those sympathetic with its goal of presenting a Wittgensteinian approach to the philosophy of religion which does not accept the fideistic and relativistic tendencies still sometimes associated with that name. Strandberg also defies the lazy and lamentable divide between 'analytic' and 'Continental' philosophy by drawing easily from members of each tradition. The text thus serves as a good model of such interaction. But those less sympathetic with Strandberg's approach will obviously resist various common moves, such as his sharp distinctions between religious belief and scientific belief, and between the God of religion and the God of the philosophers. The book also operates at a high level of abstraction, and given its Wittgensteinian convictions it would have been helpful and illuminating for more actual religious beliefs to have been considered as examples. As it is, while Strandberg offers us a well-worked out method for discussing religious beliefs, we never see the method at work. Maybe that's the part we readers are supposed to do for ourselves.

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T F TORRANCE: AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY by Alister E. McGrath, *T&T Clark*, 2006, pp. 300, £22.99 pbk.

This is a potentially confusing project. Its basic contours are A.E. McGrath explaining the thought of T.F. Torrance explaining the thought of Karl Barth. Given that all three are, of course, expert academic theologians, with Barth being a giant in his field, the possibility of muddling various layers of exposition in such a rich field was a real one. However, with his usual clarity and thoroughness Professor McGrath leads us through the intellectual development of T F Torrance, the major expositor of Barth to the English speaking world, as well as a formidable theologian in his own right.

Some biographical information is of course necessary, and McGrath provides an interesting account in part one of the book. Particularly important for an intellectual biography is the second chapter, *Education: Scotland and Beyond, 1927–38*. Born the son of missionary parents in China the family returned to Scotland where 'Tom' took an arts degree and then a theology degree at Edinburgh University. Here he was influenced particularly by H R Mackintosh and Daniel Lamont in