

Book Notes

Max Charlesworth. *Religious Inventions: Four Essays*. Pp. ix + 157. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.) £32.50 hbk, £11.95 pbk.

This is a highly stimulating book, consisting of four diverse essays centred in varying ways on the theme of ‘invention’ in religion. What is meant by the use of the term ‘invention’ is that human beings play an active part in the production of religion. This should not, however, lead one to suspect that Charlesworth thinks religions to be man-made fantasies. On the contrary, religion is here conceived as ‘the gratuitous human response to a gratuitous revelation of the divine’ (p. 10). It is this sense of ‘invention’ which informs two of the essays in this book: one considering the tension between the original revelation and the tradition that enables that revelation to be lived; and the other focusing on (and taking very seriously) the great diversity of revelations. Here Charlesworth’s thoroughgoing pluralism comes to the fore: the diversity of religions is no more a scandal than is the diversity of languages, for it is wholly to be expected, and, indeed, ‘willed by “God”’ as part of a multifaceted revelation. A different element of the invention theme emerges in the excellent essay on the anthropological invention of Australian Aboriginal religion, with interesting reflections on the intentions of such figures as Frazer, Durkheim, and Baldwin Spencer, as well as the convincing claim that the notion of the ‘Dreaming’ is a linguistic misinterpretation of Aboriginal beliefs. The final essay in this book is equally interesting, Charlesworth arguing for the impossibility and undesirability of a specifically Christian ethics. All in all, this is a deeply satisfying book, illustrating how themes in the philosophy of religion can often be enlightened by a comparativist perspective. And Charlesworth’s vision of the philosopher of religion as proceeding in a piecemeal way and respecting religious differences is certainly an admirable one.

Dan Cohn-Sherbok (ed.). *Islam in a World of Diverse Faiths*. Pp. xviii + 218. (Basingstoke & London: Macmillan, 1997.) £45.00 hbk, £15.99 pbk.

This is a reprint of a useful book first published in 1991, in which distinguished writers from the Christian, Jewish and Muslim traditions explore the nature of the Islamic religion, considering both the explosive impact of Islam on contemporary society and issues of religious pluralism. The intension is to illuminate how Islam can be related to other religious traditions. The book centres (roughly) on five themes: religious exclusivism and the absolute truth-claims of religions; revelation; apostleship; perceptions of Mohammad; and the relation between Islam and society. Those with an interest in matters of religious pluralism will be particularly drawn to the specialized nature of this book, focusing as it does on the status within interfaith debate of one particular tradition. Again, those with an interest in the theology of John Hick will here find two good (though unsurprising) papers: one on the relation between Jesus and Mohammad; and another more general argument concerning pluralism which claims that religious doctrines are ‘theological theories’ and that the incarnation can be best understood (and be pluralistically viable) when seen, not as some two natures doctrine, but, with Baillie and Lampe, as a statement of the perfect presence of grace and God’s spirit within Jesus.

Don Garrett (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*. Pp. xiii + 465. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.) £40.00 hbk, £12.95 pbk.

Another quality volume in this excellent series, this companion contains substantial and enlightening essays on all the main features of Spinoza's thought. Of particular interest to readers of this journal will be the pieces on Spinoza's ethical theory (superbly analysed by Garrett), on the political theory of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (in which Edwin Curley sketches the connections between Spinoza, Hobbes and Machiavelli), and on his religious thought. On this last subject, there are two fine essays. The late Alan Donagan assesses the way in which Spinoza's theology naturalizes God, and looks also at a number of other crucial features including Spinoza's account of the miraculous and of the Bible. This latter issue is continued at greater length in Richard Popkin's detailed essay on Spinoza's biblical studies which, he says, totally secularize the Bible, a secularization which is in tune with his 'metaphysics for a world without any supernatural dimension' (p. 403). The volume closes with an assessment of Spinoza's impact on subsequent thinkers (both philosophical and literary), which is pregnant (though, sadly, a little undeveloped) in its thoughts on such people as Paul Bourget, George Eliot and Jorge-Luis Borges.

W. Mark Richardson & Wesley J. Wildman (eds). *Religion and Science: History, Method, Dialogue*. Pp. xx + 450. (London: Routledge, 1996.) £50.00 hbk, £16.99 pbk.

Designed as an introduction to an interdisciplinary theology–science venture, and with a science–religion class in mind, this book is an engrossing and well-conceived collection of essays, written by such notable figures as Claude Welch, Nicholas Wolterstorff, John Polkinghorne and Arthur Peacocke. The intention is to 'build bridges' between theology and science, showing what they have in common at a time when it is their differences which are most apparent. Beginning with essays on the history of the relationship between religion and science – essays which aim to dismantle the perennial 'warfare' image – the book then moves into questions of shared methodologies, before reaching what is the heart of this volume: the section on 'Dialogue'. This section is groundbreaking, in that it consists of some significant theological responses to recent scientific developments. Hence, there are case studies on: cosmology and creation; chaos theory and divine action; quantum complementarity and Christology; information theory and revelation; molecular biology and human freedom; and social genetics and religious ethics. The substantial and thought-provoking essays contained in this book will be of serious interest to all those concerned with the interplay between science and theology.

Ninian Smart. *Reflections in the Mirror of Religion*. (Edited with an introduction by John P. Burris.) Pp. xiii + 237. (Basingstoke & London: Macmillan, 1997.) £40.00 hbk, £15.99 pbk.

This is a deeply impressive collection of eighteen papers written by Ninian Smart since 1982, which has as its focus the nature of the 'new discipline' of religious studies. The book divides into three sections. The first part, 'A Hermeneutics of Comparison', addresses themes emerging out of the notion of a 'science of religion', and contains a number of interesting pieces, most notably a sensitive overview and assessment of the work of Gerardus van der Leeuw, and a compelling meditation on the relation between mysticism and language ('What would Buddhaghosa have

made of *The Cloud of Unknowing?*). The second section, 'Religion on the Ground', principally contains essays on the religious traditions of Asia, and there is here contained a fascinating paper on the relation between the thought of Mao Zedong and the three traditional religions of China. Smart suggests that we may eventually see a 'four system' arrangement, with Chinese Marxism taking its place alongside the older religions. But (for this reviewer at least) the most memorable of the essays are contained in the final section of the book, 'The New Discipline: Religion as an Academic Study'. Here Smart reflects, *inter alia*, on the nature of teaching religious studies, and on some practical problems of graduate education in religion. There is also a quite beautiful essay included here – 'Introducing the Study of Religion' – which is extraordinarily helpful in the advice given to teachers of the subject. Smart perfectly encapsulates the plural, polymethodic and reflective nature of religious studies, and offers excellent ideas on how to structure and teach introductory courses. Smart's willingness to share his teaching methods with readers is illustrative of the great humanity which emerges from these pages, seen also in his belief that the teacher of religious studies can offer important virtues, such as imaginative empathy and toleration, 'the basis of actual love of others' (p. 186). 'We represent', he says, 'the deeper side of liberalism'. Such thoughts make possible a new perception of our subject, and we should be grateful to Smart for this, as well as for his pioneering work in the subject, breathtakingly attested to by the bibliography of his work included in this volume.

BRIAN R. CLACK