

BOOK NOTES

EDITED BY BRIAN R. CLACK

Walter H. Capps. *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.) Pp. xxiii + 368.

This is a very satisfying and useful book, which perspicuously traces the origins, character and future of religious studies as a discipline. The book consists of six lengthy chapters, each considering the development of one principal component of the discipline. Hence, the chapters cover the essence, origin, description, function, language, and comparison of religion(s). Capps' structuring makes the work an ideal sourcebook, for he provides succinct summaries of the view of all the major (and many minor) players in the field. In addition to being a mine of information, the book contains the argument that religious studies as a discipline was initially motivated by the desire to uncover the clear and distinct single essence of religion. Its methods of analysis and interpretation were devised in accordance with the prescribed Enlightenment mode of problem solving, and yet 'the translation of religion into these canons of analysis ... leaves the analysts and interpreters manifestly dissatisfied, even after more than two centuries of investigative work' (p. 347). Capps' suggestions for the future development of the discipline are noteworthy: he suggests, *inter alia*, that the object of the subject might shift away from static (Apollonian) elements of religion to kinetic (Dionysian) realities, those shifting, esoteric and eccentric elements which tend to get passed over by mainstream practitioners of religious studies.

Vincent Geoghegan. *Ernst Bloch*. (London: Routledge, 1996.) Pp. 197. £40.00 hbk, £13.99 pbk.

Vincent Geoghegan has provided a clear and stimulating introduction to the thought of Ernst Bloch, one which will be of use to students of politics, philosophy, theology and cultural studies. Geoghegan guides the reader through the many aspects of Bloch's philosophy, beginning with an account of his life and principal concepts, and then moving on to an analysis of Bloch's thought on human culture (here there are fascinating insights into Bloch's account of music, popular culture and the theatre). There then follow chapters on religion, on fascism and Bloch's version of Marxism, and (of course) on utopianism. Of greatest interest to readers of this journal will be the chapter on religion. Given Bloch's Marxism, it is not surprising that his account of religion is largely Feuerbachian: the theistic basis of Christianity is rejected, and religion is instead seen as a form of 'mystified consciousness'. But Bloch's account is ultimately positive: this atheism is seen as 'the development of the internal logic of Christianity itself' (p. 82). This is well illustrated by Bloch's theme of the 'underground Bible', with Jesus appearing as the opponent of Yahweh: Jesus here has the character of the serpent of Eden, proclaiming '*Eritis sicut Deus*' (You will be like God). That the reader is left with a burning desire to hear more about Bloch's views on the serpentine Jesus is a mark of the quality of

Geoghegan's presentation. And this is true for the whole book, which succeeds in introducing the epic nature of Bloch's enterprise in a compelling and unceasingly enthusiastic fashion.

Charley D. Hardwick, *Events of Grace: Naturalism, Existentialism, and Theology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.) Pp. xvi + 309.

This is a substantial piece of work, firmly rooted in the liberal theological tradition, which contends that Christianity can be made compatible with the austere physical naturalism of modern science. The premise which makes Hardwick's project possible is the claim (stemming from Bultmann) that the *content* of religious faith has nothing to do with a supernatural *Weltanschauung*. Hardwick thus adopts the existentialist contention that faith is to do with 'existential self-understanding'. Indeed, this work is presented as a marriage between existentialist theology and the embryonic theological naturalism of Henry Nelson Wieman. Hardwick's naturalism leads neither to pantheism nor to non-cognitivism; God is seen here as 'the creative event', namely 'those processes in nature that produce value, quality, and qualitative meaning' (p. 26). Though much of this book will mainly be of interest to theologians (there are large sections on grace and Christology), it may also be profitable to those readers of this journal who are concerned with revisionary accounts of religion, with 'seeing-as', with the concept of God, or with the question of a life after death.

Rodney Stark & William Sims Bainbridge. *A Theory of Religion*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996.) Pp. 386. \$17.95.

The first appearance in paperback of Stark and Bainbridge's significant study in the theory of religion is greatly to be welcomed. *A Theory of Religion* met with critical acclaim when it was first published in 1987, and it will now be available to a wider audience. The book is, as many will know, a distinctive contribution to the scientific study of religion. The authors employ a deductive model in order to explain how and why religious phenomena occur. The book thus proceeds from a set of seven axioms concerning human action. Spinning out from these axioms there are 104 definitions and 344 propositions. The theory is reductionistic in character, in the sense that religious phenomena are derived from non-religious phenomena and that it reduces a theory of religion to a general theory of human action. Starting from the premise that human beings pursue courses of action that will bring rewards, the authors contend that religion arises because some rewards cannot (or cannot easily) be obtained. Religion then functions by offering *compensators* (or intangible substitutes) for these longed-for rewards. Readers will have to judge for themselves whether the sophisticated deductive structure of the book serves to mask the banality of the central thesis that religion is a compensatory device, but the book is no doubt important in its scope and achievement, covering such matters as the evolution of gods, the formation of religious institutions, the nature of cults and sects, and secularization. It will be of crucial interest to all students of religion.

Shivesh C. Thakur. *Religion and Social Justice*. (London: Macmillan, 1996.) Pp. 145. £35.00.

The principal contention of this book is that it is a mistake to regard one of the significant missions of religion to be the pursuit of social (or economic/political) justice. Thakur contends that if theologians place economic liberation at the heart

of religion then this will ultimately be destructive of religion. Why? Because social justice is about the distribution of social goods, whereas religion is concerned with other-worldly goods. Though religion cannot thus be a direct instrument of social justice, it may indirectly promote it by inspiring the virtues of compassion, charity and fellow feeling, and hence promoting 'good works'. Moreover, religion may act as a counterweight to liberalism, and religious altruism 'can keep capitalism humane' (p. 125). The theme of the other-worldliness of religion runs consistently throughout this work and will, no doubt, infuriate defenders of liberation/political theology, as will the (rather complacent) embracing of capitalism and (over-hasty) rejection of all forms of socialism. Nevertheless, Thakur's attractively presented argument will serve as a controversial critique of some fashionable trends in theology, and it contains useful and concise summaries of main theories of justice. It will be of interest to all those concerned with the interplay of religion and politics.

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