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Book reviews

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Douglas Hedley *Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion: Aids to Reflection and the Mirror of the Spirit.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). £40·00/$64·95 (Hbk). ISBN 0 521 77035 1.

The main thesis of this book is quickly stated: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's relationship to German transcendental philosophy was not simply derivative; rather he used it as a resource to reinvigorate a British tradition of Christian Platonism. This is argued in relation to Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*, although there is no sustained reading of that fascinating text, but rather a thematic interpretation, set against the background of the transcendental philosophers and the Christian Neoplatonist tradition. Throughout, Dr Hedley aims both to uncover and display the particular character of Coleridge's Christian Platonism and (as a minor theme) to recommend Christian (Cambridge) Platonism as a viable option today. The rehabilitation of Coleridge as a creative philosopher is wholly convincing; the exposition of his philosophy thorough and erudite; and the championing of the presently unfashionable Christian Platonist tradition sufficiently well argued as to demand notice.

The book has its problems also, of course. Dr Hedley's prose is not always as clear as it is scholarly, and I am sure that readers not already familiar with the territory will, from time to time, find themselves simply lost in the forests of argument and authority that compose the long chapters. The sheer breadth of erudition on display requires more control than it is given, as quotations which span the centuries jostle together without an adequate apparatus to help the reader untangle them. Again, Hedley is quite prepared to follow interesting side issues, but the signposting of the byways and main routes of the argument is not always all it could have been. The book begins by recalling Byron's lament on Coleridge, 'I wish he would explain his explanation!', and one as impatient of obscurity as Byron might well wish the same of the present work. Nonetheless, there is much of worth here, both for the student of Coleridge and for anyone interested more generally in the Platonist tradition in theology.

Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* is a curious work: one of the more popular devotional manuals of the Victorian era, it is nonetheless even more obscurely constructed than Coleridge's other prose works. Hedley explains this by noticing

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that Coleridge radically changed what he was doing with the text whilst it was at the printers. What began as a relatively minor project, a selection of aphorisms from the works of Robert Leighton, became a series of spiritual exercises that Coleridge apparently regarded as an adequate exposition of his philosophy, and the nearest thing he had produced to his promised *Opus Maximum* (8; 89). Hedley suggests three reasons for this (17): first, the area of prosody where Coleridge did excel was marginalia, and *Aids* is, to an extent at least, a book of marginalia; secondly, within the Christian Platonist tradition, spiritual exercises are not incidental to philosophy, but the heart of it (as Coleridge was fond of saying, 'we must become better before we become wiser'); third, *Aids* is spiritual writing, a manual for devotion and experimental Christianity, comparable to Bonaventura's *Journey of the Mind to God*, and this is where the heart of Coleridge's spiritual philosophy lay. Says Hedley,

> **Once we see Aids to Reflection as a collection of spiritual exercises, a Christian-Platonic ascent of the mind to God, we can see that here we find not a late theological aberration, full of absent-minded philosophical forays, tedious sentimental piety, and abstruse arguments with deceased divines, but the most trenchant and characteristic expression of Coleridge's mind.** (17)

– or perhaps we find both.

The first chapter, entitled 'The true philosopher is the lover of God' is devoted to arguing for a rehabilitation of Coleridge as a creative philosopher in his own right. Hedley suggests that this is a 'discredited thesis' in need of 'revival' (16); others might feel the situation is not quite as desperate as all that, but it is certainly a thesis in need of further support. This Hedley offers by exploring what Coleridge could have found in earlier British Christian Platonist thinkers, particularly in Cudworth; by tracing very closely Coleridge's similarities to, and differences from, Kant and the later transcendental tradition, particularly Schelling; and by sketching a broader history of the 'Great Tradition' of Neoplatonic theology in order to locate both Coleridge and the German post-Kantians within that wider picture. The details of this argument cannot be summarized adequately here, but certain details (for instance, Coleridge's discriminating attitude to some of the issues on which Schelling shifted his position) are telling. Hedley's arguments will demand careful refutation by someone with as deep a knowledge of the history of ideas in the early nineteenth century as he has, if in the future Coleridge is to be glibly dismissed as a plagiarist with nothing of his own to say.

The next four chapters offer thematic analyses of the particular nature of Coleridge's Christian Platonism, locating his thought firmly within that tradition, so that both the family likeness, and the peculiar features, can be observed. The first of these chapters describes the role of 'Reflection', or meditation, in philosophical work. The aphoristic nature of *Aids* gives a clue to this: in contrast to any analytic tradition of philosophy, which must proceed by a series of argumentative steps, the essence of aphorisms is to be a series of brief arresting statements

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unconnected with each other, inviting the reader to pause, to think, to reflect. An aphorism is to be grasped intuitively rather than logically; it cannot be argued for, only experienced. Hedley suggests that here, too, Coleridge's thinking is determined more by an English tradition than by contemporary Germany: the irony that Schlegel associated with aphoristic prose has little or no parallel in *Aids*, which resembles far more Bacon's offering of aphorisms to 'invite men to inquire farther' (92). The essential point is that aphorisms are not aimed at informing the intellect, but at changing the will, at an emotional, affective awakening (or even 'conversion').

What is grasped in this awakening is the indwelling Christ, the Word of God. By turning within, obeying the Delphic imperative, one comes to realize first that the essence of humanity is to be a self-conscious spirit, and then that this spirit is properly understood to be a part of the divine, the indwelling Word. The world is intelligible, and indeed language is intelligible, because of this, because all human beings participate in the divine *Logos*, the source of all intelligibility. In this context, Hedley adds a useful contribution to the literature on Coleridge's use of 'symbol'.

The third chapter picks up this theme: Kant's linkage of practical reason with the possibility of theological knowledge is echoed in Coleridge by a series of distinctions between 'prudence', 'morality' and 'religion', which establish the principle that all that is truly ethical springs from the aligning of the will with the indwelling *Logos*, and so is properly considered to be religious. When human beings are described as 'the image of God' it is just this that is meant: true human action is imaging forth God's own life; is, properly considered, godliness.

Coleridge's suggestion that prudence is distinct from true morality is particularly important as an attack upon the utilitarian ethics championed by Paley (who emerges in Hedley's portrait of Coleridge's thought as the chief opponent who is to be refuted openly or implicitly at every turn, comparable in many ways to the role Hegel fulfilled for Kierkegaard). True ethics will indeed lead to true happiness, but this maxim is not transitive, and that which will apparently lead to my happiness may not be claimed as ethical on that basis. Just so, Christian revelation discloses what ought to be done, not merely a *post-mortem* system of rewards and punishments that will change the pragmatic (and selfish) prudent calculations of one who believes in it. The root theological difference here, on Hedley's account, is of great interest: Coleridge's ethics assume that we can know the good, which is to say something of the nature of God, and so that we should align ourselves with it; Paley, by contrast, believed that our only knowledge of the good comes from knowing those things which God has chosen to reward or punish. Hedley links this to the Euthrypo dilemma (189–192), but notes that this might not be fair: a Paleyan could argue that his system does not demand that there are no ultimate ethical standards, only that we have no epistemic access to them other than through God's case-by-case revelation. The issue, then, is theological: can

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we know God's nature? Coleridge, in continuity with the Platonist tradition, wants to assert robustly that we can.

Hedley therefore turns, in his fourth chapter, to discuss Coleridge's speculative metaphysics. He believed that empiricism is demonstrably inadequate, and that one can only make sense of the act of knowing by postulating a Platonic connection with divine reality, seeing the material world as symbolic and all knowledge as participation in the divine. Coleridge's famous distinction between 'reason' and 'understanding' is rehearsed and analysed here, as is the particular character of his idealism. A long discussion of Coleridge's philosophy of science follows (203–215), demonstrating the influence of Bacon and the rejection of any form of straightforward empiricism as simply inadequate to the evidence.

The fifth chapter essays a description of Coleridge's account of the essence of Christianity. The theme to the fore is the renewal of the human soul, and the central doctrines concern the fall, original sin, and baptismal regeneration. The great failure of the rationalistic religion that Paley learnt from Locke is its rational, rather than experimental, nature: Christianity is to be lived, not thought about.

A final chapter places Coleridge's account firmly in a British context. English (particularly) theology had, from Locke, espoused a rationalism that sought to demonstrate the accord of Christianity with the results of philosophizing; the Deists had taken this forward with energy. Hume's attack on religion is best read as an attempt to undermine precisely these arguments, and Gibbon's less temperate denunciations owe much to Hume. Paley is a defender of this rationalism against Hume and Gibbon, but Coleridge believes Paley's defence will not work. If one accepts the narrow rationalism and empiricism of the eighteenth century, then Hume is simply right; but true religion is experimental and mystical, better learnt from Leighton than Locke, and true philosophy will, in any case, reveal the inadequacy of a simply empiricist account of the world. A turning to the indwelling *Logos*, in whom we live and move and have our being; a life lived for the love of God, battling with sin and overcoming; *this* is Christianity.

Coleridge's historical legacy is sketched in an Epilogue, with Victorian Idealism, as exemplified by Jowett, being the philosophical outworking, and the Anglicanism of *Lux Mundi* its theological pole. Coleridge's greatness, in Hedley's estimation, lies here – in the renewal of a mystical and Platonic tradition of British theology that may be traced from as early as John Scotus Eriugena, that has its high point in Cudworth, More, and the other Cambridge Platonists, and that survives in the works of Leighton and the Caroligian divines. Dr Hedley would like to see it renewed once again. I cannot pretend to be sympathetic, but on this evidence the proposal is intellectually serious and remarkably interesting.

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Robert McKim *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Pp. xi + 280. £45·00 (Hbk). ISBN 0 19 512835 4.

This book is in two parts. The first is entitled 'The hiddenness of God', the second 'Religious diversity'. The parts are closely related. Both argue for the advisability of tentative, exploratory attitudes toward religious dogmas. The first does so from a consideration of the fact that, if there is a God, He is to a large extent hidden from human beings. The second does so from the fact of religious diversity.

In Part 1, McKim considers, with commendable thoroughness and patience, different responses to the apparent hiddenness of God in recent philosophy of religion. He examines the arguments of those theistic philosophers – such as Hick and Swinburne – who maintain that such hiddenness is to be expected because it is productive of great goods. He weighs the arguments of sceptical philosophers, such as Schellenberg, who contend that if there is a God, He would not be hidden: the non-obviousness of the divine existence and nature is good reason to think there is no God. McKim's careful sifting of pro and con on divine hiddenness finds that neither apologist nor sceptic has a compelling case. However, the points raised in the debate enable McKim to produce his own clear conclusions on the epistemic and religious consequences of divine hiddenness. It is the case that, if there is a God, this God is in large measure hidden from us. Reflection on the problem of evil yields the conclusion from the fact of hiddenness that it cannot matter very much whether we believe in God. If there is a God, He cannot have attached any goods vital for human flourishing to the need for human beings to know of His existence and nature. If such goods were attached to this knowledge, then God would not have remained hidden from human beings.

Students and scholars in the philosophy of religion will be indebted to McKim's exploration of the literature on divine hiddenness. I find the conclusion he draws from it compelling. Part 1 ends with a statement which is taken further in the discussion of religious diversity in Part 2: 'The sort of belief that is appropriate, given our circumstances, will not be dogmatic' (124).

Part 2 contains an argument for what McKim calls 'The Critical Stance' from the fact of religious diversity. The Critical Stance has two component principles. The 'E-principle' states that, given the fact of religious disagreement, each side has an obligation to examine their beliefs. The 'T-principle' states that, given disagreement, each side must hold their beliefs tentatively (see 140–141). McKim devotes an entire chapter to considering the objection that religious belief is by its very nature non-tentative. In a discussion of independent merit and interest, he argues that this point is not proven. Many forms of religious commitment are in

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fact compatible with a tentative religious faith. Part 2 contains an extended discussion of the nature and consequences of religious diversity, including its interface with the nature and character of religious experience. The final chapter, 11, consists of an appraisal of Alston on religious experience, which is, again, of independent interest.

As indicated above, the two parts of this book are connected. They both contend against dogmatic forms of faith. Both divine hiddenness and religious diversity allow the author to develop the theme of the religious ambiguity of the universe. The discussion throughout is of high quality and extremely detailed. McKim was preaching to the converted when the present reviewer read *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*. But it is worth while reflecting on what someone predisposed to see merit in dogmatic theological claims might say in criticism. One omission in the book might be seized on by such a reader. McKim's book contains no substantive reference to Plantinga's case in *Warranted Christian Belief* for the conclusion that a Christian with prior firm belief in 'the Great Things of the Gospel' faces no intellectual challenge from the fact of religious diversity. McKim is, of course, aware of the preliminary exposition of Plantinga's views in article form, even though Plantinga's monograph is ignored in his text. He makes reference to key Plantinga positions. The basic belief apologetic gets a mention on 182, the *sensus divinitatis* (though not under that title) on 17, and the possibility that unbelief, as defined from a Christian standpoint, is the product of a faculty for recognizing God disordered by sin on 136. But these references are very, very brief and somewhat dismissive. Plantinga's work will undoubtedly have supported many conservative minded Christians in the perception that dogmatic Christianity faces no epistemic challenge from religious diversity at all. Whether that perception be just or not, it is to be regretted that the author was unable to bring in reference to Plantinga in a book published a year later, especially as Plantinga's final volume in the *Warrant* trilogy was much trumpeted in advance.

There is one place in *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity* which indicates that McKim may not be too troubled by his failure to engage with or refute Plantinga. He notes that some may respond to the fact of diversity in an area of enquiry by stating that only they and their group have competence in that area. He notes 'some may claim that only their religious group has competence in the area of religion, and that all other religious groups lack competence' (185). Though Plantinga is not explicitly cited in this remarks, his account of the presence in (saved) Christians of a functioning *sensus divinitatis* (supplemented by the instigation of the Spirit) contains just such a divisive picture of epistemic competence in the sphere of religion. McKim contents himself with saying that 'there is no way of showing that the advocates of such a view are wrong' (185). Earlier, on pages 136–137, he had discussed the use of 'discrediting mechanisms' by those who do want to neuter the impact of diversity and disagreement on their cherished beliefs. He notes (obviously but truly) that not all discrediting mechanisms are such that

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it is reasonable to rely on them (136). We would like to know whether the Plantinga apparatus of *sensus divinitatis* disordered by sin is one of those it is not reasonable to rely on.

The one complaint I have made of McKim's study does not negate the impression of *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity* as a high quality discussion of important issues in the philosophy of religion.

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Garth L. Hallett *A Middle Way to God*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Pp. xi+162. £28·50 (Hbk). ISBN 0 19 513268 8.

In recent discussion, various writers have tried to forge a 'middle way' between 'fideism' and the use of 'formal' argument in support of religious belief. (Think, for example, of William Abraham's 'soft rationalism'.) Garth Hallett's text provides a further and notable contribution to this tradition, one which takes as its specific goal the charting of a middle ground between Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne. Hallett finds that Plantinga's approach, to the extent that it depends on moving inductively to the conditions of proper basicality, is bound to be arbitrary, since different groups will take different beliefs as paradigmatically properly basic. And Swinburne's approach, he thinks, risks a similar arbitrariness, insofar as it depends on assimilating religious experiences to other experiences where the 'principle of credulity' properly applies, a difficulty which is compounded by his proposing standards of proof which cannot be met by some beliefs whose rationality is evident. This suggests the possibility of a further strategy: why not start from a belief whose rationality we all recognize (so no danger of arbitrariness here), and then show in detail that the epistemic standing of theistic belief is much the same as that of this belief (in this way making good a project that is implied in Plantinga's *God and Other Minds*)?

Of course, much of the interest of this proposal will depend on the particular belief chosen to provide the basis of comparison with theistic belief. Hallett selects a belief from his own experience, recalling an occasion when he was visiting a certain Mrs M and her child and 'caught a look of such tenderness in the mother's eyes that I knew she loved her daughter' (13). The central proposal of the book is, then, that this belief in Mrs M's love for her child (or some other such belief, drawn from the reader's own experience) is clearly rational, and that belief in God can be shown to be of comparable epistemic standing, and is therefore also rational.

Standing in the way of this proposal is the fact that, for many of us anyway, belief in God seems epistemically rather less impressive than beliefs of the kind

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Hallett has taken as his point of comparison. Recognizing the force of this objection, the author argues that this difference in the seeming plausibility of these two kinds of belief can be traced to the influence of various non-rational factors, factors which are at work in lesser degree, or not at all, in the case of standard other-minds beliefs, but which impinge significantly on theistic belief. These factors include the influence of damaged parent–child relationships and the sense that God would pose a threat to human freedom. The wealth of examples the author provides at this juncture resists easy summary, but on this issue the text shows powerful sensitivity to the life-setting of religious belief formation, and its central claims are developed clearly and persuasively. A second important influence which accounts for the greater seeming plausibility of other-minds beliefs, such as the belief in the mother's love over theistic belief is, the book proposes, human vulnerability to 'evil'. Here, the author argues that we have a deep-seated tendency to overrate the intellectual force of the 'problem of evil', for instance because we do not grasp clearly the distinction between failing to see any explanation of evil and seeing that there is no such explanation. So by Hallett's reckoning, evil should make no significant difference to our assessment of the relative epistemic standing of the belief in Mrs M's love and theistic belief.

Allowing that these phases of the discussion are enough to suggest that any disparity in the seeming plausibility of theistic belief and the candidate other-minds kind of belief can be traced in large degree to non-epistemic sources, we may then wonder whether an examination of the epistemic bases of the two kinds of belief will indeed disclose a state of broad parity. Hallett compares the epistemic case that may be made for each kind of belief by reference to three kinds of consideration: direct or mystical experience, analogical kinds of argument, and teleological arguments. The upshot of this discussion is that, roughly speaking, there is indeed equality in epistemic standing, primarily because there is broad parity in relation to analogical kinds of argument, and because teleological arguments, which apply only in relation to God, should be accorded some weight.

As this brief outline indicates, I hope, this book makes an original and well-argued contribution to questions which lie at the heart of contemporary debate in philosophy of religion, especially in its sensitivity to the psychological context of religious belief formation, and its search for a perspective which will partake in the 'fuller rationality' of Swinburne's approach (through its dependence on analogical, teleological and other forms of argument) and the 'firmness' of Plantinga's basic belief proposal (in view of its determination to free religious belief from excessively stringent standards of proof of the kind that belong more properly in a scientific context).

Given the scope and ambition of Hallett's proposal, it is to be expected that it will meet with opposition. Some will wonder whether he has really escaped the problem of arbitrariness. After all, he concedes himself that his proposal will only fully convince those who have had the requisite theistic experiences (122), and the

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parity thesis seems at points to involve the idea that we might 'taste and see the goodness of God' and assess evil on the basis of that perspective, rather as we might see Mrs M's look and understand any cross words she might say within that larger context (104–106). To the extent that the argument depends on experience of these kinds, then naturally it will tend to convince only those who are members of the theistic community, and in this respect will share the fate of Plantinga's basic belief proposal. However, Hallett's discussion evidently includes features which do not presuppose the having of theistic experiences, so his case may well succeed in shifting our perspective on these issues, by rational means, even if we have not had such experiences. Others may wonder whether the rather agnostic response to the problem of evil may not jeopardize Hallett's endorsement of the teleological argument to a larger degree than is recognized in the text (89–90, 104). And some will find that the terms of the book's central comparison (the belief that Mrs M loves her child, and the belief in God) are relevantly disanalogous to the extent that the first seems much more specific. Again, the text offers comments that bear on this objection (27, 120), but some may think that the belief concerning Mrs M is epistemically better grounded, because much more by way of relevant background can be presupposed here (Mrs M exists, is a mother, and serious and intelligent), whereas belief in God, as a more fundamental kind of belief, cannot be inserted with the same ease into a set of pre-established background beliefs. I am sure that many readers will, like myself, come to this text with a sense that there is indeed a significant difference in the epistemic standing of Hallett's two key beliefs. This book may not overturn that impression entirely, but it will force the attentive reader to think hard about what finally underpins this initial sense, whether it be grounds, or mere influences, or lack of requisite experiences. These are issues of the first importance, and Hallett's text offers a clear and careful engagement with them.

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