

## Book review

D. Z. Phillips *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*.  
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Pp. xiv + 330. £45.00  
(Hbk); £15.95 (Pbk). ISBN 0 521 80368 3 (Hbk); 0 521 00846 8 (Pbk).

This book is a reworking of Phillips's *Religion without Explanation*. However, it is more than a second or revised edition of that work. It contains many new chapters and a new overall argument linking them. It fully deserves to be presented as a new book.

Like the earlier work, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* is a study of grand, explanatory theories of religion as these are found in the human sciences. Like the earlier work, its overall argument is that it is a mistake, in principle, to seek a grand explanation of religion, particularly one that is based on some overall verdict of religion's truth/falsehood, success/failure. The philosophically informed observer should rather be a contemplator of the possibilities of sense and intention in religious symbols and rituals. This contemplative stance involves neither an endorsement nor a rejection of the sense to be seen in religion.

The particular targets of Phillips's critique in this volume are thinkers like J. Samuel Preus (in his *Explaining Religion* (Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1996) who contend that the critical student of religion must choose between a theological and a naturalist paradigm for the study of religion. They must opt, that is, either for an explanation of religion that concedes religion's claims to the reality of the gods (and to the genuineness of human commerce with them) or a suspicious interpretation of those claims in the manner of a Freud or a Marx. The overall argument uniting the many studies of schools of interpreting religion which make up this book contends that Preus and those who think like him present us with a false dilemma. The book argues for the contemplative stance alluded to above, and that this stance is concerned to bring out religion's (varied) sense and neither to endorse nor condemn it.

To my mind the value of Phillips's book lies in his penetrating observations on the many individual theorists of religion on whom he turns his attention. The merit of this new study is that its range is significantly greater than *Religion without Explanation*. Many more thinkers and schools are the target of critique than are covered in *Religion without Explanation*. Phillips is an excellent critic of the foibles

and blind spots of grand theorists of religion, and individual critical chapters in this book can be recommended to students of religion to their profit.

However, the present reviewer is wholly unpersuaded of the worth of the book's general argument. One reason is that the exposé of Preus's false dilemma has been done before. Phillips is ignorant of a strand of writing about the interpretation of religion which has developed 'methodological agnosticism' as an alternative to the false choice between an avowed religious scepticism and an avowed endorsement of faith in the study of religions. A prominent source of methodological agnosticism (which owes much to the *Verstehen* approach to human social action and the idea of 'bracketing' in phenomenology) is Ninian Smart's *The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973). Smart's work has been made use of by other writers who attack the false dilemma: either the hermeneutics of suspicion or the hermeneutics of recollection. Phillips is just ignorant of the fact that there is a refutation of Preus already in the literature which espouses something different again from his 'hermeneutics of contemplation'.

The overall argument of this book seems weaker still when we reflect that the 'hermeneutics of contemplation' involves accepting the Phillipsian view that metaphysics is to be dismissed as irrelevant to religion. A clear indication of this is given in the chapter on Feuerbach. Here we are invited to agree that Feuerbach was correct in banishing the idea that 'God' denotes a metaphysical subject, a first cause beyond the world. Phillips and Feuerbach join in alliance in divorcing religion from metaphysics. But the arguments offered in support of Feuerbach are extremely weak, in my view.

Phillips's endorsement of Feuerbach's contention that 'God' cannot refer to a metaphysical subject appears to be based firmly on the equation of real subjects with empirical subjects. Phillips affirms that there is an 'internal relation' between such properties of God as that God is the creator and that God is love. So no-one could be said to have a knowledge of God if they did not have knowledge of God as creator, as love. Therefore Feuerbach was right to insist that God is not a metaphysical subject who possesses these properties (94–95). We have to interpret such predicates as 'grammatical predicates of a grammatical object, not descriptions of an independent existing object of which they happen to be true' (95). The endorsement of Feuerbach in this argument only works if we assume that all subjects of predication are like empirical subjects: their properties are possessed accidentally. There seems to be nothing, outside of Feuerbachian dogma, to stop a theistic thinker affirming both that God is like empirical objects in being a subject of predication, but unlike them in possessing all His key attributes essentially. God could not continue to exist as the thing God is and yet lose such properties as being the creator and being loving.

Phillips thinks he has a knock-down argument against the conception of God as a metaphysical subject. That conception needs a notion of God transcending

the world, as being in some significant sense apart from the world. It thereby falls into the following trap: it makes no sense to talk of 'the world'. Theism which has a metaphysical subject needs to think of the universe as a thing and of God as its source, ground, or cause. But it makes no sense to speak of the universe as a thing. It cannot be spoken of as the class of all things, because we could not identify this class as being different from other classes. There are no criteria to identify what would belong to the class of 'everything'. The world does not have the unity of a thing or of a class of things (70).

What are we to make of the point that there is no thing (the universe) which we can say the *theos* transcends? The argument certainly points to a problem in how to make intelligible the context in which talk of a metaphysical makes sense. But surely the problem has a solution and it is along the following lines. What is meant by 'world' when it is said that God transcends the world is the cosmos. The cosmos is the collection of spatio-temporal objects thought of as forming an ordered physical whole. The things which God transcends are assumed to be all spatio-temporally related to one another and to be bound together by a fundamental set of physical stuffs, forces, and laws. The notion that all spatio-temporal things form part of a cosmos in this sense is to be found at the origins of Greek natural theology and thus forms both the historical and logical basis for philosophical thought about a *theos*. It is difficult indeed to see what Phillips can have against it. With the notion of a cosmos we have a home for the cosmological argument, since we can ask whether the ordered system of physical things is self-contained or requires some cause or ground external to it. Phillips objects to the cosmological argument that we cannot ask who made the world or 'everything'. There could be no process or development leading to the world's existence and asking for the cause of everything is odd since we explain the cause of something by referring to something else (Phillips (2001), 69). But of course purveyors of the cosmological argument will accept that there is no *physical* process that is the making of the world. And they will say that we must seek a cause or ground of all *finite* things or of all *things which come to be and pass away*. Phillips's dismissal of metaphysical questions is really quite weak. There is no striking new vindication of Feuerbach here.

So, this book is mixed bag. On the one hand, Phillips the insightful critic of theories and thinkers is to the fore. On the other hand, his grasp of the debate concerning the methodology of the study of religions is limited. Moreover, the attempt to use the whole to convince us of his neo-Wittgensteinian interpretation of religion will persuade very few.

PETER BYRNE  
*King's College London*