

Book reviews

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Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp *The Predicament of Belief: Science, Philosophy, Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Pp. x+184. £16.99 (Hbk). ISBN 978 0 19 969527 0.

In this book the American theologian and philosopher Philip Clayton, writing with his long-time collaborator Steven Knapp, presents a radical assessment of where religious faith, especially Christian faith, stands in relation to the triple challenges of natural science, religious plurality, and the besetting problem of evil. Clayton and Knapp are to say the least an interesting pair. Clayton has taught for many years at Claremont Graduate University, that hot-bed of process thought, without being a card-carrying process theologian. He is now the first provost of Claremont Lincoln University, a new experiment in inter-religious dialogue. Knapp has been provost of Johns Hopkins and is now president of Georgetown University; his academic background is in literature more than in theology. I am encouraged (and amazed) to see that very senior academic leaders in the United States have time to write groundbreaking academic work – equally that major thinkers in theology and religious studies are willing to put their vision into action in generating novel academic structures.

The book falls into three sections: an analysis of the general philosophical problem of holding to theism (chapters 1–4), an engagement with the specific problem for Christians of holding to a resurrection faith (chapters 5–6), and a reflection on the implication of these analyses for contemporary faith and church (chapters 7–8). At the beginning of the book the authors make clear that they want to reject appeals to faith as self-authenticating. All such ‘immunization strategies’ are set aside in favour of a thorough exploration of reasons for doubt. The principal reasons they give are: the power of science to explain the world, the corrosive effect of ubiquitous suffering on any belief that the ‘ultimate reality’ is a being that cares about our welfare, the multiplicity of religious claims (casting doubt on whether any one claim could be true), and (specifically in relation to Christian claims) the ambiguity of the historical accounts. Clayton and Knapp point out that the resurrection, that central Christian claim, is vulnerable to all these reasons for doubt.

The authors have no hope of generating an apologetic refutation of all these concerns. Rather they attempt to show that, despite reasons for doubt, Christian faith, in some form, remains more rational to believe than not. This is the 'Christian minimalism' that they will defend and indeed promote. It is minimalism both in the manner of belief, which it holds to be somewhat more rational than not, and also in the content of belief, as will appear below. It is minimalism distinguished both from a fideism that clings to positions because they have once been confessed, and from an agnosticism that continues with practice while regarding the content of truth-claims as unknowable. It is distinguished too from the recent efforts of Dawkins and Dennett to apply 'the universal acid of Darwinism'; Clayton and Knapp recognize that there are genuinely metaphysical questions that science can pose but not answer, such as why nature appears to obey *these particular laws*. This leads them into a discussion of the fine-tuning argument – why should there exist a universe, or ensemble of universes, that could be life-bearing? Here, to my mind, was one of the thinner points in their analysis. I agree that the designedness of this universe (or ensemble of universes) is at least as plausible as a huge random assortment of universes, but was unconvinced by the move that, because, in our experience, concepts reside in the mental before they arise in the physical, it is therefore rational to posit a mindlike realm out of which universes spring. This seems to me to rest on a concept of the mental as separable from the material in a way that (arguably) is contrary to our experience. (Here the authors might have been aided by positioning themselves in relation to Keith Ward's recent work on idealism.)

Clayton and Knapp move fluently across that somewhat dubious bridge to assert that it is 'at least plausible' (a recurring phrase, and all they seek to demonstrate) that ultimate reality is mindlike, agential, and desiring the existence and flourishing of creatures, and therefore to be regarded as 'not less than personal'. Granted, the authors are honest about the alternatives to such a metaphysics, and that it has been difficult since Hume to argue from the world we know to the goodness of God. That leads them into a discussion of what might be the motive for the ultimate reality giving rise to creatures. Again, Ward's work on the creator's life being enriched by the experience of finite creatures might have found a place here; Clayton and Knapp conclude rather that the motive for creation must have been sheer generosity. They go on to suggest that the existence of conscience is suggestive of the ultimate reality imparting a lure towards moral illumination (again, they perhaps underrate the naturalistic explanations that might be given of conscience).

By the end of chapter 2, then, the authors have arrived (in their terms) at the at-least plausibility of an ultimate reality not less than personal and even with 'a Christological tinge'. There follows what will probably be the most-cited analysis in this book – their response in chapter 3 to Wesley Wildman's Argument from Neglect in respect of divine action. This is a very important discussion and shows

the way in which the divine action debate is moving back onto moral territory, informed by considerations of theodicy, as opposed to the mechanistic territory, and informed by the conversation with science, which has been much explored over the last twenty years. Clayton and Knapp conclude that the only way in which a model of divine action can be retained is if that action is confined to axiological lure, the presentation of values to conscious agents, rather than the imparting of information, or even intervention in physical processes. This step depends on a conviction that mental events can be 'anomalous' (in the terminology of Donald Davidson), not strictly governed by physical laws. Again, this is a big step, and too briefly argued. It is a step that many in the science-religion debate will reject, on the grounds that Clayton and Knapp have mistaken an epistemological ignorance, which makes mental events not completely characterizable at the level of the merely neural, for an ontological irreducibility. Mental events may be radically emergent from their physical substrate, but yet entirely dependent upon it, such that God's interaction with a human mind is necessarily an interaction with the grain of physical reality. I was unclear, moreover, how this analysis related to Clayton's recent essay on free will (*In Quest of Freedom*, 2009), which seemed to assign much more comprehensive significance to neurophysiology, and does not cite Davidson.

However, very many readers will be tempted by the position at which Clayton and Knapp arrive, in which God's action in this cosmological epoch is confined to the lure of virtue, though in succeeding epochs there may be a place where soul-making is no longer needed. Christians, however, will properly be troubled by how this relates to a biblically informed resurrection faith, and this is treated in chapters 5-6, following an excursus in chapter 4 into how to wrestle with the plurality of religions. In that excursus the authors assert that the honest believer will acknowledge that his or her religious experience would have been different if they had been raised in another tradition. They acknowledge that the truth of any one tradition is underdetermined by the evidence that we have about ultimate reality, and that some explorers may therefore want to stop at this point, accepting the plausibility of a 'minimally personalistic theism' without being willing to embrace any one version of it. This is the hinge of the book, from which the authors go on to assess the particularity of Christian truth-claims at their most characteristic. Few readers, I suspect, will actually take the journey Clayton and Knapp describe, moving from the plausibility of theism to exploration of a particular option within it. More typically the readers of this sort of book are moving in the opposite direction, starting from a very particular place in a particular tradition and working outwards, but the intellectual experiment the authors offer is a lucid and engaging one.

There follows an effort to explicate the resurrection in terms of the model of divine action arrived at in chapter 3. Clearly many things are ruled out, including the empty tomb and the physicality of the risen Jesus' appearances; Clayton and

Knapp consider that in any case the textual evidence for these is at best ambiguous. They offer what is in effect a reading of the resurrection from within the Christic pneumatology of Paul. The disciples, on this view, experienced through the Spirit the continuity of the vision of reality that had been at the centre of Jesus' teaching ministry during his life. It was natural in the light of the intensity of this experience, their own bereavement, the Spirit's activity, and their context in post-Maccabean Judaism to interpret this in terms of bodily resurrection. But what is stressed in Paul and picked up by Clayton and Knapp is the importance of participation, and the interchangeability of 'in Christ' language with the language of the Spirit. Jesus' self-surrendering engagement with God became newly available to his followers after his death (clear echoes here also of the 'paraclete' passages in the fourth gospel). Over time this experience changed, and we can see (so Clayton and Knapp suggest) in the later account of the ascension a rationalizing of this change.

This is ingenious theology, developed over chapters 5-6, and ending with the offer of a spectrum of possible positions. Maybe what endured after Jesus' death was the example of self-giving love and compassion, the conclusion most palatable to inter-religious dialogue. Maybe what endured was an authoritative and unique gift, such that all response to the divine lure comes to be response to a Jesus-shaped love. Maybe – strongest and most traditional of possibilities – the encounter of the believer with the divine is after the resurrection an encounter with Jesus, whose perfectly obedient life has been taken up into the divine. It will be evident that Clayton and Knapp preserve the core Christian assertion that something happened in the Christ-event that changed everything, while jettisoning any hint of the incarnation of the pre-existent Son in favour of some form of adoptionism. In the end they are agnostic as to the uniqueness of such a divine adoption.

This approach will be very challenging to the orthodox Christian reader, not least because of the proportion of the New Testament that can be read without difficulty while abandoning so much that seems central. Two elements seem to me particularly problematic. First, there is the extraordinary transformation of the disciples after Jesus' death. The Gospels depict them as persistently uncomprehending of his self-surrendering life until the resurrection. It could of course be argued that this is the way the evangelists needed to tell the story in the light of their world-view, but the recurrent emphasis in the texts on the disciples' ignorance and transformation seems odd in the light of the Clayton-Knapp model. Second, the model of salvation offered here is entirely human-centred – no account is offered of the increasing emphasis in Christian theology on the non-human creation and its salvation. Indeed, the very strong emphasis on the mental in Clayton and Knapp suggests a drift back towards the anti-physical anthropocentrism that has been so much criticized in recent ecotheology.

Chapter 7 is another interesting excursus on the nature of faith and doubt. The authors offer a sixfold typology of convictions – from that which is and should be held by the whole community of inquirers to that which is merely hoped for, or merely symbolic of other commitments. Again the interplay between propositions in science and philosophy and those in particular religions is fascinating, though underlying it is a modernist conviction of the strength of the narratives offered by natural science, a conviction to which not every reader will want to subscribe. More exploration of such an underlying epistemology, and more exploration of why (for example) a Barthian epistemology is necessarily ruled out, would have strengthened the book.

Finally the authors offer an account of what church might look like on the basis of this Christian minimalism. Membership would no longer be about the centrality of the confession of the conciliar creeds, but would be open to a diverse community of explorers attracted to the life of Jesus in a whole range of ways. I found this a disappointing chapter. It did not seem to me to recognize the extent to which many churches are already just such communities. The account also seemed to place too high a valuation on rational discussion at the expense of other dimensions of religious life. In particular the issue of worship, and the character of prayer, needed far more elucidation.

It may seem churlish, in the light of my opening remarks, to criticize these academic leaders for producing too short a book, but it will be evident from my comments that there are key junctures at which the discussion was frustratingly brief, and will have prevented many readers from following the trail that Clayton and Knapp lay. What they offer is nevertheless hugely rewarding. Willem B. Drees has called repeatedly for the sort of science-informed theology that takes science with the utmost seriousness and then tackles the theological loci that science renders most challenging. This book seems to me an exemplary attempt from within Christian theology to respond to his call.

It is too soon to decide whether *The Predicament of Belief* will have the importance to which its somewhat sonorous title seems to aspire – whether it will join the company of *Honest to God*, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, and *The Sea of Faith*. Indeed it may be that the very context that the book discusses, in which the content and authority of Christian faith is so much challenged, and conventional Christian observance is in steep decline, means that a book calling for a radically new approach cannot have the force that, for example, *Honest to God* possessed on publication.

Although this is not a technical book, its philosophical tone, especially in the opening chapters, will be too much for many readers. But I would see it as near-essential reading for theological educators, and teachers and students of philosophy of religion approached from within a Christian perspective. (It would also be a very interesting exercise for theologians of other religions, who will be able to engage readily with the analysis of chapters 1–4 and chapter 7, and will find

the type of approach brought to the central Christian confessional claim of the resurrection fascinating in terms of how it might be applied to central claims of their own faith.) In summary, this is one of *the* major theological publishing events of 2011.

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Robert Audi *Rationality and Religious Commitment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Pp. xvi + 311. £25.00 (Hbk). ISBN 978 0 19 960957 4.

The overall issue which concerns this book is whether religious commitment, understood as consisting of both theoretical and practical elements, can be rational. Audi's approach to tackling this question makes the book a wide-ranging one. He deals with large topics including rationality, the nature of faith and belief, religious experience, divine command ethics, the nature of human and divine persons, the challenge of secular naturalism to religious commitment, and the problem of evil.

In part I of the book, Audi offers an outline account of rationality which emerges from his previous writings. He distinguishes between rationality and the stronger concepts of justification and reasonableness. His main concern is whether religious commitment can meet the standard of rationality rather than satisfy the more stringent requirements of these latter concepts. Even regarding rationality, Audi emphasizes (pp. 46–47) the importance of not adopting the 'artificially high standard of rationality' demanded by the religious sceptic. Audi's concern, therefore, is not with convincing the sceptic but rather with defending the intellectual respectability of religious commitment.

In part II, Audi explores the dimensions of rational religious commitment. He distinguishes between different kinds of faith and also between faith, belief, acceptance, and hope. Audi stresses that faith is not reducible to belief and that non-doxastic faith can play a central role in religious life. Audi writes of the kind of religious commitment he defends in the book that 'although many religious beliefs must be part of it, its central faith need not be doxastic' (p. 287). This does not seem true to the self-understanding of many religious people within, say, the Abrahamic faiths.

Beyond taking religious commitment to include cognitions not necessarily restricted to beliefs, Audi emphasizes the importance of assessing the rationality of religious practice and not just cognition. He is concerned to defend the rationality