
REVIEWS

Ideas as Entities

Religion, Reason, and Truth — Historical Essays in the Philosophy of Religion by Sterling M. McMurrin (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1982), 280 pp., \$25.

Reviewed by Blake T. Ostler, graduate student in law and philosophy at the University of Utah.

Probably few people derive their religious beliefs or lack of them from the philosophy of religion. However, when viewed historically, it becomes clear that the philosophy of religion has greatly influenced religion in general and Christianity in particular. Sterling McMurrin's new book, *Religion, Reason, and Truth*, is an exploration of the historical tension between faith and reason, between what religion claims for itself and what history reveals it to be. McMurrin's thesis is that past triumphs may well be present tragedies for religion.

Although McMurrin's book is a collection of independent essays, many of them previously published, it contains unifying themes. In approaching religious philosophy from the historical perspective, McMurrin is at his best, combining expertise in both the philosophy of religion and the history of philosophy. McMurrin treats ideas not merely as landmarks in a particular world view but as entities that have a life of their own. The genius of his particular approach is in searching the implications of an idea in history, its functions in thought and its impact on culture, in contrast to a socio-historical reductionism which sees an idea as a mere symptom of culture.

McMurrin emphasizes that "there is no intellectual pursuit more calculated to make a free person of a normal person, to free him from his cultural bondage, and no

history is more liberating than the history of religions" (p. 135). In effect, the historian has crawled out of the murky cave where the masses still mistake the shadows cast by religion for the light of truth. McMurrin places such ideas as the immortality of the soul, the moral freedom of humans, and the absoluteness of God in the light of history and the cultures which produced them. In the context of our own "enlightened" culture, McMurrin claims, these ideas cannot be honestly maintained.

Although sympathetic to religion, *Religion, Reason, and Truth* is an extremely critical look at religion as an appendage to philosophy. More than once, McMurrin has personally intimated to me that he is a skeptic and a heretic but a religious person nevertheless. He celebrates a religious humanism that dares to face ultimate nothingness with present courage, that dares to follow reason where the heart fears to tread, that shuns the naiveté that characterized early liberal religion but which refuses to resort to existentialistic irrationalism. He is incensed by traditional absolutism which raises God above reason and lowers man below morality. "The God of the fundamentalist is an arbitrary tyrant," McMurrin charges. "He has created a world that groans in pain and suffering, accepts the blood of his own son as payment for his mercy, and creates souls to burn in hell eternally," and this despite his omnipotence (p. 99). McMurrin is equally critical of the liberal theologian who refuses to honestly confront the conflict between the theory of evolution and claims of Christianity. A Christian must believe that "Christ came into the world to save souls who had fallen from godliness, not risen from a distant cousin of the ape or from some primeval slime. The liberals have

often ridiculed this statement of the issue, but it cannot be ignored except by an intellectual gloss that intentionally avoids the basic problem" (p. 258). The liberal theologian refuses to see the problem in these terms because, avers McMurrin, he is "not genuinely interested in the truth; that his concern, rather, is simply to minister to his emotional life or possibly to promote the tyranny of a sacred book, perpetuate an antique theological tradition, or encourage submission to ecclesiastical authority."

McMurrin also employs logical positivism to analyze such ideas as *God*, *soul*, and *freedom*. Perhaps the greatest challenge to religion comes from positivism, a philosophy which contends that meaningful statements must be verifiable in principle—amenable to proof or disproof by some test that can at least be imagined. However, many religious ideas are devoid of cognitive content. Though it is grammatically correct to say that X is immaterial substance, how could one go about proving that something is substance without matter? The inquiry must stop with the assertion. McMurrin claims that such key religious ideas as *God* and *soul* are without logical reference or factual content because logical and syntactical analysis exposes them as disguised tautologies. Before a concept of God can be meaningful, it must be possible to describe in experiential terms what the world would be like with God as opposed to one without him.

Notwithstanding his criticisms, and perhaps because of them, McMurrin looks upon religious finitism with considerable favor. He lauds William James's view of God as a personal being who is struggling in the midst of the world's evils, who could conceivably fail but who would not turn his back on the suffering of his creatures. He laments that such a view did not wield greater influence on religion, for the traditional idea of God as absolute denies the possibility of moral discrimination and is meaningless in human experience. A concept of God as a personal living being, in

contrast, heightens the significance of human moral actions and possesses cognitive content. A personal living being could make a difference in human experience. In McMurrin's opinion, James's pluralistic nominalism "was probably in principle as near the truth as theism is likely to come" (p. 60).

Religion, Reason, and Truth asserts that the modern religion which would preserve intellectual integrity must contend with life in its organic fact, relate God to process and human experience, recognize the value of human actions, and deal with history honestly. Logically, then, the theology most likely to prevail will be derived from James, Alfred North Whitehead, and Charles Hartshorne—process philosophers all.

Although obviously written for philosophers and not for Mormon audiences, *Religion, Reason, and Truth* has much to offer the thoughtful Latter-day Saint. Notwithstanding Mormonism's fundamentalist tendencies, its pluralistic emphasis, materialistic aspects, preference for process, and radical finitism make it eminently amenable to the thought of McMurrin's preferred trinity of process philosophers. McMurrin's analysis of the problems of religious history and evolution is timely and helps to place these perennial problems in the wider context of Judeo-Christian thought. However, one should not expect an inquiry into possible solutions to these or other problems facing Christianity. McMurrin merely wants to state these problems in a way that demands an honest confrontation with these issues.

Some will undoubtedly reject McMurrin's admitted naturalistic bias which refuses to allow mention of God equated with history. To speak of God in the context of history, argues McMurrin, is to pass from the sphere of history to the realm of myth. One may wonder how evolution and Christianity could possibly conflict if they are not in the same sphere of discourse. However, McMurrin's point is precisely that Chris-

tianity has confused myth with history, passed off legend as historical fact, and prostituted the prophetic message of human progress for a theology which denies the reality of time. Modern theologians will contend that McMurrin has failed to grasp the relation of myth to history and has misunderstood myth as a fairy tale instead of as a pedagogical goldmine. Eden need not be an historical fact to be an insightful explanation of the human predicament. Myth can expand historic fact to encompass generic human experience — a reality at least as relevant as history.

Religion, Reason, and Truth has its drawbacks. Despite McMurrin's lucid writing style, it is difficult reading. Those initiated into the intricacies of the philosophy of religion probably won't notice, but the neophyte will have a hard time staying awake while his mind is bombarded by

allusions to recondite philosophers and little-known ideas. Moreover, the \$25 price tag is enough to discourage students, families, and tithe-payers. Further, despite disclaimers, McMurrin has little patience with the supra-mundane. He may admit that reason has limits, but he is suspicious of anything claiming to go beyond those limits. It is easier to call revelation nonsense than to deal with its implications for epistemology. For, once one admits that his source of knowledge is beyond reason, how does one show that such an assertion is reasonable? Yet if revelation must be reasonable and if we are certain that God's reasons square with our own, is not God superfluous? McMurrin assumes the latter and turns his naturalistic foil against Christianity accordingly. It is, however, a double-edged sword that cuts both ways, for it is not unreasonable to doubt reason.