

REVIEWS

The Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered

Beverley Clack and Brian R. Clack. *The Philosophy of Religion: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2008. ix+190 pp. Paper: \$24.95. ISBN 13: 978-07456-3868-3

Reviewed by Tony Clark

This introduction to the philosophy of religion, originally published in 1998, is fully revised and updated in the 2008 edition. The authors, Beverly Clack and Brian R. Clack are, respectively, reader in theology, philosophy and culture at Oxford Brooks University in the United Kingdom, and assistant professor of philosophy at the University of San Diego. This clearly written text is published in the United Kingdom and targeted at “sixth-formers and undergraduates” (vii), which translates to high school seniors and undergraduates in the American educational system. It is well pitched for an introductory college class. The authors make one reference to cricket terminology, but this need not unduly perturb the American reader!

The authors open with a discussion of the nature of religion, warning against the danger of focusing on the culturally dominant religion. They quote the words of the eminent religion scholar Ninian Smart: “We are not confronted in fact by some monolithic object, namely religion. We are confronted by *religions*. And each religion has its own style, its own inner dynamic, its own special meanings, its uniqueness” (5). This is an important point to which I will return.

In the first chapter, a basic conviction of the book emerges: “Religion is a *human* phenomenon” (7; emphasis mine). While many traditional theists do embrace this claim, it becomes clear that the Clacks propose an exclusively humanistic view of religion. These revisionist beliefs play a significant role throughout, and the reader will need to bear them in mind.

The substantive themes that the book addresses are largely conventional. Chapter 2 surveys arguments for the existence of God and responds to them with refreshing lucidity, although there is no discussion of Intelligent Design, a surprising omission given the heat of the contemporary debate. The chapter proceeds

with a discussion of divine attributes. Here the authors stress that, despite the traditional practice, “philosophy of religion must proceed via an explicit engagement with the existential ‘phenomena of human life’” (71). This emphasis assumes that one cannot speak of religion without also speaking of the human condition. Indeed, for the authors, “God-talk” is, at root, an indirect way of speaking about humanity.

Chapter 3 considers a variety of challenges to theism. Its critical discussion of theodicy considers a number of traditional and revisionist proposals. The authors conclude that it is simply incoherent to speak of an omnipotent, good God. “The fact of evil clearly undermines the Christian’s speculative claim that God is all-powerful and all-loving” (109). This familiar line of reasoning presupposes a *direct identification* of the will of God with all contingent events. But this isn’t the only possibility. A plausible alternative is to attribute agency to evil forces which are temporal but real and which sustain opposition to God’s loving purposes. God permits their existence for a time. The pinnacle of salvation history will be God’s final eschatological victory over all such evil. This approach is powerfully expressed, for example, in David Bentley Hart’s *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005). Hart’s argument lends support to a more traditional theodicy, and it is unfortunate that this robust position, with considerable warrant in terms of the Christian scriptures, is not represented in this book.

Chapter 3 continues with an examination of natural histories of religion, including succinct expositions of the thought of David Hume, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Sigmund Freud on religion. Characterizing religious commitment variously as mistake, projection, illusion, opiate, and neurosis, these thinkers offer substantial critiques of religion. In a fascinating treatment of religious language, which relies largely on the work of the early Ludwig Wittgenstein, A. J. Ayer, and Antony Flew, the authors call into question the very possibility of “God-talk” as meaningful discourse.

The first two sections of Chapter 4 consider a number of revisionary, anti-realist accounts that reject the idea of God as a personal being, ontologically distinct from human beings. A brief exposition of the work of Don Cupitt and Stewart Sutherland pre-

cedes a lengthier engagement with the earlier and later work of Wittgenstein. The final part of the chapter offers an account of feminist critiques of religion. In this context, the authors question whether the ideas associated with “rationality” are, as discourse about the philosophy of religion usually assumes, of “general applicability” (128). The Clacks explain that, for feminists, “such an approach is highly problematic, not least because their concern has been to draw attention to the way in which the ideas that human beings develop about their world invariably reflect their own individual experience and social placing” (128).

It is curious that they herald this feminist insight—that the contours of rational thought are conditioned by contingent factors—as a radical departure from the Anglo-American analytic tradition. In contemporary analytic philosophical discourse, the predominant concern is not to establish a rational grounding for beliefs (the foundationalist imperative), but to analyze the nature and implications of beliefs that one finds oneself holding. Such a task requires a self-critical evaluation of one’s personal beliefs, and it also requires consideration of the beliefs of others. Nicholas Wolterstorff in *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008) claims: “In place of the old foundationalist picture, the picture of the academic enterprise now being taken for granted by philosophers in the analytic tradition is what I call *dialogic pluralism*” (xi; emphasis his).

In the final chapter—and here the significance of the new edition comes to the fore—the authors question the conclusions of the book’s earlier edition in which “we accepted the broad thrust of the secularization thesis, according to which religion in secular societies has lost its social significance and power” (168). They explain: “World events have made us review this perspective, for recent years have revealed the continuing power of religion to shape the way in which human beings engage with the world” (169). The rise of religiously motivated terror now casts the debate about the place of religion in society in a new light. What appeared to be a fading influence has reemerged as a dangerous force. Why should this be? Their answer is that this phenomenon is rooted in the perpetrators’ supernaturalism allied to a desire for religious certainty. What is required, therefore, is the promotion of human-

istic forms of religion which are free of supernaturalism and the need for certitude.

The Clacks have written what is, in many respects, a commendably clear book, and one can gain much from it. However, at least one aspect of the book must be challenged. Despite the points made in the discussion of feminist approaches to the philosophy of religion and other occasional protestations to the contrary, the authors' fundamental *modus operandi* is to approach religion in terms of "religious ideas" ("the existence of God," "miracle," "evil," etc.) which they presuppose are essentially generic. It is surprising, especially given their knowledge of Wittgenstein's later work, that the Clacks do not acknowledge the fact that such ideas, and the words used to articulate them, cannot be properly understood aside from the ways of life and practices of the faith communities in which they are used. The effect of this approach is, inevitably, to efface the distinctions—some subtle and some not-so-subtle—in how different communities use these ideas and words. I offer this criticism of the Clacks' book, aware that it has broader implications for the philosophy of religion as a discipline.

Finally, if—as the authors claim—the recent upsurge in religiously motivated terror is facilitated by the alliance of supernaturalism and the desire for certainty, one can understand their revisionist, humanistic tendencies. But to suggest that "it might be possible to develop a form of religiosity that is not about providing answers to the problems of life, but that emanates from the human engagement with the world" (184) implies that "our human engagement with the world" is, essentially, a "given" to which religion must respond. This will make little sense to those who regard their religious commitment as the means by which their engagement with the world is transformed. Such people will require a profoundly different diagnosis of the problem of religious violence.

Re-Creating the Bible

William C. Bishop, B. G. Christensen, Samantha Larsen Hastings, Sarah Jenkins, Eric W. Jepson, Ryan McIlvain, Danny Nelson, and Arwen Taylor. *The Fob Bible*. Illustrations by Paul Gustave Doré.