Stanley M. Harrison and Richard C. Taylor, eds., THE LIFE OF RELIGION

Axel D. Steuer

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of free will in the act of believing). That controversy would seem to open the possibility of a different approach to the problem of free will for conversion from that required for explaining the fall. By avoiding the Calvinist-Arminian way of posing the question, the Basingers leave this prospect unexplored. By avoiding the Augustinian-Pelagian formulation of the issue, they leave other long-standing discussions aside. By avoiding the categories of determinism and indeterminism, they lose some focus on the debate as it is carried on by philosophers. Since they do not explain why they avoid these more familiar ways of formulating the issue, nor what the advantage is of using their categories of specific and general sovereignty, it is not evident what that advantage is.

As part of their assignment, the four authors were to develop the practical implications of their positions by responding to two "case studies." This part of the book, though interesting and promising, is unsuccessful. For one thing, the questions posed for each case are not pointed enough to draw out contrasting implications. Second, the authors themselves do not consistently follow the guideline of the questions which are posed. As a result, neither the large areas of agreement between them nor their disagreements reveal any clear pattern that might be attributed to their different viewpoints on divine sovereignty. Consequently it is difficult to conclude what important differences for the Christian moral life might stem from their theoretical differences over the nature of divine sovereignty and human free will.

The book nevertheless does attest to the enhancement of ideas and argument that results when theologians read philosophy and philosophers read theology. It concludes with a useful list of recent books on the topic by both theologians and philosophers. There is no index.


Reviewed by AXEL D. STEUER, Occidental College.

This brief book of five essays, plus a long introductory essay by one of its editors, is the product of a 1984 symposium at Marquette University on the role of belief and human rationality in the life of religion. The five contributors, certainly recognized scholars in their respective fields, address such questions as the rationality of religious belief (Alston), religious belief and inner emotions (Tallon), the expression of religious belief in activity (Schmitz), the communal character of religious belief (Tinder), and the relationship between religious belief and various cultural forms (Gilkey).

While the editors may well be correct in claiming that the contributors share
the intention of speaking “honestly about religion as a living, irreducible expression of human rationality” (p. viii), it is not clear from reading the essays themselves that a common theme or topic links them together. Despite the claim of one of the editors, the five authors do not seem to share the view that “to be rational is to be religious” or that “the religious response of people is rational” (p. vii). In fact, the authors take such radically different approaches to the issue of rationality and religious belief that it is highly unlikely that some of the key generalizations the editors draw from these five essays in fact apply. Rather, although the very general rubric, “the life of religion,” does apply to all of the essays, it is probably best to read each of them on its own to see what insights it might give us into understanding religious belief. Indeed, it is in its summary of the content of the five essays, rather than in its somewhat forced effort to connect the essays both to a common theme and to each other, that the long introductory essay by Stanley Harrison proves to be most helpful.

In addressing the question, “Is Religious Belief Rational?,” William Alston limits himself to exploring the doxastic (or belief-forming) practice that begins with religious experience and asks whether this is a rational practice, i.e., a practice that can be relied upon to lead to true beliefs. Alston’s answer, in brief, is that if experience justifies any beliefs, e.g., certain beliefs that articulate sense perception, then some religious beliefs are also justified. That is, assuming that the formation of beliefs on the basis of religious experience is a so-called basic practice of belief-formation (on the assumption, in turn, that religious experience is a basic access to God) and assuming that “basic practices are innocent until proven guilty” (p. 7), Alston shows that the doxastic practice engaged in by certain religious people is just as rational as that undertaken when we form beliefs about the world on the basis of sense perception.

Furthermore, those who engage in the practice of forming beliefs in response to religious experience frequently find their lives significantly transformed. According to Alston, these fruits of religious belief further enhance the rationality of engaging in this mode of belief-formation.

One is struck with the clarity and forcefulness of Alston’s argument almost as much as with the fact that it makes certain assumptions that not all readers may be prepared to make. In addition to those mentioned above, Alston also seems to make the assumption that we have criteria for distinguishing basic practices from those that are not basic. While one would hardly expect Alston to justify all of these assumptions in this brief essay, their central role in his argument will assure that their status will be a topic in much of the future discussion of the rationality of religious belief.

Andrew Tallon’s “Religious Belief and the Emotional Life” is less concerned with the epistemic status of religious belief than with the interconnection between belief and feeling or, as he puts it, between head and heart in the makeup of
the religious person.

According to the so-called heart tradition defended by Tallon, faith (love and hope) has its source in the heart, while “knowledge and will come from the head” (p. 18). However, all change of heart, including the development of the sort of mature faith expected of adults, requires the mediation of the mind and will. Furthermore, full human experience requires a synthesis of head and heart—“adult faith needs reason” (p. 19). In fact, religious faith (or “divine faith”) and human faith follow the same pattern of (1) origin in the heart and (2) fulfillment via the mediation of the mind and will. The achieving of full selfhood requires a dialectical relationship (or dialogue) between heart and head, faith and reason, even if the former is, as Tallon maintains, to be given its rightful primacy.

Tallon’s philosophical anthropology, which suggests that full human selfhood requires a blending of head and heart, provides a good corrective for anyone disposed to see religious faith either strictly in terms of objectively verifiable beliefs or in terms of subjective feelings. However, since few authors in the field are presently inclined to treat religious commitment in such a simplistic manner, one wonders just who it is that Tallon’s essay is supposed to convince. At those points in the essay where Tallon seems to be breaking relatively new philosophical ground, e.g., in equating becoming a self with becoming my own other (p. 33), one apparently needs to look to his other writings to understand what this might mean.

In “Faith and Practice,” Kenneth L. Schmitz presents what he takes to be a Catholic and Biblical view of religious action. As Alston takes religious experience to be a distinctive and plausible source of true beliefs, so Schmitz views religious action as both the distinctive response to religious experience and that which leads to the true life.

In presenting what is essentially a phenomenological description of religious action, Schmitz sees religious action as springing directly out of the faith response that is elicited by an apprehension of the holy (p. 41). That is, a sacred initiative brings forth a faith response that finds expression or realization in religious action (pp. 44-45). Indeed, every religious action has this dual nature of sacred initiative combined with human response, a duality that is reconciled or unified through what Schmitz calls the concept of vicariosity. That is, the unity of religious action is a vicarious unity in which the dichotomy between the human and the divine initiative, between autonomy and heteronomy, is overcome. The human response of service to the divine call to service is an “integration of the sacred and the human—without confusion or loss of difference, yet without equality” (p. 50).

The faith-response, which according to Schmitz is much more than belief, needs to complete itself in religious action. Unless it seeks to do the will of God and finds its energy in the dialectic between divine initiative and human response,
this faith-response is not infused with ‘holy actuality’ (p. 59). To summarize this thoroughly Catholic position in Schmitz’ own words, “theory without action is an empty word without power” (p. 60). Faith is not faith unless it is practiced, and this practice is not necessarily restricted to what is commonly viewed as moral activity.

Glenn Tinder writes his essay, “Religious Belief As Communal Act,” as a political scientist adopting what he calls a Pauline Christian stance, a Paulinianism that appears to be filtered through Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr. Tinder proposes to use “faith” and “religious belief” interchangably in his essay and argues that “religious belief is grounded in a paradoxical and difficult act of self-alienation” (p. 62). Neither doctrine, nor Church hierarchy, nor morality can adequately express what faith is, and faith can not find itself reflected in the society in which it exists. This is because faith or religious belief is a communal act undertaken by moderns in a community that is fundamentally secular. The person of faith, therefore, participates in the secular order as a solitary, prophetic figure. In brief, faith finds expression in the taking of a prophetic stance in a world that is secular or apart from God, in a realm that “is separated by its very secularity from the ground of its values” (p. 67).

Ironically, it is a religious conception of being that is, according to Tinder, the source of the highest values of secular society, viz., “reverence for truth and for the individual being,” and unless there are persons of faith who act in behalf of the community, politics will lack spiritual grounds and spirituality (faith) will have no political significance. Without the communal activity of faith, the primary secular virtues lose their foundation.

One might well argue with Tinder’s claim that the respect for truth and the human individual so necessary for community cannot be traced to secular origins. It also appears that he is committing a variant of the so-called genetic fallacy in seemingly equating the question of the origins of these values with their truth. That a religious conception of being spawned particular values does not necessarily speak either for the validity of religion or for the truth of those values. Nor, for that matter, does it speak against the adoption of those values by someone holding a secular or worldly perspective.

The final essay in the volume, Langdon Gilkey’s “Culture and Religious Belief,” borrows insights from both Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr in arguing for a thoroughly historicist understanding of the relation between culture and religion. The most prominent Tillichian theme is that culture, even the most secular aspects of a society, has a religious dimension, while the Niebuhrian theme is that prophetic religion is needed to counter the religious pretensions of culture whenever those become demonic. Indeed, in Gilkey’s eyes the appropriate relationship between culture and religion is a dialectic one of checks and balances, i.e., religion is needed to criticize culture and culture needs to criticize religion.
It is Gilkey’s extreme historicism and consequent relativism that makes his essay most stand out from the rest in the book. He attacks what he calls ‘easy claims’ to the rationality of religious belief and warns against “a correlation of religious belief and present canons of rationality” (p. 88). After all, “we know that modes of rationality are culturally relative, shaped by the dominant political, economic, social and intellectual structures of their epoch” (p. 88). Thus, both Alston’s finding that religious beliefs springing from religious experiences are ‘prima facie’ rational and efforts to broaden the notions of rationality and/or religious belief in a way that avoids a conflict between them would appear to be misguided if rationality always takes a culturally relative mode or form.

One wonders, of course, whether the ‘transcendent perspective’ of prophetic religion advocated by Gilkey as a counter to the demonic pretensions of culture is itself only relatively transcendent and deals with only relatively demonic pretensions. Indeed, Gilkey makes a number of claims about what is the case that make the reader wonder whether he really embraces the sort of trendy historicism and relativism that would make epistemic projects like Alston’s rather pointless exercises.

In brief, *The Life of Religion* is a volume of very stimulating and readable essays that quickly bring the reader to the forefront of contemporary discussions of the place of religious belief in the lives of modern people. While the Alston and Tinder essays come closest to doing apologetics, the general thrust of all the essays is descriptive rather than persuasive.