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Brian Hebblethwaite, PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

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BOOK REVIEWS

Philosophical Theology and Christian Doctrine, by Brian Hebblethwaite. Blackwell, 2005. Pp. 176. $72.95 (hardback), $29.95 (paperback).

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Brian Hebblethwaite's *Philosophical Theology and Christian Doctrine* is the latest monograph in Blackwell's *Exploring the Philosophy of Religion* series. According to series editor Michael L. Peterson, "the books in this series are designed to occupy that relatively middle ground in the literature between elementary texts and pioneer works. . . . The present series has been conceived to offer something to all who want to think deeply about the issues: serious undergraduates, graduate students, divinity and theology students, professional philosophers, and even thoughtful, educated lay persons" (pp. viii–xi). For reasons to be explained below, the present volume falls considerably short of this goal and will be primarily beneficial for a much narrower scope of readers.

Hebblethwaite's self-described aim is "to survey and comment on recent work by Anglo-American philosophers of religion in the analytic tradition on the doctrines of the Christian creed" (p. x) and "to offer a survey of the contributions being made by Anglo-American philosophers of religion to the analysis and explanation of the central doctrines of the Christian creed" (p. 3). After an initial pair of chapters discussing the relationship between philosophy of religion and theology and the nature and role of revelation, the central five chapters are devoted to central creedal elements of Christianity: creation, incarnation, trinity, salvation and eschatology—this chapter is devoted almost exclusively to issues clustered around life after death, immortality and resurrection. The final chapter is devoted to "other themes in Christian Doctrine," and includes exceedingly concise discussions of the Church, the Sacraments, Worship and Providence. Since substantial discussion of these topics is beyond the scope of a review, I instead will focus on Hebblethwaite's general approach and the two central problems with the volume.

A central purpose of *Philosophical Theology* is to survey contemporary philosophy of religion in a way accessible to both philosophers and theologians who are both shaped by "traditional trinitarian theology" (p. 5) in order to "encourage both sides to respect each other and learn from each other" (p. 5). But there is reason to think that a large swath of theologians

will be put off by the methodological approach Hebblethewaite takes. Let me note three potential difficulties. First, numerous theologians will balk at Hebblethwaite's appropriation of only analytic philosophy and disregard of the continental tradition that many of them draw from. He dismisses continental philosophy after noting that he is "deeply suspicious" of the continental tradition since many of its writers suffer from "willful obscurity" (p. 10). Second, while Hebblethwaite praises analytic philosophy for its linguistic sensitivity, many will take issue with his approach to religious language. Hebblethwaite writes that "justice has to be done to the unique nature of the transcendent object of theological inquiry" since religious language, and especially talk about God, does not operate at the same level as ordinary human discourse. And while he thinks that "most" (p. 61) but "not all talk about God is analogical" (p. 60), subsequent chapters pay little heed of the complications arising from analogical predication.

Third, Hebblethwaite repeatedly states that the analytic tools of contemporary philosophy can help one rationally reflect on and probe Christian doctrine for its intelligibility and coherence. For instance, "philosophical analysis is really no more than a tool for exploring and clarifying a set of ideas . . . in order to probe and explain their coherence. Whether or not they are true is another matter" (p. x). And he sees the tool of philosophical analysis, and the approach based on its utilization, as methodologically neutral: "In my view, there is no such thing as the god of the philosophers. Philosophers of religion in the analytic tradition are doing no more than singling out, for close scrutiny and analysis, aspects of, and implications of, the concept of God" (p. 11). He then explicitly rejects the view that "*faith* is the precondition of the whole enterprise [of understanding the elements of the Creed]" (p. 13). Instead, "the doctrines expressed in the Christian creeds . . . can be pondered and examined critically by anyone interested in questions of meaning and truth" (p. 7). It is easy to think of numerous theologians (Barthians and those involved in the Radical Orthodoxy movement, to name just two) that will take issue with this understanding of analytic metaphysics. Hebblethwaite does little to assuage those who "voice the suspicion that the philosophers are applying their analytic tools to an idol, a reification of their own construction" (p. 3). This isn't to deny Hebblethwaite's methodological approach, but rather to note that it will perhaps alienate a significant percentage of those very theologians he is trying to engage.

Hebblethwaite denies that he is departing from the Christian tradition in his treatment of the issues, insisting that he is simply 'reinterpreting' the traditional doctrines using the neutral tools of analytic philosophy. Here he cites his earlier *The Problems of Theology*: "[R]eason and revelation cannot be treated as different sources of knowledge. On the contrary revelation claims, despite being channeled through particular historical traditions, are part of the data upon which reason has to operate" (p. 17f). Expounding on this line of thought, Hebblethwaite writes that revelation is not an authority *per se*, but merely another set of new data to take into account. Elsewhere he argues that another laudable quality of analytic philosophy is its historical sensitivity. This claim in itself is likely to strike many as odd. But when Hebblethwaite later goes on to present his own view on a number of issues, it will likely lead to even more perplexity.

He writes that considerations "clearly . . . favour the temporal, dynamic, reciprocal nature of God's creative work as itself constitutive of maximal greatness" (p. 45). The 'clearly' here is problematic, since he reaches this conclusion after a mere page and a half of investigation, nevertheless asserting that "the weight of current opinion" (p. 46) supports him despite the fact that he here mentions only the work of Richard Swinburne and Thomas Morris (more on this tendency below). The reader is likely to wonder how historically sensitive open theism is. Later, Hebblethwaite also embraces universalism with little more than the following passage:

> The objection that universalism entails the overriding of creaturely freedom is the most serious problem from the point of view of philosophy. But clearly, for Talbott, God's power to achieve his redemptive purpose does not require compulsion. The love of God, revealed in Christ crucified, will eventually succeed in persuading and willing even the most obdurate. The tenability of this view depends, of course, on our abandoning the idea of the finality of death. (p. 123)

While it is possible to defend a view that involves both open theism and universalism (such as Keith DeRose's work in this area), more needs to be said than this—particularly if one is attempting to be 'historically sensitive.'

The above shortcomings seriously limit the scope of the volume's intended audience that will find this volume worthwhile. But there is another difficulty with the text that even further limits its usefulness. The quick treatment of many of the issues often reads as little more than an annotated bibliography. Professional philosophers will find a dearth of argument, while undergraduates and laity will likely need substantial knowledge to understand the literature surveyed. Let me cite just a few examples. Hebblethwaite rejects Molinism with one rhetorical question and one sentence on page 55, later adding that the view "must be rejected on grounds of incoherence" (p. 69). Especially puzzling here is the claim on page 136 that the discussion on page 55 amounted to an argument. Similarly, he dismisses all compatibilist accounts of divine providence with the following: "Compatibilism is the view that freedom and determinism are perfectly compatible, provided you define freedom as the lack of external constraint. But, clearly, that is not what freedom really means" (p. 136). While I am no compatibilist, surely it cannot be brushed aside so easily. Finally, after mourning the fact that issues such as the nature of the Church and the Sacraments and Worship have been largely neglected by contemporary philosophers of religion, Hebblethwaite gives approximately a page and a half to each of these issues. Such a quick rejection of various views as "hardly intelligible" without any supporting argument (see, for instance, p. 145) will be unhelpful to a significant portion of his audience.

This volume will be useful to, for example, those who share Hebblethwaite's evaluation of the neutrality of analytic philosophy and who are looking for an overview of recent philosophy of religion across a broad spectrum of issues. But I worry that this will be a small subset of its intended readership.