

Philosophy and Religion: from Plato to Postmodernism

Max Charlesworth

Oneworld, Oxford, 2002. 218pp.

This is a lucid and learned overview from one of Australia's eminent academics in the area of philosophy of religion. Max Charlesworth was professor of philosophy at Deakin University and has written extensively on bioethical issues and on Australian Aboriginal religions. In this book, a rewrite of his 1972 volume, Charlesworth provides a 'grid' of the various relations between reason and religion since the ancient Greeks.

Charlesworth outlines five different connections between reason and religion, giving us five different ways of pursuing the philosophy of religion. First, reason develops religion: intellectual reflection leads to a kind of religious understanding. Many major philosophers fit into this part of the grid—Plato, Aristotle, Leibniz, Spinoza, Hegel. Second, philosophy offers a defence of religion and is essentially apologetic. Aquinas's natural theology belongs here, where "if nothing is ventured in philosophy, nothing is won in faith" (p.81).

In the third connection, there is in fact little if any connection between reason and religion. This group (into which are successfully shoehorned Kierkegaard, Hume, Rousseau and Kant) insist that reason cannot extend as far as the things of God, and that if God is to be known it is by other routes—the conscience, the practical knowledge that is moral duty, subjective experience.

The fourth and fifth connections focus on recent developments in philosophy, namely the focus on language and the rise of postmodernism. In the fourth part of Charlesworth's grid we find Wittgenstein and those who follow the anti-metaphysicalist line that philosophy describes rather than defines or systematizes existence. Reason is descriptive, not explanatory, in this understanding. In the fifth connection, explores the postmodern attack on foundationalism, arguing that reasoning is not grounded in a key principle or concept which is unquestionable (e.g. Descartes' *cogito*). Instead, reasoning is a tool for dismantling total systems of thought to show that they are flawed. Little religion (but not nothing) remains, suggesting that no coherent philosophy of religion is possible. Reason has no basis, and neither does faith.

Each section of Charlesworth's book is clearly written and thoughtfully argued, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the five kinds of connection between reason and religion. He does not opt for one over the other, claiming that the philosophical principles employed in each different part of the grid prevent comparison. I agree that this is true, and that other forms of knowledge need to be introduced to make an assessment. Perhaps the most valuable form is historical knowledge. The history of religions can be brought into interaction with the philosophy of religion, suggesting at various points either support or critique for the philosophical position. The specific historical claims of religions such as Christianity, Judaism or Islam, provide 'test cases'. For example, one might ask whether any of the historical data for Christ's existence, his impact on the first century world, and his death and resurrection, can be brought to bear on the philosophical questions. If it can, it would make fideism (the third part of Charlesworth's grid) unsustainable, since something of God might be known through historical reasoning.

But this is to move outside the scope of Charlesworth's book, which remains an ideal high-level introduction to the philosophical nature of religion, and one which would make an excellent textbook.