

## BOOK REVIEWS

**James Charlton, *Non-Dualism in Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and Traherne: A Theopoetic Reflection*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2013, 196pp.**

Early on in his most recent book, James Charlton poses an important question for the student of Western theology. He asks if it is ‘matter’ that has ‘prevented humanity’s greater access to wisdom and compassion?’ (p.18) The question is certainly a legitimate one, and the book attempts to answer with a strong ‘No’. Reading some of the dominating voices of the Western theological canon, dualism—the dividing of matter and spirit—is a commonly found theme or underlying presupposition. Is there, however, a case to argue that dualism has had negative consequences in the spiritual development of Western minds? It is a question Charlton forces us, at the very least, to consider.

*Non-Dualism in Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and Traherne: A Theopoetic Reflection* is Charlton’s third book. In 2001 he published *Luminous Bodies* (Montpelier Press) and followed this up with *So Much Light* (Pardalote Press, 2007). Both of these are poetry collections. And *Non-dualism*, despite its academic nature, is clearly the fruit of many years of poetic and theological reflection. Indeed, the book is filled with Charlton’s own poetry, illustrating and illuminating his ‘theopoetic’ reflections upon the three writers whom he contends ‘share what might be described as qualified or moderate non-dualism’ (p.1). The question Charlton poses that was quoted at the beginning of this review seems to me to be central to the book’s main thesis: namely, that Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and Thomas Traherne correct the tendency of Western thought to dualistic categories, collapsing the boundaries between transcendence and imma-

nence by their non-dualistic spiritualities. In demonstrating this the book is original in a number of ways and I am amazed that Charlton has been able to fit so much into it in terms of methodologies and content. His skilful weaving of his own poetry into an examination of Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and Traherne, with the more thorough-going Hindu non-dualism of Ramana Maharshi as a counterpoint, makes for an interesting, if confronting, thesis.

As a historian of Christianity myself, I personally would have liked to have read more about the histories of the individuals discussed in the book. For example, did Traherne, as an Anglican, rebel against dualist theologies then present in his seventeenth-century Anglican milieu? This is not a criticism so much as an observation made by a curious reader. Perhaps a more philosophical point to raise would be my belief (I would not go so far as to call it a conviction) that Christianity cannot ever wholly escape a certain element of dualism, though there is no question its more negative excesses do need to be exorcized from Western spirituality. Dualism always needs to be reined-in and Charlton has produced a highly convincing case, at the very least, for the integration of a moderate non-dualism into Western theology. To be sure, the book is not easy reading, but it is an outstanding and highly original achievement. Moreover its thesis is, as Charlton asserts, ‘confronting’—confronting not only because it challenges a common Western theological category, but ‘because ... [i]t confronts us with potential layers of meaning that require response’ (p.93). Anyone interested in the fundamental questions of theology and spirituality will want to consult Charlton’s book.

—Robert Andrews, University of Notre Dame  
Australia (Fremantle)

**Roger Scruton. *Our Church. A Personal History of The Church of England*. Atlantic Books, London, 2012.**

It is almost never the case that the view of an institution, especially a church, is the same from the inside as it is from the outside. As an outsider, my view would be different from that of a long time insider like Scruton.

What he says from the inside is, nevertheless, mostly recognisable to an outsider, even one living in Australia, as is his view that God is an Englishman, ‘uncomfortable in the presence of enthusiasm, reluctant to make a fuss, but trapped into making public speeches.’ [p.40] His frequent nut shell descriptions of the Anglican Church are wonderful, for example, “the Anglican Church emerged from the smoke and gun fire (of the Civil War) as a creative muddle, a genial mixture of belief and scepticism, of Christian devotion and ironical self doubt.” (p.78)

An outsider is struck by the pervasive Calvinism within the Anglican Church at all levels, manifest in the persistent scepticism and the occasional anti-Catholicism. Scruton, on the other hand, sees a major departure from Calvinism in the Sacraments within the Anglican church. In fact, the importance of these is a major theme in the book, and Scruton gives a forceful defence of them. The Sacraments, he writes, provide ‘the ordinary sinful person’, for whom the Anglican Church exists, with ‘a point of intersection of the timeless with time.’ Moreover, England itself is a kind of Sacrament, ‘the nostalgic vision of our country that lies at the heart of the Anglican faith.’ Hence becoming a Roman Catholic is one way of rejecting England, he alleges.

Which Sacraments matter most? His view of Christianity is highly redemptoral. At the centre of Christianity is Christ’s crucifixion as a propitiation for our sins. It looks like penance is the Sacrament that should matter most, and, in fact, Scruton regrets the absence of a special sacrament of penance within Anglicanism.

Hence the Eucharist becomes the Sacra-

ment of expiation, of atonement. But it has another aspect as well, to symbolize the exchange of love between the soul and God – ‘I in thee and thou in me.’ To be fair to Scruton, he does mention that, but union with God doesn’t loom large in his vision of Christianity.

There is little emphasis on the inwardness of religion in the book, which may explain why Scruton misses a big one about English culture. When one looks at Russian literature, one is struck by the huge religious presence in the great novelists, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, and one can sense it in Solzhenitsyn. It is completely lacking in the English novelists, Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Charles Dickens and D.H. Lawrence.

But it is there in abundance in English poetry, which is the inner voice of English literature. For example, Donne, Herbert, Milton, Crashaw, Vaughan, Dryden, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Hopkins, Oscar Wilde (‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’), R S Thomas, Belloc, Chesterton, T.S. Eliot. And there are more. English poetry is a God-bearer, just as Russian novels are. Could it be that Scruton misses the English soul?

What made the Anglican Church, repeats Scruton, are the Authorized Version of the Bible, and the Book of Common Prayer, and these are now going, or gone. Hence he is pessimistic about the future of the Anglican Church. But it is likely to be more resilient than he anticipates.

The book is provocative and delightful.

—Reg Naulty

**Anthony O’Hear [Ed.] *Philosophy and Religion*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement:68. Cambridge University Press 2011 pp314 \$39-45**

In his recent book, *The God Argument*, the prolific atheist author A.C.Grayling, gives the impression that the atheist side is prevailing in the debate with ridiculous ease. This collection of articles by fourteen scholars shows

that this is not so. Some of them are theists and some are atheists, all well positioned in British academia, and the theists turn in a commendable performance against formidable opponents. It is a great contest.

The first paper is by Richard Swinburne, arguably the most outstanding proponent of the theist arguments for the last thirty years. He is not well known, since he writes mainly for his peers (he is an Oxford professor). He has written one book for a wider readership *Is There a God?* but as it is written for his daughter, it lacks polemical intent, and has not set him directly against the atheist opposition. The article here is entitled 'God as the Simplest Explanation of the Universe'. The argument is that simplicity is the criterion which favours God against competing explanations as the cause of the universe. God emerges from his paper as everlasting omnipotence, plus perfect freedom. God's other attributes follow from that. Swinburne makes some noteworthy points. He has a restricted notion of divine omniscience. God's omniscience is restricted to all truths about the past and all necessary truths (including the necessary moral truths, p.17). Conspicuously absent is foreknowledge of human choices.

Another very interesting point is that God has not been considered as timeless by mainstream Catholicism, Protestantism and Orthodoxy. Instead, God is held to be everlasting. One reads this with some relief. If God and eternity were timeless, it is hard to see how anything could happen, since all happenings take time.

The second article defends the fine tuning argument from its critics. This argument has it that the universe is fine tuned for life; that is, had the universe been slightly different physically, life would have been impossible. Where there is fine tuning, there must be a fine Tuner.

That is challenged by Richard Norman in another article, which seeks to strengthen Dawkins' case. 'The theistic hypothesis may be simply stated' Norman writes, 'but the existence and agency of such a being stands much

more in need of explanation than what it is supposed to explain' (p.107). This argument turns up in other contexts, and should be resisted. If the conditions favourable to the emergence of life are together too much of a coincidence, there must be something else which explains them, even if it is currently mysterious. There are parallels in science. When an object in space passes close to the earth it is sometimes pulled by a force in to the earth. That force is called a gravitational field, which is more mysterious than an object falling to earth. But we give it a name and wait for further elucidation.

There is another objection Norman raises, an old one, about how can mind causally effect matter. Science has helped with this one. It has been discovered that small electric currents run through nerve membranes in the brain. These generate an electromagnetic field around them. These fields are not tangible, but they do have at least one property of matter. Light is part of an electro-magnetic field, and it is bent on its way past the sun, due to the gravitational pull of the sun. So electromagnetic fields have one property, *i.e.* weight. They have some, but not all properties of matter. Perhaps mind influences the brain through the field. As Bertrand Russell once remarked, modern science has shown that physical nature is less material than people thought.

The book contains articles on Darwinism, Purpose and Meaning, Christianity and the Errors of our Time, Spirituality for the Godless, Living in the Light of Religious Ideals (mainly about Kierkegaard). They are mostly philosophical. There are two mainly religious articles, one about sacrifice and the other about the Incarnation. The book concludes with a useful article on toleration.

About four of the articles would be for specialist readers only. Unfortunately, Swinburne's is one of them. The other ten articles should be accessible to the general reader. This would be a good book for a library to purchase.

—Reg Naulty