



Resensies / Reviews

Christian worldvewish reflection of religion

Van der Walt, B.J. 2008. Man and God: the transforming power of Biblical religion. Potchefstroom: Institute for Contemporary Christianity in Africa. 520 p. Price: R180,00.
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The book is a second print of the text originally published in 1997. It is a very “accessible” (i.e. non-specialistic) introduction to philosophy of religion from a reformational point of view. Perhaps one should rather say it is a Christian-worldvewish reflection on religion with a very practical intent and a broad scope. This will become clearer as we look at the content of the book.

After a short introduction, the book is articulated into four sections. Section 1 is an introduction to the theme of religion in the history of philosophy. After a definition and description of philosophy (essay 1) and of religion (essay 2), this section deals with questions like: Which scientific disciplines are interested in the study of religion? (essay 3); Which methods are adopted? (essay 5); Which trends are particularly influent in philosophy of religion? (essay 4). The author also explores the nature of religious language (does it convey anything “real”? – essay 7) and tries to “classify” the main “types” of religion and religious experiences (essay 6).

Section 2 provides a “Foundation” by focusing on the written revelation (essays 10, 11, 12), and by sketching an ontological model, in which “God, law and cosmos” (essay 13) are related to each other. Then the human being is introduced in the (ontological) picture

(essay 15). The practical nature of the text emerges more clearly when the author deals with issues of religious diversity, equality and religious freedom (essay 9). This theme is obviously very relevant in the globalisation context in which we live.

Section 3 constitutes an “Application” of the previous sections and explores a broad range of topics. Here one will find for example a discussion of the issue of evil and suffering in the world (essay 17), or the nature of God’s intervention in history (essay 19). Religion is related to the themes of authority and power (essay 21), economics and politics (essay 22), the possibility of Christian politics (essay 23) and Christian scholarship (essay 24).

The last section opens a dialogue with several interlocutors, mainly philosophical and theological traditions which are particularly influential in today’s debates. But this doesn’t mean that the discussion remains locked into the present, without awareness of its historical roots. Essay 28, for example explores how the relationship between faith and knowledge has been understood in the history of the Christian community. This provides an essential background for those who wish to approach, for example the contemporary debate concerning “theology and science”. In this context, the clarifications concerning “natural theology” are helpful as well (essay 27).

A specific chapter is dedicated to the theme of “spirituality”. Here the author tries to capture the essential traits of reformational spirituality (essay 35). The theme of spirituality is attracting worldwide attention at present and I believe *Koers* is surely going to offer several contributions on it, in future issues.

But the author does not only address Christian interlocutors. He interrogates secularism in contemporary culture (essay 30) and denounces the “intolerant” attitude (when it comes to practical issues) of some movements presenting themselves as more tolerant than others (essay 34). He also explores the relationship between religion and ideology (essay 29).

To summarise, *Man and God* offers 35 essays containing stimulating reflections on religion. It is especially recommendable to students of theology, philosophy and the humanities in general. It would have been more interesting to students in the natural sciences, I suppose, if section 3 contained a more direct discussion on issues like “religion and (natural) science”, or “theories and beliefs” just to make an example. Of course the whole background constituted by sections 1 and 2 is relevant for the natural sciences as well, but the

only essay which comes close to the topic is “Christianity and scholarship” (essay 24), which, however, does not deal explicitly with the natural sciences. At the same time essay 31 on the “New age movement” is nowadays a bit less relevant, as this movement (very active and attractive to many a few years back) has lost much of its initial appeal.

The book, however, is not only recommendable to students. There is the amateur as well, of course, and there are also many lecturers and practitioners in the so-called special sciences (e.g. psychology, economics) who often struggle to see how our “beliefs” may have any relevance for their specific fields of study. In this area, even some introductory texts may prove to be rather challenging, simply because the issues under discussion may not be too familiar to a mathematician or an economist. This is why an accessible introduction is particularly helpful. In some cases one would also like to have an introduction from a Christian point of view, not to avoid other perspectives at a later stage, but because one would like to start from what is more familiar and makes one feel more comfortable. Finally, there are also those who come from a non-Christian background but are intrigued to know more about themes like religion, philosophy, religious freedom, religious conflicts and so on. To all these potential readers, and for all the reasons mentioned above, this book is recommended.