

JAMES F. SENNET, ed. The Analytical Theist: an Alvin Plantinga reader. Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998. Pp.xviii + 369. ISBN 0-8028-4229-1.

The initial impression on opening this book is of having drifted into a religious gathering. Sennet devotes much of his ten page introduction to praising Plantinga for greatly increasing the numbers and status of Christian philosophers, by which he means not so much philosophers studying the philosophy of Christianity, as philosophers who are practising Christians. In British universities we would not speak in this way. Philosophy of religion has to hold its own as philosophy irrespective of the religion of the philosopher. For philosophical treatments of specifically Christian doctrines we have the term 'philosophical theology', but even this does not imply that its practitioners must be believers: the seminal volume *'New Essays in Philosophical Theology'* was co-edited by A.G.N. Flew.

As one would expect from its title, this collection is devoted exclusively to Plantinga's work in the philosophy of religion. His work on modalism, foundationalism, proper names, and the philosophy of mind are covered only in their application to his views on theism. These areas probably represent his most important contributions to philosophy: in the volume devoted to him in the Reidel Profiles series (edited by Tomberlin and van Inwagen, Reidel, 1985) only a minority of the papers were mainly concerned with religious issues. Sennet's selections serve to make clear the extent to which all his work has been motivated by his Christian commitment, which Plantinga himself underlines in a brief afterword.

Plantinga is a demanding philosopher, and where he has dealt with the same subject matter in more and less technical ways, Sennet has sensibly preferred the more approachable treatment. There is nothing bitty about this reader: only thirteen sources are used, and the excerpts are substantial, averaging more than twenty pages each, enabling the reader to get fully to grips with Plantinga's way of building an argument, and capturing flashes of the dry wit which must make him a splendid speaker. The papers range from philosophy of religion through philosophical theology to not very philosophical theology. Sennet is sparing in his commentary, but his own philosophical acuity is shown by the appearance of notes whenever essential background is required to follow the argument.

Plantinga's most widely known views in the philosophy of religion are his comparison of knowledge of God with knowledge of other minds, his version of the free will defence to the problem of evil, his form of the ontological argument, and his claim that belief in God can be basic and foundational. The first three are dealt with, in that order, in the first section of the collection, making an impressive start. The first paper, chapter 10 of 'God and Other Minds' (1967) is to my mind much the strongest in the book.

The second section of the collection deals with Plantinga's efforts from 1980 onwards to establish what he terms 'Reformed Epistemology'. The basis of this is his contention that belief in God is a foundational belief which does not require reasons or evidence, though he does claim that it is not immune to contrary arguments or evidence. This seems a rather disappointing retreat for someone who had made such a good start at showing what the reasons and evidence might be. Plantinga's formidable philosophical skills are well displayed, though he sees nothing question-begging in including among the reasons why belief in the Great Pumpkin cannot be as basic as belief in God the fact of 'there being no Great Pumpkin' (152). Great-Pumpkinian philosophers presumably differ.

The third section contains three fascinating papers in which Plantinga addresses the nature of God. His views in this area of philosophical theology have attracted less critical attention than his better known work in the preceding sections. He pays close attention to Augustine, Aquinas, William of Ockham, and Descartes. However, he seems always to make God rather more ordinary than they did. So God must have a nature, God is not timeless, God ends up sounding like a person much like you or me, only bigger. For all Plantinga's respect for Aquinas, he seems never to grasp Aquinas's constant awareness of the gulf between his conceptualising and the Deity.

The book ends revealingly by exploring Plantinga's views on 'Christian Philosophy'. The last two papers were included at Plantinga's own urging, and his choices are less happy than Sennet's. His foray into biblical criticism is simply embarrassing in its refusal to acknowledge the methods and requirements of another discipline. He attacks the distinguished Franciscan scholar Barnabas Lindars for refusing to accept the biblical accounts of miracles as evidence, in tones reminiscent of the Vatican's denunciation of Duchesne for excluding the miraculous from his great history of the early Church. That, though, was some ninety years ago, and Rome has come a long way in that time. Plantinga would seem to think it has moved in the wrong direction.

Plantinga's other selection again makes clear that he sees a Christian philosopher as a Christian first and a philosopher only second. If his personal faith is uncompromising, though, it is neither bigoted nor ungenerous. This collection does include a paper entitled 'A Defense of Religious Exclusivism' but by religious exclusivism Plantinga turns out to mean only the insistence that one's own religious beliefs are true. He makes no comment on the likely spiritual fate of those who hold other beliefs.

Few of these papers can be read without concentration, and none without pleasure to those who relish the process of philosophising, as Plantinga clearly does, whether or not they share his faith. This is a valuable volume, and even those who know Plantinga's work well may find that this collection subtly changes their understanding of him.

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Published in *Philosophy in Review/Comptes rendus philosophiques*, Volume XIX
(1999) pp. 373-375.

(964 words)