

THE AUTONOMY OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF: A Critical Inquiry. Edited with an Introduction by Frederick J. Crosson. University of Notre Dame Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, 2. Notre Dame, 1981. pp 162.

According to the introduction the six contributors, all philosophers, address themselves to the question of whether religion may fruitfully be discussed as a 'form of life' – taking that phrase in Wittgenstein's sense. The answer is clearly no. That is surely correct. But the essayists have no agreed interpretation of the phrase. It is not really clear that *any* of them knows what Wittgenstein meant!

What the argument comes down to is whether religion may be justified or criticized on non-religious grounds. J. M. Cameron, in a characteristically lucid and literate essay, insists that religion is interwoven with political and cultural realities. It is obvious that he could have exploded the idea of 'the autonomy of religious belief' without ever mentioning Wittgenstein's phrase. Louis Mackey, expounding St Bonaventure's critique of Aristotle, comes out with the following thought (p 56): "Christianity is a discourse of the Other that dislocates and destructures all our forms of language and their attendant forms of life. In this sense the Christian religion is not a form of life, but a deformation of language and of the life informed by that language. The reformation of life and the transformation of language projected by Christianity are available only on the other side of the collapse of all immanent norms of being and intelligibility". The somewhat Barthian echo of that radical thought might have been congenial to Wittgenstein, but it is clearly not his use of the phrase 'form of life'.

In the third essay, D. Z. Phillips argues that his rejection of certain philosophical ways of justifying religion does not commit him to the worst sort of individualistic pietism ('faith lies deep in the human heart, invulnerable to all rational discussion'). As Rowan Williams has noted (*Theology*, May 1980), Phillips is more concerned than most philosophers of religion to locate the question of faith and unfaith where it belongs. In this essay, certainly, he writes illuminatingly and quite movingly about the possibilities for faith that

a culture may favour or foreclose. In an appendix he cites the textual evidence that he has never defended the 'autonomy of religious belief' thesis so frequently ascribed to him. But, as he concludes ruefully, too many philosophers now need him to have propounded that thesis in order to get their creaking critical machines into the air. The fourth essay, by Kai Nielsen, appropriately sets up the Aunt Sally of 'Wittgensteinian Fideism' and goes through the familiar routine: what the word 'God' *stands for* still needs to be *shown* – there is no getting away from *that*. The final two essays, however, amply demonstrate that Nielsen doesn't have to look far for more grist for his mill.

In the fifth essay, Kenneth Sayre rejects the notion that the word 'God' *refers* to anything – but by that he means "the notion that the mind of the believer, as it were, casts a beam of intention into the realm of the eternal and unerringly spotlights the Divine Being itself" (p 116). The notion of reference surely need not be as crass as all *that*. On the other hand, Sayre rejects "the 'form-of-life' model", which is to the effect that believing in God is to engage in certain practices – but this does not require "any particular mental relationship with God at all" – indeed, these practices "could be engaged in independently of whether God even exists" (p 117). His preferred solution, drawing on Wittgenstein's early writings, is that believing in God is a certain way of *seeing the world*.

In the sixth essay, William Alston has a go at construing 'Christian discourse' as a 'language-game' that 'enjoys a certain autonomy'. He comes up with the following thought (p 159): "The behaviour of God, as revealed in the Christian language-game, is in line, roughly speaking, with what one could reasonably expect from the categorical features of God, as depicted within this language-game". There is much else in this vein.

As a whole, then, the collection is not a great success. The alleged autonomy of religious belief has been shown to be myth-

ical. On the other hand, some philosophers of religion seem to be working in complete isolation from what is going on at the growing points in other areas of philosophy – in connection, for example, with ‘varieties of reference’: a topic of obvious theological importance. The game is already lost if problems in philosophy of religion are not the same as problems everywhere else. The autonomy of philosophy of religion would certainly be a dead end.

So what did Wittgenstein mean by the phrase ‘form of life’? The best discussion is by John Hunter (*American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1968). The key remark runs as follows (par. 25): “Commanding, questioning, telling stories, chatting, belong to our natural history just as much as walking eating, drinking, playing”. Wittgenstein, throughout these early remarks in the *Investigations*, wants to get our minds back into our bodies. According to the picture of language which he is trying to destroy, we speak to one another because we have thoughts to exchange. We are inclined to say that animals do not speak because they lack the mental capacities. It is as if we argued: “Animals don’t think – therefore they don’t speak”. But Wittgenstein wants us to rediscover what is obvious – that speaking – conversation – is a biological or organic phenomenon. It is easy to imagine a language, he says (par. 19); but to imagine a language is inevitably to imagine a ‘form of life’ such as interactions like giving and obeying commands, asking and answering questions, etc. We have to recall the *function*, e.g. of commanding, in the practice of the language (par. 21). The *speaking* of the language is always a component part of some ‘form of life’ (par.

23). On this account, then, a ‘form of life’ is some reaction, or interaction, which is biologically organic as well as culturally refined. If we find it hard to get hold of this idea it is surely (as Hunter says) because our inclination is to say that what is learned, what is done at will, or what is intelligent, must ‘transcend’ the merely biological. Anything else seems to verge on behaviourism – precisely what Wittgenstein feared. Anyway, the phrase ‘form of life’, as it comes into the *Investigations*, is intended to restore commanding, questioning, etc. to the whole complex of reactions to their environment and to each other which compose the ‘natural history’ of human beings.

Thus it could never make sense to discuss the phenomenon of religion in terms of a ‘form of life’ in Wittgenstein’s sense. A ‘form of life’ is something ‘animal’ – ‘something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified’ (*On Certainty*, pars. 358–359). What he has in mind is the immense variety of instinctive reactions and relationships that constitute human life (*Zettel*, par. 545). Without some such primitive reactions the phenomenon of religion would no doubt be impossible. He listed ‘praying’ as a ‘language-game’ (par. 23). Religion thus depends on the fact of innumerable ‘forms of life’ – not many of which need to be overtly ‘religious’. That idea leads back to the point that D. Z. Phillips makes (e.g. p 72): philosophy of religion gets whatever life it has from the lives of the faithful. But if we no longer hear his word it does not follow that God has fallen silent.

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WOMEN, NATURE AND REASON by Carol McMillan
Basil Blackwell 1982. £12.50.

The author’s interesting project is to argue that traditionally feminine qualities and activities (intuition, emotion, nurturing) have been undervalued, and deemed to be less than human, because they lack that element of objective reasoning which some have thought to be the faculty that distinguishes us from the animals. McMillan shows that this distinction is a false

one; and equally false is the assumption that women who undertake nurturing in the private realm are somehow not a real part of human society, which has been identified with traditionally masculine engagement in the world of public affairs. Thus she argues that simply to press for women’s right to drop their responsibility for children and plunge into the ‘real’