

Reviews

UNCERTAIN BELIEF: IS IT RATIONAL TO BE A CHRISTIAN? by David J. Bartholomew *Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, pp 289 £30.00*

David Bartholomew's book is distinguished from others in the philosophy of religion as it is by a statistician and concerns probability theory. It is straightforward, informative on a number of topics and fully accessible to the layman. Bartholomew pretends to no specialist knowledge of theology or philosophy and no new insights in these fields are offered. The result is a book somewhere between a philosophy textbook, an introduction to probability theory and a guide to current religion versus science debates.

The author believes that there can be no certainty about the existence of God; thus faith is a matter of probability, making inferences on the basis of uncertain evidence. Readers of this journal will decide for themselves whether this is a line of enquiry they might find rewarding; suffice it to say Bartholomew gives the flimsiest of cases for holding that there is no certainty in matters of faith. The conclusion of individual sections—and of the whole book—is that probability theory can give only a little comfort to the believer, but precious little to the non-believer.

After explaining the need for a 'logic of uncertainty', Bartholomew outlines one in Chapter 2. The discussion is clear and simple and leads in Chapter 3, 'The Credibility Barrier', to a central insight of the book: if one cannot initially see Christianity as possible, there is no probability calculation to be made. The next four chapters deal with miracles, the paranormal, God's existence and the Bible. The book ends with a chapter on the rationality of religious commitment, including discussion of Pascal, decision theory and some game theory, and a concluding chapter in which various themes are woven together into an interesting essay on faith and certainty—though again with little philosophical substance.

The book stands or falls by its four central chapters. Bartholomew thinks miracles need not be violations of (divine) natural laws: 'What gives them their special character is that the divine component of the action is unusually conspicuous' (p. 84). Using probability he argues that Hume was wrong in asserting that it is always more probable that witnesses are deceived or colluding than that a miracle has occurred, and in denying that some coincidences may be miraculous. His suggestions on the Virgin Birth (we all have a 'divine dimension' to us, Christ has it in unique way) and the Resurrection (if Christ is more than human, science cannot possibly disprove the Resurrection) cut little weight. In general, this chapter is a collection of 'pointers' to the miraculous and not a sustained argument.

The paranormal is surveyed because it is more readily investigated by science than are events of more obviously religious significance and because suspicion towards its wilder excesses helps distinguish true from false religion. Bartholomew tries hard to invest the phenomena discussed (ESP, astrology, near-death experiences...) with theological significance but despite the 'fun' interest of the material, its inclusion is hardly justified.

On God's existence the book is most disappointing, offering little

philosophical (or even statistical) underpinning. Bartholomew argues (contra Montefiore) that it is equally possible that God did and did not create the Universe, and that evidence from human experience (moral, aesthetic, social, religious...) adds nothing significant to a probability case for God. Bartholomew also rejects Swinburne's approach, here questioning the logical possibility of ever giving a high prior probability to God—something which, if true, would seem to tell against any case for God's existence. The chapter ends by arguing that even if (uniquely) we may not assign God a prior probability, we can still claim his existence is likely, plausible, given the incidence of otherwise incredible cosmic coincidences.

The chapter on the Bible contains little work on probability though much on approaches to Scripture. Bartholomew usefully shows how often Scripture scholars use probability language; finds a circularity problem in Bible interpretation (any biblical arguments used presuppose the Bible is true—which surely holds only for a certain sort of biblical fundamentalist); discusses stylometrics, 'hidden' divine codes and the historical reliability of biblical manuscripts. The very little probability theory has to say here perhaps illustrates the inappropriateness of Bartholomew's discipline for this sort of theological and philosophical enquiry. In general, probability theory takes us hardly any distance at all in matters of faith since it depends on how initially (in)credible you find the proposition that God exists, and credibility here depends on more overtly philosophical, non-mathematical, approaches to reality.

One major defect of this study of the rationality of Christianity is that it never addresses the possibility that faith may itself be rational, an ultimate end or rational requirement of the happiness of the human person. Bartholomew's only possibilities at the book's conclusion are that faith is rational (= has good consequences) or intuitive (= a matter of inner sense). This dichotomy may appeal to readers in certain Christian traditions, but perhaps not to many Catholics. He does show that probability theory gives no more support to atheism than to theism; however, he is quite clear that the book's purpose is to expose the 'weaknesses of those who pretend to certainties that are unobtainable' (p. 268). Painstaking philosophical work laying to rest religious certainty would be required before many of us were persuaded that the slight hope offered by probability theory is the best or only basis for a rational Christianity.

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HANNAH ARENDT — MARTIN HEIDEGGER by Elzbieta Ettinger *Yale University Press, 1995, £10.95.*

Hannah Arendt (1906–75) was a considerable figure. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) she argued that Nazism and Soviet communism were mirror images of each other. In *The Human Condition* (1958) she argued that, contrary to the tradition since Plato, action, not thought, is the summit of human achievement. Her account of Eichmann's trial (1963) stressed that he was a case of the 'banality of evil'—a phrase that has passed into general currency.

What emerges in Elzbieta Ettinger's book, documented from their