Book review


This is a valuable book for several reasons. It provides a thorough and clear account of the views of three philosophers whose thought is significant but about whom not much secondary material is available. It also subjects the ideas of these men to critical scrutiny and thereby raises some important considerations for philosophy of religion in general. Lastly, the author, Adam Hood, advances some of his own views in dialogue with those of the thinkers he writes about, and these views are themselves of interest. There is, of course, not space in this brief review to discuss all of these matters.

On the negative side, this work seems originally to have been a doctoral dissertation, and the “dissertationese” has, unfortunately, not been thoroughly edited out. Repeatedly there are passages that say several points will be considered and certain results will be reached. This then happens in a very point by point way. We are then told that these points have now been considered and the anticipated results reached, and so on. This does not make for pleasant reading, but the content of the book makes wading through it worthwhile. The other negative (and perhaps this will be thought just a quirk of the reviewer) is that Hood insists on using “they” and its cognates as a pronoun for singular nouns. He does this even with “God.” Hence, though he is speaking of a monotheistic God, he sometimes uses “they” and “their” as pronouns. It is much more effective to alternate uses of “he” and “she” in different contexts or to use plural nouns as much as possible – though this is cannot be done for the God Baillie, Oman and Macmurray are writing about. There it is likely best to say “Godself” and the like, as Hood sometimes does.

Hood says all three philosophers have a functional and experiential approach in that each understands the significance of religious belief in terms of its function in bringing about some valued state, and
their accounts are experiential because each holds that religion arises in response to a valued state in experience and tries to throw new light on this experience. All three contend that religion arises out of ordinary experience of the world, not from special experiences had by only some people at some times.

John Macmurray locates religion in an attempt to solve “the problem of the personal.” All agency, he says, is marked by a desire for freedom, and one of the conditions of freedom is fellowship. This is present in all immediate experience. Even the first cognitive act of the infant – recognition of the other (the mother) – shows this. There is no isolated Cartesian ego. This unity is broken in the inevitable conflict of wills. Religion aims at lifting the primitive sense of bondedness with the other to the level of explicit intention. Religious ritual tries to strengthen the communal feeling by symbolizing a common life shared by a society or group. The idea of God arises in reflection. It is “… the necessary postulate for the recovery and sustenance of human community” (48). Macmurray also argues that a wholly mechanistic view of reality is impossible because that would see persons as mechanistic, too, in which case there would be only events, not actions; but we know we are actors, agents.

Hood’s primary critique of Macmurray is that there are defining characteristics other than fellowship that define the human, that, in fact, we wish to communicate directly with the divine for its own sake. Nor does Macmurray explain sufficiently why the search for community generates a leap to God. Hood thinks there is a more definite sense of divine presence in immediate experience.

The second John (Baillie) sees religion as arising from a universal moral awareness. He cites his own early childhood experience of being overwhelmed by a feeling of responsibility to a transcendent other. Religious belief, he says, is a kind of perceptual belief present in moral demands. It is, for him, an encounter with a personal god. As we are aware, and he thinks we all are, of a categorical moral demand, we are simultaneously aware of a personal god. If we trust that this sensing is veridical, then we trust in the reality sensed – God.

Baillie definitely has a form of moral intuitionism, and Hood defends that view against some major criticisms. For example, there is the view that moral judgments are intrinsically related to feeling certain needs (J. L. Mackie). But, says Hood, this assumes that Humean psychology is correct. Recent work by other thinkers has shown that beliefs themselves can be motives for actions. Again, critics assert that if moral talk is like talk about simple perceptual properties like yel-