Book review


This volume, number 3 in the Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion, is authored by James F. Harris of the College of William and Mary in Virginia, U.S.A. The purpose of the Handbook, as stated by the editor of the series Eugene Long, is to explore developments in contemporary philosophy of religion in its many forms. Long, in the first volume, presented a comprehensive overview of twentieth-century philosophy of religion which also served as an introduction to the series as a whole. The second volume focused on the Thomist tradition in twentieth-century Western philosophy of religion and Harris’ volume focuses on the Analytic tradition in twentieth-century Western philosophy of religion.

This magisterial work by Harris is governed by a threefold aim: to identify the developments in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, placing them in the broader philosophical context in which they have taken place; to describe the various issues and problems generated by these developments in philosophy of religion; and to examine critically the positions taken by the major figure in the field. Without a doubt he accomplishes his goal with a great deal of discernment, insight, skill and sophistication. Two general features characterize the analytic heritage of reflecting on religion. First, analytic philosophy of religion is a rich and varied philosophical development that is identified by a group of family resemblances concerning the proper methodology for philosophical inquiry and the kinds of subject matter that can appropriately be objects of philosophical investigation. Most analytic philosophers are united in the conviction that language and linguistic analysis are of fundamental importance in philosophical inquiry. Secondly, analytic philosophy of religion is primarily an English-speaking enterprise that has focused mainly on Western theistic traditions and the topics, issues, and problems that these traditions have generated. However, in the latter decades of the twentieth century, recognizing our world culture and ever-expanding knowledge of the religions of humanity, analytic philosophers have broadened their interests to include non-Western religious traditions. Harris acknowledges the significance of that wider vision and takes it into account.
Without question this work is a major contribution toward understanding the full scope of analytic philosophy of religion. Harris’s comprehensive narrative presents a thorough investigation of the developments in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion in the broader philosophical context in which they have taken place. His historical narrative describes and maps the philosophical landscape covered by these developments and critically responds to the positions taken by the major figures in the field. It examines all the major loci of analytic philosophy of religion as they mutually involve each other. The book opens with an introductory chapter on the rise of analytic philosophy of religion and closes with a summary and conclusion. In between, one finds all the major topics presented in depth and the major players in the field fairly represented: the problem of religious language, the nature of God and arguments for the existence of God, religious experience and religious epistemology, religion and science, contemporary challenges to theism (evil and suffering and atheistic, humanistic naturalism), religion and ethics, and finally the problem of religious pluralism.

There is much to praise in Harris’s book. His writing is as model of clarity and his descriptions of points of view are well validated by careful and judicious reading and citation of texts. His knowledge of the history of philosophy, his own background in the analytic tradition, and his logical and epistemic abilities serve him well in his endeavor to understand and assess the work of the various authors represented in his book. Harris has not “short changed” any one and his favorable and not so favorable assessments, as well as his own contributions to the analytic conversations and debates, do much to advance the field of the philosophy of religion. Harris is also sensitive to the actual beliefs and practices of religious communities, and he is critical of those who violate the integrity of those communities by reading into their creeds and codes a meaning they do not intend. Furthermore he is sensitive to the respects in which religions and points within religions are to be taken into account in terms of their similarities and dissimilarities. In short, he does not blur the proper distinctions essential to understanding religion, and he is committed to the ideal of objectivity and to the use of methods that produce and preserve that objectivity.

In a review such as this, one cannot, of course, summarize each and every chapter of the book under review. Harris basically provides the reader with that in the last chapter of his book along with some of his own conclusions. I would like, however, to pick out some of the abiding insights and enduring features of analytic philosophy of religion that I believe Harris would stress in any adequate analysis of religious worldviews and religious ways of life. First of all, when Moore and Russell in England and Peirce in America rejected both the modern turn to the subject and absolute idealism and returned to the