

[MJTM 17 (2015–2016)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis, eds. *Four Views on Christianity and Philosophy*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016. 240 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-31052-114-3. \$19.99

Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis have assembled a diverse cast of leading philosophers in their entry to Zondervan's Counterpoints series. This book maintains the usual format of the series where each contributor makes their case, critiques the other perspectives, and responds to the others. However, unlike some of the other installments in this series, this volume unfortunately does not contain a glossary of terms. Admittedly, philosophers often disagree over definitions, which could pose certain challenges in making a glossary, but defining basic terms such as "epistemology" would have been helpful for the non-specialist.

The guiding question of this book appears in the opening line: "What is the relationship between Christianity and philosophy?" (11). In a bold move, Gould and Davis ask Graham Oppy, an atheist, to write on the "conflict model" of the relationship between Christianity and philosophy, where philosophy trumps Christianity. The other contributors are more predictable (but no less valuable): K. Scott Oliphint writes on the "covenant model" (the direct opposite view of Oppy's model) of this relationship from a Reformed perspective; Timothy McGrew writes on the "convergence model," which views philosophy as a confirmation of Christianity; and Paul K. Moser writes on the "conformation model" in which philosophy is explicitly subject to Christianity.

In his opening essay, Oppy takes care in defining his terms, in limiting the scope of his essay, and in working through his arguments in ways that are clear and methodical. He begins by modifying the "conflict" model so that the conflict is actually

between Christianity and “metaphysical naturalism,” where philosophy is “a framework for presenting and discussing worldview disagreements” (21) rather than constituting a worldview in its own right. It is precisely this move to make philosophy an arbiter between competing views that puts his position into direct conflict with the positions of Oliphint and Moser. His case for preferring metaphysical naturalism to Christianity is that “naturalistic worldviews are simpler than Christian worldviews” (31); naturalistic worldviews assume natural causes, while Christian worldviews must posit additional supernatural ones. As per Ockham’s razor, the simpler explanation is to be preferred. Naturally, his fellow contributors push back against his assessment. McGrew in particular elicits from Oppy an admission of some sort of universal morality. Oppy states that there is no inherent contradiction between being a naturalist and holding to universal morality, but McGrew points out the Achilles heel in Oppy’s position by noting that Oppy has not provided an “account for the existence or emergence of objective moral values in a naturalistic world” (172). If such values exist, they may require supernatural causes, undermining Oppy’s case against Christianity.

Oliphint’s Reformed perspective is evident throughout his essay. In fact, he limits his discussion of Christianity to “the theology that came out of the Reformation . . . as expressed in the creeds and confessions of that era” (72). His exposition of how the first principles or *principia* of theology must come prior to the “*principia* of any and all other disciplines” (74) is consistent with presuppositional apologetics (i.e., the stance that Christian presuppositions are necessary to make sense of reality). These principles and his outline of covenant theology undergird his approach. In direct opposition to Oppy’s suggestion that philosophy might serve as an arbiter, Oliphint insists that human reason is incapable of determining what is and what is not possible. In the Reformed model, theology necessarily precedes philosophy; theology provides a solid foundation on which philosophy can be built and delineates philosophy’s proper scope and aims. Unfortunately, for his perspective, Oliphint fails to adequately respond to McGrew’s forceful critique of Cornelius

Van Til's philosophy. McGrew argues that Van Til conceded far too much to David Hume's skepticism, and that this move is (at least partially) responsible for the negative view of natural theology from the perspective of contemporary Reformed philosophy.

McGrew writes conversationally, peppering his essay with brief personal anecdotes and offering colorful engagement with a variety of scholars. Of all the contributors, his essay and responses are the most fun to read, but at times his responses to his fellow contributors are not fully nuanced (which they do not fail to point out in their rejoinders!). In stark contrast to Oliphint and Moser, McGrew openly embraces and defends natural theology (the idea that knowledge of God can be gleaned from the natural world). He understands philosophy to be a discipline rather than "a set of substantive beliefs" (124), though he acknowledges that some prior commitments are necessary, such as the laws of logic and certain foundational beliefs "about one's self and one's present experience" (125–26). Rather than insisting on Christian presuppositions, McGrew moves into Oppy's territory by daring to say that the Christian narrative can be tested by reason and proceeds to outline his defense. His sharp critique of Bart Ehrman's list of contradictions in the Gospels is particularly engaging.

For Moser, the only worthwhile engagement between Christianity and philosophy is one in which the latter surrenders unconditionally to the former. Although he does not reference Tertullian, the question "what has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" underlies his essay. In his view, philosophy "is the love and pursuit of *wisdom*" (178), and Christian wisdom differs markedly from the wisdom of the world. He spends a significant portion of his essay calling natural theology into question, arguing that it falls far short of revealing God in Christ. Instead, he argues for a radical disjunction between God's wisdom and speculative thought, arguing for the primacy of God's assurance to believers over worldly epistemology. Moser's commitment to an experiential basis for Christian faith causes him to question McGrew's faith in the closing paragraph of his rejoinder, first citing McGrew's comment that he is "not personally subject to

such [religious] experiences” (213) and then comments that “Christian hope and faith in God depend on such experiences according to the apostle Paul” (224). Whether Moser is correct or not, it is unfortunate that he issues a thinly veiled personal attack rather than following the generally irenic stance of his fellow contributors.

In spite of their inclusion of Oppy’s essay, Gould and Davis’s opening and concluding essays unapologetically assume a Christian viewpoint. They also shy away from directly engaging with their contributors, choosing instead to affirm the general importance of careful thought, on the one hand, and the necessity of Christ for a fulfilling thought life, on the other. It seems a pity that Gould and Davis do not take advantage of the opportunity to summarize the salient points the contributors make in their sharp and substantial debates with one another.

As Oppy points out in his response to Moser, much of the disagreement between the contributors revolves around the legitimacy of natural theology. Oppy even wades into the fray around Rom 1:19–20, arguing with McGrew against Moser and Oliphint that these verses refer not to Calvin’s *sensus divinitatis*, but rather to the way creation testifies to God’s existence and basic qualities. One of the key questions at stake in this book is whether reason has a role to play in evaluating the evidence found in creation and in Scripture for the existence and actions of God. If reason can play such a role, then an evidence-based approach to apologetics of the type that McGrew pursues in his essay is worthwhile. If that role is denied, Christian philosophy will be invulnerable to secular philosophy (at least internally) and inaccessible to it.

The main essays, responses, and rejoinders in this book are written with vigor and verve. The issues they raise are important, and ought to be considered by thoughtful Christians and secularists alike. The writing is clear enough that a determined layperson will be able to make sense of the arguments with the help of a dictionary. Students of philosophy and/or philosophical theology will undoubtedly benefit from the arguments and the wide variety of sources embedded in the essays. Pastors may also find this book useful in engaging with seekers and/or

inquiring congregants. It is a worthy and highly recommended addition to Zondervan's Counterpoints series.

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