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BOOK REVIEW

Keith Ward. *God and the Philosophers*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009. 153 pp. Pbk. US\$20.00; CDN\$24.63.

Amid the vitriolic verbiage of certain atheistic philosophers and biologists, one can easily come away with the perception that Western philosophy, both modern and traditional, has been predominantly hostile toward theistic belief. It is with the hopes of clearing up such misunderstandings that Keith Ward has penned the slim volume *God and the Philosophers*, an adaptation of his 2008 Sarum Lectures. In it, he aims to defend a singular thesis, namely, that the general consensus of the Western philosophical tradition accepts what he calls “the God conclusion,” which posits that there is a perfect spiritual reality that gave rise to, and now continues to sustain, the natural world. This he sets out to do by chronologically examining the thought of a number of key thinkers from Plato to Schopenhauer, along the way drawing attention to their (more or less) theistic presuppositions and straightening out common misreadings.

The back cover notes that the material has been adapted “for a wide readership,” and this claim appears to be substantiated. For instance, terms that would be common knowledge for the undergraduate philosophy major—e.g., idealism, critical realism, and materialism—are almost always introduced with concise definitions. Moreover, Ward’s tone is consistently genial and anecdotal, even humorous at times. As a result, it is likely that those with a Bachelor’s degree in the humanities will have few problems understanding the bulk of the material. The confessional stance of the book’s intended “wide readership” is slightly more difficult to discern, although as it is a publication of Fortress Press—the official publishing house of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, those in ministry and those in the church

looking to deepen their roots in religious philosophy are likely targets. Non-believers in search of an account that runs counter to the “common” wisdom cannot be ruled out either.

One concern that surfaces even after a brief perusal of the book is that the material can meander at times. On the one hand, Ward is attempting to make the thinkers he is presenting accessible, so he begins most chapters with a brief background; on the other, he is looking to uphold his thesis by showing the pervasiveness of the God conclusion in Western philosophy, and thus quickly moves well beyond the rudiments. To add to the copious digressions intrinsic to this approach, he aims to defend many “lost causes” (such as the possibility that Plato was a proto-libertarian of sorts) along the way. Nevertheless, perhaps pressing the book for a rigid formalism misconstrues Ward’s intentions, for excursions aside, Ward is by and large successful at justifying his thesis. Salient among the book’s eleven chapters in this regard are the ninth and tenth. In the ninth, Ward demonstrates how the first “German atheist,” Arthur Schopenhauer, actually held to the idea of a comprehensive spiritual reality that was more a rejection of the popular, anthropomorphic misconception of God than of the idea of God himself; consequently, room is left even in his framework for a more nuanced construal of God. In Chapter Ten Ward sets forth the contradictions in Nietzsche, and goes on to show negatively what ultimately happens when the God conclusion is rejected—the imperilment of reason, the loss of dignity to the human person, and so on. By cutting off the flow “upstream,” Ward is accordingly able to undermine the position of later atheists, and hence to present the God conclusion in a more attractive light. Positive contributions to the thesis from Plato, Aquinas, Descartes, and even Kant further strengthen Ward’s case.

A central theme, one correlated to Ward’s thesis, is the philosophical theory broadly identified as “idealism.” Beginning with Plato and his concept of the Ideas or Forms, Ward traces the way in which this theory has, in one shape or another, remained part of the Western philosophical tradition, being a keystone in the systems of thinkers as diverse as Plato, Descartes, Berkeley, Kant, Hegel, and even Schopenhauer. Idealism contains as a

posit that mind or consciousness is somehow fundamental to all reality. Without finite, human minds to process the material world, “this world of more or less solid coloured and extended objects in motion dissolves into a sea of probability-waves in a multi-dimensional logical space” (48). But one can take this concept even further, as Western philosophers often have. That the world as we experience it is not “an accidental concatenation of chance occurrences” (46)—that material reality is even intelligible at all—suggests that as we explore the natural world we are actually inquiring into a supreme cosmic mind, the very mind of God. Faith, then, tends in the direction of upholding the power of human reason, where the ideas of atheistic thinkers like Hume—*contra* the misconceptions bandied about by iconoclastic secular humanists today—actually detract from it. By bringing idealism into the discussion, Ward is able to show that even when Western philosophers have spoken on topics other than God, their treatment of these topics has consistently presupposed, indeed, positively demanded, the God conclusion.

A particular strength is the way in which Ward makes the writings of the philosophical “greats” of the Western tradition not only accessible, but palatable for further intellectual expeditions. Of Hegel, for instance, Ward concedes that his writing “is excessively complex and obscure,” and yet he goes on to deftly demonstrate how “its main ideas are actually rather simple” (90). The same rings true for each thinker introduced. That is by no means to say that this book is a walk in the park, but in every instance Ward provides the reader with the tools necessary to get a handle on the material being presented. Thus, even if the primary purpose of the book is to uphold the God conclusion, it nevertheless succeeds in the concomitant aim of serving as an accessible primer on some of the towering figures in Western philosophy.

It should be clear by now, though, that this book is almost only incidentally related to Christianity. While the Christian faith is an irreducible aspect of the Western philosophical tradition, the erasure of the sparse biblical quotes and Christian-God references that dot the book would make it equally applicable to other monotheistic traditions. Indeed, the book is every bit one of

philosophy, with little relation to the seminary discipline of Christian theology—for better or for worse.

And that leads to a significant criticism: the careful reader will note that the “God” to which Ward seems to lend support diverges at times from the “God of the Bible” and the God of the Christian theological tradition. For instance, in dealing with the question of evil and suffering, Ward suggests that there might “be something in the divine nature that necessitates the creation of a universe of free agents” (71). He goes even further, however, positing that God might not even be “free to create a universe without evil in it” (71). Such ideas stand in clear contradiction to the traditional exposition of the doctrine of Creation, in which God creates sovereignly and with no obligation on his own part. A little later, in treating Hegel’s thought, Ward approvingly writes, “it may be necessary for Spirit to originate [the] world, if it is to realise more completely its own possible perfections” (99). Clearly, the gist of these remarks impugns traditional Christian views concerning the total sovereignty of God. If God’s own being inherently contains need, that is, imperfection, what basis do we have for believing that he will be able to set to rights this cosmos, so replete with seemingly insuperable evil and suffering? At any rate, Ward excuses himself: “philosophers have something of a reputation for independence of mind and scepticism, and they usually dislike being thought of as defenders of any sort of orthodoxy” (2). Apparently he views himself as no exception.

All told, however, there is much to be commended about this book. As an accessible introduction to Western philosophy, it provides the amateur enthusiast with a wading pool in which to get the feet wet. And as a demonstration of the consentient God conclusion in the Western tradition, the book succeeds admirably on both academic and popular levels. Ministers and lay leaders alike would do well in purchasing it, if only as a starting point for further study in a discipline which has time and again been the “handmaid,” not the chief antagonist, of Christian theology.

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