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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

Nancey Murphy and George F.R. Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.

REVIEWED BY PHIL SMITH
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY, GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

The ambition of this book astonishes the reader. At the end of a century in which many thought science would vanquish religion, and in a post-modern age in which some thinkers reject out of hand any totalizing meta-narrative, Murphy and Ellis write to synthesize theology, cosmology, and ethics. Further, for reasons of coherence and completeness, the ethic they advocate requires pacifism.

Murphy and Ellis propose nothing short of a comprehensive worldview. Along the way, they attempt: 1) to refute reductionism, 2) to reform and complete the hierarchy of the sciences, 3) to rehabilitate ethics as a science and defend its place in the hierarchy of sciences, 4) to argue that since both cosmology and ethics provoke boundary questions that can only be answered by theology or metaphysics, theology must be included in the hierarchy of sciences, 5) to describe a “kenotic” theology that answers important boundary questions in both cosmology and ethics, 6) to explain that kenotic theology requires pacifism in both personal and social ethics, 7) to suggest how a pacifist ethic supports a progressive research program in the social sciences, 8) to criticise Augustinian theology as less able to handle the problem of evil than an Anabaptist (or “kenotic”) theology, and 9) to give an account of noninterventionist divine action. Even this list only suggests the scope of Murphy and Ellis’s book, as they touch on many important issues in philosophy of science along the way.

The central idea of the book is that a single conception of God provides adequate answers to boundary questions in both ethics and modern cosmology. According to this “kenotic” theology, God relinquishes or restricts divine power in order to create a universe in which morally free creatures can exist. Murphy and Ellis see this divine self-emptying in the creation of an anthropic universe, its maintenance according to natural laws, and God’s relationship to free moral creatures. At every point, God preserves creaturely freedom by refraining from coercion. This same kenotic theology, most fully expressed in

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the cross of Christ, explains the hard core of Murphy and Ellis's ethic, self-renunciation.

Nancey Murphy, a philosopher at Fuller Seminary and a Church of the Brethren minister, and George F.R. Ellis, a South African Quaker activist who is also an accomplished astronomer and mathematician, must know how radical and far reaching their project is. Their academic credentials (Murphy won a Templeton prize for *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* in 1990; Ellis coauthored *The Large Scale Structure of Space Time* with Stephen Hawking in 1973) and their scholarship (the book is littered with hundreds of references to important works in natural and social sciences, theology, and philosophy) suggest that readers should take their project seriously.

The ambition of the book prevents it from being as thorough as one might like. At several places the reader wishes for a more extended defense of the controversial proposals Murphy and Ellis are making; they tend to cite scientists or philosophers whose work fleshes out their ideas, but they don't respond to the criticisms from their opponents that could easily be anticipated. But this weakness could not be remedied without making the book many times as long as it is. Murphy and Ellis don't write to establish their case, but to make it plausible and invite others to pursue their ideas with them. Therefore, I have no desire to criticise their arguments—at most places in the book, I agree with the direction they take—but to invite others to read this book.

If I am not mistaken, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe* is a truly important book. It deserves to be widely read and discussed.

The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, edited by F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone. New York: Oxford Press, 1997. ISBN: 0-19-211655-X. 1,824 pp. \$125.

REVIEWED BY ARTHUR O. ROBERTS

A standby reference since 1957, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* has been updated as a second edition through the efforts of E. A. Livingstone. He was involved in the first edition and assumed leadership after the death of F. L. Cross. Over 6,000 cross-references are provided, according to the blurb, through the efforts of “480 scholars from around the world.” Actually, these scholars are predominately (90 percent?) British.

It is a difficult task for a project of this sort to be truly inclusive, geographically and ideologically, and those who use this resource are bound to be disappointed in respect to particulars. Any attempt to portray the spectrum of Christian life and belief falls short, but to this reviewer it appears the editors did not work hard enough at the task. The editorial perspective (British Anglican) marks the finite boundaries. For example, there is no reference at all to Aimee Semple McPherson and the Foursquare Church but there is one to Athelstan, a relics-collecting king of England in 927. The extended article on Methodism includes no mention of the Free Methodist Church, nor is there a reference to the Church of the Nazarene.

A sampling of Quaker references yielded the following results. E. H. Milligan, Friends Library, London, provided a well-written paragraph reference to George Fox, with an up-to-date select bibliography. The three-quarter page entry on “Friends, Society of,” however, is glaringly deficient in summarizing twentieth-century Quaker history and thought. A casual reader would erroneously assume only a few Friends in the U.S.A. have structured instead of silent worship, and would have few clues about Quakers “in other parts of the world.” There is an entry for William Caton but none for Everett Cattell, one for Henry Cadbury but none for Elton Trueblood, one for Elias Hicks but none for Joseph John Gurney, one for James Nayler but none for Thomas Lung’aho, one for Isaac Penington but none for J. Walter Malone. And so forth.

In sum, the work is more helpful for earlier periods of church history than for later ones, and for European than for American, African, or Asian-Pacific readers. Frankly, this reviewer expected a major new edition to be more current and less provincial.