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In Defence of Christianity

By Brian Hebblethwaite

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0–19–927679–x.

[1] This book reworks two Gifford lectures given by Brian Hebblethwaite in Glasgow in 2001 and four Hensley Henson lectures he gave in Oxford in 2002. In the preface he presents it as a ‘short book of apologetics’, intended to ‘set out some of the reasoning that can be used in support of the Christian faith’ (p. 1).

[2] In the first chapter Hebblethwaite puts forward a number of arguments from natural theology which are intended to show that ‘theistic metaphysics [can] offer the best explanation of a world productive of mind, freedom, morality, art, philosophy and religion’ (p. 32). These arguments should not be considered separately since they are all part to a single cumulative case in support of the Christian faith. In chapter 2 Hebblethwaite argues that this cumulative case should also include appeals to revelation. In Christian apologetics natural theology must in this way be supplemented by revealed theology which consists ‘first, in setting out a case for taking some specific historical phenomena be it a series of events, a book, or a life story, as specially revelatory of the divine, and, secondly, in critical reflection on the illuminating and explanatory power of such an allegedly revelation-based theology for our understanding, not only of the world as it is but also of the human predicament, its resolution, and our destiny’ (pp. 33–34). In this way, Hebblethwaite argues, there is no sharp distinction between natural and revealed theology. Both are necessary elements of the same apologetic enterprise. ‘Christian apologetics consists in a cumulative set of appeals, first to general features of the world and of human experience, and then to particular strands in world history, strands which, it is claimed, throw light on everything, including what is wrong with the world. . . . All these data from both nature and history, are subject to critical scrutiny and evaluation of their capacity to come up with a total world-view, providing among other things, the best theory of everything’ (p. 44). In the rest of the book Hebblethwaite tries to show how ‘appeals to history exemplify the extension of our cumulative case for Christian belief from appeals to nature to appeals to revelation’ (p. 60).

[3] In chapter 3 Hebblethwaite discusses the history of religions in general and tries to show how ‘the pluriform fact of religion in human history all over the globe’ can be ‘held to contribute to the cumulative case for Christian belief’ (p. 60). As a first step he discusses ‘some of the principle elements or dimensions of religion’ (p. 62), i.e. religious experience, moral perception and moral demand, the experience of beauty and the awareness of the objectivity of truth, and argues

that theistic faith makes best sense of these phenomena. He then turns to ‘the question of how important these appeals to the experiential, moral, aesthetic and metaphysical dimensions of the history of religions are to the cumulative case for specifically Christian belief’ (p. 69), and not merely to theism in general. At this point, Hebblethwaite argues, we cannot avoid a comparative evaluation of the various forms of theistic faith. This requires ‘a plausible Christian theology of religion and the religions’ containing the following three features: ‘(i) it must account for the diversity of religions; (ii) it must . . . appreciate the value of that diversity; and (iii) it must account for the necessary particularity and indispensability of its own key element: namely, the finality of Christ’ (p. 81). He adds that from their own perspectives other faiths also have to produce such theologies, and that comparative evaluation will entail assessment of the relative success of these enterprises. However, the cumulative case in support of Christian belief has to go beyond ‘appeals to theologies of religion that attempt to make best sense of the whole history of religions. It also includes appeals to specific historical events that, under certain conditions, invite doctrinal construal in terms of providence, covenant, incarnation, and redemption, including the redemption of the world’ (p. 84).

[4] In chapter 4 Hebblethwaite discusses ‘the specific appeals to history that lie at the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition and of the Christian tradition in particular’ (p. 85), namely the historical claims regarding the history of Israel and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The important issue to be considered here is ‘how far the data of history *per se* – empirical facts accessible to the historian *qua* historian – can be held to support the theological appraisal of those data as constituting vehicles of revelation and redemption and how far Christian appeals to history involve the postulation of meta-historical factors’ (p. 86). Hebblethwaite admits that the scriptural records of this history is, to say the least, ‘messy and ambiguous.’ ‘We can only express gratitude to historical criticism for showing how much human, relatively primitive construction has gone into their making, and for the recognition that the actual history . . . is largely inaccessible . . . as it actually was’ (p. 93). The question is, however, how this ‘messy and ambiguous’ history is to be understood in order to contribute to the cumulative case for Christian faith. At this point Hebblethwaite suggests that ‘the apologist invites his interlocutor to consider the history of Israel and the story of Jesus, on the assumption of theism’ (p. 87). From this point of view, Hebblethwaite claims, it can be shown that ‘historical factors in themselves just puzzling or at most suggestive of interpretation in terms of divine activity, can be made most sense of on the hypothesis of theism’ (p. 87). Thus he suggests that ‘certain strands of all-too-human history, which from a purely historical point of view are just puzzling, or at most suggestive, make most sense when seen as embodying, and as revelatory of, God’s redemptive purposes’ (p. 91).

[5] In chapter 5 Hebblethwaite argues ‘that the doctrines developed over time in order to make best sense of those historical phenomena themselves contribute to the cumulative case, in so far as their logic, their scope, and their power provide us with the most theoretically and existentially convincing account of

where we are, of what is to be done, and of what we may hope for' (p. 110). In this context Hebblethwaite proceeds to briefly expound his own preferred version of incarnational Christology, social trinitarianism and the implications of these for soteriology and eschatology.

[6] In the final chapter Hebblethwaite discusses the way in which 'the appeal to a providential reading of universal history' makes 'most sense of the way in which world history has gone and is going' (p. 129). Thus the providence of God can be discerned in the lives of the saints, in the life of the church and in the way in which 'kingdom values' are realised not only in Christianity and in Western society, but also in secularised society and in non-western cultures and religious communities.

[7] In the end Hebblethwaite summarises the conclusions of his book as follows: "That there is evidence, in the gradual, episodic, though hardly "inexorable", transformations of public consciousness and political order, not only in Christendom, but after Christendom, of the sanctification of the world seems arguable and, at best, quite plausible. So I suggest, there are further appeals to history to be added to the cumulative case for Christian belief. In addition to natural theology and the inner rationale of Christian doctrine, in addition to the history of morality and religion, in addition to the faith of Israel and the story of Jesus, not least his Resurrection, in addition to the lives of the saints and the Christian Church, in so far as it actually does embody and manifest the fruits of the Spirit, the apologist will also appeal to the ways in which the values of the Kingdom can be seen to have penetrated society and made their contribution to the redemption of the world' (p. 149).

[8] In many ways this seems a bold conclusion to such a short book. The question it raises for me is who this 'short book of apologetics' (as it is called in the preface) is intended to convince? I doubt whether any atheist or unbeliever will be persuaded by this apologetic because there is something fundamentally circular in the whole argument. What Hebblethwaite presents is not an 'explanation' of the world in the usual scientific sense. It is rather an extended interpretation which makes sense of human experience and history in the light of the Christian faith and therefore acceptable only to those who already believe. In fact as a believer I can accept most of what he says in the book, but this is only possible because like him I would like to make sense of my experience of history and the world in the light of my Christian faith. In this sense Hebblethwaite's apologetic fails to provide 'grounds' for the faith but is itself a proposal to look at the world and at history with the eyes of the faith. Without the eyes of faith one cannot look at the world in the way Hebblethwaite proposes.

[9] If it fails to convince the unbeliever, can it convince the believer? At this point Hebblethwaite repeatedly throughout the book warns against interpreting his argument in a foundationalist way. Thus at the very beginning of the book he states that 'I am well aware that reason is not the basis of faith. Christian faith is not founded on arguments. Most believers have either grown up and been nurtured in what have been called "convictional communities" and have simply found that religious faith and participation in religious life make sense to them,

or else have been precipitated into religious belief by some powerful conversion experience. Few people are actually reasoned into faith. The arguments which I intend to sketch here are more like buttresses than foundations, reasons that can be given, as I say, in support of faith' (p. 1). For most of us who have been nurtured in contemporary Western culture, looking at the world with the eyes of faith does not come naturally. It requires practice. In a secularised environment such as ours, we are continually tempted to understand the world in secular (=worldly) terms rather than in terms of the faith. As an exercise in looking at the world with the eyes of faith, this book can therefore indeed function for believers as a 'buttress' for their faith, i.e. as a reminder of what the world looks like in the light of their faith. As such I can heartily recommend this book to all modern-day believers who live with the temptations of secular society to understand their life, their world and their history in worldly terms rather than in the light of their Christian faith.