

The Moral Interpretation of Religion**Peter Byrne**

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RÉSUMÉ

Byrne propose une excellente introduction à la philosophie morale d'Emmanuel Kant et plus généralement au projet néo-kantien de démonstration de la validité des croyances religieuses sur des bases morales. Le but de ce livre est d'examiner jusqu'à quel point 'la morale sert d'ancrage à la croyance en un être transcendant, en une réalité sacrée, et en conséquence, offre la méthode d'interprétation de la croyance en une réalité religieuse ultime' (p. 1). Ce mode philosophique d'étude de la religion caractérise grosso modo la notion que Byrne appelle « l'interprétation morale de la religion ». Il se situe nettement au sein de la tradition kantienne anglo-américaine, qui situe la religion dans le cadre de la philosophie morale rationaliste de Kant. Le style est fluide est agréablement lisible. L'étude est globalement solide, tout particulièrement la lecture et la critique de la philosophie morale des débuts de Kant. Cependant, en fin de compte, le projet de Byrne repose sur des présupposés kantien que le lecteur doit accepter avant de se laisser convaincre par les arguments de l'auteur ; or ce qui pourrait pousser le lecteur à les accepter n'est pas suffisamment mis en avant.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Byrne präsentiert eine hervorragende Einleitung in Kants Moralphilosophie und allgemein in das neukantianische Projekt, den Wert religiösen Glaubens auf moralische Fundamente zu gründen. Der Zweck des Buches ist, das Ausmaß zu erkunden, in dem 'Moral den Anker für den Glauben an eine transzendente, heilige Realität darstellt, und als Konsequenz den Schlüssel zur Interpretation des Glaubens an ein religiöses Letztes bereitstellt.' (S. 1) Diese philosophische Art der Reflexion über Religion charakterisiert grob das, was Byrne 'die moralische Interpretation von Religion' nennt, und sie gehört klar zur anglo-amerikanischen kantianischen Tradition, in der Religion unter die Rubrik der rationalistischen Moralphilosophie Kants fällt. Das Buch ist flüssig und gut lesbar geschrieben. Die Diskussion enthält viel Wertvolles, beson-

ders die Darstellung und Kritik von Kants früher Moralphilosophie. Letzendlich ist Byrnes Projekt von kantianischen Annahmen abhängig, die der Leser akzeptieren muß, um die Schlüssigkeit der Argumentation von Byrne zu erkennen. Die Motivation, diese Annahmen zu übernehmen, ist allerdings nicht klar genug erläutert.

Byrne provides an excellent introduction to Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy and in general the Neo-Kantian project of establishing the validity of religious belief on moral foundations. The aim of this book is to investigate the degree to which 'morality provides the anchor for belief in transcendent, sacred reality and, consequently, provides the means for interpreting belief in a religious ultimate' (p. 1). This philosophical mode of reflecting on religion roughly characterises the notion Byrne refers to as 'the moral interpretation of religion' (MIR) and lands squarely within the Anglo-American Kantian tradition of conceiving religion under the rubric of Kant's rationalist moral philosophy. It is immediately evident that Byrne intends to provide a vigorous defence of this method of interpreting religion as grounded in (and therefore dependent upon) morality and to explore the means of making this claim most cogent. The style is fluid and very readable and much of the discussion is of value, particularly the reading and critique of Kant's early moral philosophy. However, in the end Byrne's project depends upon Kantian assumptions the reader must first allow before Byrne's case will be cogent and the motivation for adopting these is not sufficiently argued.

From the outset Byrne takes leave of the resources of 'traditional theism' and particularly the idea of religious knowledge being grounded in a divine revelation. After arguing in the introductory chapter for the *prima facie* worthiness of his 'Neo-Kantian' project, in chapter two Byrne turns the classical argument that attempts to predicate any coherent moral thinking on the God of Christian theism on its head by arguing that all such attempts fail. The situation is in fact the reverse. All coherent theologies find their rational grounds in the basal character of moral thought. The rock on which classical theism founders is 'the secular problem of evil', or as Byrne also refers to it, 'the Euthyphro dilemma': Either we accept that matters of right and wrong are founded upon the will of God—that is, our basic intuitions about morality (for example, that 'what makes mur-

der wrong depends upon the intrinsic character of that act and its relationship to its surrounding environment', p. 12) are wrong and we do not know the extension of moral predicates (that is, we cannot intelligibly reason about good and evil at all). Or we agree that God commands what is right because it is so independently of God's will—in which case the project of traditional theism is woefully misguided. Byrne concludes that even 'if there are facets of the epistemology and metaphysics of morals which are obscure, referring them back to a personal God might not help them become less obscure', and that if these obscurities 'constitute genuine problems about morality, their primary solution has to come from within morality itself' (p. 33).

Several points need mentioning. First, the nature of Byrne's project is to establish the rational foundations of religion. Note, for example, how in the above argument our views of morality and religion are beholden to the tribunal of human reason. Leaving aside questions (too detailed to discuss here) about the cogency of Byrne's argument, the assumption is that the final court of appeal for the *justification* of these matters is their intelligibility to the human mind. Apparently Byrne finds it unthinkable that there be truths accessible to us humans whose justification lies beyond our grasp.

Furthermore, Byrne is working from within the parameters of a strictly Kantian program. It is disturbing that there is no acknowledgement (in any form) of the recent developments in moral theory by Alastair MacIntyre, which sees moral reason and norms as culture-specific. In chapters three and four Byrne examines Kant's notion that God is a 'postulate of practical reason' and criticises recent attempts to both interpret this and build upon it. On his reading, Kant is a 'revisionary realist' for whom the postulate of God is at once 'realist', in that the exigencies of our rational moral existence force upon us the actuality of an extra-human reference for religious language, and yet there cannot be a proper referent with any positive cognitive content for our language about God. Kant's version of religious realism cannot achieve the rational necessity of the postulations of God and immortality, but 'it does succeed in relating religion to fundamental human needs and in articulating in a sophisticated fashion a common thread in religion as such' (p. 92).

This facile acceptance of the Kantian limitations on reason and religious language

has two important implications for Byrne's inquiry. One, the mode of inquiry is predetermined. Byrne has already begged the question of a genuine transcendence within religion—there cannot be one. This also implies something about the nature of the transcendent to which Byrne may gain access. Again, his is a religion whose only option is a transcendence-within-immanence, within the boundaries of mere reason. What is not clear is why we must follow Byrne as he follows Kant on this point. It seems a transcendental category mistake to assume that the metaphysical conditions for the possibility of experience (of God or otherwise) are *a fortiori* epistemic conditions as well. Byrne spends no time arguing for truth of Kant's paradigm; he simply exposit it and adopts it as his own.

Chapters five and six treat respectively Iris Murdoch's gloss on MIR (via her 'moral Platonism') and the 'Wittgensteinian' challenge (via D.Z. Phillips and S.R. Sutherland) to MIR as the only viable way of re-conceiving religion post-classically. Both fail to retain a robust realism of the sort Byrne finds in his Neo-Kantian program. But here Byrne seems to miss the force of Wittgenstein's rejection of metaphysical problems as category mistakes. Again, it is disappointing that there is little or no treatment of Wittgenstein's own writings on the subject, or at very least other (stronger) religious Wittgenstein interpreters like, for example, Fergus Kerr.

In the final chapter Byrne addresses what he perceives to be the remaining objections to his project. We have already noted that Kant's program cannot provide rational necessity for Byrne. Instead he turns to William James' argument regarding 'the will to believe' in combination with Robert Audi's idea of a non-doxastic faith to ground the rational foundation of Kantian religious postulates. We are within our rational rights (and obligations) to exercise our wills to believe in those circumstances when the hypothesis in question is the kind where the adopting of and acting upon it may create the conditions in which it is true and may be tested. This creates a situation where 'a 'faith that p' minus a 'belief that p' may nonetheless pervade someone's life and be associated with an unshakable condition and resolve' (p. 158).

This renders his project ultimately self-defeating. If morality has broken free from its Kantian moorings in rational necessity, what is to hinder us from seeing morality and religion as distinct spheres of thought, where religion achieves a genuine transcendence?

Byrne concludes with a foundation for religion that is beyond the positive grasp of reason which, in so far as he has demonstrated the reasonableness of morality, overturns (or at least points to the wrongheadedness of) MIR. My suggestion is that this deeply met a physical moral projectionist account of religion is deeply flawed.

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Faiths in Conflict? Christian Integrity in a Multicultural World
Vinoth Ramachandra

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RÉSUMÉ

Ce livre est basé sur les conférences londoniennes sur le christianisme contemporain (London Lectures on Contemporary Christianity) données en 1998. Les deux premiers chapitres cherchent à identifier et à éliminer les mythes entourant l'islam et l'hindouisme qui sont propagés sur la scène politique internationale. Ayant proposé une juste compréhension de ces traditions, Ramachandra présente une analyse théologique de la seigneurie du Christ, de la nature de la conversion, puis des arguments en faveur de la tolérance. Ces conférences n'ont pas été rédigées pour des spécialistes, mais pour des laïcs prêts à réfléchir. L'argumentation est globalement plausible et cohérente, bien que la nécessité de brièveté génère à l'occasion quelques difficultés. Le livre est enrichi par l'expérience de l'auteur, au secrétariat régional de l'IFES en Asie du sud, et par son ministère d'enseignement international. Son désir d'être fidèle au Christ en pensée et en actes fait de ce livre une lecture conseillée.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieses Buch basiert auf den 'Londoner Vorlesungen zu gegenwärtigem Christentum' von 1998. Die ersten beiden Kapitel versuchen, Mythen, die den Islam und Hinduismus auf der internationalen politischen Bühne umgeben, zu identifizieren und abzuweisen. Vor dem Hintergrund eines korrekten Verständnisses dieser Traditionen stellt Ramachandra einen theologischen Entwurf vor, der sich mit der Herrschaft Christi, dem Wesen von

Bekehrung und dem Argument für Toleranz befaßt. Die Vorlesungen sind nicht für Spezialisten, sondern intellektuell interessierte Laien geschrieben. Die Argumente sind im allgemeinen plausibel und kohärent, obwohl die notwendige Komprimierung des Materials zu gelegentlichen Schwierigkeiten führt. Der Autor ist qualifiziert durch Erfahrungen als regionaler Sekretär des IFES (Internationale Vereinigung evangelikaler Studenten) in Südasien und internationale Lehrtätigkeit. Das Buch ist empfehlenswert aufgrund seiner Passion, Christus im Denken und Handeln treu zu sein.

Dr Vinoth Ramachandra has already placed us in his debt with two volumes on *The Recovery of Mission* and *Gods That Fail*. Now he does so again with this work, based on the 1998 London Lectures on Contemporary Christianity. His self-appointed task is to observe faithfully, diagnose accurately and engage remedially with the contemporary global scene which features religio-cultural conflict and demands straight thinking on Christianity, truth and tolerance.

The first two chapters attempt to remove egregious misunderstandings of what is the case with Islam and Hinduism. Myths need to be exploded: myths of Islam as a monolith, dangerous and united, opposed, by any acceptable standards, to democracy and human rights; myths of Hinduism as a religion of toleration and social harmony, corrupted against the grain by Western political interventions. Ramachandra forces us to attend to the actual facts, to substitute a grasp of historical particulars for sweeping judgements on the presumed essence of a socio-religious phenomenon, whether projected on to a religious culture from without or by it from within.

Turning to Christ, conversion and toleration in the three remaining chapters, the author first rehearses and upholds the conviction that Jesus is Lord, grounding the scandal of the particularity of divine action in the necessities of our particular, embodied, relational humanity and emphasising the lifestyle that reached out to the poor and outcast, not just the exalted self-understanding and the centrality of the resurrection. The stage is thus set for pondering conversion and culture. What Ramachandra wants to do here is to think of incarnation in terms of translation, which means that it is not a paradigm of exclusivity but rather a declaration and demonstration of cultural inclusivity, the glo-