



Reviews



Faith and Its Critics, David Fergusson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 176, ISBN 978-0199569380. £16.99

The Gifford Lectures in the Scottish Universities – delivered as we know by a galaxy of intellectual giants – are probably the most prestigious institution in the world of Religions. They are equalled perhaps only by the Bampton Lectures in Oxford – which Professor Fergusson, inevitably, has also given. With the Gifford Lectures, the proof of the pudding is in the continuity of the audience numbers. The fact that audience numbers in Glasgow in 2008 not only kept up, but kept *going* up, was a tribute to a superb set of Gifford lectures.

However, the thought of reading through a set of Gifford Lectures is not always a happy one – memories are recalled of vast and ponderous tomes well furnished with purple prose and long incomprehensible paragraphs. By contrast, this set of lectures appears in handy tablet form, snappily written in Twitter-friendly sentences. But be not deceived: the book packs a powerful punch.

Religion and its critics has been a talking point since time immemorial, and at no time more so than today, when both the religious and their critics seem to have turned up the volume to ear-splitting levels. By contrast, David Fergusson, standing in the best and hallowed tradition of Glasgow Philosophy and Edinburgh Divinity, has given us a measured case for a sane appreciation of religion: a case which is fair, balanced, and very much ‘the middle ground of faith’ – and impressive precisely for that reason.

Not many stones have been left unturned in these chapters. What of the New Atheism? Should all religion come with an annual risk assessment? This book is a plea for a measured and considered faith. The first chapter on “Atheism in Historical Perspective” explores different varieties of atheism – there are no broad brush generalisations here. As Fergusson says, ‘These arguments and explanations require careful examination.’ (31) We turn next to “The Credibility of Religious

Belief: Claims and Counter-Claims”. Arguments ranging from traditional natural theology to theories of multiverses are succinctly deployed, leading into a discussion in the next chapter about the explanatory power of Darwinism. We are soon deep into the delights of the flagellum bacterium, intelligent design theory, Marx, Freud and cognitive science – a miracle of miniaturisation. The demolition of intelligent design is elegantly and effectively accomplished. There may or may not be a God; there doesn’t have to be a God; but we are encouraged to think that, if we have come to believe in God, perhaps in part on other grounds, then this belief is certainly not unreasonable.

With the fourth chapter we zoom out to the wider canvas of morality, art, and religion. The selfish gene grows up into the cooperative gene – and most of us will, I think, concede that the Good Samaritan promises marginally more congenial company than the flagellum bacterium. And what of moral concern? ‘What it suggests is that while evolutionary forces may have generated powers of empathy and moral reasoning in human societies, these then have a capacity for more independent reflection and assessment that is not bound by evolutionary drives.’ (108)

‘Independent reflection’ – what sort of reflection might this be? Chapter Five asks, “Is Religion Bad For Our Health? Saints, Martyrs and Terrorists”. The characterisation of the religious as extremists is a common enough accusation: however, Fergusson is careful here not to place Professor Dawkins’ brand of atheism explicitly within this taxonomy in a kind of counter-accusation. The religious are obliged to admit that extremely nasty things continue to happen under the guise of religion. Al Qaeda continues to attract young people, and it is possible that religious moderates are no more than chastened fanatics. But there are counter-examples of moderation. The sub-title of this book, and by now you will appreciate how very apposite it is, is “A Conversation”. Atheism too has its moderate and patient voices. As Fergusson counsels, ‘Believers should welcome that fact, learn from there, and make common cause where they can.’ (147) We may reflect that only the seriously insecure need to shout.

The final chapter turns to the title deeds of religion – the sacred texts that too often become texts of terror. As far as Christianity is concerned, we are not invited to retreat into fundamentalism: ‘The interpretation of scripture is never fixed or settled at any period in the history of the church. The constant transmission and translation of the content requires fresh interpretation.’ (161) Dialogue and interfaith reading is already happening, and the chapter includes a nuanced and sympathetic analysis of contemporary developments in Islam.

The conclusion is characteristically critically aware, and at the same time confident. Fergusson quotes R. S. Thomas: ‘Where the heart pontificates, there the questions proliferate’. But that is not the whole story about faith commitment: ‘Far from being an egregious act of unreason in the face of contrary evidence, a commitment seems an unavoidable feature of our human condition.’

Times change and we change with them. Cultures shift and the shape of debates change. This is a book that has moved on with the times. *Faith and Its Critics* offers no convenient consolations: it just leaves you to think. We live in a world in which there is daily waste and disaster on an unimaginable scale, though it can just about be imagined in fragments in the debris of individual shattered lives. But here too there are traces of huge compassion, usually invisible to us who are external observers.

At the end of the day, is Religion good for you or not? Perhaps it depends where you are. If you are open to the notion of faith, this cautious, low key but attractive and still modestly confident apologia might just help to tip the balance for you. Some might have wished for a more extended, perhaps more constructive account of faith. But this is a case where less is probably effectively more. In conclusion, we may take it as an extremely hopeful sign for theology in Scotland that we can number such an outstanding scholar of real international distinction in our midst.

George Newlands,
University of Glasgow