

1-1-2000

Review of "The Moral Interpretation of Religion," by Peter Byrne

Philip J. Rossi

Marquette University, philip.rossi@marquette.edu

THE MORAL INTERPRETATION OF RELIGION. By Peter Byrne. Reason and Religion. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. Pp. ix + 178. \$26.

Byrne understands "the moral interpretation of religion," in its broadest terms, to consist in the efforts of philosophers "to show that morality provides one sure route to belief in God" (1). He specifically focuses on what he terms Kantian and neo-Kantian forms of this interpretation, which he sees as representative of "a liberal stance" toward religion, i.e., "one that places the ethics of religion before its doctrines and historical myths" (1). His goal is to reconstruct and defend a version of this neo-Kantian approach, which, he argues, functions as a program of "revisionary realism" (5) with respect to "a full blown metaphysical conception of God" (6). In so doing, he seeks to avoid what he considers to be the pitfalls of either noncognitivist or reductionist treatments of claims about the divine.

In the course of his discussion, B. usefully puts his own neo-Kantian interpretation in conversation with those of Ronald Green and Gordon Michalson, and also explores the affinities and differences it has with the work of Iris Murdoch and with positions articulated by the Wittgensteinians D. Z. Phillips and Stewart Sutherland. Two problematic features of B.'s discussion deserve notice. One is that his treatment of the Kantian postulates of God and immortality deliberately sets aside their relation to Kant's account of freedom. This leads to a subtle misconstrual of their function by referencing them primarily to theoretical issues rather than to the practical one that seems to be Kant's own main concern: What sustains moral agents for life-long moral endeavor? The other problematic feature is that B.'s revisionary realism does not seem able to overcome the deeply embedded modern picture that places God and the world—including the workings of human freedom in the moral life—in a relation to one another that is merely extrinsic.

PHILIP ROSSI, S. J.
Marquette University, Milwaukee

GLOBAL POPULATION FROM A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE. By John C. Schwarz. Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third, 1998. Pp. 256. \$19.95.

We are having too many children, a crime the Catholic Church would probably be convicted of aiding and abetting. Schwarz examines this link between overpopulation and Catholic teaching on contraception, urging that the latter be reassessed in light of the former.

The Catholic option for life has accomplished much. It respects the dignity of human life everywhere; it promotes health and education standards among the poor both at home and abroad. But the stance of the Church toward contraception, particularly as seen in *Humanae vitae*, does not seem consistent with this cry for human dignity. The Vatican has addressed the evils of overconsumption in the West and its deplorable effects on poorer nations, but it has been reluctant to grant that data showing a relationship between overpopulation and poverty are valid. Theologically, contraception is seen as an intrinsic evil, a view that leaves little room for compassionate solutions to overpopulation. S. argues that a consistent ethic of life, following the insights of the late Cardinal Bernardin, should include contraception.

Since 1974, when *Theological Studies* dedicated an entire issue to the question of overpopulation, responsible Catholic scholars have shown their uneasiness with Catholic teaching on contraception and its relation to overpopulation. S. follows this tradition, responsibly questioning church teaching from within. He brings social data, historical perspective and clear moral persuasion to his writing.

As a Protestant who has lived in Latin America and seen its barrios of poverty, I find S.'s call for reassessment of Catholic teachings on contraception both reasonable and welcome. Overpopulation is a recognized problem there, the vast majority of the population is Catholic, and church teaching directly relates to the issue. I can think of no other moral issue over which the