

**NEW PERSPECTIVES ON OLD-TIME RELIGION** by George N. Schlesinger. *Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988. Pp. 196. £22.50.*

This work comprises a series of relatively self-contained essays, which offer a view of some of the most basic problems in the philosophy of religion from the standpoint of an author who is familiar with recent contributions to the subject and who has a definite perspective of his own to advance. Schlesinger considers: divine attributes, the problem of evil, religious and secular morality, miracles, arguments from design, Pascal's Wager, and divine justice.

Under the first of these headings, Schlesinger examines the compatibility of properties conventionally assigned to God. Using Anselm's idea of God as that than which nothing greater can be conceived, he outlines a scheme which, if right, would serve as a completely general response to the suggestion that some of these properties are inconsistent with others. 'When someone demonstrates that two divine attributes A1 and A2, which have traditionally been ascribed to God, are incompatible, we need not draw the inference that the received idea of a Divine being has to be given up or at least radically changed. After all, neither A1 nor A2 are in themselves of primary importance, but only in so far as they contribute to Divine greatness. The correct conclusion, therefore, is that we ascribe just the degrees of A1 and A2 to God that are compatible, and maximise His perfection' (p. 26).

In introducing this section, Schlesinger notes that he will 'try to view matters from the standpoint of pure logic alone' (p. 4). Considered in the light of this disclaimer, his conclusion just quoted seems entirely satisfactory. But if a purely conceptual treatment of the matter of whether God exists (in the style of Anselm) fails, then other factors may have a bearing on our understanding of the nature of God. For example, if we suppose God to exist on account of the fact that change is to be explained, then there are grounds for conceiving of God as unchanging. Without some sensitivity towards issues of this kind, we may end up with a concept of God that is logically coherent, but which cannot be shown to be instantiated. On the question of change, Schlesinger simply writes: 'Suppose that being in state A at one time and in state B at another results in a higher overall perfection than being constantly either in state A or in state B. In that case we are dealing with a desirable mutation and we should expect it to take place' (p. 25).

Schlesinger turns next to the idea that we can know God not to exist on account of the evil that we find in the world. Schlesinger formulates the problem thus: a perfectly moral agent will do the best that he can; therefore if God existed, he would have brought about a better world than this. Schlesinger replies by questioning the premise of this argument, and again his procedure is strikingly bold and general. 'How does the universal ethical rule, "increase the degree of desirability of state as much as possible" apply to God? After all, no matter to what degree desirability is increased, it is always logically possible to increase it further. A mortal's possibilities are physically limited, and hence in his case there is a natural limit to the principle; but there is no limit to what God can do ... Thus the problem of evil could be said to have vanished' (p. 55).

But Schlesinger's solution may only work in connection with this form of the problem of evil. For the premise in the above argument can be re-phrased as: a perfectly moral agent will, given the power, make a world which conforms to certain minimum standards. The question of whether our world conforms to these standards cannot be dismissed as being misconceived in principle. In favour of this re-formulation, it may be suggested that we would not regard a world in which creatures endure intense and unrelieved suffering as one which is consistent with the projects of a supremely perfect being, even allowing that in such a situation there is a sense in which 'the degree of perfectability of state of an individual ... would be precisely as short of being a maximum height as it is now' (p. 61).

In his chapter on the argument from design, Schlesinger fulfils the promise of the book to bring to bear new insights by offering a discussion of what has come to be termed 'the anthropic principle'. This principle holds that it was necessary for the basic physical constants of the universe to assume almost exactly the values that they have for the emergence of life in a way which is consistent with natural law to have been possible. Here Schlesinger draws some judicious conclusions concerning when events of low probability are to be explained. For instance he records Monod's charge that 'among all the events possible in the Universe the *a priori* probability of any particular one of them occurring is next to zero' (p. 132). In reply he says that 'Monod is, of course, absolutely right that given any one of infinitely many universes, some conjunction or other of physical magnitudes will have to obtain. However the prevailing conjunction is not merely one of indefinitely many; it is also an instance of an infinitesimally rare *kind* of universe: the kind that is capable of sustaining life' (p. 133). The author's grasp of the relevance of measures of probability is borne out also in the chapters on miracles and Pascal's Wager.

Schlesinger's book can be commended for its clarity and accessibility. These qualities are evident in the passages I have cited. In conjunction with the range of issues examined and the directness of the conclusions set forward, they make the book both pleasing and challenging.

MARK WYNN

**WISDOM IN THE Q-TRADITION: The aphoristic teaching of Jesus**  
by R.A. Piper, S.N.T.S. Monograph 61, C.U.P., Cambridge, 1989,  
Pp ix + 325. £30.00.

This monograph, like many others, is a revised version of a doctoral dissertation. It examines, in great detail, certain aphoristic sayings of Jesus. One is perhaps inclined to believe that such sayings belong to the periphery of Jesus' teaching—for after all, was that not mainly given in the form of parables? Dr. Piper does us a service in reminding us how large a part these sayings play in the tradition, and in suggesting that their importance has been obscured by the fact that scholarly attention has been largely focussed on the parables.

The first part of this study looks at seven collections of aphoristic sayings, the first five of which are found, in reasonably similar form, in both Matthew and Luke. These five collections are found in (1) Matthew 516