

## Reviews

**REASON TO BELIEVE** by Maurice Wiles *SCM Press, London: 1999. Pp. xi +13, £7.95 pbk.* **THE MEANING OF IT ALL IN EVERYDAY SPEECH** by Don Cupitt *SCM Press, London: 1999. Pp. 125. £8.95 pbk.*

Maurice Wiles and Don Cupitt are two of the United Kingdom's more innovative and percipient religious thinkers. Their most recent books, however, reveal how starkly their religious world-views differ.

Maurice Wiles latest offering, *Reason to Believe*, is addressed to people perplexed by Christian belief in our times. Its driving thesis is that Christianity remains a legitimate guide to understanding, and living in, the world of the late twentieth century. Though slender in volume, it is clearly the fruit of profound erudition and a lifetime of reflection. It constitutes a delicately argued treatise on the reasonableness of Christian faith in a scientifically sophisticated world. Wiles sets himself the task of explaining Christian belief as simply as he can. In doing so he shows himself capable of striking a balance between the double danger of oversimplifying issues to the point of distortion or of seeking refuge in the use of highly technical language. His book is lucidly written without footnotes. It does not seek to prove faith, but to stimulate its readers to wrestle with difficulties accruing to attempts at understanding belief. To aid their struggle he appends a list of recommended reading at the book's end.

*Reason to Believe* is structured in an interesting and helpful way. It is divided into fifteen chapters that deal with a large variety of topics such as God, the Son of God, the Trinity, Miracles, Salvation, the Church, Morality, and the Problem of Evil. The chapters are interspersed with explanatory interludes wherein the author elucidates the assumptions and principles that guide his treatment of topics in the various chapters. These explanatory *intermezzi* are a model of compendious instruction. The ones devoted to the nature of language (about God), the modern study of the gospels, symbolism, and the development of doctrine, are particularly instructive. Catholics, because of the leadership they now experience, would be well advised to study the enlightening sections on morality and the evolution of episcopal government.

At the heart of this book is the thesis that language about God, if it concerns God and not a human substitute for God 'must of necessity be indirect, suggestive, tentative, and exploratory in character; it cannot be clear-cut, precise or definitive' (p. 11). Such a view is linked to the conclusion that creeds and religious belief are highly symbolic (see the conclusion to Chapter 4). Recognizing the

metaphoricity of God-language and the symbolism of belief can diminish the anxiety of believers who conclude that they have no alternative to affirming doctrines as literally true. All doctrines, because of their inherently subjective interpretative nature, are provisional and revisable.

Pope John XXIII distinguished between a permanent substance of Christian faith and altering ways of articulating it. Maurice Wiles takes a different line, observing that 're-expressing old beliefs in a new cultural setting can never be a matter of translating old ideas into a new language with no change of substance at all. A change of culture involves a new way not just of stating things but also of how we see things. A new cultural context affects not only how we express old beliefs, but in some measure the content of what we believe as well' (p. 73). Professor Wiles excels in courage and creativity when it comes to telling the Christian story in a new world of advanced science.

In the same world, Don Cupitt plays a contrapuntal tune. While *Reason to Believe* illuminates the affirmations of the Apostles' Creed, Cupitt's latest essay regards Christian orthodoxy as a bad dream from which we need to wake. *The Meaning of It All in Everyday Speech* is the second instalment of a planned trilogy devoted to those words in common usage which have become, as far as the author is concerned, the effective focus of religious devotion. The first part appeared earlier this year and was called *The New Religion of life in Everyday Speech*. It argues that the word 'life' is displacing the symbol 'God' in current parlance. As amazing as it may seem, the second monograph, *The Meaning of It All in Everyday Speech*, is all about the little word 'it'. Could it be that it-talk is also displacing God-talk in our present social settings? Well might one ask: 'What ultimately governs and limits our life and our several fates? Is it Necessity, or just Chance, or is it God, or perhaps in these agnostic times plain old unspecific It?' (p. 71).

Cupitt discusses a long list of it-idioms like 'It won't do', 'What's it all about?', 'The gist of it', and 'I've had it'. Several times in the book he concludes that unlike most other words 'it' is devoid of meaning: 'It does not stand for anything' (p. 9; see too, pp. 10, 16, 21, 24, 26, and 83). Perhaps 'it' is the vague backdrop to everyday life. The trouble for Cupitt is that no word has a meaning in isolation from other words. In that respect, 'it' is like any other word. Words are rendered meaningful in rhetorical performance with other terms. In the second place, it seems odd to assert that 'it' does not stand for anything. As a pronoun, 'it' often refers to a noun already mentioned or known so as to avoid repetition. It can stand for a person, things, and deities.

Because Cupitt thinks philosophy and theology are in a parlous state nowadays, *The Meaning of It All in Everyday Speech* is offered as an exercise in 'democratic philosophy', that is, not of a type practised by élitist dons, but focused on the way ordinary people use

ordinary words. Ordinary language, for Cupitt, has no interest in a theoretical understanding of human life (p. 49); and postmodern popular culture, as viewed in TV soap operas, '... is a low and plebeian celebration of life' (p. 91). In fact, it is nothing of the kind. Very often it is simply a commercially driven celebration of greed, violence, and narcissism. Cupitt's ordinary person turns out to be a leisured layabout whose language does not represent at all the purview of the world's wretchedly poor who struggle for an understanding, however rudimentarily theoretical, of their lives. When Cupitt speaks of 'us' and 'our' life-idioms and 'it-talk', just who is included in 'us'? Certainly not the 1.3 billion absolutely poor who do not have TVs let alone the time to watch them; certainly not the millions of conventionally religious people in the Hindu, Islamic, and Jewish worlds; and certainly not American politicians whose lips are caressed by the word 'God' with amazing frequency.

Though written with his customary verve, *The Meaning of It All in Everyday Speech* is not one of Don Cupitt's more significant works. It opines that 'From now on, the object of religious love and commitment is increasingly going to be life: that is the human world, human values, art' (p. 96). But how would such a view escape the age-old charge of idolatry?

PHILIP KENNEDY OP

**RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND POPULAR CULTURE IN SOUTHWARK C. 1880-1939** by S.C. Williams *Oxford Historical Monographs*, 1999. Pp. vi + 206, £40.00 hbk.

"They will do anything for me — except come to my church!" — a wry remark attributed to that 'legendary' Christian socialist priest, Fr. Groser, whose memory still lingers among elderly East Enders to this day. Sarah Williams in this fine study of beliefs and practices south of the Thames, centred mainly on Southwark, explains why there was this adult detachment from the institutional church alongside intense loyalty to particular clergy and local places of worship. Full participation in church life usually entailed separation from the *mores* of family and neighbourhood.

The twenty-nine interviews which form the core of this book were conducted with men and women well into their seventies and eighties. This is rare material which becomes scarcer as these hitherto mute voices are silenced for ever. The author has had to go somewhat beyond the strict limits of Southwark to assemble a sufficient sample. Although small in number, the interviews have depth and were obviously conducted with a remarkable delicacy and friendliness. One can hear these unmistakable cockney voices whose sentiments ring with an authenticity recognisable by anyone who has worked in inner London. They are supplemented by

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