

Raymond J. Vanarragon

Key Terms in Philosophy of Religion.

London and New York: Continuum 2010.

168 pages

US\$75.00 (hardcover ISBN 978-1-4411-6013-3);

US\$19.95 (paper ISBN 978-1-4411-3867-5)

Continuum's blurb describing its 'Key Terms' series states that it 'offers undergraduate students clear, concise, and accessible introductions to core topics. Each book includes a comprehensive overview of the key terms, concepts, thinkers and texts in the area covered and ends with a guide to further resources.' Vanarragon's expositions are indeed admirably clear, concise, and accessible. However, his book does not quite achieve the comprehensiveness and helpfulness that one might hope for from a work of this kind.

The book consists of four sections of greatly varying length. First comes a short six-page introduction that addresses the nature of religion, the relationship between philosophy and religion, the main topics covered by the philosophy of religion, and the nature of philosophical argumentation. The introduction is followed by a series of entries explaining various terms in the philosophy of religion presented in alphabetical order. This section makes up the great bulk of the book. After it come two much shorter sections on 'Key Thinkers in Philosophy of Religion' and 'Key Texts in Philosophy of Religion'. The entries found in these last sections are generally disappointing when compared to those of the 'Key Terms'. The selection of thinkers and texts discussed is a bit idiosyncratic and far from comprehensive (two entries on books by Alvin Plantinga and none on books by Kant—more about this below). Surprisingly, there is no 'guide to further resources' as promised in the series' blurb, but almost all the individual entries conclude with bibliographical suggestions. While the book is indexed, it annoyingly lacks a straightforward list of entries.

Vanarragon proves himself a capable expositor. His sentences do not grow too long, his style is conversational yet succinct, and he is careful to prepare the novice reader before moving on to the next stage of an argument. Anyone who has taught a introductory undergraduate course in the philosophy of religion will notice how he deftly avoids common pedagogical pitfalls. For example, when discussing the 'Problem of Evil' he forestalls confusion by beginning with a terminological aside explaining how in 'ordinary conversation, when we talk about evil we are often describing people who engage in unconscionable acts...[or referring to]...nasty supernatural phenomena in movies...In philosophy of religion, however, it is useful to think of evil as "bad stuff"' (100). While the problem of evil serves as the focus of many of the book's longer entries ('Evidential Problem of Evil', 'Free Will Defense' and 'Theodicies'), the traditional proofs of God's existence, Christian exclusivism, miracles, Pascal's Wager, divine foreknowledge and human freedom and the traditional proofs of God's existence are among the other issues usefully treated. Vanarragon's lucid explanations may even inspire otherwise reluctant lecturers to tackle difficult topics such as Molinism in a freshman course.

Given Vanarragon's virtues as an expositor, his book's shortcomings derive largely from sins of omission. While respectful of other opinions, the book is clearly written from a very specific viewpoint. Vanarragon teaches at a resolutely Christian institution (Bethel University) and he is careful not to provoke any crises of faith in his religious readers; he pulls more than one punch when presenting critiques of orthodox Christian beliefs. Only a single page is devoted to 'Atheism' and the recent wave of anti-religious publications by New Atheists is left unmentioned. The entry on religion and science omits the challenge of naturalistic explanations of religion, such as that forwarded by Daniel Dennett. (Admittedly, *The Future of an Illusion* is briefly described in the 'Thinkers' entry on Freud.) Unusually for a contemporary book on religion, the specter of 9/11 does not haunt its pages. The entries on 'Divine Command Theory' and 'Fideism' skip over the possibility of a contradiction between the demands of ethics and the imperatives appearing in sacred texts or otherwise promulgated by organized religions. Accordingly, while Kierkegaard does make two appearances in the book, his 'teleological suspension of the ethical' never comes up. Neurotheology, another currently 'hot' topic, is only obliquely touched upon when, while discussing religious experiences, Vanarragon makes mention of the possibility that the 'wave of comfort' experienced by people under stress may be explained in terms of a 'natural reaction generated in the brain' (111).

Several historically prominent issues and schools in the philosophy of religion are missing from the book altogether. Remarkably, while Vanarragon's introduction explicitly mentions 'the nature of religious language' as belonging to the category of 'philosophical questions about religion in general' (4), the long twentieth-century debate that began with the logical-positivist attack on religious language is completely absent from his book. Similarly, there is no mention of the so-called 'NeoWittgensteinian' approach to religion espoused by such thinkers as Rush Rhees, D. Z. Phillips, and Peter Winch. At this point it should be no surprise that Continental thinkers who have engaged with religion (e.g., Levinas, Derrida, and Habermas) are not at all represented. Alvin Plantinga is the only philosopher whose work enjoys perhaps *too much* coverage in an introduction of this size. (Vanarragon studied at Calvin College and Notre Dame University, so a bit of Plantinga-centrism may be expected). The entry on 'Reformed Epistemology' may be the longest in the book, and Plantinga's more obscure 'Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism' is allocated as much space as the entries on 'Omniscience' and 'Omnipotence' combined.

All in all this book may be highly recommended for its treatment of many topics in the philosophy of religion, but its lack of comprehensiveness mars its usefulness as a stand-alone beginner's guide to the sub-discipline. Perhaps more importantly, its failure to address contemporary critiques of religion undermines its value for earnest young students struggling to determine what role religion should play in their nascent world-views.

Berel Dov Lerner

Western Galilee College, Israel