
REVIEWS

R. Melvin Keiser and Rosemary Moore, eds. and commentators. *Knowing the Mystery of Life Within: Selected Writings of Isaac Pennington in their Historical and Theological Context*. London: Quaker Books, 2005. Pp. 322 + xiv. ISBN 085245 378 7. £18.00 pb (available through bookshop@quaker.org.uk or in US at www.quakerbooks.org).

What of interest might a book about the life and writings of a seventeenth century Quaker have for students of the thought of Michael Polanyi? Quite a bit, it turns out. The Quaker in question is Isaac Pennington (1616-1679), who focused his later writings on the life within. The dynamics of that life turns out to have much in common with the workings of the tacit dimension.

After a brief General Introduction, the book is divided into two parts. Part I features Pennington's correspondence as commented upon by the English historian of the early Quaker movement, Rosemary Moore. It sets the historical context, during the Puritan revolution and the Restoration, for Pennington's spiritual development, attending to family relationships as well as Quaker thought and practice. Pennington interacted with George Fox and other leaders who helped shape the Society of Friends, and his daughter married William Penn. The contrast between Isaac's practical wife and his own rather otherworldly concentration is revealed in these letters. Part II is entitled "The Spirituality and Thought of Isaac Pennington." In the Introduction to and twelve sections of this part, Mel Keiser provides a philosophically and theologically informed commentary on extracts from Pennington's publications. The book includes helpful bibliographic material and a full general index.

The editors do an excellent job of interpreting a person whose mode of discourse is not that inviting on initial impression. The first edition of his collected works (1681) was entitled *The Works of the Long Mournful and Sorely-Distressed Isaac Pennington*, which would not exactly attract the average reader today. That original title does accurately suggest that Pennington probably inwardly suffered from depression and certainly outwardly was subjected to loss of property and freedom, as he was jailed on a number of occasions for his belief and practice. Moreover, the editors note that "Isaac Pennington was,

beyond question, a wordy writer" (ix), one whose language is replete with metaphor and unconcerned with formal consistency. Ah, but Keiser shows how there is a spiritual consistency to his Quaker writings, which began in 1659.

Pennington's faith is rooted in an internal uprising based on the givenness of sense and feeling – not on reason. Embodied experience provides the data for relating to the orienting but mysterious phenomenon (not an object) he calls God. Pennington contrasts two ways of relating to God: an intellectual way that makes scripture and theology basic for the life of faith, and the inward way of waiting upon and discerning God's presence in a process of continuing revelation. In his pre-Quaker days, Pennington was attracted to the former, Puritan-influenced way of living. Then he came to believe that he was deceived, that he was, in Keiser's words, "captive not only to his own thoughts but to the way thinking dominated his life, obstructing the springs of life" (196). Many would-be Christians, Pennington claims, rely upon Christian theology and ritual but without a transformed heart rooted in discernment. They exhibit a veiled self that advocates dominating structures serving self-interest. Similarly, the historical church became trapped in apostasy: it "lost the mutuality of people drawn together under the leadership of the Spirit, and set up a hierarchical structure" (Keiser, 158).

What then is the true way of life Pennington champions? His ruling metaphor, according to Keiser, is Life, which signifies attunement to the Spirit within. Such Life transforms us so we become committed "to live harmoniously with diversity in community; to work for justice and an end to oppression in the nation; and to participate in the wisdom of the Spirit that originates, orders, and fills nature" (Keiser, 275). Thus thinking and doing are both articulations of the embodied spirit. Ethical action flows out of discernment, not out of abstract principles applied with discriminating rationality. Sin is defined not as disobedience to the commandments of God, which have taken on rational form, but as "not living in the life, not being transformed, filled and led by the divine life" (Keiser, 245).

Keiser mentions Polanyi only once (215): "Locating true religion in feeling and a changed life confronts us with mystery, in which we must wait for clarity to emerge

from this 'tacit dimension' (as Michael Polanyi has named it in *The Tacit Dimension*; see ch. 1)." But Polanyi's influence is more pervasive than a single reference would indicate. For instance, Keiser states, "For Friends the self is an experiential being, whose knowing, even scientific reasoning, is personal" (178). Similarly, "Discernment is discovery, not applying known principles" (184). Penington, then, emerges as a nascent postcritical thinker very much in opposition to the modernist spirit of his time as exemplified by Cartesian dualism. If one wants to explore how the tacit realm lying "underneath" subject and object might be interpreted in theological terms, Penington, as interpreted by Moore and Keiser, offers much that is suggestive and useful.

It might have seemed from my comments that Penington is an anti-rational mystery monger. That is not so. Rather his concern is to place reason in its proper epistemological (he would say "spiritual") context. Let the last words then be Penington's.

Is not sense an excellent thing in man, if it be guided by reason? And is not reason a much more excellent thing if it be guided by an inward principle of life? But sense left to itself, without the guidance of reason, how brutish it is! And reason left to itself, without the guidance of a principle of life, falls below sense. (*Concerning the Sum or Substance of our Religion*, 455, quoted on 191-2)

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Richard Dawkins. *The God Delusion*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Pp. 416. ISBN 13: 978-0-618-68000-9. \$27.00 hardback.

In this review I will discuss what I take to be four of the most prominent problematic claims (which I'll call fallacies) made in this new book. While, in my opinion, Dawkins performs a needed service for atheism by calling attention to the oppressive and discriminatory milieu in which American atheists now live (esp. pp. 43-45), as one of atheism's current elites, his intellectual contribution offers little for atheists to be proud of.

The first fallacy is that of the need for "science" to completely displace "religion." He cannot see how the natural and the supernatural can ever co-exist. Dawkins regards all supernatural points of view as "viruses of the mind" (186 ff) which must be eradicated for the betterment of humanity.

Unbeknownst to Dawkins, Michael Polanyi wrote, "Theological accounts of God must, of course, appear meaningless and often blatantly self-contradictory if taken to claim validity within the universe of observable experience. Such a result is inevitable, wherever a language that is apposite to one subject matter is used with reference to another altogether different matter" (PK 282).

Dawkins was made aware of this basic point by other writers. Dawkins quotes Steven Jay Gould's sage advice: "'To say it for all my colleagues and for the umpteenth millionth time ... science simply cannot (by its legitimate methods) adjudicate the issue of God's possible superintendence of nature. We neither affirm nor deny it; we simply can't comment on it as scientists'" (Dawkins, 55). "'These two magisteria do not overlap,'" writes Gould, just as "'the magisteria of art and the meaning of beauty'" (55) are distinct frameworks of meaning.

Of course, the key word here is "meaning." Dawkins's "theologian friends" told him that there are other sources of meaning besides the scientific, and that he was "brutally foisting a scientific epistemology upon an unwilling theology" (153). But Dawkins simply refuses to acknowledge that frameworks other than natural science can be legitimate sources of meaning for those who are committed to them. He doubts that theology can truly "be said to have a province" (56). He sees no "good reason to suppose that theology (as opposed to biblical history, literature, etc.) is a subject at all" (57).

Others besides Gould have cautioned him against his crusade of intolerance. For example, Cambridge astronomer Martin Rees gave the same advice in a book Dawkins quotes. Another astronomer at Oxford made the point to him directly. But, in plain denial, Dawkins writes, "I suspect that neither the Cambridge nor the Oxford astronomer really believed [what they had said to him, or written]" (57). Furthermore, "I simply do not believe that Gould could possibly have meant much of [the advice] he wrote" (57).

Secondly, writes Dawkins, the position of Gould and the others also “implies that science cannot even make *probability* judgments on the question.” Dawkins, of course, thinks such judgments are possible (cf. 58). Dawkins notes that T.H. Huxley wrote that the existence of God is a matter of faith, and not of proof. “Contrary to Huxley,” Dawkins writes, “I shall suggest that the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other” (50). He then attempts to disprove the hypothesis by his own fallacious brand of statistical probability.

Dawkins does not consider that probability estimates generally require some recurring experience from which the estimates can be fashioned. One example is the predictions of rainfall made in the Farmer’s Almanac. Instead, he asserts that since God either does or does not exist, both hypotheses have an “exactly equal probability of being right” (48). After a long discussion of his “statistical science,” he concludes that God’s existence is equal to the possibility of a hurricane sweeping through a junkyard and producing a perfect Boeing 747. Therefore, he announces triumphantly, “the god hypothesis ... is untenable. God almost certainly does not exist” (158).

The logical confusion here is like judging the beauty of a painting by taking a bite to taste it. But for Dawkins, those who disagree with his “science” are among the “many people [who] have not had their consciousness raised” (143, 146).

The third fallacy is his topsy-turvy notion of “child abuse.” Dawkins reveals that he was “the victim” of abuse while a child in one of England’s “boarding schools.” But then he adds, as a mere parenthetical aside, that it was “(an embarrassing but otherwise harmless experience)” (316). Instead, “what is really pernicious is the practice of teaching children that faith itself is a virtue” (308).

In reference to some sensational stories about Catholic priests in Ireland, he comments “horrible as sexual abuse no doubt was, the damage was arguably less than the long-term psychological damage inflicted by bringing up the child Catholic in the first place” (317). Dawkins expresses his outrage that society allows such abuse all in the name of “maintaining cultural diversity” (329).

What would Dawkins do about this “pernicious ... practice of teaching children ... faith”? Dawkins engages in a bad cop, good cop routine on this point. He quotes his “colleague the psychologist Nicholas Humphrey,”

who said that children ““have a human right not to have their minds crippled by [the] dogma and superstition [of their parents’] faith ... and we as a society have a duty to protect them from it”” (326).

However, Dawkins does not advocate making this novel notion of “child abuse” a crime. Instead, he writes, “Please, please raise your consciousness about this, and raise the roof whenever you hear it happening” (339). Thus, Dawkins gives us a chance to redeem ourselves before the likes of Humphrey have their way.

For his fourth fallacy, Dawkins begins by declaring, “I shall end this book by arguing ... that one can lead a happy and fulfilled life without supernatural religion” (353). He prescribes “a good dose of science” (361). For him, “our life is as meaningful, as full and wonderful as we choose to make it” (360). All the knowledge made available by natural science cannot only give “consolation,” but just thinking of the new knowledge awaiting discovery can give “inspiration” (360, 374). Thus, he concludes, society has no need for “the god delusion.”

Dawkins’s zeal causes him “framework blindness.” Not only is his intellectual capacity to make clear distinctions diminished by his ardor, but more pathetically, his capacity for human empathy is overridden. He cannot understand that other people may not find his brand of natural science a satisfying source of meaning.

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