

Book Reviews

Reviews Editor: Victor Hayes

The Anatomy of Religion

Adrian Crees

Castlemaine, Australia, and West
Lothian,

Scotland: Freshet Press, 1989.

222 pages \$15 ISBN 0 9593361 3 3.

(Available from 2 Lyttleton Ave.,
Castlemaine, 3450, Australia)

A review copy of a new book has just arrived (Spring, 1989) from Freshet Press. Titled *The Anatomy of Religion*, it announced itself as "an irreverent survey of world religions and a vigorous restatement of the rationalist position". Intriguing! Who, I wondered, is Freshet Press? What is an "anatomy of religion"? Will "an irreverent survey" of world religions do something for me that "reverent" surveys do not do? What is the "rationalist position"? And why does it need "a vigorous restatement" in 1989?

So I read the book. It was a trip through dusty rooms and musty cellars. ("Anatomy" seemed the appropriate word: dissection and death, the reduction of a living being to skin and bone, a mummy.) In his Preface, the author, Adrian Crees, tells us, nostalgically, that "the great days of the Rationalist Press" were back at the turn of the century. In those balmy days, he says, "active anti-clerical minorities avidly propagated the new science, history and social philosophy" and "many of the battles against religion were won". For example, those old biblical myths were demolished which derived the human race from Adam and Eve and Noah's

Ark and which confined human history to the shores of the Mediterranean".

(Preface)

That's strange, I thought. Why would these and kindred "myths" and parochialisms need to be demolished again?

And why does Crees call for another demolition job to be done on supernaturalism, especially since he believes that Bertrand Russell set out the arguments against supernatural belief "a generation ago with inimitable clarity"?

(Preface) The fight is still on, says

Crees, because religion is still with us, is still being promoted by various interests, and is still untrue! And since "what is untrue must be harmful"

(Russell), it is time once again to gather evidence for this claim "by examining with an unsympathetic eye, the practices of the historic religions over the centuries", i.e., to make once more a case against organised religion. (p.14).

So off goes Crees with snappy chapters on "The perpetuation of religion and the persecution of free thought", "Primitive religion", "Christianity", "Sects, cults and missions", "Hinduism", "Buddhism", "Islam", "Religion in the USSR and China", "Evidences for the Supernatural", "Psychology of religion", "Religion and morality", and "The need for scientific thinking".

The chapters are loaded with unqualified and unsupportable generalisations. Here are some examples of the rhetoric: "all religions are based on fear" (p. 13), "all religion derives ultimately from the statements of prophets, visionaries and

mystics about the supernatural" (p.166), "religion is an addiction maintained by the activities of religious bodies" (p.14), "like all authoritarian systems, (religions) necessarily encourage bigotry, intolerance and hatred of outgroups" (p.14), "all religious morality is irrational, fixed and inflexible" (p.173), "Islam as a social system was a complete failure" (p.123), "church goers are more bigoted, intolerant, prejudiced, gullible and uneducated" than non-attenders (p.160), "religion has had its day as an agent of social control" (p.196), "God cannot be said to be even a useful fiction" (p.145), "the proofs of (God's) existence have troubled the minds of philosophers and others whose minds have been debauched by learning for some thousands of years" (p.144), "contrast the radiant intelligence of the healthy child with the feeble intellectual powers of the average adult" and show that "religious education is not largely to blame for this relative atrophy". (p.162).

But Crees knows that all this is wild stuff. He writes; "My short accounts of the historic religions no doubt suffer from the biases of selection, omission and interpretation that are to be expected (sic) in a work that attempts to state the case against religion. In treating whole centuries in a few lines there have to be sweeping generalisations; and no doubt there are places where relevant facts have been omitted or interconnections in the data forcibly inserted (sic) in the interests of a consistent narrative." (p.15). Admissions like these take the wind out of the sails of the critical reviewer!

There are other surprises. For example, this "vigorous restatement" for the 1990s of the rationalist position of the 1890s, features many disclaimers

that seem to take the heat off religion. The author is even repentant at times. "Perhaps", he confesses, "I have dwelt too much on the cruelties and absurdities of the religious past". (p.14) (The sentence has a kind of Prayer Book cadence.)

It's as if Crees knows there are at least two sides to most questions. This permits him, occasionally, to say nice things about religion and negative things about science, technology and the media (see especially pp. 204-207). He even asserts that "the three major threats to the future of the earth - overpopulation, nuclear weapons and the rape of natural resources - are the direct or indirect results of science and technology" (p.206) Religion isn't blamed for any of them. It is "scientific expertise" that is being "diverted to the exploitation of human folly and weakness". It is "scientific effort" that is "very largely directed to the international arms trade and to the manufacture of products of questionable social utility (drugs, luxury goods, adulterated foodstuffs, pinball machines etc.)." (pp. 206f, emphases added). Should Crees have written a book called "The Anatomy of Science"?

Perhaps that too. But the sins of religions are sufficient for the book under review. Religion is, he thinks, at least partly responsible for "the current resurgence of all kinds of superstition" (p.208), it still perpetrates mass delusion, still gives birth to prejudice and bigotry and still, in its zealous expressions, leads to religious wars and persecutions. (p.210).

I kept asking myself if I was wasting my time reading this book. What kept me at it was, in the end, the sting in Crees' tale! The history of religion is replete with the absurd, the cruel, the

pathological, and the wicked. It is easy to scoff at and important to criticise religion - even if such scoffing criticism is not everywhere popular. Crees complains that "publications against religion are vastly outnumbered by the publications of organised religion". (Preface). I checked that out with a rationalist source who claimed that the ratio was eight hundred to one! If that's the case, a good read of a provocative sceptical anatomy of religion may be a new experience for many of us, even one not to be missed.

For the record, the term "Rationalism" refers to an array of philosophical views which have in common a regard for reason as the chief source and test of knowledge and/or stress the power of a *priori* reason to grasp substantial truths. So, depending on the context, rationalism is the opposite of empiricism, fideism, irrationalism, traditional authority, revelation, the occult, fanaticism and superstition. (For good surveys of the Rationalisms see New Catholic Encyclopedia (NCE) XII, Encyclopedia Britannica (EB) XV or Encyclopedia of Philosophy (EP) VII). A great rationalist tradition originated in ancient Greek philosophy (especially Parmenides), and flourished in the 17th and 18th centuries in the work of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. In these thinkers, however, Rationalism was not characteristically antireligious or nonreligious. The fact is that Reason has been used to support theism (as in Thomas or the early deists) or to attack it (as in Hume, d'Holbach, Voltaire, or Kant). It was this eighteenth century Enlightenment rationalism, with its faith in the power of reason to perfect our social institutions, that waged war on religious creeds and institutions - whether Catholic, Protestant or Jewish.

All supernaturalism and whatever was above human comprehension came under attack. That included Biblical accounts of creation, God's dealing with the Jews, miracles, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, prayer and providence. By the end of the 19th century the best-known use of 'rationalism' in a religious connection was this entirely negative one. "It stood for an anti-religious and anti-clerical movement of generally utilitarian outlook, laying great weight on historical and scientific arguments against theism." (EP VII: 69). This is the "rationalist position" which Crees is concerned to "vigorously restate" in his *Anatomy of Religion*. The term is used in a popular rather than a technical sense and seems now to be almost obsolescent. Crees tells us that "in England the Rationalist Press Association, founded in 1885 with the aim of establishing a secular ethics, verifiable by experience, had its peak membership in 1947, but declined sharply in the next decade and ceased publication". (p.181).

Rationalist concerns have, for the most part, been taken up and softened (in Australia, the UK and USA) under what I think is a much richer term, "Humanism". (EP VII:69). I say "for the most part", because we do still have The Rationalist Association of Australia (in Melbourne) and the Rationalist Association of New South Wales (in Sydney, membership 200). They have no listed telephone numbers. The Melbourne group have much in common with the Humanists; but the Sydney Rationalists are apparently more militant and anti-clerical, still proclaiming that their purpose is "to promote a conception of nature, history, and the meaning of life, in accord with the facts of experience and with the

progress of science and criticism, in opposition to traditional beliefs and practices which prevent or interfere with free enquiry; and to dispute all claims for supernatural interpretations." (For a brief overview of Australia's Rationalist and Humanist groups see Ian Gillman's *Many Faiths, One Nation* (Collins, 1988), pp. 184ff.) Crees' book is rather a lonely witness to the survival, as a kind of folklore tradition of this 19th century form of anti-religious rationalism. According to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, this tradition holds on to three main tenets: (1) that reason in an age of science has demolished all forms of spiritual and supernatural reality and knowledge; (2) that only rationalism inspires hatred of hypocrisy and teaches moral and intellectual honesty, inspiring courage in the fight for social justice; and (3) that only those who deny Christianity and embrace atheism are true rationalists." (XII:91f).

If Crees really holds these views, we should remind him that the first is not yet true, the second is naive and possibly self-righteous, and the third is a stipulative definition that not everyone will accept. But his book is not extreme. Crees is closer to Melbourne than Sydney. And so is Freshet Press which, I discovered, has published at least one other book: Harry Maddox's *Happiness, Lifestyle and Environment*. The *Anatomy of Religion* could help to keep us honest. And I recommend it! There is something intriguing and useful about a writer who, in full flight, confidently attacks organised religions, denying their truth and dismissing them as psychologically and socially harmful. Dismissals can provoke argument. A denial can be a prelude to an explanation.

In the end, however, it's that musty smell that could put the reader off. Who needs old-fashioned outsider-critics of religion like Crees? Christianity, for example, has eminent insiders, men of the cloth, who, like a Bultmann, have taught generations of preachers how to de-mythologize or, like a Cupitt, can endorse a Christian Expressivism which happily lives with the denial of objective reality-reference in theology.

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Dance Of The Spirit : The Seven Steps Of Women's Spirituality

Maria Harris
New York: Bantam, 1989,
xiv+223pp.
US \$18.95,
cloth ISBN 0-553-05384-1

In the Epilogue to *Dance of the Spirit : The Seven Steps of Women's Spirituality*, Maria Harris invites her readers - and here, as throughout, she is addressing women - to enter with her into a moment of blessing, into "a benediction" (p.204) in which the voices of millions across space and time, across social class and creed and race are raised in song:

May the Spirit of the Dance be with you.

May the Spirit of Awakening touch you, that you in turn may touch one another, in your celebrations and your woundedness, in your going out and your return.

May the Spirit of Dis-Covering find you, that you in turn may find one another, in your listening and remembering, in your brokenness and your connection.

May the Spirit of Creating fashion you, that you in turn may fashion one another, in sensitivity and in gentleness, in artistry and awe.

May the Spirit of Dwelling quiet you, that you in turn may be quiet resting places for one another, in the desert and in the garden, in the city and at home.

May the Spirit of Nourishing feed you, that you in turn may feed one another, in your hungers and your yearnings, in your neediness and your losses.

May the Spirit of Traditioning inspire you, that you in turn may inspire one another, as lovers and teachers, as mentors and models.

May the Spirit of Transforming re-create you, that you in turn may give new life to one another, and to all of Earth's creatures, and to the Earth itself.

This benediction contains within it powers of liberation and of transformation both at personal and at global levels. How might women not only receive such a blessing, but "become" (p.181) this blessing, for one another and for Creation?

It is Maria Harris' conviction that the way lies in entering into/finding ourselves in a dance, not just any dance, but one enacted in "the blessed company of women" (p.X) and one in which we encounter the Spirit. Thus, in *Dance of The Spirit*, women's spirituality is presented as "a Dance of the Spirit; more specifically as a series of steps...where there is movement backward and forward, turn and return, bending and bowing, circling and spiralling..." (p.xiii). The danceprints are seven in number (corresponding to the book's seven chapters and to the seven moments of the Epilogue). They are: Awakening, Dis-Covering, Creating, Dwelling, Nourishing, Traditioning and Transforming.

Each step (chapter) is choreographed in three parts. First, there is "a pause for Centering." (p.xiii) This "pause" consists of a series of focussing questions to enable the reader to explore the meaning the particular step has had in

her life to this point. This leads to the body of the chapter where the step is described. Then, as a way of making each step "not only one we read about but one that we rest in and real-ize," seven practices or exercises are offered. The purpose of the book is thus proffered: to assist women's spirituality to flourish.

Readers will find their own rich treasury of reflection and ritual-making in the book, so rather than systematically describe each of the seven steps or their three moments, I shall concentrate here on those characteristics of women's spirituality which are unfolded. These characteristics are shaped out of the Dance and shape it in return.

The spirituality of which Maria Harris speaks "begins with our taking womanhood seriously." (p.66) It is marked by woman's refusal to accept definitions of what it means to be a woman from sources outside of her self. It is characterised by women telling one another their stories, learning to cherish their bodies and discovering their powers. It involves women taking seriously the belief that God is found in the midst of life and in the hearts of women. "Acknowledging this situation," writes the author, "teaches us that at this time and in this place, spirituality is at least this: our way of being in the world: surrounded, held, cherished, touched by and bathed in the light of the Mystery of God...it is our way, ours as women, who are neither children nor men." (p.67) Women's spirituality, therefore, reappraises the story of life by admitting women's experience. It also reclaims our images of God.

At this point it would be important to note that for Maria Harris a spirituality only about women's lives, or only

about God, is a "stunted spirituality." (p.104) In order to flourish spiritually we need to engage in a "continual dancing" (p.103) towards all people: "Let us enter the world of our own depths, our own mystery, our own promise... and let us believe in so doing we are contributing to our own wholeness and to the wholeness of the world." (p.xiv)

In this view, women's spirituality is liberative and healing. It is women giving birth to their selves, to those around them, to the world, and even to God. Here women's spirituality is sensual, justice oriented, integrative and relational. It is "Mystery... Earth...Body...Communion." (p.80) It is dancing into Transformation: "And that is the direction of Transformation ... the direction of Spirituality too...A dance that leads to Communion with Mystery residing at the center of all that is and so to Communion with everyone and everything. A Dance that is yet not over and never will be." (p.195)The metaphor of Dance/dancing as a way of exploring women's spirituality is not a new one. Maria Harris refers to its use by the German medieval mystic, Mechtild of Magdeburg, for example. (p.208) In the Hebrew Scriptures there are the stories of the dances of Miriam and of Judith. Readers may be familiar with its contemporary use in Diane Mariechild's *The Inner Dance* or in Matthew Fox's *A Spirituality Named Compassion*. I would make the claim, however, that it is *Dance of The Spirit* which offers one of the most sustained and sustaining explorations of the metaphor currently available in the literature. It is, after all, a symbol for "the dynamisms in our spiritual lives," a symbol for "the rhythmic series of

movements" at the heart of women's spirituality, movement which is not linear, but movement in which there is "...turn and return...circling and spiralling...in ways similar to the bodily rhythms natural to us as women." (p.xii)

Just as the image of dancing is represented, so too are some earlier themes of the author. Readers of *Maria Harris' Teaching and Religious Imagination* or *Women and Teaching*, for example, will be familiar with her "forms": Contemplating, Dwelling, Birthing, Bonding...Mourning. The insight into former topics by means of such images is again evident and I would propose that an even deeper thematic synthesis is achieved by the author's focussing upon women's spirituality.

Although the seven steps of the Dance taken together offer an image of wholeness for women's spirituality, and although there is in each step an "impulse" (p.87) towards the next, as individual women we are free to find ourselves "where we are meant to be...moving on to a next step happens according to our soul's own rhythm."(p.xii) The book addresses women's spirituality, but its conversation is with the uniqueness of women's spiritualities. This is one of the book's major appeals.

For those readers with or without a knowledge of the work of Maria Harris, I suggest that the riches of the book are extensive. Indeed it is a book to rest in, a book to return to—for reading, for reflection, to assist one in Centering prayer or in daily ritual creating. It is suitable for use on one's own or in the company of others. I recommend it highly, both to those women in the

process of awakening tentatively to the Dance and to those who are surer of their steps. For each woman, then, I add, in closing, my own quiet blessing to Maria Harris: "May the Spirit of the Dance be with you."

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A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes.

Hawking, Stephen W.

London: Bantam Books, 1988.

211p ISBN 0 553 17521 1, Aust \$9.95

Readers unaware of the fact that there is no real distinction between the forward and backward directions of time may be surprised to discover that in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines) the Lord Buddha, Subhūti, his foremost disciple, and others, are actually discussing Hawking's book - a book which, as Sagan says in his introduction, is about the non-being of God. We cannot, of course, reproduce the complete discourse here but offer instead a few central pieces (quoting from Conze's translation, California: Four Seasons, 1973, [hereafter 'P']) indicating how they are responses to key passages of Hawking's book (hereafter 'H'). The non-'scientific' mind is perhaps after all not as compliant a quarry as Hawking might assume.

Hawking: A complete, consistent, unified theory is only the first step: our goal is a complete understanding of the events around us, and of our own existence. [H:179].

Subhūti: How deep then is this perfection of wisdom, since it is so hard to gain confidence in it?

The Lord: Form is neither bound nor

free, because form has no own-being. The past starting point of a material process is neither bound nor free, because the past starting point of a material process is without own-being. The end of a material process, in the future, is neither bound nor free, because the future end of a material process is without own-being. A present material process is without own-being, because the fact of being present is not a part of the own-being of a present form. [P:142].

Hawking: The boundary condition of the universe is that it has no boundary. [H:144].

Pūrṇa: But what then is that form of which you say that it is neither bound nor freed...?

Subhūti: The form of an illusory man is neither bound nor freed. The Suchness of the form of an illusory man is neither bound nor freed. [P:90]

Hawking: Imaginary time is really the real time, and... what we call real time is just a figment of our imaginations. In real time, the universe has a beginning and an end at singularities that form a boundary to space-time and at which the laws of science break down. But in imaginary time, there are no singularities or boundaries. So maybe what we call imaginary time is really more basic, and what we call real is just an idea we invent to help us describe what we think the universe is like. [H:147].

The Lord: As they do not exist, so they exist... [The foolish] construct all dharmas which yet do not exist. Having constructed them, they settle down in the two extremes. They then depend on that link as a basic fact, and construct past, future and present. [P:87f]

Hawking: The idea that space and time may form a closed surface without

boundary also has profound implications for the role of God in the affairs of the universe. With the success of scientific theories in describing events, people have come to believe that God allows the universe to evolve according to a set of laws and does not intervene in the universe to break these laws. However, the laws do not tell us what the universe should have looked like when it started - it would still be up to God to wind up the clockwork and choose how to start it off. So long as the universe had a beginning, we could suppose it had a creator. But if the universe is really completely self-contained, having no boundary or edge, it would have neither beginning nor end: it would simply be. What place, then, for a creator? [H:149].

The Lord: Well said... It is just as if a Tathagata should, during his entire life speak in praise of space, without thereby increasing the volume of space; and space would not diminish, either, while he was not speaking in praise of it. [P:146]

Hawking: However, if we discover a complete theory, it should in time be understandable in broad principle by everyone, not just a few scientists. Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason, for then we would know the mind of God. [H:185].

Thereupon the Venerable Sariputra, the Venerable Purna, son of Maitrayani, the Venerable Mahakoshthila, the Venerable Mahakatyayana, the Venerable Mahakashyapa, and the other Great Disciples, together with many thousands of Bodhisattvas, said: Who, Subhuti, will be those who grasp this perfect wisdom here explained?...

Subhūti: No one will grasp this perfect wisdom as here explained... For no dharma at all has been indicated, lit up, or communicated. So there will be no one who can grasp it. [P:99].

