

Kai Nielsen

Naturalism and Religions.

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Although it never describes itself as a collection and gives the initial misimpression of being a monograph, this book is a compilation of eleven of Nielsen's articles defending naturalism and critiquing religion, sandwiched between a brief introduction and a long postscript. The jacket blurb promises 'a new approach to naturalism ... at the very cutting edge of recent developments in philosophy,' but it is unclear that 'new' and 'cutting edge' describe a collection consisting almost entirely of previously published articles dating to at least 1964 (I say 'at least' because the bibliographical information for some articles omits the date of original publication). As one might expect from a collection of separately published pieces, the book contains needless repetition, and it seems that no editing took place to correct this flaw.

In his critique of religion, Nielsen makes some apt claims. He rightly draws a gloomy moral from the fact that most theists report never once having questioned God's existence (14). Following Anthony Flew, he notes that the uneven temporal and geographic distribution of theistic belief undermines Reformed epistemology's claim that belief in God is innate in all human beings (34, 312). Unfortunately, however, and despite the book's considerable length, too many of Nielsen's claims are merely asserted rather than carefully defended. His sentences abound with references to opponents, but his tendency to dismiss them with a phrase ('*pace* Plantinga,' '*pace* Quine') only shows us his erudition; he is aware of the opponents he dismisses this way, but he does not say how he would answer them.

Nielsen's favorite epithet by far is 'incoherent', a label he uses dozens of times, especially in describing non-anthropomorphic theism. Given the central role that the charge of incoherence plays in Nielsen's critiques, one would expect to see it spelled out carefully. Yet in calling a concept or a position 'incoherent', he seldom indicates what fails to cohere with what. One exception is his discussion of the theistic concept of God as an *infinite individual*, a concept he finds incoherent for this reason: 'Something could not be an *individual* unless she or it were differentiated from other individuals or things. But something that is infinite cannot (logically cannot) be so differentiated. She or it cannot, being infinite, be an individual distinct from other individuals, for something which is infinite is not bounded, is not, and cannot be, differentiated from other things in the way an individual can be' (473). Although it is unclear how Nielsen construes 'infinite' in this argument, he seems to give it a *spatial* sense: a spatially infinite being would have no spatial boundaries. But sophisticated theists would never apply that sense of 'infinite' to God, who is supposed to be infinite in power, knowledge, and goodness rather than in size. It is, moreover, false that 'something which is infinite' in *some* respect, such as the set of real numbers, cannot be differentiated from other things, such as Kai Nielsen. In short, this particular

argument for incoherence — one of the few such arguments we get — looks irrelevant to theism and unsound.

Nielsen has long said, and in the book often says, that he accepts atheism not because non-anthropomorphic theism is false but because it is *meaningless*, a position he bases on an avowedly verificationist theory of meaning. But the book's postscript essentially retracts this long-held view: '... verificationist arguments do not play the central role in the critique of religion that I ... took them to play ... I tried to milk more out of verificationism than could be milked' (486). Such a candid retraction makes sense at the end of a retrospective collection of old articles, but in a supposedly 'new' and 'cutting edge' book it is exasperating to see the last chapter retract earlier chapters.

Nielsen is proudly contemptuous of natural theology, which he writes off as 'an old game that has come a cropper again and again ... New developments in physical cosmology and biology are not going to help one whit' (21). He doesn't say how he knows that physical cosmology will never support the fine-tuning argument, for instance, or that molecular biology will never support the intelligent design hypothesis. Those two research programs may end up failing, but why should we suppose they must? Importantly, he takes up Jean Hampton's demand for an informative definition of 'naturalism', but in the end it is unclear that we get anything more than an unhelpful negative definition of naturalism as the denial of supernaturalism (227).

The book's results are the more disappointing given the clumsy prose one has to wade through to reach them. Nearly every page contains sentences as bad as these: 'His very explanation (as all natural explanations) is incompatible, where accepted, with the person who accepts it, continuing to be a religious believer, if he would be at all consistent' (48); 'This social naturalism, which is nonscientistic and nonutterly biological, is not only social but, as well, a contextual-historicist naturalism' (60); '... belief in an afterlife ... is so problematic that it should not be something to be believed' (78); 'It is this conceptualization that we are maintaining that is incoherent' (82); 'It is over such matters that her arguments and perspicuous articulations obtain' (201). Often Nielsen himself loses track of his meaning: he writes, 'I am, hardly unsurprisingly, largely sympathetic with Flew here' (299-300), when he means 'hardly surprisingly'; he doubts 'that the term "God" answers to something' (311), when surely he means it the other way around.

Along with questionable writing comes careless editing. Nielsen claims (15) that blacks constitute 25 percent of the U.S. population — double the correct figure, something easily checked; he repeatedly calls Plantinga a 'Reform' philosopher, as if Plantinga's tradition were Jewish rather than Calvinist; and he frequently misspells the names of people he's discussing or citing, including his own name at least twice (130).

Nielsen rightly worries that most religious believers never question their faith or take seriously the claims of atheistic critics, yet he believes that books such as his can have value outside academic circles. For on those occasions when believers do entertain doubts seriously enough to read critiques of religion, 'it is important that there be secular humanists who write in ways

that speak to where they are' (16). Regrettably, this book is unlikely to serve that purpose.

Stephen Maitzen
Acadia University