

Analysis Without Emotion

Jean Paul Van Bendegem*

Paul CLITEUR: *The Secular Outlook. In Defense of Moral and Political Secularism.* Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. ISBN: 978-1-4443-3520-0, 317 pages.

Discussions about religion, atheism, tolerance and their relations towards society at large tend to be very intense and very strongly opinionated, often thereby entering the arena of insults, threats and menaces, where the person rather than his or her opinions come under attack, sometimes with fatal results. It is, therefore, always a relief when someone deliberately avoids that arena and presents a sincere attempt to formulate a well-balanced view on these matters. This is precisely what Paul Cliteur, Professor of Jurisprudence at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, has done in this book. In addition, over the past years he has published extensively on these topics and he has taken part in public debates, mainly in the Netherlands and therefore mainly expressed in the Dutch language, so it was high time that the English-speaking world got to know him better (for he has, of course, already published internationally) through this book. Here is an author who, equipped with his background and expertise, is eminently suited to deal with these difficult and important questions.

The overall structure of the book is quite clear. Chapter 1 presents a thorough discussion, both philosophical and historical, of the core concepts that the book deals with, viz. theism, agnosticism, and atheism. Chapters 2 and 3 outline and discuss in considerable detail what freethought (not coinciding with but distinct from atheism) implies. Cliteur presents an excellent argument to show that freethought implies, first, that religions can and should be subjected to criticism (as is the case for all other social phenomena) and, secondly, that freedom of speech is an essential ingredient and has to be guaranteed and safe-guarded on the societal level. The final chapter 4 brings all the previous considerations together to present and defend the moral and political secular outlook that the book title is referring to. It is important to note that right from the start, the author makes it clear that the book will deal with the “narrow” definition of atheism: “Atheism is concerned with one specific concept of god: the theistic god. The theistic god has a name and this is written with a capital: God.” (p. 17). This also implies that he focuses, as far as religion is concerned, on the three monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Still a huge task to perform, as hardly needs to be mentioned! Simultaneously one might make the observation that that very task has already been performed a number of times in recent years, as the steady flow of books dealing with religion and atheism demonstrates. So it is logical to ask what

makes this book special, compared with the expanding literature on the subject. I think there are two features that indeed make Paul Cliteur’s contribution special.

The first feature is that the book avoids either a too abstract and theoretical presentation or, ending up on the other extreme, a too specific and concrete approach. The latter has the drawback that too many details of the specific examples discussed tend to intervene and obscure the point one is trying to make, whereas the former leaves the reader behind with the unanswered question how to translate the theoretical framework into practical considerations, if not actions. Cliteur has done an excellent job in combining both the theoretical and the practical view. The specific case studies that are treated and analyzed in the book are not the easiest ones to deal with for that matter. Among them are: (a) the clash between Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Tariq Ramadan (pp. 86ff), (b) the conflict between Ayatollah Khomeini and Salman Rushdie (pp. 125-130), (c) the affair of the Danish cartoons (pp. 164-168). Even if one does not agree with his viewpoints – I, for one, had little or no difficulty to go along with him in his analysis of these incidents – his approach offers a framework that enriches the particular case, thus in a sense making it easier to discover where the disagreement lies. It is an invitation for discussion, which brings me to the second feature.

The second feature is that from the argumentational point of view this book is truly interesting. Paul Cliteur has a way of writing which makes the argumentative structure of his analysis almost transparent. As a consequence he himself pays a lot of attention to the argumentative style of others. In that sense, the book is almost a catalogue of arguments. This is an art that is not practised often enough in my view (and, yes, perhaps the fact that I am a logician involved with argumentation theory, might serve as an explanation). Let me give a few examples for the reader to judge. At several places in the book he discusses the difficult and intriguing matter of what are the consequences of the simple act of posing a question. One of the important features is that any question comes with presuppositions, i.e., conditions that have to be satisfied to make the question answerable. Say, if a Christian asks an atheist how she deals with the void in her life that the absence of God has caused, then the presupposition of the question is that there is such a void. When one rejects this presupposition, the question cannot be answered. This leads directly to the question of the burden of proof, an equally difficult and intriguing matter. On pp. 37-39 Cliteur is quite clear and leaves no room for misunderstanding: atheism does not have the burden of proof. It is a bad argument to claim that if someone makes an existential claim – “God exists”

*Jean Paul Van Bendegem is at present full time professor at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Free University of Brussels) where he teaches courses in logic and philosophy of science. He is director of the Center for Logic and Philosophy of Science (www.vub.ac.be/CLWF/) where currently ten researchers are working. He is the editor of the journal *Logique et Analyse* (<http://www.vub.ac.be/CLWF/L&A/>). His research focuses on two themes: the philosophy of strict finitism and the development of a comprehensive theory of mathematical practice.

– then anyone who denies the claim has to provide proof for that denial because the claim has been made so long ago and is part of a tradition or, worse still, because the deniers form a minority. Another element that occupies an important place in the book is the art not of explaining but of explaining away. Let me briefly present two specific examples of such fallacies. The first one could be expressed in the following terms (to be found on p. 83, but the formulation is mine): If X has a property P at time t (usually the actual time) and property P is considered to be positive, then X has always had that property P. If today many religious individuals and institutions condemn religious violence, then it does not follow, as is often claimed, that this has always been the case. As far as Christianity is concerned, it is sufficient to have a look at the magnum opus of Karlheinz Deschner, *Kriminalgeschichte des Christentums* (ten volumes planned, eight have been published). The second one is related to the first one (to be found on p. 90, but this formulation is also mine): If from something X unwanted consequences follow and it is possible to delineate a part of X that is responsible for these consequences, redefine X by eliminating that part. Then one can claim that X' is no longer responsible for these consequences. If, in addition, a well-known fallacy, namely equivocation is added, then X' can be replaced by X, whenever necessary. This argument is often used when the matter arises whether or not religion leads to violence. Because in many cases it is extremely difficult to deny that violent acts, motivated by religious ideas, have occurred, the argumentative strategy is to redefine religion through the addition of such expressions as “in its essence” or “per se”. The statement then becomes that religion in its essence or religion per se is non-violent. A last example concerns the unmasking of hidden assumptions in reasonings, an art that Cliteur masters brilliantly. On p. 161 he shows that, e.g. in the Danish cartoon affair already referred to in this review, a hidden

assumption is often made that is incorrect. In my formulation the assumption states the following: if a person X feels insulted by what a person Y has done, then Y must have had the intention to insult X. Moreover, the stronger X's feeling of insult, the clearer and more malicious Y's intentions. To unmask this assumption is quite important for it leads to ridiculous consequences. It seems reasonable to assume that for nearly any statement one can make, someone will feel insulted by it. If one has to refrain from insulting people, then silence will reign. Which is quite absurd.

Apart from these two features that focus more on the presentation and the method of analysis, the most striking feature, content-wise, is the (moderate) optimism that Paul Cliteur defends for a liberal democratic society to deal with issues such as multiculturalism and, above all, religious violence by fundamentalists of all kinds. That religions such as Christianity and Islam need not necessarily lead to violence but, in order not to do so, do require a different approach such as a secular view of religion or a freedom of interpretation is a hopeful view for the future. I will not in this review present further details of Cliteur's argumentation, for any kind of summary would do injustice to the fact that the author is extremely sensitive in his reasonings, taking into account all nuances that are required, firm at one moment and generous at another. Nevertheless, if I would be forced to summarise the book in its entirety, then I would claim that it can be seen as an elaborate and successful (as far as I am concerned) defense of the view that religion derives from morality and not the other way around. Or, in other words, that the only reasonable starting point is that of moral autonomy. That is the secular outlook – “a tradition and perspective we have to cherish, further develop, and build upon” (p. 280) – that will make it possible to organise a society, believers and non-believers together, where lives are worth living.

World Humanist Congress Special Issue

The August 2011 issue of the *IHN* will be a special issue covering the World Humanist Congress, being held in Oslo, Norway from August 12 to 14, 2011. The issue will carry pictures, a few speeches and interviews with major attendees.

Spotlight

From this issue, *IHN* will be putting the spotlight on a different member organisation in each issue. This issue carries a piece on Manava Vikas Vedika, a bold organisation in South India that has led the way on many fronts, including the drive against superstition. For Spotlight, member organisations are invited to send in a short piece of not more than 800 words highlighting their activities and achievements as well as a few good pictures.