Author: Andrew P. Porter
Year: 2001
Titles: 
Elementary Monotheism I: Exposure, Limitation and Need
Elementary Monotheism II: Action and Language in Historical Religion
Publisher: University Press of America
City: Lanham, New York, Oxford
Number of Volumes: 2
Number of Pages: 282+257 pp.
Price: ?

Review: The reflections of Andrew P. Porter about basic aspects of monotheism have been published in two volumes. Each volume is like a walk through a system of ideas, realizing and grasping fundamental elements and conditions of monotheism. While the first path leads through philosophical, theological and psychological fields, the second is comparable to a journey through different places, events and activities around monotheistic themes in the history of religions and their dealings within religious and philosophical texts. The two paths cross each other frequently throughout both volumes. Although the perspective is obviously wider, Porter’s reasoning is focussed on the western, occidental traditions and their different roots in and influences from other cultures, religions and patterns of thought.

Both volumes can also be seen as an attempt to renew and to continue the approaches of Helmut Richard Niebuhr. Porter advances a concentration and radicalization of Niebuhr’s theological, historical and ontological elements. “Elementary Monotheism” can be read as a form of correspondence with Niebuhr’s “Radical Monotheism and Western Culture” and “The meaning of Revelation”. “Elementary” in this context also means reduction. Porter reduces a wide range of monotheistic concepts to a set of ideas or notions such as “Exposure, Limitation and Need”, which could be described as secularized Christianity or a form of Philosophy of Religions based on theological patterns, which are supposed to be fundamental to every human monotheistic worldview. The subtitle of each volume presents the basic notions or ideas which are then surrounded by the reasoning which supports them. Porter’s reasoning runs in circles. Each circle confirms the level of knowledge from the previous one and leads to a further step of cognition. The reader is guided through different aspects of monotheism, which are sometimes logically and sometimes associatively - in Porter's words “analogically” - tied together. In this way the chapters of the two volumes can be read both as steps of a greater argumentation and as independent essays. But following the systematic structure of the books, the general questions at the start of part I - “Present or Absent ?” - and part II - “How is God Present?” - seem to be answered in part III - “Knowing Providence” - and IV - “Languaging Providence”. “Belief in providence is characteristic of monotheism, and this book is about monotheism as much as it is about providence” (p. 4)
confirms Porter at the beginning of his reasoning. The main paradigm presented in these two volumes is “Niebuhr’s vision of covenantal history” (I, p. 182).

Porter’s initial point for his “philosopher’s exploration” (I, p. ix) are “the pains of life” and how it is possible to integrate them into a positive conception of life: “The first issue is what to do about the pains of life, and the second addresses the question of whether human life is just part of nature, without history, or whether human life is essentially historical. This choice will undermine some problems and solve others naturally in ways that many common approaches to philosophy do not.” (I, p. ix) In acknowledgement of the religious character of this question he clarifies his understanding of religion: “\textit{Basic life orientation} is the term I would like to use for whatever gives human life coherence. The term \textit{religion} I would like to use as a near-synonym for basic life orientation, differing, when it does, only in that it adds recognition and intention to basic life orientation.” (I, p. ix) Based on this definition Porter distinguishes, along with Merold Westphal, between three types of Religion: “(1) One can relate positively to life, taking it primarily as history, with nature present secondarily (historical-covenantal religion). (2) One can relate to nature, omitting history, and in effect escaping from hazards of history into a safety of nature (mimetic religion, seeking mimesis of nature). (3) Or one can seek escape from both, positing an ideal realm from which this world is an exile, and to which one seeks to return (exilic religion).” (I, p. 77) Elementary Monotheism is not only analysis but also a form of advocacy for the first type.

According to H. Richard Niebuhr, Porter generates two further starting points: the first “is the affirmative stance that biblical religion takes toward life in this world”, the second “is that biblical religion is radically historical” (I, p. x). From a basic approach to the pains of life Porter evolves the title of the first volume: \textit{Exposure, Limitation, and Need} opens the way to the central thesis: the disappointments of life bear blessings. “Exposure met with honesty brings freedom. Limitation met with innovation brings creativity. Need met with open eyes, hands, and heart, brings fellowship and community.” (I, p. xi) Porter to ok over this trilogy of disappointments from Edward Hobbs, who beside Niebuhr is the most important intellectual father of this work.

There is a fundamental difference between monotheistic and non-monotheistic religions, in the eyes of Porter. Monotheistic religions like biblical religion are able to see life as good, including pain. All non-monotheistic religions are only able to understand life as good, excluding the disappointments. At this point Porter has to clarify that his philosophic exploration is necessarily a confessional: “All talk of God is \textit{confessional}, as opposed to deductive or inductive. That is, one may confess monotheistic faith, challenge others to it, even persuade them. But it is not possible to \textit{prove} God is good.” (I, p. 7) Porter’s confessional point of view is a combination of the positions of Karl Barth and Ernst Troeltsch. From Karl Barth, Porter takes the dialectic conception of God’s presence in the absence. From Troeltsch, he takes the fundamental importance of history and historical criticism for the constitution of faith. Porter’s radical position against the Enlightenment and its philosophical and theological traditions limits in particular his reception of Troeltsch. “The Enlightenment view has all too often slipped inconspicuously into the pagan theology that disappointments are barren, and that one can only be rescued from them, that they cannot bear any good blessings.” (I., p. 6) Porter insists that it is not compatible with monotheistic thought in search of proof of the existence of God and his goodness. Each attempt in this direction would lead directly
The monotheistic knowledge of God could therefore only be a confessional knowledge, i.e. a knowledge of faith. That is the reason why Porter frequently takes a strict position against the thinking traditions of the Enlightenment. In regard to the fideistic notion of God, he prefers the scholastic metaphysical inquiries of Thomas Aquinas. Porter criticizes especially the unhistoric, absolutistic and positivistic tendencies of the Enlightenment and he tends to be polemic in this context.

Important to Porter’s exploration of monotheism is also what he terms tripartite thinking. “Tripartite thinking really is a matter of three reciprocally related principles.

The several three-part series are acknowledgement, loyalty, and confidence; fides, fidelitas, and fiducia; exposure, limitation, and need. They are all instances of a peculiar conceptual way of organizing human experience. There are in each series three departments of functions in human life. The first function has to do with order and legitimacy, the second function with action, and the third function with nourishment and sustenance.” (p. 26f) At this point he follows Georges Dumézil’s analysis of the Indo-European Religions. Although this tripartite thinking is originally not a monotheistic pattern, Porter realizes it as an important pattern of thinking which came to Christian and non-christian monotheism through Indo-European influences. During the period of National Socialism in Germany, ideologically influenced scholars tried to find the Indo-European center of biblical texts and Hellenistic Literature in order to separate it from the Semitic parts. In regard to these attempts it seems to be problematic that Porter, in this context, also tries to distinguish Indo-European patterns from the Hebrew in Jewish, Christian and Hellenistic writings. Porter is aware of these difficulties and tries to escape them by confirming that his own intentions run in another direction. (p. 34) Beyond that, his interpretations seem to be contrived and not very convincing on that point. - When he reflects and discusses the anti-Semitic traditions and their supposed roots in Christian Theology, Porter shows that he is far away from any prejudice against the Jewish Religion or Jewish culture. Comparable patterns to tripartite thinking in pre-Christian and Non-Indo-European cultures of Africa, Central America or East Asia are mentioned briefly as interesting fields for further exploration of historical backgrounds in the development of monotheism, but are not discussed in detail. For Porter, “Exposure, Limitation, and Need” is just an “instance of tripartite ideology, and ... an instance of Trinitarian thinking.” (I, p. 52) The reason for this determination is hermeneutic, as he explains: “Not being able to think like a native outside of my own mother-culture, I thought it prudent to work with the conceptual categories that I know best.” (I, p. 53)

For those with interests in theology and the philosophy of religion, Porter’s work is probably a fruitful subject, which could set them to thinking and help clarify their own theological or philosophical convictions. For those interested in study of religions, these volumes could be viewed as objects that show how European (Georges Dumézil, Paul Ricoeur, Existentialism) and German schools of thinking (Ernst Troeltsch, early Martin Heidegger, neo-Kantianism) of the first part of the 20th Century still have an influence in some contemporary humanities in the United States. The answer to the question of whether Porter has solved or clarified the problems surrounding monotheism, depends on one’s point of view. In particular, the obvious and explicit trinitarian concept behind his Phenomenology of Monotheism and in some cases anti-liberal opinions may lead to opposite positions being adopted by the reader. Those in agreement may be satisfied with
Porter’s arguments, while those disagreeing may be left unconvinced, and those setting the question of truth in parenthesis may be disappointed. Porter’s phenomenological study uses monotheism as a notion implicating a mixture of religious, philosophical and analytical meanings. Similar to Gerardus van der Leeuw and his Phenomenology of Religion, the result is ambivalent because of its theological implications, which determine the reasoning. In contrast to van der Leeuw, Porter claims to be radically historical in his view, including a relativism which allows correct understanding only inside a particular system of categories limited by languages and cultural patterns. Porter’s historical perspective is rooted in categories of the so called Indo-European tradition and within the concept of Narrative Theology, as the second volume shows.

© Dr. Fritz Heinrich (Bad Wildungen)