

Reason, Faith and History

Philosophical Essays for Paul Helm

Edited by

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Introduction

M.W.F. Stone

The philosophy of religion is not a particular type of philosophy, as the wines of the Loire are a particular type of wine, and the fact that some aspect or other of a religion is being addressed does not give us license to depart from usual standards of philosophical strictness and rigour.

Paul Helm¹

As it is recognized and practised in the analytic tradition of English-speaking philosophy, the philosophy of religion presents several intellectual challenges to anyone foolhardy enough to submit themselves to its exacting discipline. First and foremost, one must realize that to broach and scrutinize the central arguments of the philosophy of religion is to engage with philosophy itself. For the subject matter of the field, as it ranges over issues in philosophical theology, the justification of religious belief, quandaries concerning religion and morality, the topic of God and other minds, or questions emanating from ancient and more recent formulations of the so-called 'problem of evil', is always conditioned by developments in the core areas of philosophy; especially, philosophical logic, metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, and the philosophy of mind. Thus, the philosophy of religion is not a *sui generis* subject beholden to an internal framework of coherence and its own standards of verisimilitude. Progress or otherwise in the discipline, will be predicated upon the emulation and endorsement of normative standards of clarity, rigour and sagacity, as these pertain to analytic philosophy as a whole.

A second, and much more specific, challenge concerns the requirement that those prepared to engage with the philosophy of religion must cultivate an appreciation of those finer points of theology (whether Jewish, Christian, or Islamic) that prompt genuine philosophical puzzlement, and which require further elaboration of their dogmatic scope and point. Under this heading, the student of the philosophy of religion must be cognizant of the basic details of theological argument, in just the same manner as a philosopher of physics or mathematics, will marshal his technical understanding of those disciplines in order to provide a conceptual clarification, or else a reasoned justification, of some mathematical theorem or physical theory. The practice of philosophy of religion thereby requires a sympathetic and informed understanding of Western theology and its rich and complex history, whereby ideas and concepts gleaned from the distant past are brought into critical engagement with techniques and methods of philosophical analysis distilled from the present.

The revival of the intellectual fortunes and institutional profile of the philosophy of religion over the last thirty years or so, can be attributed (at least in part) to the fact that so many of its leading figures have risen to the challenges specified above. Whatever else might be said of their work, it should be beyond dispute that

1 *Faith With Reason*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000, p. 1.

the seminal writings of philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, William Alston, Robert Adams, Marilyn McCord Adams, and Norman Kretzmann, have not only ameliorated the general intellectual level of the discipline, but have helped to restore something of the philosophical integrity of the field which had been lost during those long and gloomy years in which self-styled ‘philosophers of religion’ were overtly fixated with non-cognitive accounts of religion, or else sold their souls to one or more suggestive interpretations of the religious legacy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Up to the present day, ‘analytic philosophy of religion’, as it is now known, continues to blossom in many philosophy departments in North America, Great Britain, and parts of continental Europe. Centrally connected with on-going developments in English-speaking philosophy, as can be illustrated in the work of leading exponents such as Peter van Inwagen, Eleonore Stump and Brian Leftow, it shows little sign of conceptual ill-health or lack of creativity as it negotiates the profound challenges of a new millennium.

Aside from those luminaries of the subject listed above, there is another philosopher, Paul Helm, whose commitment to the best practices of analytic philosophy and whose formidable knowledge of many important areas of the history of Christian theology, have enabled him to make a genuine contribution to the philosophy of religion over the last thirty-five years. His industry and achievements are honoured in this book of essays by friends, admirers, former colleagues, and students. Educated at Worcester College Oxford, Helm has enjoyed a distinguished academic career, in which he was for several years a Lecturer and then Reader in Philosophy at the University of Liverpool, before taking up from 1993 to 2000 the prestigious chair of the History and Philosophy of Religion at King’s College London.² Subsequent to taking early retirement from King’s in 2000, Helm moved to Regent’s College, Vancouver, where he became J.I. Packer Professor of Philosophical Theology, a post he held until 2005. He continues as a Teaching Fellow at the College. Helm remains an active presence in contemporary philosophy and theology, not least by virtue of his attendance at many conferences, and by dint of a continual flow of publications on an assortment of academic and topical issues. Ever willing to indulge his taste for innovation, he has even established his own web blog, ‘Helm’s Deep’,³ in which

2 In English universities of the post-war period, named chairs in the philosophy of religion were few and far between. Other than the Nolloth Professorship of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at Oxford University, most recently held by Richard Swinburne, and now by Brian Leftow, the chair of the History and Philosophy of Religion (originally a chair of the University of London before its translation to King’s College, whose incumbents before Helm included H.D Lewis, Stewart Sutherland, and Keith Ward), was the only other recognized senior post to which philosophers of religion could aspire. The Norris Hulse chair of the Divinity Faculty of Cambridge University, has more often than not been the preserve of systematic theologians with little or no interest in English-speaking philosophy of religion, the only real exception to this rule being the tenure of Donald MacKinnon. It is a cause of great regret that on Helm’s departure from King’s, the College decided not to renew the post with the consequence that the chair is now suspended. That said, it should be emphasized that Helm’s old department remains an internationally recognized centre for the study of philosophy of religion.

3 See <http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/>.

his current philosophical interests and theological predilections can be enjoyed and contested by all those at ease with the vagaries of cyberspace.

On the basis of the publication of several highly focused monographs that tackle some of the more recalcitrant issues of the subject, Helm has become one of the most respected philosophers of religion of his generation. In numerous works that straddle the domain of epistemology and other cognate disciplines, he has analysed the nature and meaning of faith and its more general relationship to other forms of belief, and to the exercise of the will. In the course of these enquiries he has advanced an original account of the relationship between faith, reason and volition, one which is opposed to many influential arguments in post-foundationalist religious epistemology, especially those postulated by philosophers smitten by the contrivances of so-called 'Reformed Epistemology'. From the publication of his first major book *The Varieties of Belief* (1973),⁴ and continuing with *Belief Policies* (1994),⁵ and on to *Faith and Understanding* (1997),⁶ and *Faith with Reason* (2000),⁷ Helm has ploughed his own furrow on the taxing subject of the justification of religious belief. Neither beholden to the siren voices of contemporary fashion, nor obstinate in his advocacy of the putative verities of the past, his work is always characterized by a sane and proportionate commitment to reason and argument. Whether read in chronological sequence or else consulted as self-standing contributions, Helm's books on religious epistemology repay serious study, and will be read for many years to come.

Helm's extensive corpus also includes works of great interest in the area of philosophical theology. His widely admired *Eternal God* (1988),⁸ sought to defend the classical Christian view that God exists in timeless eternity, rebutting the charge of modern critics that it is incoherent. By arguing that the idea of divine timelessness is grounded in the notion of God as creator, Helm contended that this was sufficient to enable one to advance a plausible description of divine omniscience. The eternity of God is then considered in the context of a unified treatment of the main concepts of philosophical theology, and one of the main strengths of Helm's account, was to identify the important ramifications which a sketch of God's timeless existence might be said to have for issues related to divine and human freedom. Alongside acclaimed studies such as the famous article 'Eternity' by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann,⁹ and the book by Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity*,¹⁰ Helm's

4 Paul Helm, *Varieties of Belief* (Muirhead Library of Philosophy), London: Allen and Unwin, 1973.

5 Paul Helm, *Belief Policies* (Cambridge Studies in Philosophy), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

6 Paul Helm, *Faith and Understanding* (Reason and Religion Series), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997.

7 Paul Helm, *Faith With Reason*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000.

8 Paul Helm, *The Eternal God: A Study of God Without Time*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988; Second edition paperback, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

9 Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, 'Eternity', *Journal of Philosophy*, 78, 1981: 429-458.

10 Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion), Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Eternal God is widely acknowledged to be one of the more influential conceptual assessments of this divine attribute in recent philosophical theology.

Helm's other notable contribution to this area of philosophical religion can be seen in his discussion treatment of the knotty problem of divine foreknowledge, and its impact on issues related to counterfactual conditionals, fatalism, human freedom, and providence. In a series of papers and discussion notes published in the 1970s,¹¹ Helm defended with great clarity and determination a position commensurate with his own Reformed Tradition. A later book, *The Providence of God* (1993),¹² sets out his mature account of God's prescience and its general implications for an account of divine providence.

Mention of the Reformed tradition brings us to the last area in which Helm has made a palpable contribution to contemporary theological learning. A sincere yet restrained advocate of Calvinian Christianity, a position which he deems to be nothing more than the unequivocal teaching of biblical revelation, Augustine, and selected medieval scholastics, Helm has found cause to write about his great hero John Calvin, either with a view to expounding the Reformer's ideas in such a way as to make them philosophically tractable and plausible, or else to defend his own view of the development of the Reformed Tradition against what he deems to be unscholarly and suggestive reinterpretations of historical Calvinism, especially those forms that found expression in the British Isles in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The second of these traits is in evidence in his most polemical opusculum, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (1982),¹³ a small tract written at the expense of R.T. Kendall's *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (1981).¹⁴ It is the burden of Kendall's study to show that there exists a profound rupture between Calvin and his later followers such as the English Puritans, with the consequence that Puritan theology had departed significantly from the spirit and the letter of Calvin's own dogmatic teaching. At the time at which Kendall's study appeared, it had become commonplace among a prominent cohort of Protestant theologians (here one thinks of T.F. Torrance and his many enthusiasts and imitators), as well as among some historians of the Reformation, to oppose the historical teaching of Calvin to the mediated ideas of the 'Calvinists'. Rejecting this position as simply false, Helm sought to argue that, within the period covered by Kendall's monograph, Calvin and the English Puritans were speaking in one and the same theological voice. He prosecuted his case on the basis of a detailed exposition of the doctrines of the Atonement and of 'Saving

11 See especially: 'Divine Foreknowledge and Facts', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 4, 1974: 305-315; 'On Theological Fatalism Again', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 24, 1974: 360-362; 'Fatalism Once More', *ibid.*, 25, 1975: 289-296; 'Timelessness and Foreknowledge', *Mind*, 84, 1975: 516-527; and 'Foreknowledge and Possibility', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 6, 1976: 731-734. For an excellent discussion of some of the ideas on divine foreknowledge and omniscience defended by Paul Helm, see the essay by Christopher Hughes 'No Way Out', in this collection.

12 Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Contours of Christian Theology Series), Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993.

13 Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982.

14 R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981.

Faith', showing that there was no real warrant for anything like the conclusion that Kendall had proposed.

Helm's other great gift to the scrutiny and analysis of the doctrines and legacy of the Reformed Tradition is the ambitious and pioneering, *John Calvin's Ideas* (2005),¹⁵ a book entirely without precedent,¹⁶ and the product of its author's long and studious engagement with Calvin's ideas and historical context. While never denying that Calvin was first and foremost a theologian, and by stating that he was not a 'philosopher' in our accepted understanding of that term, Helm proceeds to explain Calvin's own familiarity with a range of philosophical ideas, and the ways in which he was prepared to put such ideas to work in the elucidation of his theological positions. Given the length and sophistication of this tome, its conclusions and proposals have yet to be fully absorbed by scholars of Reformation thought. Still, without exaggeration, one can envisage that the general dissemination of Helm's analysis will lead to a thorough reappraisal of Calvin's theological method, his relationship to late medieval thought, and to later Reformed scholasticism. When viewed alongside the recent completion of Richard A. Muller's important *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*,¹⁷ Helm's volume, like those of Muller, provides a new and radical means whereby our existing understanding of the intellectual context and development of Reformed theology can be liberated from antecedent theological assumptions, especially those associated with T.F. Torrance and the ahistorical neo-Barthian school, and viewed in a different and much more appealing light.

An interesting by-product of greater topicality which *John Calvin's Ideas* bequeaths to its readers, however, is Helm's own powerful critique of some of the staple ideas of contemporary 'Reformed Epistemology', a position associated with the writings of Alvin Plantinga and others.¹⁸ At many places, Helm is eager to show his reader that at crucial points Calvin's own ideas are not those of Plantinga, and that in certain instances the strictures of self-styled Reformed epistemology and those of Calvin, particularly on matters concerning warrant and the rational justification of belief in God and on natural theology, are not always in full accord.¹⁹ While several scholars have recently taken Plantinga to task for his interpretation of Calvin,²⁰ the singular merit of Helm's own exposition is to call into question some of the more confident historical assertions that Plantinga makes on behalf of Calvin and the

15 Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; paperback edition 2006.

16 The only other comparable study would be Charles Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* (Studies in the History of Christian Thought, 14), Leiden: Brill, 1977, which restricts itself to a study of Calvin's use and appropriation of the ideas of ancient philosophy.

17 Richard A. Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols., Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.

18 See Alvin Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God', in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, pp. 16-93; and *Warranted Christian Belief*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

19 See Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, pp. 210, 241-242, 265-268, 269-270.

20 See especially the articles by Michael Sudduth, 'Calvin, Plantinga, and the Natural Knowledge of God: A Response to Beversluis', *Faith and Philosophy*, 15, 1998: 92-103; and the 'Prospects for 'Mediate' Natural Theology in John Calvin', *Religious Studies*, 31, 1995: 53-68.

Reformed Tradition. The detail as well as the sobriety of Helm's exegesis invites any scholar and philosopher to approach Calvin's writings with greater tact and nuance, the effect of which will surely help to introduce a greater critical distance between some aspects of the teaching of John Calvin and the research programme of Reformed epistemology.

Further to his achievements in the philosophy of religion and in the history of Reformed theology, Helm has also edited several significant collections of essays. For many years his 'Oxford Readings' paperback, *Divine Commands and Morality* (1981),²¹ was an undergraduate's first port of call as they got to grips with this distinctive and, at times, perplexing approach to ethics. His years at King's College saw him produce two major collections, the first being an anthology of texts for Oxford University Press entitled *Faith and Reason* (1999);²² and the second being the proceedings of a conference he organized on Jewish and Christian approaches to God, subsequently published as *Referring to God: Jewish and Christian Philosophical and Theological Perspectives* (2000).²³ When in Vancouver he produced with his friend, and contributor to this volume, Carl Trueman, a volume of essays dealing with *The Trustworthiness of God: Perspectives on the Nature of Scripture* (2002);²⁴ and also co-edited with his former research student, Oliver Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards: Philosophical Theologian* (2003),²⁵ a volume which has been roundly praised as one of the more significant assessments of Edwards's career to appear in the last twenty years. Once again in these highly successful books, one can see so many of the traits that have won Helm the esteem of his peers: a thorough knowledge of the history and complexity of the Christian tradition; philosophical acuity and imagination; and perspicuous and thought-provoking commentary.

The essays that follow this inadequate appreciation need little by way of introduction. All the contributors gladly accepted the editor's invitation to write in honour of Paul Helm, and some choose to address themes directly related to ideas and issues that are represented in his published corpus, while others decided that the most felicitous way to pay tribute to their friend or former colleague was to offer a piece of their current research. This is why the volume is loosely organized around the themes of *reason*, or those pertaining to philosophical analysis; *faith*, or those issues which direct our attention to the content of specific theological beliefs; and *history*, or those areas of the Christian tradition which continue to intrigue and delight our speculative instincts and which call forth for further clarification and debate.

21 Paul Helm ed., *Divine Commands and Morality* (Oxford Readings in Philosophy), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.

22 Paul Helm, ed., *Faith and Reason* (Oxford Readers), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

23 Paul Helm ed., *Referring to God: Jewish and Christian Philosophical and Theological Perspectives* (Curzon Jewish Philosophy Series), Richmond: Curzon, 2000.

24 Paul Helm and Carl Trueman eds, *The Trustworthiness of God: Perspectives on the Nature of Scripture*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

25 Oliver Crisp and Paul Helm eds, *Jonathan Edwards: Philosophical Theologian*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003.

The volume begins with an article by David Robertson, who considers questions concerning the philosophy of language that can be found in the theological heritage of patristic writers such as Basil of Caesarea, and by Carl Trueman who offers a reinterpretation of the significance of a neglected early modern divine, Stephen Charnock. From there, Christopher Hughes invites us to consider his own novel proposals concerning the solution of Alvin Plantinga and others (Paul Helm included) to traditional perplexities concerning divine omniscience, while Richard Swinburne urges Paul Helm to take natural theology more seriously than he has been disposed to do hitherto. Alan Torrance provides us with a series of reflections on theological epistemology, and Howard Robinson tackles the rarefied subject of God's existence and His essence. Stephen Clark provides a repose for the reader in the quiet and agreeable thoughts of G.K. Chesterton, a pause which is followed by Thomas Pink, whose subtle excursus into several salient themes in the history of moral psychology and theological anthropology, affords the reader great insight into several issues touched on by the work of Helm. Jerome Gellman provides the volume with a further set of reflections on the epistemic quandaries that court any analysis of mystical experience, and Richard Cross offers a polished exposition of a perennial difficulty in Western Christology. The last three essays of the volume contain a critical study on Helm's account of the authorship of sin by Peter Byrne, a highly innovative philosophical analysis of concepts by Keith Hossack, and an adroit discussion by Oliver Crisp of the thorny issue of multiple incarnations.

The fact that these essays embrace such a wide variety of themes and issues is perhaps the best and most appropriate tribute to Paul Helm. In these sad and trying times of excessive specialization, and the proliferation of increasingly myopic and quite ghastly academic approaches to both philosophy and theology, it is important that we celebrate the achievements of a civilized and cultivated colleague who writes on a great number of topics in philosophy, philosophy of religion, theology, and Reformation studies, with learning, wit and authority. Helm's work is always attuned to the need to bring important areas of philosophy of religion into a genuine dialogue with the study of the history of our magisterial Christian tradition. He does this in order that one can recapture and reassess ways of thinking about the philosophical issues that attend the justification of religious belief, or else the description of God's nature, which have been forgotten or arbitrarily rejected. The philosophical imagination is broadened and ameliorated by the introduction of new and interesting things to think about. Paul Helm's industry and creativity as a philosopher of religion can be measured against those novel insights he has introduced to the areas of religious epistemology, philosophical theology, and the history of the Reformed Tradition. For this, and for so much more, we remain in his debt.

Significant Publications of Paul Helm

Books

- Editor, *Jonathan Edwards' Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings* (Cambridge, James Clarke, 1971).
- The Varieties of Belief* (Muirhead Library of Philosophy) (London and New York, George Allen and Unwin, Humanities Press, 1973).
- Calvin and the Calvinists* (London, Banner of Truth Trust, 1982; Korean Edition, Seoul, Word of Life Press, 1988).
- Editor, *Divine Commands and Morality* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981; Spanish Edition, Mexico, Fondo De Cultura Economica, 1986).
- Editor, *The Divine Revelation* (London, Marshall, Morgan and Scott 1983; Reprinted Vancouver, BC. Regent Publishing, 2004).
- Editor, *Objective Knowledge: A Christian Perspective* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1987).
- Eternal God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988; Paperback Edition 1997).
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- Editor, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999).
- Editor, *Referring to God* (Richmond, Curzon Press, 2000).
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- Editor (with Carl R. Trueman) *The Trustworthiness of God* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2002).
- Editor (with Oliver D. Crisp) *Jonathan Edwards, Philosophical Theologian* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003).
- John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004; Paperback Edition 2006).
- Calvin: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London, T & T Clark, 2008).
- Calvin in the Centre* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008).

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- ‘The Perfect and the Particular’, Inaugural Lecture, King’s College, September, 1994.
- ‘Eternal Creation’, *Tyndale Bulletin* 45 (1994): 321-338.
- ‘One Truth, One Way’ (London, Evangelical Library, 1996).
- ‘Eternal Creation: The Doctrine of the Two Standpoints’, in *The Doctrine of Creation* (ed. Colin Gunton) (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1997), pp. 29-46.
- ‘Perfect Goodness’ in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford, Blackwell, 1997), pp. 243-259.
- ‘Time and Trinity’, in *Questions of Time and Tense*, ed. Robin Le Poidevin (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 251-265.
- ‘Eternality’, in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide to the Subject*, ed. Brian Davies (London, Cassell, 1998), pp. 75-79.
- ‘Maimonides and Calvin on Divine Accommodation’, in *God and Reference*, ed. Paul Helm, (Richmond, Curzon Press, 1999), pp. 149-170.
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- ‘Wittgensteinian Religion and “Reformed” Epistemology’ in *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*, eds Robert L. Arrington and Mark Addis (London and New York, Routledge, 2001), pp. 101-118.
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- ‘Calvin, English Calvinism and the Logic of Doctrinal Development’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 34 (1981): 179-186. (Reprinted in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, ed. Richard C. Gamble, vol. 14. *Calvinism in France, Netherlands, Scotland, and England* (Hamden, Conn. Garland Publishing Inc., 1993).)
- ‘Thomas Reid, Common Sense and Calvinism’, in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, eds H. Hart, J. Van De-Hoeven and N. Wolterstorff (Lanham, Maryland, University Press of America, 1983), pp. 71-89.
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