

Anderson, Owen (2008) *The Clarity of God's Existence: The Ethics of Belief after the Enlightenment* Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, US\$25.

Anderson's stated aim in this work is to defend what he calls 'The Principle of Clarity'. In his own words, 'this principle states that if the failure to know God (unbelief) is inexcusable (culpable ignorance), then it must be clear (readily knowable) that God exists' (2). Anderson also asserts that he aims to establish that The Principle of Clarity is, necessarily, 'a presupposition to the redemptive claims of Christianity' (20).

Anderson holds that Christianity teaches that unbelief is culpable ignorance; indeed, he goes so far as to claim that this is Christianity's 'central truth' (201). Moreover, he claims that Christianity teaches that unbelievers need redemption *precisely because* they are guilty for their unbelief (3). According to Anderson, unbelief is '... the central sin for which Christ died' (2), '... the sin that results in all other kinds of sin, ... the "root sin", ... "the original sin", ... "the first sin"' (42). And he claims that 'if it is true that unbelief is inexcusable, and justice demands payment for wrong, then the suffering and death of Christ ... can be understood' (79).

Apart from an introductory overview (Chapter 1: 'Inexcusability, Redemption and the Need for Clarity') and a brief epilogue (Chapter 10: 'Conclusion: Where do we go from here?'), the book divides into two main parts. The first part, Chapters 2-7, is a discussion of the ways in which, hitherto, the Christian tradition has either failed to recognise the need to prove that there is universal general revelation of God's existence and nature, or else has fallen short in its attempts to establish that this is so. (Chapter 2: 'Attempts to Avoid the Need for Clarity'; Chapter 3: 'Attempts to Avoid the Need for Arguments'; Chapter 4: 'Theistic Arguments before Hume'; Chapter 5: 'Enlightenment Challenges to Theistic Belief'; Chapter 6: 'Victory over Theism?'; Chapter 7: 'Theistic Responses to the Challenges of Hume and Kant'.) The second part, Chapters 8-9, gives an outline of the way in which Anderson supposes it can be proven that there is a universal general revelation of God's existence and nature, together with what Anderson supposes is an adequate proof of the very first step along the way: a proof that there is a universal general revelation that there is something that is eternal. (Chapter 8: 'The First Step toward the Clarity of God's Existence'; Chapter 9: 'Historical Overview of Being from Non-Being'.)

Anderson's account of what it is to be inexcusable in belief plays an important role in both parts of his discussion. According to Anderson, one is inexcusable if: (1) one's beliefs are contradictory; (2) one does not have integrity; (3) one does not know what is clear (and, in particular, if one does not know what is basic); (4) one denies that there are clear distinctions (3, 141). Anderson makes it clear that these conditions come with a rider: one is not inexcusable if one could not have avoided one's plight 'through a reasonable amount of effort' (3n.4). However, Anderson nowhere states clearly whether he intends these conditions to be individually sufficient for inexcusability or whether he supposes that they are only jointly sufficient for inexcusability.

Anderson's account of inexcusability in belief relies on a prior understanding of what it is for a doxastic item to be clear, and of what it is for a distinction to be clear. While he does tell us that 'since thinking is presuppositional (the less basic assumes the more basic), if anything is clear, the basic things are clear [and thus] one is inexcusable if one does not know what is basic' (3, 141), this further claim only sheds light on his understanding of what it is for a doxastic item to be 'basic'. I don't think that Anderson provides any further clarification of what it is for a doxastic item to be 'clear'; however, since the book has no index, it is hard for me to be very confident that this is so. In any case, it is worth noting that it is highly controversial to suppose that 'thinking is presuppositional' in the way that Anderson takes it to be: if, for example, there are no basic doxastic items, then questions concerning one's inexcusability in failing to know what is basic do not even arise.

A propos the clarity of distinctions, Anderson tells us that 'Clarity requires distinguishing between *a* and *not-a*. An example of a basic belief that is clear is the distinction between *being* and *non-being*. There is no excuse for failing to distinguish these because their distinction is the foundation of all thought—to give an excuse requires a distinction.' (3) This is all rather muddy, though susceptible of clarification. I sketch the barest rudiments of the requisite clarification here. On the one hand, at the level of words, we have names and predicates. If 'a' is a name, and 'F' is a predicate, then the sentence 'Fa' is true provided that 'a' refers to something that falls under the predicate 'F'. If 'F' is a properly functioning predicate, then the following two things will be true of it: first, there is no name in the language for which both 'Fa' and '~Fa' are true (where '~' is negation); and second, there is no object such that, if a new name—say 'b'—were given to it, then it would be that both 'Fb' and '~Fb' were true of it. If 'F' is a properly functioning predicate, then, *a fortiori*, there is a clear distinction between 'F' and '~F'. Given this account, we can suppose—if we wish—that 'exists' is a properly functioning predicate. For any name 'a' in any natural language, we do not have both that 'a exists' is true and that 'it is not the case that a exists' is true. Moreover, for any object, if we give the name 'b' to that object, we do not have both that 'b exists' is true and that 'it is not the case that b exists' is true. The foregoing account can be accepted by those who accept, and by those who deny, that there are non-existent objects. Moreover, the foregoing account can be strengthened—if desired—to entail that it never fails to be the case that at least one of the sentences 'a exists' and 'it is not the case that a exists' is true. However, it is simply not obvious that we have a clear distinction between 'being' and 'non-being' *only if* we adopt this strengthening. (Should we say that there is no clear distinction between 'red' and 'not red' because there are some borderline cases?)

According to Anderson, 'if unbelief is inexcusable then arguments are not just for some—they are necessary for all humans as rational beings who wish to make sense of the world' (124). Moreover, according to Anderson, successful demonstrations of the clarity of a given claim must establish 'the impossibility of alternatives' and 'show that [alternatives are contradictory]' (139). Given these standards, it is not surprising that Anderson finds that Christian tradition has either failed to recognise the need to prove that there is universal general revelation of God's existence and nature, or else has fallen short in its attempts to

establish that this is so. However, it is perhaps somewhat more surprising that Anderson supposes that he has the wherewithal to meet this supposed shortcoming in the Christian tradition, and perhaps no less surprising that Anderson doesn't spend more time worrying about whether Christianity really is committed to the inexcusability of unbelief in the way that he supposes that it is.

Anderson's reasons for supposing that Christianity really is committed to the inexcusability of unbelief in the way that he suppose that it is essentially turn on a particular interpretation of Romans 1:20. ("For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.") While Anderson also cites other passages from the Bible—including second hand citations via a direct quotation from J. I. Packer's *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Belief* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001)—his reading of Acts 14:17, 17:28, Hebrews 11:1, Isaiah 6:3, Matthew 6:9, Psalms 14:1, 19:1 and Romans 1:32, 2:4, and 2:14 are all pretty clearly dependent upon his interpretation of Romans 1:20. Moreover, as Anderson himself *implicitly* acknowledges, this interpretation of Romans 1:20 is very controversial. (At 72, Anderson shows that he is aware that Aquinas did not accept his interpretation; at 117, he shows that he is aware that Barth did not accept his interpretation.) Speaking for myself, I can't see that there is particularly strong support for Anderson's reading of Romans 1:20. I think that it is not at all clear that the occurrence of 'they' in this passage refers to all human beings, past, present and future. In Romans 1:18, we are told that 'the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hold the truth in unrighteousness.' And in Romans 1:21, we read 'Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imagination, and their foolish heart was darkened'. At the very least, it seems not implausible to take the occurrence of 'they' in Romans 1:20 to refer to those who, despite having had the benefits of *special* revelation, fail to accord proper respect to God.

Anderson claims to be an adherent of 'Historic Christianity'. He tells us that this is 'the worldview expressed in such creeds as the Apostles' Creed, the Nicean Creed, and the Chalcedon Creed. Historic Christianity is theistic, holds that scripture is divinely inspired, and that salvation is necessary for all persons and is available only through the atoning work of Christ.' (17). Moreover, he claims that Historic Christianity 'is based on a worldview which is being developed over time through working our implications and growing in consistency. ... [I]t is called Historic Christianity not necessarily because it has been held by the majority at any one time (although throughout the centuries it is the majority position), but because it is the most consistent with the scriptures and the presuppositions of Christianity from general revelation.' (9) However, on his own acknowledgement, many of the major figures in the history of Christianity are not adherents of Historic Christianity. In particular, while Anderson takes Historic Christianity to be committed to his own views about general revelation and inexcusability, he admits that those views are not shared by, for example, Tertullian, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Calvin, and almost every significant figure since the Enlightenment. The sober truth is that Anderson's 'Historic Christianity' does not

have the historical and scriptural support that he takes it to have, though it cannot be denied that Anderson's views have some historical antecedents (e.g. in the Westminster Confession of Faith and in those Protestant denominations that are wedded to the Larger and Shorter Catechisms).

How does Anderson suppose that it can be proven that unbelief is inexcusable? In rough outlines, his 'program' is as follows:

1. Show that there must be something eternal by showing that the claim that nothing is eternal is contradictory.
2. Show that not everything is eternal by means of the following:
 - a. Show that matter exists by showing that the claim that matter does not exist is contradictory (*contra* spiritual monism and idealism)
 - b. Show that matter is not eternal by showing that the claim that matter is eternal is contradictory (*contra* material monism)
 - c. Show that the soul exists by showing that the claim that there are no souls is contradictory (*contra* material monism and Advaita Vedanta)
 - d. Show that the soul is not eternal by showing that the claim that the soul is eternal is contradictory (*contra* Advaita Vedanta and other forms of spiritual monism)
3. Respond to the problem of evil (both moral and natural)
4. Respond to natural evolution (vs. uniformitarianism and materialistic reductionism)
5. Respond to theistic evolution (the original creation was very good—without evil)
6. Respond to deism (the necessity of special revelation)
7. Show that there is a moral law that is clear from general revelation. (140/1)

Anderson claims that this 'program' is based on S. Gangadean (2008) *Philosophical Foundation: A Critical Analysis of Basic Beliefs* University Press of America (a work that he mentions repeatedly, even though it is not listed in his bibliography, and even though he does not actually cite from it: see, e.g., xvii, 140, 142, 197).

Even allowing for the 'sketchy' nature of this 'program', it is hard to see how one could think that it will be adequate to the task. True enough, if you accomplish 1 and 2, then you have ruled out all views but those that allow that some things are eternal and some things—including matter and souls—are not. But how are we supposed to get from there to the claim that it is contradictory to deny that the Christian God exists and possesses the various properties affirmed of Him by "Historic Christianity"? There is not even the slightest hint in

the rest of the ‘program’ that indicates how all of the remaining alternatives to ‘Historic Christianity’ might be shown to be contradictory.

Scepticism about the viability of Anderson’s ‘program’ is only increased when one considers the details of his attempt to carry out the first step, i.e. the details of his attempt to show that the claim, *that nothing is eternal*, is inconsistent.

Here is how Anderson begins: ‘In Historic Christian theism, God is a Spirit who is infinite, eternal, and unchanging in being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. Unbelief is the denial that this God exists, and the affirmation that something else is eternal (has existed from eternity). If clarity is to be established, it must be proven that only God is eternal, and all other claims about what is eternal are contradictory. It requires showing that there is a clear distinction between eternal and non-eternal. ... The alternative to this is that there was an uncaused event in which being came from non-being. ... The following two chapters are going to consider this possibility in order to argue that it is clear that something has existed from eternity. To do this requires clearly defining what “being from non-being” and “uncaused event” mean. ... This analysis will help to show what is meant in saying “it is clear that something has existed from eternity”, and that the alternative to clarity is a self-contradiction which ends in silence. One must be silent when one’s assertions are self-contradictory and thus are not about anything. They are about nothing.’ (140).

Much of this is bizarre. Why should unbelief be committed to the claim that something other than God is eternal? Why is the only alternative to the claim that something is eternal the claim that something came from nothing? And what are we to make of the strange claim that contradictions lead to silence? It is the plainest commonsense that I can make contradictory claims about one subject matter without making contradictory claims about other subject matters. If I contradict myself in my account of what I was doing this morning, then my contradictory assertion is plainly about something: namely, what I was doing this morning. Moreover, rather than shut up, what I ought to do is to revise what I say so that it is no longer contradictory.

At 146, Anderson says that “‘eternal’ means what is without beginning and therefore changeless (either no change or changeless in the sense of recycling the same changes)’. But, on this understanding of “‘eternal”, it seems straightforward to model a world in which there is nothing that is eternal, and yet in which there is no point at which something comes from nothing: all we need is a beginningless infinite sequence of pair-wise distinct things, each of which goes out of existence when it brings the next member of the sequence into existence. Since we can model this scenario, it is not logically contradictory (as even those who suppose that such a scenario is not really possible acknowledge).

Anderson thinks that he can show that the claim that ‘being from non-being’ is contradictory on other grounds. First, he argues as follows: ‘[Being from non-being] can be shown to be a strict contradiction by considering that all “from” claims presuppose being. Obviously, “from” in “being from non-being” is not a spatial term, such as “I came from Phoenix”. Nor can it be a term denoting origination such as “that noise came from me”, since non-being

cannot do anything. Upon analysis, all uses of “from” involve being, and it can never be used with non-being.’ (151) Here, the obvious response—which Anderson notes elsewhere—is to deny that ‘being from non-being’ is anything other than a metaphorical restatement of ‘uncaused existence’. Given that ‘from’ does not appear in the literal statement, Anderson’s contestable claims about the use of the word ‘from’ are simply irrelevant. (His claims are contestable because there are acceptable uses of the word ‘from’ that don’t conform to his strictures—e.g. in discussion of the possibility of particles “coming from infinity” in Newtonian mechanics. Since there are models of Newtonian mechanics in which particles ‘come from infinity’, there is plainly no *logical* inconsistency involved in this use of the word ‘from’. Or—to take a more mundane example—consider the sentence ‘Bilbo Baggins is from Middle Earth’. Since there is no such place as Middle Earth—i.e. since Middle Earth does not exist—this sentence clearly involves a use of ‘from’ that involves non-being: but it is a perfectly proper use of ‘from’ nonetheless. Suppose that someone says to Anderson: ‘This artefact is from Atlantis’. Will he seriously respond: ‘I cannot tell whether your use of the word ‘from’ is grammatically appropriate until I determine whether or not the term ‘Atlantis’ is a denoting term?)

Anderson’s most developed argument for inconsistency in belief in uncaused existence is contained in the following passage: ‘*a* and *non-a* is an absolute distinction. While *being* from *non-being* follows this formally, it is different from all other distinctions between *a* and *non-a*. All other such cases are cases of beings. “Table” falls into the category of “non-egg”, and yet both are beings. ... Behind all of these is the distinction of *being* and *non-being*, and the reality that in causal relations being is only related to being. If being could come from either being or non-being, then on this point the two are not different—they are not *a* and *non-a* on this point, just as table and egg are not *a* and *non-a* with respect to the category material objects. Here then is the contradiction: if being can come from either *being* or *non-being*, then on this point they are not different, which is to say that *being* is *non-being*. Tables are equivalent to eggs with respect to being material objects. But *being* and *non-being* are different on all points and in every respect, which means if *being* comes from *being*, then it can never come from *non-being*. This holds true for whatever sense of *from* that one wants to hold, and for the example where a series of changing and dependent events is preceded by nothing.’ (152/3)

Suppose one thinks that there are just two different kinds of things (or states, or events, or whatever): those that are essentially caused, and those that are essentially uncaused. Suppose, further, that one supposes that essentially uncaused things (or states, or events or whatever) are essentially temporally prior to all other things: essentially uncaused things cannot begin to exist at moments of time that are preceded by other moments of time at which they do not exist. Finally, suppose that all essentially uncaused things are contingent existents. Given these three assumptions, it follows that, for each essentially uncaused thing, there is some other thing that causes it, but that, for each essentially uncaused thing, there is no other thing that causes it. Does this set of assumptions somehow erase the distinction between *being* and *non-being*? I can’t see how. Of course, in the case of an essentially uncaused contingently

existing thing, there is no thing that is causally related to it: but it does not follow that we therefore have a case in which causation *relates being* to *non-being*. What is true, on the given assumptions, is that essentially uncaused contingently existing things do not have causes (whereas all essentially caused things do have causes). If we insist on talking the way that Anderson does, then what we need to say is something like this: cases in which *being* comes from *being* are essentially different from cases in which *being* comes from *non-being*. But, once we say this, we take away *any* force that attaches to Anderson's suggestion that, if we say that *being* can come from either *being* or *non-being*, then we are obliged to accept the contradictory claim that *being* is *non-being*.

Even setting the above considerations aside, it is not clear that we should agree with Anderson's claim that *being* and *non-being* are different on all points and in every respect (unlike *table* and *non-table*, which can both apply to *material objects*). As we noted earlier, at least *inter alia*, Anderson provides no theory of fictional objects. Should we say that *being* and *non-being* can both apply to ships (e.g. the Queen Mary and the Argonaut, respectively)? Should we say that *being* and *non-being* can both apply to people (e.g. John F. Kennedy and Slartybartfast, respectively)? If we should say these kinds of things, then we have good reason to reject Anderson's claim that *being* and *non-being* are different on all points and in every respect. And if we should not say these kinds of things, then we need to be told a lot more about the ways in which Anderson proposes to regiment the language in which his views are being proposed and defended.

Even if detailed examination did not point out the problematic nature of Anderson's 'program' and his attempt to undertake its 'first step', there are pretty strong independent reasons for being sceptical about the prospects of defending the claim that unbelief is inexcusable (in the sense in which Anderson supposes it to be). Anderson is at pains to emphasise that 'all humans' who fail to believe that God exists and conforms to the details of the general revelation prescribed by 'Historical Christianity' are inexcusable. (See, e.g., 4, 8, 10, 11, and 24.) Moreover, as we noted above, Anderson thinks that 'all humans' who wish to make sense of the world need to be able to discover and follow the arguments that prove that God exists and conforms to the details of the general revelation prescribed by 'Historical Christianity' (124). However, given these two constraints, there are obvious difficulties that arise. On the one hand, given that Anderson insists that he cannot be satisfied with 'a sound proof that is extremely difficult to understand and that is knowable by only a few' (123), it seems clear that his 'program' is bound to fail: for surely it is London to a brick that, if his 'program' could be successfully carried out, it would yield a proof that is 'extremely difficult to understand and knowable only by a few'. (Certainly, as things now stand, what he says in Chapter 8 is very hard to follow: *no one* could plausibly claim that he has given a 'clear' demonstration that it must be that something is eternal.) And, on the other hand, given that he is looking for a proof that will be accessible to 'all humans', it seems unlikely that any proof—no matter how simple—could meet that standard. For, surely, there are many human beings who are simply unable to comprehend any proofs. Consider those who die in infancy. Consider those who are born with hideous cognitive deformities, and who never learn to

communicate at all. Consider those who fall into unending comas in early childhood. Consider those who are simply not very bright, e.g. those whose mental age never progresses beyond that of a typical three year-old, or a typical six year-old, or a typical nine year-old. What sort of proof is going to be accessible to these human beings? How could anyone suppose that there is a general revelation of the existence and nature of God that is available to human beings that fall into these categories? And how could anyone suppose that a perfectly good, perfectly wise, and perfectly powerful God could make a world in which salvation is simply denied to human beings that fall into these and similar categories?

It seems to me to be a very hard saying to claim that the central truth of Christianity is that unbelief is inexcusable. While it is understandable how a religion whose central claim is that we are all loved by our Creator—and that we are all destined to spend eternity in His embrace, having been forgiven for the many wrongs that we have done—has widespread appeal, I cannot see how a religion whose central claim is that unbelief is inexcusable could gain widespread assent. I think that the fact that there are so many people who claim to be Christians is overwhelmingly strong evidence that Anderson's "Historic Christianity" is not widely held. But, even if this were not so, it would remain that Anderson's book does nothing to add credence to "Historic Christianity"; on the contrary, a careful reading of the book—along with the noting of the various difficulties that I have mentioned above, and the noting of many further difficulties that I am not able to discuss here—simply reinforces the conviction that his claims about inexcusability and redemption cannot possibly be correct.