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LEIBNIZ ON GOD AND RELIGION: A READER. By Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Translated and edited by Lloyd Strickland. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. Pp. xiii+350. Hard Cover $114, ISBN: 978-1-472-58061-0; Paper $29.95, ISBN: 978-1-472-58062-7.

Lloyd Strickland has already made significant contributions to Leibniz scholarship through online and print translations of many short Leibniz texts, and through his translation of the correspondence with Electress Sophie and her daughter, Queen Sophie Charlotte. He now offers a very helpful volume of translations drawn from Leibniz’s work on religion and philosophical theology. This new volume would be suitable for an advanced seminar on Leibniz, or as a source of fresh readings for a historically oriented course on the philosophy of religion. It is also a valuable companion to those reading Maria Rosa Antognazza’s *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation: Reason and Revelation in the Seventeenth Century* (2007), Irena Backus’s *Leibniz: Protestant Theologian* (2016), and Claire Rösler-Le Van’s 1172–page French commentary and translation of letters and papers related to Leibniz’s ecumenical correspondence with Daniel Ernst Jablonski, a bishop of the Unity of the Brethren (2013). There is now abundant material available to stimulate a reconsideration of Leibniz as a theologically engaged philosopher and even as a theologian.

Strickland offers more than 300 pages of translations drawn from 70 texts, some complete and others with less philosophically relevant material left out. Though complete translations would have been helpful or at least interesting, the abridgement enabled Strickland to sample more widely. Individual texts are given titles to make the table of contents more useful, and the reader is directed to the manuscript and transcription sources. Helpful introductory comments and annotations point the reader to a range of controversies, works, and personalities that are now obscure but would have been familiar to Leibniz and his contemporaries. The footnotes provide phrases and whole paragraphs that Leibniz deleted; Leibniz’s preliminary drafts are also included when these are available. On the whole, the collection is helpfully transparent to the considerable editorial difficulties presented by Leibniz’s manuscripts.

Faced with the choice of topical or chronological organization, Strickland chose both. The texts are arranged chronologically within eleven distinct topics: The *Catholic Demonstrations*; The Existence and Nature of God; Reason and Faith; Ethics and the Love of God; The Bible; Miracles and Mysteries; The Churches and their Doctrines; Grace and Predestination; Sin, Evil and Theodicy; The Afterlife; and Non-Christian Religions. These divisions do not always reflect basic divisions in Leibniz’s own thought, and the arrangement creates the misleading impression that divergences among works may be explained by sorting works into topics. For example, Leibniz seems to express contradictory views about the Eucharist in passages that appear under separate topics—but Leibniz’s defense of transubstantiation under “The *Catholic Demonstrations*” (35–42) should not be reconciled with his claim that “a host is not God” under the “Churches and their Doctrines” (226) simply by classing the former and not the later among *Catholic* demonstrations. This would miss a viable interpretation of the second passage, on which Leibniz still aimed to defend transubstantiation, this time by rejecting a pious inclination to adore the created accidents that persist in the host. Although the topical divisions erect artificial barriers within Leibniz’s thought, it is admittedly hard to think of a better arrangement, and Strickland himself is careful not to present his organizational scheme as an interpretive key.

The broad range of topics also creates a false impression of completeness, but this is inevitable given the sheer volume and variety of Leibniz’s work on God, revelation, sacred history, and the Churches. As Strickland notes (13), much has been left out, including the hundred-page *Examination of the Christian Religion* of 1686, which occasioned a controversy in the 19th Century over Leibniz’s apparent embrace of the Catholic Church (10n47). Most importantly, Strickland leaves out Leibniz’s writings on church reunion. This is a reasonable omission, because Backus’s volume includes many original translations on that topic and Rösler-Le Van’s contains over 600 pages of material drawn from Leibniz’s effort to reconcile the evangelical and reformed churches in Hanover and Berlin.

Strickland also provides a general introduction, in which he argues that Leibniz’s orientation toward religion was predominantly practical and political. The final sentences read: “Perhaps, then, Leibniz’s most deeply held belief was not in this or that religious creed or doctrine, but in what religion could and should be, namely a force for good, bringing people together and enriching their lives. To that ideal, at least, Leibniz’s commitment was certain, and unwavering (10–11).” Strickland returns to this ideal later to suggest a reason why Leibniz keeps defending Catholic dogma: “Leibniz is concerned above all to show that the dogmas of the Catholic Church are in harmony with reason, perhaps in an effort to lay solid metaphysical foundations for the reunion of the Churches (70, cf. 61).” According to Strickland’s suggestion, Leibniz may value religion primarily for its potential to improve relations among human beings, and only secondarily, if at all, for its potential to put us in right relation with God.

Although even Leibniz’s contemporaries had difficulty making out his religious commitments (cf. 10n45) and although Leibniz was genuinely concerned with the practical import of religion, I do not think this is an accurate or well-grounded characterization of Leibniz’s most deeply held beliefs about religion. Rather, Leibniz holds that “our perfection consists in the knowledge and the love of God” and that “we are advanced in perfection to the extent that we penetrate eternal truths (89).” Moreover, “we should demonstrate the supreme love we bear toward God through the charity we owe to our neighbor (135).” On this view, whatever power religion has to benefit us and to draw us together in salutary ways would derive from religion’s power to foster knowledge and love of God. The truth of this or that religious creed or doctrine would be of first importance if our perfection consists in knowledge of God, and when the love of God is demonstrated in a desire for religious unity, it would be a desire to share knowledge of God, not a desire for consensus itself.

Strickland could reply: what Leibniz meant by “the knowledge and the love of God” is universally available to rational creatures and not dependent on the authority or practices of any particular religious community. Leibniz seems to support this reply when he expresses a hope for the ultimate perfection of “those who have not known Jesus Christ (320)” and when he suggests that “one can be saved through the sincere love of God above all things, whatever communion one belongs to (154).” If this is correct, then the Churches would be justified on horizontal grounds and the point of religious unity would just be political.

But salvation outside of any particular church can be defended by affirming our weakness just as well as by affirming our strength. Perhaps our natural, rational capacities are inadequate to penetrate eternal truths and even a divinely established church that teaches these eternal truths is not sufficient to guarantee that all who would believe actually do. Perhaps, then, divine justice makes two concessions for our weakness, first by establishing a church to teach eternal truths and second by extending hope even to those who do not accept that church. Crucially, Leibniz appeals to God’s justice and not to our natural powers when defending these hopes (320), and so his position may affirm rather than undercut the vertically oriented self-understanding of most Churches. As Leibniz writes, “Christ has revealed to us some divine doctrines which reason cannot discern (211, cf. 223).” Even if God makes up for our failure to receive that revelation, it would still be incumbent on us to at least search for truth, true authority, and true piety among the competing claims and practices of the several Churches.

It is a testament to Strickland’s scholarship that an argument against his own interpretation may develop, at least initially, from texts he has made readily available. *Leibniz on God and Religion* is an important resource for Leibniz scholars and for all who share Leibniz’s interests and concerns.

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