A RESPONSE TO JAN PLATVOET

MARTIN PROZESKY

Jan Platvoet’s review article “Programmatic statements from Africa, 1982-1992” is a welcome contribution to the critical discussion of some of the work done over the last decade in the academic study of religion by scholars in Africa. As one of the three scholars whose work he selected for detailed attention, I am also personally gratified by his interest, not least because he ends by commending what he calls my “audacity to develop an all-encompassing, revolutionary argument” in my book Religion and Ultimate Well-being: An Explanatory Theory (London: Macmillan, and New York: St Martin’s Press, 1984). However, in some important respects Platvoet’s interpretation of the book is significantly at variance with what I intended to convey, so I am responding to his own suggestion to reply to his review article in the pages of NUMEN. I shall do so firstly by means of a brief summary of what I regard as the essential proposals contained in my book, and then by contesting what I regard as some problematic portrayals by Platvoet.

My theory holds that all religions are the product of human creativity alone, activated in response to unseen but, so far as I am concerned, wholly natural forces in the cosmos, in quest of supreme or ultimate well-being. While this is the theme of the entire book, it is also concisely summarized near the end in two places (pp. 228 and 234), and is therefore, I would have thought, clear and prominent enough to indicate my intentions, but perhaps this is not so for some readers.

Whether or not any spiritual entities of the kind believed in by the faithful exist or not, is not a question that can be settled by the phenomenological method. Therefore the book neither accepts nor rejects the believer’s contention that such entities in fact exist. To maintain neutrality on this matter, I therefore used the terms “powers” and “forces” for the supposed spiritual entities invoked by believers, defining these terms as anything that produces an experienceable effect. All of this is made clear, I think, in various places throughout the book; see for example pp. 12, 13, 52, 97, 100, 101 etc. I thus consider that my theory, in this respect if not also in all others, maintains precisely the kind of scholarly neutrality extolled by Platvoet.

To have left matters there in the book struck me, however, as being too inconclusive. Therefore I proposed that—while still leaving the
metaphysical question of the existence or otherwise of alleged spiritual entities open—we should see to what extent the facts of religion could be explained by using as proposed causes only such factors as fall within ordinary, natural experience, and my conclusion is that religion can in fact be so explained. (See pp. 96-7, 156-7, 162, 174, 176, 191, 209). I called this approach an experiment in open-ended empiricism (p. 97). In short, I argued in that book that religion in all its forms is the product of nature alone, though I recognize that this conclusion is not itself tantamount to an endorsement of materialism (or whatever else we might call a world-view which rejects as false the belief that there are spiritual realities distinct in some way from physical existence).

With these points in mind I turn now to Platvoet's account of the book, where there are several main misunderstandings and a set of lesser ones. A wrong emphasis appears virtually at the beginning where Platvoet calls the book an exercise in religious and philosophical anthropology, quoting my own words out of context and omitting an important qualification of them. The word "religious" here no more means personal religious involvement than it does in the term "religious studies" as the name of an academic discipline, contrary to the interpretation Platvoet places on the book. And in addition to its focus on philosophical anthropology in relation to humanity's religious interests, the book is also an exercise in philosophical cosmology.

The most important of the main misunderstandings in Platvoet's article concerns his interpretation of the cosmological factor which I argue to be a necessary causal condition for the rise of religion, comprising the cluster of mostly unseen powers or forces at work in the cosmos and affecting humanity for good and ill in often unpredictable ways. As I explained above, my theory of religion holds that what we today would call purely natural cosmological forces which surpass all human resources (and are thus purely natural instances of transcendence), are enough to evoke the rise and diversification of religion among human beings, given also certain natural features of our human make-up plus contextual variation. Platvoet sees here a confusion of natural and supernatural forces. He thinks I fuse (and confuse) "empirical methodology with transempirical religionism" and end up with a philosophical theology which cannot be the empirical explanation of religion it sets out to be. Now I can accept that there are passages whose neutrality of expression, or whose ambiguity, might have given him this notion, but, as I have already demonstrated, the book has ample instances of what I would say are perfectly clear statements showing that I consider natural or mundane causes to be enough to explain religion. Here is just one example, in