Hugh Rock


Hugh Rock has written an ambitious, wide-ranging and scholarly book: intricately “plotted” and passionately expressed, it is a theological “page-turner” that keeps the reader guessing as the “new vision of God” is progressively unveiled right up to the final chapter.

The familiar premise is that an original, radical Christianity has been disastrously overlain with an alien philosophical framework of Platonism. Rock, however, extends the notion of “Platonism” to embrace many theological traditions that have not normally been so designated, such as mysticism and liberalism. Chapters 1 and 2 recount how Platonism and biblical religion were incompatible, but the Church Fathers supposedly united them to produce “Christianity”. Whereas Rock’s “house of the Platonists” offers a detailed exposition of the antecedents and substance of Platonism, his “house of the Christians” is his own rather selective view, placing “apocalyptic” (eschatology) centre stage in what distinguishes the Christian religion, somewhat in the manner of Schweitzer.

Rock argues that Plato’s ideal “forms” are not a logical necessity following from the existence of real things, but an attempt to solve the riddle of why things as we experience them in this world are not perfect, and that this is also the purpose of the idea of the Apocalypse. The difference is that in Platonic thinking, the “perfect” is a reality existing behind the veil of the material world, whereas in Christianity the “perfect” is yet to come, the ultimate destination of history. These are alternative ways of solving “the Existence Mystery” (p. 106), but the routes that lead to forms of “Nature God” have been dominant, as in such disparate traditions as Deism, Romanticism and Mysticism. Platonic Christianity leads to a two-tier system: God is only accessible to the sophisticated (pp. 126–127).
In the ensuing chapters, Rock steadily reduces the space in which the “new vision of God” might be fashioned. The mystics and “Jesusologists” of chapters 3 and 4 are seen as no more than variants on the Platonic, focusing on religious experience, or an idealized humanistic Jesus, as a basis for a secular/politicised theology. In Chapter 5, the five “problems” of liberalism (“Ecumenical Imperialism” or the “all religions are basically the same” tradition; Ethics; Authority; Esoteric Elitism; and “Protestant Trauma”, or the kind of God Cupitt took leave of) sum up Rock’s rejection of the modernistic, neo-Platonic, nature God option. I think he is wrong about Schleiermacher, already rejected in the “Introduction” (pp. 12 ff.): he is after all the father not only of liberal but also of practical theology, an approach more useful for Rock’s reconstructive task than he seems to allow.

In chapter 6 he argues that the sociology of religion cannot help, because it works within the paradigm of liberal theology’s “Platonic” view of God as “a supernatural or spiritual being” (p. 195; a critique initially set out in the “Introduction” on pp. 32 ff.). However, his model for the sociology of religion is overwhelmingly Durkheimian: the treatment conspicuously lacks any reference to Max Weber or David Martin. Consequently, his charge that “sociology has adopted a perfectly unsociological definition of religion” (p. 196) cannot hold. It covers only those sociologists who insist that religion equals belief in supernatural beings, or some such; so, he can easily dispatch Steve Bruce, but sorely misrepresents Grace Davie (pp. 200–202). He says, “sociology must be prepared to engage theology closely”, but does not acknowledge that such figures as Martin, Peter Berger and Robin Gill have done precisely that.

In beginning to disclose his own position, Rock sides with a functionalist over a substantive definition of religion (favouring its “purpose” over its “operating program”, p. 218): “I want to define religion by its purpose” (p. 220), “the moral purpose of caring for others” (p. 217). The quote from Macmurray on pp. 224–225 does not quite seem to prove what Rock wants it to: Macmurray is “convinced that religion has its own reality” [emphasis mine], whereas Rock’s view of religion equalling its purpose appears to be epiphenomenal. On p. 227 he writes that “the purpose of religion is the exercise of the ideal potential of human relationships”, a more substantive definition but one in which the little word “ideal” seems to smuggle in a hint of his despised “Platonism”.

The “new vision of God” is further revealed in chapter 8, introducing the concept of psychosymbiosis (p. 244): “the creative power of all persons in relation to each other”. Here Rock “comes out” as a Durkheimian theologian: “I want to propose that it is this power that is the social reality represented by religion” (p. 253). But straight away he qualifies it as the “ideal potential and ideal workings of this power” [emphasis in original]. But where does this “ideal” come