

Kind Truth

Winifred Wing Han Lamb, (2005), *Living Truth & Truthful Living: Christian Faith and the Scalpel of Suspicion* (Adelaide: ATF Press).

Dr Winifred Lamb approaches the task of apologetics unapologetically. Fully conversant with twentieth century atheism, as well as postmodernism, she clearly analyses three major critiques of the Christian Faith and finds them lacking. Unlike the analytic philosophers on one hand, or those that accuse Christians of bad faith on the other, Lamb does not resort to nastiness to shore up her arguments. She not only promotes dialogue but exemplifies it. Lamb answers some contemporary critics of the Christian by turning their criticisms back upon themselves.

Lamb's writing is scintillatingly clear and refreshingly easy to read; her book has helpful signposting so that the reader always knows what is going on. See for example the paragraph on page 192. Somewhere near the middle of Chapter Three I became irritated by the cryptic subtitles with their many ellipses and there are a few typos. The introduction clearly tells the reader what will happen during the course of the book and Chapter One's only surprise was how easy it was to read, given the subject matter. The matter of language and its inadequacy for communicating religious truth is examined and affirmed but there is no hostile defence of any hard-line position.

Lamb considers truthful lives to be more important than true propositions; she proposes that we conceive of believers themselves as the best arguments against the suspicion generated by the critiques she addresses. She gives several criteria, which

can be attached to character, for evaluating religious convictions (p. 45). There are three traits associated with corrupt interiority: self enclosure, self loathing and self deception. Lamb concedes that Nietzsche has a point; there are some Christians who exhibit these traits. Lamb goes on to show, however, that these traits afflict all human beings but Christians have a way to transform their inner lives. In response to Nietzsche's inadequate account of Christian interiority, Lamb describes a healthy Christian interiority (p. 92). She cites four effects of grace which would address Nietzsche's critique: inner freedom, self-acceptance, affirmation of life and truthfulness. Part of what Christians mean by grace is that God loves us in full knowledge of our sin (p. 97); our self-righteousness counts for nothing where God is concerned. Lamb takes the lesson from Nietzsche that self-regard and self love are the necessary and robust foundations for other-regarding forms of love (p. 95). Christian wholeness is illuminated by integration (which requires a dialogical formation of the self) coherence (wholeness can be viewed in terms of the 'task' of integration which achieves the state of coherence) and continuity (p. 265). Lamb argues for the plausibility of the Christian faith:

[T]he argument for the plausibility of Christian faith thus aims to demonstrate that Christian faith is real, not because God can be shown to be an empirical reality, but because what faith says about itself is verified by certain states of affairs, viz. the lives of individuals and communities which make plausible the truth which they profess, not only because they are sincere, but because the nature of their lives points beyond themselves to transcendent reality (p. 246).

Lamb writes about forms of life which believers 'indwell'; drawing attention to the continuity between the social and intellectual space in which people live and people's inner reality. (p. 249)

The first of the major critiques of Christianity that Lamb addresses is Nietzsche's representation of Christian piety as a form of corrupt interiority (p. 57). For Nietzsche, the impossibility of altruism establishes the impossibility of faith (p. 72). Lamb makes an insightful and more than plausible comparison between Nietzsche's slave mentality and pharisaism (p. 84). Nietzsche would disagree but Lamb is convincing. She shows that the traits of 'Christians', that Nietzsche so deplores, are described in the New Testament but there they are attributed to the Pharisees.

After disposing of Nietzsche's critique, Lamb addresses the postmodern critique of metanarratives. Christianity is understood by some to be one such metanarrative; such a metanarrative, while it purports to be about truth, is really about power. Lamb claims that Christianity is more complicated than that. She unmask the philosophical assumptions behind this critique then gives a specifically Christian answer (p. 101). Lamb questions the postmodern assumption that in a contest of deconstruction of religious metanarratives religion always comes out worse off than postmodern theories (p. 105). She shows that when we ask "Is Christianity a metanarrative in the postmodern sense?" we come up against the presuppositions and slippages in the postmodern concept of oppressive metanarrative (p. 118)), which is itself totalizing and dismissive (p. 121). Within Christianity we find the resources to resist Christianity being used as a metanarrative; there is especially no place for complacency within Christianity itself, however it may look from the outside (p. 134).

Lamb is particularly skillful at providing brief lessons in background knowledge for her readers. For example, she gives a lucid summary of the enlightenment or modern position of reason; she sees this as a particular master narrative which postmodernists assume that Christianity takes on board (p. 109). Lamb also gives a very good potted history of Christian fundamentalism from its intellectual birthplace at Princeton. Most Christian fundamentalists would be unaware of this history (p. 197). ‘[T]he ‘historylessness’ [of fundamentalism] contributes to its epistemic arrogance and cuts it off from the resources available within history for faithful engagement with the world’ (p. 234). In considering why it is that fundamentalism is inherently non-dialogical, Lamb explains fundamentalist doctrine sympathetically while firmly and kindly refuting it (p. 217). On page 250 she gives a very nice summary of the main analytical approaches to truth.

Whether Christianity can engage in true dialogue is the third critique to be addressed by Lamb. Many, including Lamb’s friend Chris Falzon, claim that Christianity, because it starts from a position of epistemic closure, precludes true dialogue. In contrast, Lamb claims that the interior qualities that are required for true dialogue are central to Christian interiority: “trust, care, resilience, humility and hope” (p. 156). Falzon assumes that the question, “Is there a necessary connection between transcendent theological belief and epistemic closure?” has an affirmative answer. Lamb refutes this assumption (p. 157). According to Falzon, transcendent beliefs are “of necessity dogmatic and stand in the way of critical reflection and dialogue” (p. 162). While Falzon claims that his position is non-normative, Lamb unmaskes the assumption of historical neutrality behind his position (p. 164). Lamb draws our attention to some strange anomalies in the postmodern position: for example, Falzon

holds that Hegelian metaphysics is antithetical to dialogue and Kierkegaard finds Hegelian thinking inimical to Christian faith but Falzon aligns Hegelian metaphysics with Christianity while Kierkegaard opposes it to Christianity (p. 172). Lamb has found some interesting examples of Christian thinking that are counter examples to Falzon's claims, for example, S. T. Coleridge's love of truth and Lesslie Newbigin's openness to the other. For Christians 'knowing is an unavoidable act of responsibility' (p. 181).

Lamb draws an analogy between a fundamentalist belief in the inerrancy of scripture and the representational/expressivist theories of language. Language can only represent a 'real' thing; otherwise it can only express subjective positions (p. 204). In regards to political philosophy, Lamb suggests that 'thick' 'religious' positions can contribute beneficially to public life rather than be automatically precluded because they don't match the kind of 'thin' ethical position advocated for the public space by Rawlsian theories' (p. 171). Lamb characterizes a dialogue between philosophy and theology; philosophy wants to give a 'real account' of human religious sentiment; theology is involved in philosophical unmasking of the agenda of philosophers (p. 48). Lamb contrasts analytic philosophy's preoccupation with the truthfulness of propositions with the Christian's vision of the truthfulness of human lives. She develops this idea to an account of truth as faithfulness, as in 'true to' something. Lamb employs the phrase 'continuity of realities' to resist the urge to bifurcate human experience into objective and subjective. She sees integrity as grounded and continuous with reality (p. 245). The notion of faithfulness is used to dissolve the unhelpful dichotomy between objective and subjective (p. 253). Lamb concludes her book with reference to hope:

The temporally active idea of ‘continuity’ thus reflects the work of the self as it embraces hope in the midst of the discontinuity and contradiction of our lives (p. 266).

After addressing the three critiques, Lamb looks inside Christianity at Christian fundamentalists. She claims that all fundamentalists, not only Christian ones, have three faults: self-deception, terror of metanarrative and epistemic closure (p. 186). She also calls into question the convenient correlation of “well being” and ‘right’ that is so prevalent in evangelical fundamentalism (p. 220). ‘The fundamentalist mindset presents itself as a totalizing metanarrative and a ‘comfortable’ view to be unmasked’ (p. 222). Although she unmasks fundamentalism, Lamb does not ally herself with the virulent critics of fundamentalism who come in for a similar unmasking. Both fundamentalists and their virulent opponents deny human continuity and the ever present way in which our thoughts are scaffolded in just the same way.

Overall, this is a very readable and intelligent apologetic for Christian faith, suitable for senior High School Students as well as for use by more serious practitioners of theology.

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