



## Religious Doubt in New Zealand

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Jim Thornton, *Reason at Work: Philosophical Papers*, Diamond Harbour Press, 40 Ames St., Paekakariki 5034, New Zealand, 2020, ISBN 978–0-473-47,180-4, 202 pp.

Jim Wilson, *Journey to the Centre of my Being*, Zen Publications, 60 Juhu Supreme Shopping Centre, Gulmohar Cross Road, No.9, JVPD Scheme, Juhu, Mumbai 400 049, India, 2019, ISBN 978–93-87,242–64-7, 216 pp.

The following two reviews are of books written by members of the Department of Religious Studies of the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand: ‘We want Out!’ The first text is the late Jim Thornton’s *Reason at Work: Philosophical Papers*. Thornton, an Anglican Priest, reasoned his way out of Christianity, so reversing the Roman Church’s, ‘Reason is the *ancilla* of theology’! His first essay, ‘Can the Moral Point of View be Justified?’, is neatly argued and with Oxbridge clarity. He writes:

“Why should I be moral?” or “Why should I be just?” or “What is the ultimate justification of morals?” These are all variations of one theme and all of them, I believe, are equally suspicious ...

Thornton’s thesis is – in part –

...the question “Why should I do what is right when it is not in my interest to do so?” is logically impossible to answer –

Given that Thornton recognizes only two elements, *the moral* and *self interest*,

– and is merely a pseudo question. (p.13).

The reductionism, in which ‘hot’ questions are relegated to the – vast – class of *pseudo questions*, is Thornton’s typical philosophical move. He makes it often and very neatly.

Later, in an extended argument, Thornton writes:

...it seems likely that both Baier and Mrs. Foot were prevented from seeing that they were attempting the logically impossible principally because they

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both repeatedly confuse the task of justifying *particular* moral acts, with the very different task of justifying the *general* institution of morality. (p.13, *Italic added*)

Thornton asserts that Baier and Foot are attempting to answer a *pseudo* question. He leaves Baier and Foot with the task of attempting the – formidable – arithmetical task of adding: particular moral act (a) to particular moral act (b), all down the Roman and Greek alphabets, to produce a *sum total* which may – or may not – cash out as *general*. ‘ST=G’?

Thornton is very good at this kind of move, and I strongly recommend philosophers to read his book and see how it can work – or not – in the dozen other essays in *Reason at Work*.

Given Thornton’s formidable Reductionism I recommend his second essay, ‘Religious Belief and Reductionism’; when is an analysis of religious belief a ‘reductionist analysis’?

In a Postscript (p.38), Thornton takes *Sophia* to task for including an article of his ‘in print, littered with errors’: He also remarks that when Richard Hare was attending a conference, Thornton was inclined to withdraw his own paper. Having sat through Hare’s lectures in my two years at Oxford, I saw him slowly painting himself into a corner. Hearing him in Cambridge many years later I could see the floor-paint on his boots. Thornton could have held his own against the Oxford man – easily. He was falsely modest.

*Journey to the Centre of my Being* by Jim Wilson is a religious autobiography, with a Foreword by Lloyd Geering, New Zealand’s most notable Presbyterian thinker. Wilson is the son of a very liberal Presbyterian father in whose footsteps he might have followed, but although not an analytic philosopher like Thornton, he nevertheless doubted the Christian standard story. Not without first embracing it (pp.7 ff).

In his days as a believer he had ‘...some small dark void at the center of my being, not gone, never forgotten completely, but quiescent, biding its time.’ (p.7). His Christianity was disturbed by its central doctrine, the Atonement. Protestants and Roman Catholics take it for granted because of its very centrality. Some Catholics take it as a mystery of Faith: Beyond rationalization, *pace* St. Thomas Aquinas. (*cf.* p.10). Jim Wilson, taking a venture, a fellowship at Banaras Hindu University, found his spiritual home. In Philosophy at the University in Christchurch he had encountered Arthur Prior – the world famous logician, and sometime intending Minister of the Kirk – and Jim Thornton. Both left their faith behind: as would Wilson (pp.14–15). Wilson struggled with the arguments for the existence of God, and judged them wanting (pp.17 ff). The ‘problem of evil’ he found insoluble (p.31). In India Wilson achieved his spiritual satisfaction. There is no way in which to sum up or paraphrase Wilson’s genial anecdotes about his filling his ‘small dark void’ with the physical monism of Shankara. Far from the Manse, indeed (Chapter 23).

In Thornton’s *Reason at Work* he sums up the impossibility of the resolution of *self interest* and *the moral*: ‘...if anything is going to function as an ultimate reason it will have to be something which everyone wants most of all.’ (p.15). In the heyday of Christianity, that was, Salvation. In ‘the Orient’ it remains a cessation of

the cycle of rebirth. Philosophy of itself can guarantee neither. Professor Emeritus Bob Stoothoff, erstwhile Head of Philosophy and Religious Studies Department in Christchurch, who sent me the Thornton and Wilson books, now tends a garden.

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