Introduction

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There is a familiar conceptual slope down which philosophers of a certain temper slide when they come to the analysis of religion, and perhaps they do so on purpose, because we like to bring the discussion round to what we can talk about, and if we are sufficiently dominant we become the ones who define what it is proper to say, though the consequence be the stilling of other voices, who may have spoken with understanding.

The philosopher slides from 'religion' to 'religious belief' and from that to 'belief in God', and the latter becomes, imperceptibly, 'belief in the existence of God', so that philosophical reflection about religion is transformed without a pause into reflection on the existence of God, and questions about the rationality of belief, the validity of the proofs, and the coherence of the divine attributes cannot be far behind. It would be absurd to deny the historical importance of natural theology, but there is an established, though slippery, methodology that causes the slide, one that connects natural theology to a certain picture of the procedures that render religious engagement rational or otherwise. The issue, however, is whether such preoccupations should remain central to the philosophy of religion, and, if not, what should replace them.

I

The silent assimilation of questions about 'religion' to questions about '*belief in the existence of God*' has already by-passed the Buddhist tradition, which is, in many of its phases, 'non-theistic'. Whether there is anything that corresponds there to '*religious belief*' depends on how we construe that term. Certainly it cannot be assimilated to '*belief in the existence of God*', or even '*belief in God*', though it may in some points be analogous to the latter if we take 'belief in God' as something like Abrahamic faith, the theological virtue, which, in terms of the tradition to which it belongs, is a *grounded* confidence in the Word. If, for the Buddhist, the impulsion to meditational practice and the re-formation of life arises out of a felt unsatisfactoriness, the first touch of an emergent consciousness, then *śraddhā*, translatable perhaps as 'faith' or 'confidence', develops *pari passu* with the confirmation of particular Dharmic claims, internal to the practice, claims which, it is insisted, are

to be tested, and not merely received or made the object of a 'commitment'. The analogy, if there is one, is with Abrahamic faith, a venture based on a grounded confidence in God's word, and so not assimilable to 'belief in the existence of God'. As Professor Anscombe has made clear (Delaney, 1979, p. 141), 'belief in God' is *believing God*, and the sorts of reason it might be proper to adduce for the latter are hardly the same as those for 'believing in the existence of God', a troublesome expression: philosophers remain divided about this, but there is a tendency now to think that it is a mistake to suppose, as some of our sliding philosophers suppose, that there is something independent of, and prior to, 'belief in God', that the rational agent needs to establish first, viz., 'the existence of God'. Opinion differs thereafter. It may be claimed, for instance, that 'belief in the existence of God' cannot be prised apart from 'belief in God' on the grounds that coming to see that there is a God is *constituted* by recognition and acknowledgment, an immediacy of presence and personal relation, so that there is no separate limbo of bare existential belief. An alternative option is a form of fideism, not of the alleged Wittgensteinian sort. Faith, the theological virtue which waxes or wanes among 'believers', grounds a commitment to an enterprise. Ironically, the commitment aspect of faith has come in some quarters to be directed towards this 'belief in the existence of God', which becomes, though, the object of a *bare* commitment. Thus the assimilation of 'belief in God' to 'belief in the existence of God', the transposition of language appropriate to one context to a radically different one, is apparent in the following passage from Alvin Plantinga:

> . . . the mature theist . . . does not typically accept belief in God tentatively, or hypothetically, . . . (n) or . . . does he accept it as a conclusion from other things that he believes . . . The mature theist *commits* himself to belief in God; this means that he accepts belief in God as basic. (Delaney, 1979, p. 27)

This passage fuses the commitment that manifests faith in the sense of 'believing in God', an attitude of the believer to God, with the supposed attitude of the same believer to the *existence* of God. But whereas the 'belief in God' expressed in a commitment to a venture has religious or spiritual grounds *internal* to a particular tradition, such a commitment, when its object becomes 'belief in the existence of God' *has no grounds*. That is not *necessarily* an objection in itself: but it marks a shift, a difference. In any event, if it *were* a matter of commitment, it would be possible to withdraw from it: but in that case we are not talking about the *foundations* of a person's 'noetic structure', as Plantinga expresses it: the latter is the background against which a commitment is made, not its object. It is one thing, say, to commit oneself to a process of

regeneration, acting in the faith that out of death comes life, and quite another to commit oneself to a 'noetic structure', and another still, if it means anything at all, to *commit oneself to believing God*, since believing God is presumably a movement of the heart out of which commitment grows.

This Plantingan fideism is, then, one response to the conception favoured by the philosopher with whom we began. According to this view, the rationality of Abraham's venture of the spirit depends upon establishing a 'real existence': God's. Such a philosopher may readily concede that though it is at least rare to found one's faith on those metaphysical proofs that are, as Pascal said, so remote from our reasonings, it does not follow that the existential propositions implicit in faith cannot be shown to be false, unfounded or incoherent, thus subverting the enterprise of faith for those already engaged.

But it may be a mistake to think in terms of *belief* in the *existence* of God at all, though to say so may lead to charges, not just of fideism, but also of anti-realism and reductionism. How could it be a mistake? One approach might be to say that questions of existence are not so much inappropriate as construed on the wrong model, a model alien to but superimposed upon the real logic of religious discourse. Abrahamic faith, whether construed grossly or subtly, is not dependent upon prior rational deliberation about real existence, nor upon a commitment to a belief-system, and nor is it necessarily undermined by the probing of the culturally received cosmology in which it was originally embedded, though such probing may deeply affect its form. It is a culturally specific form of 'spirituality', formed by as well as shaping the transformations of the local conceptual background which determines the forms which a 'spiritual awakening' may take. Such a claim does not imply that different spiritual traditions are all 'saying the same thing'. Nor does it rule out that such awakenings are to real existence, accessible only to those whose spirit is not sealed by a slumber.

Everything then turns on what may be said to answer to the description 'a spiritual awakening', what such an event may be said to discover, and who is in a position to assess such 'discoveries'. If a new focus of discussion is to emerge in the philosophy of religion, it may be necessary to displace, not just the familiar manoeuvres around 'belief in the existence of God', but the very idea of *belief* as its central concern: (we are not interested in what people *believe*, but in what *insights* are manifested in their lives). This is not a proposal in support of a kind of spiritual non-cognitivism, or a 'religion without doctrines', however, but, on the contrary, a proposal in support of a vision of philosophy as the articulation, the intellectual mapping, of the epistemic inquiry which is an essential strand in the also conative and affective trajectory of the 'spiritual life', a tracking of its transformations and discoveries, in

a way which seeks to retrieve the *application* of religious language. To put it another way, displacing belief puts the focus on knowledge, understanding and action. In the Buddhist tradition it is said that one who is 'concentrated' sees things as they really are. Aquinas talks of knowledge of God being a gift of grace belonging only to the good. The point is not that these say the same (they clearly don't) but to inquire into the status of their difference. The suggestion is to establish what the conditions are under which we may come to see what kind of reality such talk attempts to reveal or express, *and what would show such talk to be deluded*. One issue here is whether anyone 'speaks with authority' in religious contexts, whether, through 'spiritual progress', if there is any such thing, a person may come to see the *point* of this or that image, offered by others who have gone before, and so move out of the hearing of those who now stand where they formerly did, but beckoning with the same or similar images. The reference to 'expression' is not 'anti-realist', though it is certainly incompatible with what might contestably be called theological naïve realism. On the other hand, an issue remains, if we stay alert to the greater availability of the Buddhist tradition, about whether we should be seeking to establish a sophisticated realism about God, or whether we should take God-language itself as a local imaging-forth, dependent upon cultural conditions, of what we cannot comprehend. Aquinas said that every way we have of thinking about God is a particular way of failing to understand him as he is in himself. But we might decide that thinking in terms of God at all is a particular form of the breakdown of language in the face of reality, and take refuge in the irony and conceptual modesty of references to dependent origination, an expression which teasingly conceals and unconceals the range and directions of its own applications.

The implication of all this is to see the spiritual life as the ground of concept-formation in religion. In an earlier volume in this series, on the philosophy of religion, Renford Bambrough was critically concerned with 'the main division between those who might be called the grammarians and those who still think of theology and religion as being concerned decisively, though not only, with the world or the universe or reality or how things are' (Brown, 1977, p. 14). But if the grammar had been cartographical, the work of explorers, the distinction would be illusory, though to establish whether it were or no, one would have to follow their tracks. A new form of the philosophy of religion, conceived in these terms, will certainly be exploratory, and, in these dark times, rudimentary. The question will be whether there is anything that the language of our cartographers, those in the stream of the spiritual life, really discloses or unconceals, and, as has been said, what the conditions may be under which their 'disclosures' are to be assessed: 'Phoe-

bus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was/a name for something that never could be named.'

So who says so, and who says not?

II

The present collection of fourteen essays derives from the 1991 Royal Institute of Philosophy conference at Liverpool. The Liverpool conference was conceived as an exploratory and interdisciplinary venture, exploratory because it represented an attempt to find and define new ground in the philosophy of religion, and interdisciplinary because it called in aid theologians and other thinkers about religion. It was conceived as an attempt to *start* discussion, as an opportunity for philosophers, theologians and other thinkers to *listen* to a common tradition, and to what each other had to say. Although this is not the place to seek to define differences between theological and philosophical inquiry, it is worth pointing out that the division of labour was by no means always clear cut, in part because many of the participants had some familiarity with what was going on in their neighbour discipline, and also because there were discernible trends on both sides, towards a religious naturalism in some instances, or towards an engagement with the same thinkers, especially perhaps, Plato and Augustine, rejecting or retrieving particular strands of their works. But the Liverpool conference was conceived as exploratory for another reason connected with the very idea of thinking about religion. The participants were invited to consider the relationships between 'Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life', and the invitation extended to reflection on their own experience, if they thought that appropriate. The point was to consider with particular emphasis the role of the 'spiritual life', and give sense to that notion, in relation to religion and in relation to philosophy. This was an attempt to move away decisively from the traditional models of natural theology as the main focus of the philosophy of religion, and to look again at the relations between language, experience and reality, not forgetting to be existing individuals, as Kierkegaard might have put it, and so writing within the discipline of one's own practice and degree of 'appropriation'. The necessity for the 'subjective appropriation' of what might be called 'spiritual truths' is well caught in the British theologian H. A. Williams' remark that 'theological inquiry is basically related to self-awareness and . . . therefore . . . involves a process of self-discovery so that whatever else theology is, it must in some sense be a theology of the self' (1972). This claim does not need to be confined narrowly to theology, of course, but captures something essential to the activity of thinking about religion at all, an activity which anyway draws to itself

the scrutiny of the ironist, and rightly so, since a thinker under such a discipline reveals their religious ignorance as well as insight, either in the very stuff of their writing or in the dissonance between their writing and their life, whether or not there is such a thing as religious ignorance or insight. There are other attendant dangers. H. A. Williams' comment needs some qualification if a particular misinterpretation is to be avoided: theological inquiry, or, if we may be more general, reflection on religion, is *related* to self-awareness and to the process of self-discovery, but that is not to say that its subject-matter can be *reduced* to it, and be reinterpreted in terms of human values, human truths, however important they are in their own right. Bambrough had made the point that theology and religion were concerned decisively, though not only, with how things are. We could say that they are also concerned, and equally decisively, with the status and the states of the self, and this for a particular reason connected with the relation between selfhood and reality: to claim that such inquiry is related to self-awareness certainly suggests that such awareness is yet to be established, but there is a further, entirely realist issue, whether the process of self-discovery, suitably understood, is a *condition* of genuinely religious thinking just because it is a condition for the apprehension of how things really are, and not just how they are with the self and its consequent transformations.

III

In the event a surprising diversity and congruence has emerged. There is a wide range of reference, with discussions of the pre-Socratics, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Jesus, the Gnostics, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Boethius, Kamalasila, Al-Ghazali, Aquinas, Gregory Palamas and the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, Tsong kha pa, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, James and Bradley, Heidegger, Lacan and Girard. As far as congruence is concerned, it made for some difficulty in arranging the papers, since there were many points of contact, even between papers apparently unrelated. There were some more or less natural pairs and clusters. For instance, Stephen Clark's re-reading of Descartes in the light of Augustine goes naturally with Sarah Coakley's discussion of Descartes' fourteenth century antecedents in the Christian tradition, but then there are discussions of Augustine in Rowan Williams, Janet Martin Soskice and others. John Haldane's paper on Boethius shares with Anthony O'Hear's an insistence on the importance of aesthetics; Janet Martin Soskice, James Mackey and Michael McGhee all write about ethics.

What follows is not intended to summarize the papers but only to underline the points of contact. Michael Weston's attempt to show that

Kierkegaard remains unsurpassed by later thinkers such as Heidegger seems especially suited to open a collection on philosophy, religion and the spiritual life just because Kierkegaard's work remains for our time a formative critique of the pretensions of the first, the corruptions of the second and the delusions of the third. The papers of John Haldane, Anthony O'Hear and Janet Martin Soskice come together, because not only do they each in different ways bring aesthetics to bear on the issues they discuss, but they all, perhaps because of that, share an insistence on the importance of particulars, over against Platonic universals and noumenal realms. Stephen Clark's paper and Sarah Coakley's are brought together for reasons already mentioned, but Timothy Sprigge's is included with them because he shares with Stephen Clark a decisive rejection of anti-realist tendencies in modern theology. On the other hand, there are points of contact between John Haldane's alertness to the *style* of Boethius and the ancient conception of philosophy as related to the attainment of wisdom or enlightenment (a conception implicit in Timothy Sprigge's Idealist position), and Stephen Clark's retrieval of the Stoics' conception of the role of the philosopher, as contrasted with the modern view of philosophy as a subject, with its unintended though real tendency to corrupt its students. It is worth relating this ancient conception of philosophy to Janet Martin Soskice's situated criticisms of the cultural effects of the notion of an 'unchanging wisdom'. By contrast Sarah Coakley draws attention to the poverty of a philosophy of religion which neglects the *complexity* of the spiritual traditions.

The papers of Ronald Hepburn, James Mackey, Fergus Kerr and Oliver Leaman provide the next sequence, since they could be seen to exemplify a particular line of development. Thus James Mackey responds in effect to Ronald Hepburn's scepticism in the face of recent theologizing about the role of the imagination in religious epistemology by an attempt to discover a meaningful use for the term 'God' through an analysis of the idea of moral obligation conceived, not legalistically, but, interestingly, in terms of a felt impulsion or *eros* that we find *within* us but which does not come *from* us. Fergus Kerr's exposition of Girard makes his work on scapegoating available and connects with James Mackey's revision of natural theology since he shows, though not in these terms, how it is precisely the embodiment of this *eros* in the person of Jesus that reveals the futility of the avoidable forces that bring about his death. Whereas Girard shows the possibility of the overcoming of social conflict, Oliver Leaman's account of the relations between ordinary believers, philosophers and mystics in the Islamic tradition describes a case of the actual management of potential conflict within a particular society.

Finally, the papers of Paul Williams, Rowan Williams and Michael McGhee complete the sequence, with points of contact around the Buddhist tradition and the nature of self-knowledge. Paul Williams seeks to make available a tradition which is largely unknown among western theologians and philosophers, though fairly generalized references to Buddhism are becoming more frequent. His discussion of the roots of unenlightenment in forms of self-grasping, the idea that particular forms of perception and associated behaviour are the product of fixed and deluded formations of the self connects with Rowan Williams' discussion of the history of self-knowledge and its distortions, in the twentieth century, in early Christianity, in psychotherapy, in 'spirituality', a discussion that has points of contact with most of the other contributions.

References

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Philosophy and Religion in the Thought of Kierkegaard

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Kierkegaard is often regarded as a precursor of existential philosophy whose religious concerns may, for philosophical purposes, be safely ignored or, at best, regarded as an unfortunate, if unavoidable, consequence of his complicity with the very metaphysics he did so much to discredit. Kierkegaard himself, however, foresaw this appropriation of his work by philosophy. 'The existing individual who forgets that he is an existing individual will become more and more absent-minded', he wrote, 'and as people sometimes embody the fruits of their leisure moments in books, so we may venture to expect as the fruits of his absent-mindedness the expected existential system—well, perhaps, not all of us, but only those who are as absent-minded as he is' (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 110). However, it may be rejoined here, this expectation merely shows Kierkegaard's historically unavoidable ignorance of the development of existential philosophy with its opposition to the idea of system and its emphasis upon the very existentiality of the human being. How could a form of thought which, in this way, puts at its centre the very Being of the existing individual, its existentiality, be accused of absent-mindedness? Has it not, rather, recollected that which metaphysics had forgotten? Yet the impression remains that Kierkegaard would not have been persuaded himself that such recollection could constitute remembering that one is an existing individual, for he remarks, of his own ignoring of the difference between Socrates and Plato in his *Philosophical Fragments*, 'By holding Socrates down to the proposition that all knowledge is recollection, he becomes a speculative philosopher instead of an existential thinker, for whom existence is the essential thing. The recollection principle belongs to speculative philosophy, and recollection is immanence, and speculatively and eternally there is no paradox' (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 184n). We must ask, therefore, whether the recollection of existentiality can cure an existential absent-mindedness or remains itself a form of immanence for which there is no paradox.

I

As this last quotation might suggest, for Kierkegaard, Plato and Hegel represent the beginning and culmination of a particular project of

human thought, metaphysics, which, in its claim to reveal the truth of human existence, represents a misunderstanding. This also suggests, of course, that since metaphysics is itself a human enterprise, it thereby misunderstands itself, where the misunderstanding will not be accountable in terms of a failure of metaphysical recollection. But what then is the nature of the latter, and why should it be characterized as 'immanence' for which there is no paradox'? And what indeed is this paradox? 'Our inquiry', says Plato in the *Republic*, 'concerns the greatest of all things, the good life and the bad life' (Plato, 1978, 578c). A man who lived the good life would be *eudaimon*, and *eudaimonia* constitutes the end for our lives: 'We don't need to ask for what end one wishes *eudaimonia*, when one does, for that answer seems final (*telos*)' (Plato, 1975a, 205a). Yet although such an end is, Socrates tells us, 'that which every soul pursues and for its sake does all that it does', we are 'baffled and unable to apprehend its nature adequately' having 'only an intuition (*apomanteuomenos*, announced by a prophet) of it' (Plato, 1978, 505d–e). The human being, unlike the animal, has a conception of his or her own life, that they have a life to live, and so is faced with the question as to what is the good life for themselves. Only in the light of this can they determine the value of different aspects of their lives. But in order to answer this individual question, they must first determine the nature of the good life itself. It is this which humans are unable adequately to apprehend and so remain equally uncertain as to what is the best life for them as individuals. The process of recollection is intended to remove this bafflement, and its nature is revealed in the so-called ascent of the soul in the *Symposium* (201d and following).

This progress is undergone by one who pursues 'beauty in form' and who progressively realizes the nature of the end he is directed towards through the experienced inadequacies of the proposed resolutions. The end proposed by our common bodily nature, physical well-being, is apprehended by the body merely sensuously, both changing with our disposition and lacking any conception of its end in terms of which we could unify our lives. That suggested by our socialized character, social excellence, *arete*, changes as the conventions and traditions of our *polis* or land do and lacks the capacity to say why these *nomoi* should be taken as the ground for the determination of the goal of the individual. The ends proposed by our capacity for knowledge as it reveals itself in the various *epistemai*, forms of knowledge, are multifarious and unable to justify their own primacy in relation to the end sought by human life. Yet such *epistemai* do embody self-conscious procedures of justification and are directed towards the production of truth which ultimately attains a form immune to refutation by contingencies in the timeless truth of arithmetic and geometry. But even here, although the end sought is unchangeable because timeless, such practices are unable to