Introduction

The four essays that are at the centre of this book are exercises in the philosophy of religion, that is the philosophical discussion of certain crucial issues that arise about the important but diffuse dimension, or realm, or form of life that, for want of a better word, we call 'religion'. The term 'religion', at least in its present use, is itself a relatively new one and most scholars agree that it is not a happy one. None of the great founders thought that they were founding a 'religion'; instead, they spoke of a 'revelation' or disclosure of the divine, or of a 'Way' of belief and living, or of a 'Law', or of the 'spiritual life', or of a life of 'perfection'.[1] Jesus, of course, spoke of setting up a new 'kingdom', or the reign or sovereignty of God.[2] Again, and more importantly, 'religion' conveys the wholly misleading idea that all the multifarious beliefs and practices and (to use Aristotle's term) 'phenomena' that we now call 'religious', have something in common by reference to which we can define religion and clearly demarcate it from other areas of human life such as the realms of ethics, or art, or science.[3]

[1] If it were possible, I would like to revive the ancient pre-Socratic idea of 'the divine', understood as an order of being which irrupts into our ordinary world. See Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 305–11. But, alas, the word 'divine' is now hopelessly compromised.

[2] See James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus' Call to Discipleship*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 10. Dunn notes that the Aramaic 'kingdom of God' is best understood as the 'reign of God' or 'God himself in the exercise of his *sovereignty*'. In this context one might recall Alfred Loisy's ironic remark in *L'Evangile et l'Eglise*: 'Jesus announced the Kingdom, and it was the Church that arrived.' See Bernard Reardon, *Roman Catholic Modernism*, London, Black, 1970, p. 76.

[3] See Hans Küng, 'The Debate on the Word "Religion"', in H. Küng and J. Moltmann eds. *Christianity Among World Religions*, in *Concilium*, 183, 1986, xi–xv.

DEFINING 'RELIGION'

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century attempts to define the religious sphere, in much the same way as Kant tried to specify the conditions that make possible ethics and aesthetics and science, have proved to be illusory, confronted by the extraordinary variety and complexity of the realities and experiences we call religious. One thinks of Rudolf Otto's characterisation of 'the Holy' or the sphere of the 'numinous', itself defined in terms of an experience of a 'mystery' which evokes a sense of overwhelming awe and at the same time a sense of utter fascination and attraction (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*). Or, again, one recalls Emile Durkheim's category of 'the sacred', or Paul Tillich's later characterisation of religion as that which evokes 'ultimate concern', or the various attempts to characterise religion in terms of 'the transcendent'.

It is fashionable now to invoke the name of Wittgenstein and to say that 'religion' is what he calls a 'family resemblance' concept. Wittgenstein uses the concept of a 'game' as an example to make the point that there is nothing common to all the activities we call 'games'. Instead, there is 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail'. Since 'the various similarities between the members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way', Wittgenstein calls 'game' a family resemblance concept.[4]

'Art' is also a family-resemblance concept since we cannot specify any well-defined set of characteristics that all the activities we call 'art' – poetry and drama and the novel, music, dance, painting, sculpture and architecture – have in common. So also, 'religion' is a family-resemblance concept *par excellence* in that the various ensembles of belief and practice we call 'religions' – Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Zoroastrianism, Orphism, Mithraism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, Confucianism and their respective sectarian offshoots, as well as the myriad forms of 'primal' religions like those of the Australian Aborigines or

[4] See L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1953, sections 66–7. William James had already made a similar point in 1902 in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1985, Lecture 2.

Amerindian peoples – differ from each other as radically as the art of poetry differs from the art of dance.

In parenthesis, the philosophical ways of life of the western ancient world – Platonism, Aristotelianism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, Cynicism, Plotinian neo-Platonism – were systems based on rational reflection, but they were also presented as 'choices of life' and 'spiritual exercises', as Pierre Hadot has brilliantly shown. In this sense they were 'religions'. As Hadot says:

> all spiritual exercises are, fundamentally, a return to the self, in which the self is liberated from the state of alienation into which it has been plunged by worries, passions and desires. The 'self', liberated in this way, is no longer merely our egoistic, passionate individuality: it is our *moral* person, open to universality and objectivity, and participating in universal nature or thought. With the help of these exercises, we should be able to attain to wisdom, that is to a state of complete liberation from the passions, utter lucidity, knowledge of ourselves and of the world. In fact, for Plato, Aristotle, the Epicureans and the Stoics, such an ideal of human perfection serves to define divine perfection.[5]

The idea of family resemblance does not explain anything; it simply reminds us that not all concepts are univocal concepts (like 'kangaroo' or 'triangle' or 'petroleum') denoting that the objects to which they are applied have certain characteristics in common and so belong to a definable class. So 'art' and 'religion' cannot be defined in the same way as we can define what a 'kangaroo' or a 'triangle' or 'petroleum' is. The best we can do is to draw, with a great degree of arbitrariness, rough boundaries around the many and various activities we call 'art' or 'religion'. We are *locating* the concepts rather than *defining* them. Because of this there will always be difficulties in deciding whether or not a certain activity is really 'art' or 'religion': is, for example, Marcel Duchamp's presentation of a bicycle wheel a work of 'art,' or are John Cage's randomised sounds 'music', or is Confucianism, or even a secular ideology like Marxism, a 'religion'?

If, then, 'religion' refers to a vast and ill-defined collection of beliefs and activities and practices and exercises related in complex

[5] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, London, Blackwell, 1995, p. 103. This is an extended version of Hadot's *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Paris, Etudes Augustiniennes, 1987.

ways, and if the various ensembles or beliefs and activities we call 'religions' are often radically different from each other, and if there is a large grey area where we do not know whether or not we should describe a given ensemble of beliefs and practices as a 'religion', it follows that the philosophy of religion has itself to be seen as an ill-defined and diffuse form of enquiry. It cannot be the business of the philosophy of religion to discover the 'essence' of religion or to determine the universal characteristics that all religions share, nor to analyse the meaning of 'religious language' (as though it were a distinct species of language or discourse), nor to attempt to isolate the characteristics of 'religious experience' (as though there were a specific form of experience that we call 'religious'). Rather, the philosopher of religion must proceed in an *ad hoc* and piecemeal way, reflecting on issues that arise about the things we call 'religious', resisting the powerful temptation to look always for what is common to religious phenomena and remaining scrupulously sensitive to differences.

INVENTING RELIGION

The four main essays presented here were written on different occasions and for different purposes. My observations on religion and revelation are made from a very high level of abstraction, and I make no attempt to specify how they might be translated into concrete institutions or used to critically adjudicate between religions. I am convinced, however, that future developments, especially within Christianity, will need to be along the general lines I have adumbrated, although there will also no doubt be what I have called 'pathological' or 'demonic' developments.

My four areas of interest – religious diversity, Australian Aboriginal religions, the relationship between the universal claims any religion makes and the local knowledge and lived experience that plays a central part in the formation of 'tradition', the elaboration of a Christian ethics – are, of course, very different. However, I argue that they are all concerned with what might be called the invention of religion. The four chapters are, as it were, soundings in the diffuse set of phenomena we call 'religion', and the rationale of the book is to show how the idea of invention operates in an analogous way in the four examples.

To speak of the invention or construction of religion may seem to be a paradoxical description, since religions are, to speak very generally, revelations or disclosures to human beings of supra-mundane truths by a God or gods or by an 'enlightened' or prophetic agent. These revelations are seen as pure acts of grace. From this point of view, it might be said, there is very little room for human initiatives or interventions; our part is simply to receive passively the gratuitous revelation and to follow its commands. But to speak of the *invention* of religion conveys the impression that we play an active part in its production or fabrication, as we do, for example, in developing languages.

Of course, philosophical sceptics of various persuasions have argued that religions are 'man-made' fantasies and, in this sense, are totally invented. On metaphysical grounds, the story goes, there really cannot be any supra-natural realm of reality and experience, and religion is therefore an illusion. The world of empirical facts is the only reality there is, and scientific knowledge of those facts is the only valid form of human knowledge, and all claims that religion provides a supra-scientific mode of knowledge are mere obscurantism and superstition. We invent or make up or construct religions for our own purposes: to provide meaning and hope in a meaningless and indifferent universe ('a heart in a heartless world'), to cope with personal and social alienation and the prospect of death, to explain natural phenomena (such as chance events) that resist scientific explanation, and so on.

Thus, for Feuerbach and Marx and Nietzsche, we create 'God' in order to avoid or escape the existential situation in which we find ourselves as human beings – alone in a world which has no intrinsic meaning or purpose or value and realising that we are totally responsible for ourselves and for creating our own morality. If we are to assume that responsibility, we must (symbolically) bring about the 'death of God'. Or again, for Freud, religion (all religion!) has its origins in neurotic infantile fantasies by means of which we seek to regain a 'heavenly' father and escape responsibility for our own lives. As Sartre argues: all religion is a game of 'bad faith' or self-deception by which we attempt to evade the burden of being free and autonomous beings who have to determine, and be responsible for, our destinies. Not only is religion an invention, it is

a malign invention by means of which human beings systematically deceive themselves.

This story is a familiar one and, of course, still a powerful 'myth' in our culture. But the kind of ideological secularism which is its source and which has held sway in western cultures since the eighteenth century, is showing signs of decay and exhaustion and has certainly lost a good deal of its force. Of course, scientism of various kinds (the philosophical theory that scientific knowledge is the sole valid form of knowledge) remains a potent influence. In particular, evolutionary biology has been pressed into service to produce a new scientistic 'world view' which excludes any religious dimension.[6]

THE PERSISTENCE OF RELIGION

However, the view of science and reason and the philosophical theories of empiricism and positivism on which the ideology of scientism has relied, have all been subjected to damaging criticism, and the naive view of human progress as a continuing saga of the reign of human reason removing obscurantism and bringing about enlightenment and human freedom and equality and justice, is now no longer plausible. Finally, the secularist confidence that religion would, like the state in Marx's theory of revolution, simply wither away, has been denied by the persistence, and even proliferation, of religious movements of all kinds. Some of the major forms of Christianity have lost large numbers of adherents and undergone crises of various kinds, but by and large the Christian churches and other religious bodies (for example, Islam) have shown remarkable powers of adaptation and transformation.

[6] For a brash example see Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1995. Dennett does not expain why, if science itself and its method of enquiry are also products (as presumably they must be) of the processes of evolutionary biology, they should be accorded any special or privileged epistemic status and value, or how, in any plausible sense, they can claim to be *true*. For pertinent remarks see Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995, pp. 137–8:

> Science has a distinguished epistemic standing, but not a privileged one. By our standards of empirical evidence it has been, on the whole, a pretty successful cognitive endeavour. But it is fallible, revisable, incomplete, imperfect, and in judging where it has succeeded and where failed, and at what times it is epistemically better and in what worse, we appeal to standards which are not internal to, nor simply set by, *science*.

No doubt, some of these developments in contemporary religions are extremely dubious and some patently evil. Again, some owe their success to their being linked to ideological nationalist and anti-colonial movements. Further, the astonishing growth of so-called religious fundamentalism in its protean forms, and the wilder expressions of 'New Age' sectarianism, are ambiguous signs of religious vitality. It has been estimated that some fifty million Americans subscribe to a fundamentalist Christian faith: they believe that they have been 'reborn', that we live in the 'last days' and that the end of human history is imminent, and that the Bible is a fund of inerrant truth relevant to all the social and economic and political issues of the day.[7] However, whatever judgments we make about the authenticity of these religious developments, the fact remains that, by and large, religions have shown themselves to be extraordinarily creative in transforming themselves in the face of radical social and cultural change. No one can now take seriously the once fashionable neo-Weberian sociological theories about the inevitable secularisation of economically advanced societies. In more general terms, when one reflects dispassionately on the matter, the scientistic and secularist claim that religion is really and finally an illusion, despite the fact that it has been seen in all cultures at all times as a fundamental dimension of human life – indeed, as the central value of any culture – is itself an extraordinary piece of philistinism. Casually rejecting a whole world of religious life like, for instance, the immensely rich and various 4,000-year-old Indian tradition – Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Muslim – is rather like claiming that the whole aesthetic order or dimension of human life is meaningless or trivial and can be dismissed accordingly.[8]

[7] See Robert Jay Lifton and Charles B. Strozier, *New York Times Book Review*, 12 August 1990, p. 24.

[8] On the 'ubiquity and persistence' of the phenomenon of religion see the recent work by Walter Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religion*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1996. Burkert argues that, although there are no 'religious genes' which determine us to be religious, there are 'biological preconditions' behind many religious activities and attitudes (p. 22). 'Religion keeps to the tracks of biology' and these preconditions 'produce phenomena in a consistent fashion' (p. 33). For example, 'the impetus of biological survival appears internalised in the codes of religion. Following this impetus, there is the postulate of immortality or eternal life, the most powerful idea of many religions' (p. 33).

THE RECEPTION OF REVELATION

The human reception of divine revelation is not just a passive reaction but an active and creative process, since our response to a revelation of the 'divine' (the 'act of faith' in Christian terms) is, or should be, the response of a free and autonomous person. God cannot coerce us to believe in and accept his revelation: that acceptance must be the free act of a free person. It is, in fact, a traditional doctrine in Christianity that religious faith in Christ and commitment to him cannot be the result of coercion, whether benign or violent. In the actual history of Christianity (and for that matter in other religions) that doctrine has been, no doubt, more honoured in the breach than in the observance. While giving lip-service to the autonomy of the act of religious faith, religious intolerance and coercion were justified on the ground that a particular revelation of God's truth *ipso facto* entails that other 'revelations' are erroneous and that one must be intolerant of them. After all, we have no obligation to tolerate religious error.

We now realise, after two millenniums of intolerance within Christianity (and other religions) how destructive that attitude has been. We are also aware of the paradox involved in any kind of religious coercion, namely that a person who is forced to believe is not really making a personal religious commitment. What does it profit a person if he or she is coerced, either directly or indirectly, to make a specific religious commitment? A forced commitment is no longer an autonomous personal act and has no meaning for the one who is forced, any more than a person who is forced to marry another really loves that other. Authentic love cannot be compelled by force (whether physical or psychological) and neither can authentic religious belief and commitment be compelled. It is, no doubt, because of the modern development of human values, such as the value of personal autonomy and the values of the liberal society, that we now belatedly realise this.[9]

[9] *See the Declaration on Religious Freedom* (*Dignitatis Humanae*) in Walter M. Abbott ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1966, pp. 672–700. In his recent work *The Gift of Death*, University of Chicago Press, 1995, Jacques Derrida, commenting on the work of the Czech thinker Jan Patocka, draws a strict distinction between the demonic, 'an experience of the sacred as an enthusiasm or fervor for fusion . . . a form of demonic rapture that has as its effect . . . the loss of the sense or consciousness of responsibility', and

If we reject the now discredited secularist views of the invention of religion, there is still an important sense in which religions are human constructions or inventions, since any revelation coming from a supra-natural source always has to be *received* and appropriated by human beings and is inevitably mediated by that fact. The medieval scholastic principle, 'whatever is received is received according to the mode or capacity of the recipient', directly applies here. In a completely obvious sense, which does not involve any kind of subjectivism, any revelation is what its recipients make of it. As already noted, the free assent of authentic religious faith is not just a quasi-passive assent to a body of teaching, but a creative appropriation and development of the revelation.This is a common sense point and it is not necessary to invoke any sophisticated theory of 'reception hermeneutics' to justify it.[10]

In parenthesis, it will be obvious that I am using the concept of revelation in the most general sense. Within contemporary Christian theology there has been a large debate about different 'models' of revelation – as a narrative of sacred history, as a body or system of sacred truths, as a vehicle of religious experience, as a means of transforming our human perspectives on reality and life and bringing about a 'new awareness'.[11] However, this book is not directly concerned with such specific theories about the nature of religious revelation: its theme is rather the dialectical interplay between religious revelations and the creative human appropriation of, and response to, and development of, those acts of grace.

A corollary of this point is that any revelation has to be *interpreted* in human terms. It has to be expressed in human languages and in terms of human philosophical categories and of particular cultural contexts. In other words, it has to be localised in order to become liveable. In a sense, God, or the gods, or any other supra-natural

authentic religious commitment based upon 'the responsibility of a free self'. 'In the authentic sense of the word, religion comes into being the moment that the experience of responsibility extracts itself from that form of secrecy called demonic mystery' ibid. pp. 2–3.

[10] See, for example, Hans Robert Jauss, *Question and Answer: Forms of Dialogic Understanding*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989. See also Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Crisis of Scriptural Authority: Interpretation and Reception', *Interpretation*, 44, 1990, 353–68.

[11] See the excellent survey by Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, New York, Orbis Books, 1992.

agency, cannot speak to us directly or immediately; their voices must always necessarily be mediated by human interpretation. Similarly, the voices of divinely appointed mediators – Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, the Buddha – have also themselves to be interpreted and mediated. Even if an angel were to speak to me and give me a message from some divine source, I must receive it and interpret it for myself. I must make it *mine*.

GRATUITOUSNESS OF AUTHENTIC RELIGION

Religion then is, so to speak, what comes about when a disclosure or revelation of the 'divine' – or whatever we may call it – is gratuitously made to human beings and human beings receive that revelation and actively respond to it in the same gratuitous spirit. As the dying words of George Bernanos' poor country priest have it: 'Grace is everywhere.' Various ploys are used in all religions to escape the implications of the gratuitous character of authentic religion: by attempting, for example, to emphasise the miraculous aspects of religion which overwhelm or coerce our reason and our will (before the burning bush Moses has no choice), or to make it seem that revelation is in some way necessary or 'natural' (as in certain aspects of Plotinus' Neoplatonism[12]), or to claim that revelation is made immediately and directly to us through the very words of sacred texts such as the Torah or the Gospels or the Qur'ān. However, as has been said, authentic religion is the gratuitous human response to a gratuitous revelation of the divine. A revelation always leaves a certain range of possibilities open to us and we must freely choose between them.

From this point of view then, one can speak of the whole receptive and interpretive dimension of religious revelation as being humanly constructed or invented, so that any religion is a product or resultant of the original revelation and what human beings make of it. As a contemporary Christian theologian has said: Jesus did not found Christianity: 'it was founded by Jesus' earliest followers on the foundation of his transformation of

[12] See Pierre Hadot, introduction to *Plotin: Traité 38*, Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 1988, p. 27.