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0521843774 - The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy, and Human Value

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THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION

The Spiritual Dimension offers a new model for the philosophy of religion, bringing together emotional and intellectual aspects of our human experience, and embracing practical as well as theoretical concerns. It shows how a religious worldview is best understood not as an isolated set of doctrines, but as intimately related to spiritual praxis and to the search for self-understanding and moral growth. It argues that the religious quest requires a certain emotional openness, but can be pursued without sacrificing our philosophical integrity. Touching on many important debates in contemporary philosophy and theology, but accessible to general readers, *The Spiritual Dimension* covers a range of central topics in the philosophy of religion, including scientific cosmology and the problem of evil; ethical theory and the objectivity of goodness; psychoanalytic thought, self-discovery and virtue; the multi-layered nature of religious discourse; and the relation between faith and evidence.

JOHN COTTINGHAM is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Reading. His many publications include *Western Philosophy: An Anthology* (Blackwell, 1996), *Philosophy and the Good Life* (Cambridge, 1998), and *On the Meaning of Life* (Routledge, 2003).

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Religion, Philosophy, and Human Value

JOHN COTTINGHAM

University of Reading



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Preface and acknowledgements

This book aims to engage not just philosophers but those from several other disciplines concerned with religion, including theology and religious studies, as well as that elusive figure the ‘general reader’. But perhaps unavoidably, given the background of the writer, it remains a philosophical piece of work; and hence it may be helpful to begin with some brief remarks on the current state of philosophy, especially in relation to religion.

Since it is part of philosophy’s *raison d’être* to be preoccupied with what is elsewhere taken for granted, it is no surprise that philosophers devote a lot of attention to reflecting on their own subject – what it is and what it should be. Anglophone philosophy is a far richer and more exciting discipline today than it was forty years ago, when it was largely preoccupied with conceptual analysis. That restricted conception of how to philosophize still has supporters, many producing first-class work, but philosophy has now diversified into a large array of methods and approaches, and, so far from being restricted to questions about ‘what do you mean by the term X?’, now encompasses a broad range of substantive issues including those concerned with truth, knowledge, justice, right action, consciousness, and rationality. Conceptual precision is still a paramount concern (and a good thing too); but it is now widely seen as a means to an end, not an end in itself.

So there seems little to be said for the judgement, still sometimes heard among contemporary cultural pundits, that analytic philosophy has run aground, stuck in the shallows of scholastic pedantry and the dissection of language. The ship is afloat, and sails a wide sea. Yet for all that, there remains a sense that the philosophical voyage has somehow become tamer, more predictable, than it used to be – more like joining a carefully planned cruise than venturing forth on the uncharted ocean. Humanity has always had a deep need to raise the kinds of ‘ultimate’ question to

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which the great religions have in the past tried to supply answers, and one might suppose that philosophy ought still to have some role to play here. It is disquieting therefore to find that a recent collection of state-of-the-art articles on ‘The Future for Philosophy’ has no room for a chapter concerned with religion, and indeed that it does not contain a single index entry under any of the headings ‘God’, ‘religion’, ‘faith’, or ‘spiritual’. Can we really suppose that an accurate survey of the ‘important agendas for philosophy’s future’¹ has no need to include any reference to this hitherto central area of human thought and practice?

The future of philosophy will no doubt continue to include philosophy of religion, if only for institutional reasons – because it is an entrenched speciality within the philosophical academy. But there does seem to be a genuine possibility that religious thought and practice may increasingly become sidelined, either brusquely dismissed or politely ignored, in the work being done at the ‘cutting edge’ of philosophy, by those who are seen as shaping the ‘mainstream’ philosophical agenda. For that agenda is now largely dominated by what Brian Leiter has aptly identified as the ‘naturalistic revolution which has swept anglophone philosophy over the last three decades’ – a revolution inspired by the vision that philosophers should ‘either . . . adopt and emulate the method of successful sciences, or . . . operate in tandem with the sciences, as their abstract and reflective branch.’² This scientific vision is understandable, for there is ample cause to admire the magnificent edifice that is modern science, and few of us do not have reason to be grateful for the benefits, often including life-saving ones, that it has brought to our existence. But it is important to remember that there are vast swathes of human life where understanding and enrichment does not come through the methods of science; these include not just poetry, music, novels, theatre, and all the arts, but the entire domain of human emotions and human relationships as they are experienced in the inner life of each of us, and in our complex interactions with our fellows.

Religious thought and experience, though it partly connects with the realm of science, has very significant affinities with this other, more personal domain. So if it is not simply to ignore religion entirely, and not just religion but all these other vital areas of human experience, it seems crucial that philosophy should maintain the resources to explore the domain in question. And hence, to set against the ‘naturalistic turn’

¹ B. Leiter (ed.), *The Future for Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), Editor’s Introduction, pp. 2–3.

² Leiter, *The Future for Philosophy*, pp. 2–3.

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that has been so influential in the last three decades, it needs (not necessarily in hostility, but as a balance or counterweight)³ to develop a 'humane turn'. Building on the work of some outstandingly insightful writers in the anglophone philosophical tradition,⁴ it needs to address itself unashamedly to questions about human self-understanding and self-discovery that will never be understood via the methods and resources that typify the naturalistic turn. Philosophical thought about religion must not ignore science, but neither should it ape science; for, as Hamlet told Horatio, there are more things in heaven and earth than science dreams of.⁵

Philosophers ought never to be dogmatic, but should 'follow the argument where it leads'; so there is no guarantee in advance that the results of such a 'humane' turn will succeed in vindicating a religious view of life, or show it to provide the kinds of insight and enrichment that are found in the other more personal areas of our human experience just listed, let alone the even deeper kinds of transformative awareness to which religious reflection has traditionally aspired. But if such a hope is even to get off the ground, if the feasibility of a philosophical support for religion is even to be on the agenda, the adoption of a 'humane' approach to the subject seems an essential prerequisite.

Accordingly, and in furtherance of the hope just articulated, this book has as one of its aims the modest attempt to nudge the philosophy of religion just a little way further towards the genre of the 'humane'. The wider aims of the work will, I hope, emerge clearly as the argument develops. In inviting someone on a journey it is not always helpful to describe every turn of the route in advance; but I have tried to offer ample signposting along the way, and an overview of the exact terrain covered by the argument will be provided towards the end.⁶ Essentially, the book is

³ Despite this irenic note, it seems to me that there are certain dogmatic forms of naturalism that are open to serious philosophical challenge; see below, Ch. 6, §3.

⁴ Among several who might be mentioned, Charles Taylor and Martha Nussbaum come to mind as paradigm cases; see especially Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). By mentioning 'anglophone' writers who have particularly influenced my own approach, I do not mean to discount the importance of those from other traditions whose contributions to the understanding of religion have been very significant. Emmanuel Levinas is a prime example here; see his 'God and Philosophy' ['Dieu et la philosophie', 1975], transl. in G. Ward (ed.), *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 52ff. See also Ch. 7, n. 20, below.

⁵ 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* [c. 1600], I.v. 166–7.) In the early seventeenth century, 'philosophy' in this sort of context meant something rather closer to what we now call 'science'.

⁶ At the start of Ch. 8.

an attempt at integration, at trying to show how a philosophical approach to religion needs to bring together the disparate areas of our human experience, emotional as well as intellectual, practical as well as theoretical, embracing the inner world of self-reflection as well as the outer world of empirical inquiry. Current attitudes to religion among philosophers are highly polarised, some impatient to see it buried, others insisting on its defensibility. But as long as the debate is conducted at the level of abstract argumentation alone, what is really important about our allegiance to, or rejection of, religion is likely to elude us. There is, to be sure, a cognitive core to religious belief, a central set of truth-claims to which the religious adherent is committed; but it can be extremely unproductive to try to evaluate these in isolation. There are rich and complex connections that link religious belief with ethical commitment and individual self-awareness, with the attempt to understand the cosmos and the struggle to find meaning in our lives; and only when these connections are revealed, only when we come to have a broader sense of the 'spiritual dimension' within which religion lives and moves, can we begin to see fully what is involved in accepting or rejecting a religious view of reality.

Having indicated something about strategy, let me add a brief word about tactics. The inquiry that follows may well, in its style and content, be too philosophical for some tastes, while at the same time being not philosophical enough for others; all I can plead is that I have earnestly endeavoured to strike an acceptable balance between rigour and readability. Since the subject-matter also encroaches on theological territory, some parts of the discussion may irritate theologians by over-simplifying, or by spelling out what is excessively familiar to them, while at the same time irking the philosophers by straying from time to time onto matters of faith or personal belief. But I firmly believe that attempts, however inept, to build bridges across these subject-boundaries are essential if our academic culture is not to become even more damagingly fragmented than it already is. The barrier between 'academic' and 'general' readership also seems to me one that needs eroding, particularly when it comes to discussing something as central to human life as religious thought and practice; and for this reason I have tried to write as accessibly as possible, attempting to trim away the array of self-defensive qualifications and hedging that become almost second nature for anyone who has spent many hours in the seminar room. (Where there are important clarifications and distinctions to be made, these have generally been relegated to footnotes, to avoid interrupting the flow.)

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The book is based on the Stanton Lectures which I gave at the University of Cambridge in the Easter Terms of 2003 and 2004. Being invited to give a public lecture series of this kind is perhaps the perfect stimulus for producing a book, and I am most grateful to the Electors for the honour they did me in inviting me to give the lectures, and to the audience at Cambridge for the many helpful and invigorating comments and questions that were put to me in the discussion periods following the lectures themselves. I am also very grateful for the kindness and hospitality of the Cambridge Faculty of Divinity during my tenure as Stanton Lecturer, and in particular to Professor Denys Turner, not just for chairing the series, but for his warmth and generosity as my principal host; it is a great pleasure to recall the enjoyable evenings we spent in discussions that illuminated many of the issues covered in this book, as well as much else besides. It is also a pleasure to record my thanks to Mrs Rosalind Paul, the Faculty Administrator, for the kindness and seemingly effortless efficiency with which she dealt with everything to do with the organization of the lectures.

In various places in the book I have drawn on ideas from my previously published work: *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003); ‘“Our Natural Guide”: Conscience, “Nature” and Moral Experience’, in D. S. Oderberg and T. D. Chappell (eds.), *Human Values* (London: Palgrave, 2005), and ‘Spirituality, Science and Morality’, in D. Carr and J. Haldane (eds.), *Essays on Spirituality and Education* (London: Routledge, 2003). Earlier versions of some of the chapters or arguments in the book were presented at research seminars at the University of Reading, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, the University of Cape Town, Birkbeck College, London, Heythrop College, London, Trinity College, Dublin, and St John’s College, Oxford, and I am most grateful for the helpful criticism and feedback received on those occasions. I have also been fortunate enough to benefit from discussions with many colleagues and friends, including Ward Jones, Eusebius Mckaisar, Andrew Moore, David Oderberg, Peter Hacker, Jim Stone, Philip Stratton-Lake, Samantha Vice, Francis Williamson, Mark Wynn, and many others. I should like to record my special thanks to Myra Cottingham, who read the complete final version and made many invaluable suggestions. I am also very grateful to an anonymous reader for Cambridge University Press for most helpful comments and suggestions on the initial typescript, to Rachel Baynes of Reading University Library, who kindly offered her help in tracing some of the references, and to Hilary Gaskin of Cambridge University Press, who has once again been a most supportive editor.

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I should also like to express my gratitude to Barbara Richards and to Derek Joseph, to both of whom I owe a great deal.

Fruitful religious philosophizing is both like and unlike many other kinds of philosophy in so far as it employs rational argumentation but at the same time needs to appeal to more than that – it needs to open the heart as well as to illuminate the mind. For that reason, there are many pitfalls, for one may lose the sympathy of readers in many more ways than simply by failing to make the logic watertight. What is offered here is in no sense intended to be prescriptive or doctrinaire, but simply to reflect the continuing search that I hope at least some readers will be able to identify with – a search conducted in a spirit of intellectual inquiry, but whose motivations and goals go deeper. The book, like several of its predecessors, is dedicated to my immediate family, in love and gratitude.