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978-1-107-01943-0 - Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach

John Cottingham

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PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Towards a More Humane Approach

Religious belief is not just about abstract intellectual argument; it also impinges on all aspects of human life. John Cottingham's *Philosophy of Religion* opens up fresh perspectives on the nature and basis of the religious outlook, arguing that the detached neutrality of much of contemporary philosophizing may be counterproductive – hardening us against the receptivity required for certain kinds of important evidence to become salient. This book covers the traditional areas of the subject, including the meaning of religious claims, the existence of God, and the relation between religion and morality, as well as the role of spiritual praxis and how religious belief affects questions about the meaning of life, human suffering, and mortality. While preserving the clarity and rigour that are rightly prized in the analytic tradition, the book also draws on insights from literary and other sources, and aims to engage a wide readership.

John Cottingham is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Reading; Professorial Research Fellow at Heythrop College, University of London; and an Honorary Fellow of St John's College, Oxford. He has served as Chairman of the British Society for the History of Philosophy, President of the Mind Association, President of the Aristotelian Society, and President of the British Society for the Philosophy of Religion. He was also editor of *Ratio*, the international journal of analytic philosophy, from 1993 to 2012. Professor Cottingham's books include *Descartes* (1986); *The Rationalists* (1988); *Reason, Will and Sensation* (1994); *Western Philosophy: An Anthology* (2nd edition, 2007); *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the Passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge, 1998); *On the Meaning of Life* (2003); *The Spiritual Dimension* (2005); *Cartesian Reflections* (2008); and *Why Believe?* (2009). He is co-translator of the standard three-volume Cambridge edition of *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (1985–1991). *The Moral Life*, a collection of essays honouring his work on moral philosophy and philosophy of religion, was published in 2008.

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University of Reading

and

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P R E F A C E A N D A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

The philosophy of religion is a growing and flourishing field, as may be seen from the increasing numbers of textbooks, anthologies, and companions now available in the area. This book certainly does not try to cover all the topics that have been included under the heading ‘philosophy of religion’, though it aims to discuss those I take to be the most central. It is primarily a work of philosophy, as opposed to philosophical theology, and does not include detailed discussion of doctrines like the Trinity or the Incarnation that have received attention from philosophers (often very fruitfully and interestingly) in recent years. Nor, apart from one or two brief passing references, does it venture into comparative world religion, which has become a vast and fascinating academic field in its own right. All philosophizing (whether its practitioners acknowledge it or not) is inevitably conducted within a given cultural and historical context, and this book is no exception, being primarily informed by the philosophical tradition going back to Plato and Aristotle, and the religious tradition whose roots go back to the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. The audience at which the book is aimed includes colleagues and students working in the philosophy of religion, but I have tried to make the philosophy accessible to as wide a readership as possible. Many of the topics are inevitably complex, but I have endeavoured to avoid technical jargon, and for the most part I have avoided engaging with the minutiae of the debates in the recent academic literature.

It will be apparent that while much of the discussion in the following chapters falls broadly within the ‘mainstream’ of contemporary philosophy of religion, the approach taken sometimes diverges in some respects from that which has become prevalent in the anglophone philosophical

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world. My aim in developing this approach is certainly not to disparage the prevailing model, and nothing I say here is intended to cast doubt on its value. I think there are many possible ways of approaching the subject, and it should not be assumed that they are necessarily incompatible or that they must somehow be in competition. One of my aims in what follows is to open up what I take to be enriched modes of philosophical understanding, which seem to me especially fruitful in the philosophy of religion (and for that matter in a number of other branches of philosophy), without compromising the standards of clarity and precision that are so rightly prized in the anglophone philosophical world. I shall be happy if at least some of my readers take away from this book a sense of the conviction that has motivated me to write it: that philosophizing about religion is no mere academic exercise but something that engages every part of us, and impinges in the closest possible way on who we are and how we lead our lives.

In various places I have drawn on material from the following previously published articles, and my thanks are due to the respective editors and publishers for allowing me to make use of it here: (in Chapter 3) ‘Human Nature and the Transcendent’, in Constantine Sandis and M. J. Cain (eds.), *Human Nature*, Royal Institute of Philosophy supplement 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 233–254; (in Chapter 4) ‘Confronting the Cosmos: Scientific Rationality and Human Understanding’, *Proceedings of the ACPA* (Philosophy Documentation Center), Vol. 85 (2011), pp. 27–42; (in Chapter 6) ‘The Question of Ageing’, *Philosophical Papers* 41:3 (2012), pp. 371–396; ‘Meaningful Life’, in Paul K. Moser and Michael T. McFall (eds.), *The Wisdom of the Christian Faith* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 175–196; and ‘Meaningfulness, Eternity, Theism’, in Beatrix Himmelmann (ed.), *Meaning in Life* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013); (in Chapter 7) ‘Philosophy and Self-improvement: Continuity and Change in Philosophy’s Self-conception from the Classical to the Early-modern Era’, in Michael Chase, Stephen Clark, and Michael McGhee (eds.), *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Ancients and Moderns* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), pp. 148–166; ‘Spirituality’, in C. Taliaferro, V. Harrison, and S. Goetz (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Theism* (New York: Routledge, 2013), ch. 50, pp. 654–665; and ‘Conversion, Self-Discovery and Moral Change’, in Ingolf Dalferth and Michael Rogers (eds.), *Conversion*.

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Claremont Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), pp. 211–229.

A word about the reference system used in the footnotes. I have made a point of *not* using the increasingly prevalent ‘Harvard’ system, which refers to texts by giving only the author and date. Though it may be suitable for the sciences, where priority of discovery is important, this system is singularly inept for the humanities. Expressions like ‘Kant 1958’ or ‘Aquinas 1990’ are not just an affront to chronology; they are pedagogically uninformative (students and others are deprived of being told or reminded when the work originally appeared); they are tiresome (the reader will constantly have to leaf back to the bibliography to discover which title is being referred to); and they are unhelpful, since they often simply reflect the edition the writer happened to have on his or her shelves when writing, and do nothing to enable readers to find the relevant passage, unless they happen by chance to have the self-same edition at their disposal. With this in mind, when citing sources in the footnotes, I have always given the title of the work referred to, and, at the first mention, the original date when it appeared (and, where appropriate, the original title). Also, wherever possible, and especially with canonical philosophical and literary texts, I have referred to passages by *part*, *chapter*, or *section numbers*, which are common to all editions and translations and thus enable the reader to find the passage in whichever edition they are using. In the case of passages quoted from non-English texts, the English renderings supplied are generally my own; but for the convenience of the reader details of widely available English editions are given in the Bibliography.

Some of the materials included here have been presented in one form or another at various conferences and discussion groups around the world, including at the following institutions: Bristol University, Cape Breton University, Central European University Budapest, Claremont Graduate University, Durham University, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Fordham University, Heythrop College University of London, Oxford Brookes University, Peking University, Rhodes University, St Francis Xavier University, University of Johannesburg, University of Oxford, Thomas More Institute London, University of Stirling, and the University of Utrecht; I am indebted to the many participants on those occasions for their stimulating comments and questions. I am grateful

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