Religion and Belief
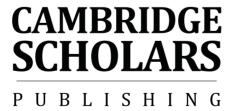
Religion and Belief:
A Moral Landscape

Edited by

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**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**
P U B L I S H I N G

"It is our duty to … select the best and most dependable theory that human intelligence can supply, and use it as a raft to ride the seas of life."

—Plato, *Phaedo* 85d

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

FABIO SERRANITO AND CHRISTOPHER T GREEN

Heraclitus, Aristotle tells us, was heating himself by the oven, when visitors appeared.[1] Embarrassed, the visitors hesitated, but they were encouraged by the philosopher to come in, since "here too there are gods". Aristotle uses this anecdote to illustrate how in even the smallest and apparently most insignificant things one can find wonder and beauty. It is unclear what the hermetic Heraclitus meant by his strange utterance, but it is possible that he was echoing a belief eloquently expressed by the famous *dictum* attributed by Aristotle to the first known philosopher, Thales: "everything is full of gods".[2] Regardless of the interpretative minutiae, the idea that there is a spark of the divine in every being, that there is something divine in everything, seems to be at the heart of the Ancient civilizations of which we are the inheritors: Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome. But the idea of a world full of gods, where the divine is present in each and every being, from the greatest and most magnificent to the smallest and most insignificant, seems very far from describing the secular societies that constitute contemporary Western civilization.

Our world is not full of gods. This is not just the result of the transition from polytheism to monotheism: the emergence of the major Western monotheistic religion, Christianity, put God and the relationship with God at the forefront of all human concerns, and made religion the most defining cultural factor. The fact is that, for a significant portion of the population in the Western World, God or gods and religious belief seem to play a secondary role, if any at all. This is the result of a centuries-long process of progressive secularisation, spurred and motivated to a large extent by a reaction to the bloody religious conflicts that scarred Europe in the Modern Age. However, this process has not destroyed religion, nor has it cancelled its fundamental role in defining personal identity and in shaping private lives. It has rather led to the construction of secularized

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[1] Aristotle *De Partibus Animalium,* A 5. 645a 17. Or according to some critics, on the toilet. See Adomenas (1999), 105-107. (See Chapter Three bibliography).
[2] Aristotle *De Anima,* 411a7. (See Chapter Three bibliography).

public spaces and institutions, where freedom of religion is recognised as a fundamental right, but that are nonetheless free from religious bias or favouritism.

However, the contact with cultures and civilizations where religion still plays the fundamental role in determining and defining the way people live has created the potential for clashes, conflicts and misunderstandings, and has brought religion into the forefront of our concerns. The movement towards secularisation, with the increment in atheism, agnosticism, and general indifference towards religion has been accompanied by a renewed interest in religion, not only by the faithful, but also by those unbelievers that are eager to understand such an important cultural phenomenon. Religion and belief have therefore become important subjects of discussion and renewed interest also in academic contexts.

It was with the purpose of discussing the nature of religion and the role religious belief plays in society that the Fourth Annual Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Research Conference met on the 5th June 2013, under the title "Religion and Belief: a Moral Landscape". The Annual Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Conference is an annual interdisciplinary conference aimed at the postgraduate community and organized by the postgraduate students of the Department of Classics at the University of Leeds. It is now in its fifth year and has included participants from all over the UK, and abroad. Every year the organizers select a different theme that might encourage participation from a wide range of disciplines, with the purpose of giving postgraduate students in different areas the opportunity to share their research and share ideas. It is an occasion for dialogue between researchers in different areas and with different approaches. For the first time, the versions of the majority of the papers presented at one of the annual conferences will be published. This interdisciplinary gathering produced papers covering subjects that ranged from Classics to Cultural Studies, and included Philosophy and Religious Studies.

The collection of essays that comprise this edited volume are a selection of the high quality papers delivered to the Fourth Annual Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Research Conference. The aim of this book, and why these essays have been compiled, is to show how diverse religion in the ancient world was, be it Platonic religious belief or the Roman Eagle Standard.

ABBREVIATIONS

Ap.Rhod.*Arg.* *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius
AO   *Orphic Argonautica*
DK   Diels-Kranz
Phd.   *Phaedo*
Phdr.   *Phaedrus*
Rep.   *Republic*
Smp.   *Symposium*

CHAPTER ONE

ECUMENICAL PARADOXES

MALCOLM HEATH

    Moral landscapes are hard to navigate. They are full of pot-holes and quagmires, and the map-readers frequently disagree with each other. Since the choice of a moral direction may be both perplexingly complex and profoundly important, those disagreements often become passionately divisive. When religion is involved, the divisions tend to be multiplied, the passions heightened. Religious believers have a remarkable track-record of coming into moral conflict with each other, and with non-believers.

    Non-believers can, in their turn, be stridently anti-religious, as the "New Atheist" phenomenon shows. In view of the undeniable tendency of religion to turn problematic moral landscapes into battlefields, the New Atheist protest would merit a more sympathetic response if its stridency and its combination of intellectual self-confidence and shoddiness were not so off-putting.[1] But, that aside, where does the protest lead? The Call for Papers for the conference which lies behind this collection singled out the New Atheists for mention, speaking of them as "wishing firmly to separate the moral landscape from religious institutions". But that, surely, can only be part of the truth. The insertion of religiously informed morality into the moral landscape by religious *individuals* must also be unwelcome to New Atheists (as to many old ones). Yet separation of the moral landscape from religion at the individual level is deeply problematic. To ensure that religious individuals do not try to shape the moral landscape of society in the light of their religious beliefs, it would be necessary either to persuade them to act against their moral convictions,

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[1] See Eagleton 2009. Eagleton has the advantage over his New Atheist targets of being theologically better informed, as well as more stylish and witty. He also has an advantage over other critics of the New Atheists in that he is not an apologist for religion (xi: "Religion has wrought untold misery in human affairs. For the most part, it has been a squalid tale of bigotry, superstition, wishful thinking, and oppressive ideology").

or else to coerce them into doing so. So which would you prefer: a society that encourages moral hypocrisy, or one that violates the right to religious freedom? If you do not find either option acceptable, you must resign yourself to coping with the problem of accommodating religiously-grounded morality in a community which to a greater or lesser extent has abandoned inherited religious beliefs and the moral convictions they generate.

The question of how we are, collectively, to live with the pervasive tensions arising from the co-existence of (multiple) religious and secular moralities constitutes an important, even urgent, problem for society. Society has not, so far, found a good way of resolving that tension. Can ecumenism provide a model?

The word "ecumenism" comes from the ancient Greek *oikoumenē*, meaning the inhabited world—though in practice its application in antiquity was most often limited to those parts of the inhabited world within the Roman Empire and its sphere of influence. From the fourth century AD onwards, Christians distinguished assemblies with the authority to regulate local or regional church affairs from those whose decisions were normative for Christians everywhere. The Council of Nicaea in 325 was the first of the councils recognised as "ecumenical" in this sense. In modern usage, "ecumenism" is generally applied to the quest for unity between different Christian denominations: or, if not formal unity, then cooperation, or at least constructive dialogue; or, at the very least, refraining where possible from burning each other at the stake. It is sometimes extended to include efforts to secure cooperation, dialogue and the avoidance of lethal conflict between different religions, though these are more commonly designated by expressions such as "interfaith dialogue". Since this kind of engagement is evidently preferable to the confrontational tendencies from which we started, the thought of extending the ecumenical spirit still further seems attractive. Could we solve the problem by extending the ecumenical spirit to the whole inhabited world, and include within its scope not only religious people of different denominations and faiths, but also non-religious and anti-religious people? Could we engage them all in cooperation, dialogue and not killing each other?

If the history of Christian ecumenical councils is our precedent, the prospects are not encouraging. The distinction between locally and ecumenically normative decisions intersects with a distinction between decisions that are normatively valid and those that are not. To recognise a council as ecumenical is not simply to *agree* with its conclusions: it concedes a claim to *authority*. Such claims can be used to delegitimise

dissidents and to license coercive measures against them. Moreover, since recognising a council as ecumenical means recognising it as universally normative, agreement about which councils are ecumenical requires (as a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition) agreement on which councils have reached the right conclusions. But there has never been universal consensus on that. In the absence of disagreement, ecumenical councils would never have been necessary; the disagreement that necessitates them make it unlikely that they will ever succeed in eliminating it. The (Roman) Catholic[2] church recognises twenty-one councils as ecumenical (down to Vatican II, 1962-5); the (Eastern) Orthodox churches recognise only seven (down to Nicaea II, in 784); the (Oriental) Orthodox churches only three (down to Ephesus, in 431);[3] some Protestants recognise none, either because they do not concede normative authority to conciliar decisions, even if they agree with those decisions, or (in some cases) because they do not agree with those decision.[4]

The fractured and fractious history of relations between Christians constitutes one of the many respects in which the history of the Christian churches has from the very beginning been a history of sustained failure. Consequently, the starting-point for modern ecumenical dialogue between Christian churches is a messy and unsatisfactory one. On the other hand, ecumenism with an expanded horizon must also begin from a messy and unsatisfactory starting-point: if that were not so, the co-existence of multiple religious and secular moralities would not be such an intractable problem. It is therefore a promising sign that Christian ecumenism has, despite its unpromising starting-point, made some progress. One crucial factor underpinning the possibility of that progress has been the determination of participants to maintain their own integrity, combined with a respect for the corresponding determination of other participants to maintain theirs. Assent without conviction would be at best the substitution of one kind of theological error for another, since a dishonest theology is *ipso facto* an erroneous theology; so there is no point in either offering such assent or expecting it to be offered. Theological integrity requires all parties to be willing to surrender or modify inherited belief-structures and traditions of practice, liturgical and ethical, if they are

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[2] "Catholic" derives from the Greek word *katholikos*, meaning "universal"—which stands in some tension with the conventional local qualifier. Because the self-designations of different churches embody conflicting claims to legitimacy, it is not easy to refer to them in terms that are uncontentious and unambiguous.
[3] In other words, rejecting the two-natures Christology of Chalcedon in 451. Parry 2007 provides a guide to "Eastern" and "Oriental" Orthodoxies.
[4] Unitarians, for example, do not accept the Trinitarian theology of Nicaea I.

persuaded that this would improve their belief or practice—but not otherwise. One aim of ecumenical dialogue, therefore, is agreement, when that can be achieved without loss of integrity; when it cannot, there remains the search for the closest convergence and cooperation consistent with maintaining one's own, and respecting each other's, integrity.

One might wonder whether Christianity's history of failure in this respect is fully representative. Monotheistic religions are likely to have a greater tendency to exclusivism, and therefore to divisiveness, than polytheisms, and strongly creedal religions than those that are weakly creedal. If so, Christianity (and some cognate religious traditions) faces a particular challenge in maintaining unity, and in repairing breaches of unity. By contrast, we would expect classical polytheistic religions to have found it easier to recognise parallels between their own religious beliefs and practices and those of other peoples, to make inter-religious identifications, and to absorb elements from other traditions without loss of integrity.

Consider, for example, the essay on images of the gods by Maximus of Tyre, a popularising Platonist philosopher who wrote short essays on philosophical topics around the late second century AD. Greek intellectuals of this period tended to disapprove of the ways in which non-Greeks represented gods visually. Egyptian images of gods in animal form, for example, were thought to be degrading; the Greek practice of representing gods in human form was regarded as more suitable, because of its associations with purposeful agency and rational intelligence. Maximus' *Oration* 2 represents one of the variants possible within that broad consensus.[5] He begins by drawing attention to the diversity of divine images between cultures, and poses the question whether we could do without any images at all. His answer is that, though images are of no use to the gods, they are indispensible to their human worshippers: few individual humans, if any, and no human community as a whole can do without external support to the recollection of the divine. Having made that point, Maximus returns to the diversity of images. The superiority of Greek anthropomorphic images is affirmed: "if the human soul is very close to god and bears most resemblance to him, then surely it is not reasonable to clothe what is most similar to it, god, in an utterly unsuitable outward form" (*Or*. 2.3). The catalogue of non-Greek customs that follows begins with examples that are explicitly, or by clear implication, presented as unsuitable: Persian worship of fire (a destructive element); Egyptian

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[5] The translations below are my own. See Trapp 1997 for a complete translation. I have discussed Maximus' oration in its intellectual context background briefly in Heath 2013, 127-34.

worship of animals; Indian worship of snakes. But as the examples
accumulate, the evaluative slant drops out; Maximus' attention focuses
instead on the universality to which this accumulation attests, which he
takes as confirmation of the indispensability of images. He concedes that
natural images might be more appropriate in principle than artificial
images. Perhaps, if one were starting from a blank slate, with people
newly sprung from the earth, it would be best to recommend the sun,
moon and heavenly bodies, and the four elements. But that is not our
starting-point. We have instead a plurality of peoples, each with their own
established traditions. Since divine transcendence is beyond the reach of
any image, natural or artificial, all images are a concession to human
weakness. The important question, then, is not adequacy, but
effectiveness, which is in part a function of familiarity. The practices
which have been made familiar by each community's traditions should
therefore not be disturbed. In the light of this relativisation of all images,
even the criticism of Persian and Egyptian religious practices is effectively
revoked in the essay's conclusion (2.10):

> Let men know the race of gods—let them only know it! If Greeks are
> aroused to the memory of God by Pheidias' art, and Egyptians by the
> honour paid to animals, and a river or fire arouses others, I have no
> objection to that diversity. Let them only know God, let them only love
> him, let them recollect him!

How should we categorise Maximus' position? In modern religious
studies and theology of religions, a common taxonomy of ways of conceiving
other religions distinguishes exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist positions.[6]
So, for example, an exclusivist religion might maintain that its truth-
claims are uniquely true and that it provides the only way to salvation; an
inclusivist religion might acknowledge that other religions provide ways to
salvation, while maintaining that this possibility is explained by its own
truth-claims, which are uniquely true; pluralism would maintain that many
(or even all) religions provide ways to salvation and truth. As a
classificatory scheme this is not very satisfactory: religions differ in too
many independently varying dimensions to be effectively subsumed under
three headings. But, for the present, let us see how far it gets us.

At the level of religious practice, Maximus' view is pluralist. It is true
that he makes a claim for the superiority of Greek practice, but this is
heavily qualified: the inadequacy of all attempts to represent the divine in
visible images (or, indeed, in words or concepts) makes the differences

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[6] See e.g. Markham 2004.

between religions trivial. The overridingly important point is that all religions provide a way to god. However, this pluralism rests on a meta-religious theory that is inclusivist, rather than pluralist. Maximus' background assumptions include the belief, widely shared by Greek philosophers of this period, that there is a single universal human wisdom underlying cultural diversity, including the diversity of religious belief and practice.[7] The existence of this universal wisdom was explained by a common origin and/or by a common cognitive basis, though the various philosophical schools disagreed about the content of that universal wisdom, and also about its cognitive basis: different epistemological theories yielded different accounts of how we have access to that universal wisdom. Maximus is a Platonist, and works with a Platonist epistemology. All souls have, in a discarnate state, had direct acquaintance with Reality; this knowledge is latent in the embodied soul, but can (under favourable conditions) be elicited by the soul's encounter with that Reality's instantiations in the empirical world.[8] Hence, when he talks of images as an aid to recollection of the divine, he is not thinking only of aids to empirical mindfulness, which might help to guard against negligence of religious observance, but also intends the deeper sense that recollection has in Platonic epistemology.

In this light, Maximus' seemingly attractive affirmation of the value of all religious practices perhaps reveals a weakness: it is inclusive *by assimilation*. Everyone is right, because, deep down, they all agree with *us*. Maximus can take a tolerant view of the distinctive truth-claims and practical commitments of diverse religious traditions because he has, in effect, declared them irrelevant *except* insofar as they approximate the truth-claims and practical commitments of his own philosophy. Would everyone on whose religious practice Maximus bestows this kind of approval have accepted subordination to a sophisticated meta-religious theory contentedly?[9] The irrelevance of that question from Maximus' perspective reveals the extent to which his position depends on higher-order religious truth-claims that are potentially divisive.

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[7] Heath 2013, 122-5, 149-50.

[8] See Plato *Meno* 80d-86b; *Phaedo* 72e-8b; *Phaedrus* 246a-250c. Maximus addresses the topic of recollection directly in *Or.* 10.

[9] Markham 2004, 416 notes that "inclusivism is not popular in Interfaith circles", quoting Sambur 1999, who says of the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner's concept of "anonymous Christians": "This concept does not have any contribution to interfaith relations, because ... that concept includes the disrespectful approach to human freedom and humiliates the religion of the other" (30). On Rahner's "anonymous Christians" see Kilby 2004, 115-26; Fletcher 2005.

If the conflicting truth-claims of different religions are an obstacle to ecumenical convergence, would it not be better to set them to one side, and ... and *what*? The proposal tacitly assumes that those truth-claims are not fundamental to the religions that make them. In the case of some religions, that may be right; but clearly not in all cases. Where distinctively religious truth-claims do play a fundamental role, what are the consequences of them putting into suspense? Though their truth is treated as indifferent, the claims themselves remain, and the likelihood is that they will undergo an instrumentalist reduction: never mind whether it is true or not—just look what it can do for us! It may seem unlikely that any believer would take so crass a view: so let us consider an example.

"The Moral Maze" is a BBC radio programme in which a panel of opinionated personalities engage in "combative, provocative and engaging debate" with expert witnesses and with each other. The episode in question carried the title "The Ring of Gyges", alluding to a thought-experiment proposed by one of Socrates' interlocutors in Plato's *Republic*: what effect would a ring which conferred invisibility have on the morality of someone who gained possession of it (2, 359b-60d)? The question addressed by the panellists was: would an intelligent person be just and moral if he were not compelled to be so? One of them, Melanie Phillips (a well-known newspaper columnist), contributed these thoughts to the closing discussion:[10]

> Conscience is the essence of morality. Conscience is what you freely choose to do in a kind of inner directed sense to follow a set of rules that you think are important. And I think that ... this is where God comes in. Whether or not one believes in God, the point is that God is so useful when it comes to morality. In my view it is indispensible—because the idea that God sees everything is the stimulus, because it is what stops us feeling we can get away with it.

Charity demands that we pass over the shallowness of a conception of morality as "a set of rules", and the incoherence of an inner directed sense which only works if there is an external monitor. So let us focus on the

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[10] The episode was first broadcast on Wednesday 6 March 2013. The quotation is transcribed from the podcast:

(http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01r0yt8, accessed 26 August 2013), and has been lightly edited to remove distracting features of impromptu speech. Another panellist, Michael Portillo (a former Conservative Cabinet Minister) agrees on the instrumental value of God, though from a different perspective: "I entirely accept the utilitarian argument for God. God is very useful, makes a society work very well ... I just can't believe in it myself."

real problem: "whether or not one believes in God, the point is that God is so *useful* when it comes to morality." That is how easy it is for a religious believer to treat God as a convenience—and the double meaning is deliberate: for if God exists, such an attitude to God is profoundly disrespectful. Or, to use more technical language, it is blasphemous. Atheists, insulting a god they do not believe in, are mere amateurs; it takes a religious believer to do the job properly, and insult a god they think is real.

The reduction of God to a socially convenient instrumentality is shocking. But it is not in the least surprising, if one views it from the perspective of a religious tradition which sees humanity as sharing, not (with Maximus) a universal wisdom, but a universal corruption: humanity is sinful. From this perspective, since religion is a human activity, and therefore an activity of *fallen* humanity, the one thing that is guaranteed to be common to all religions is the inevitability of defacing God's image in word and deed. The human mind, according to Calvin, is a non-stop idol-factory.[11] Martin Luther maintained that "the piety of man is sheer blasphemy of God and the greatest sin a man commits. Thus the ways now current in the world—the ways which the world regards as worship of God and as piety—are worse in the eyes of God than any other sin."[12] Karl Barth, in his commentary on *Romans*, described religion as "that human necessity in which the power exercised over men by sin is clearly demonstrated".[13] When Barth returned to the problem of religion in §17 of his *Church Dogmatics* ("The revelation of God as the sublimation [*Aufhebung*] of religion"),[14] he declared: "religion is *faithlessness*; religion is a concern—one must say, in fact, *the* concern—of *godless* men" (55 = 299-300/327). That declaration is open to various misunderstandings, which Barth attempted to pre-empt. To guard against the assumption of a tacit Christian exceptionalism, he immediately adds that this proposition "is aimed not only at various others with their religion, but rather first of all at ourselves as members of the Christian religion". To avoid another

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[11] Calvin 1960, 108: "man's nature [*ingenium*], so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols [*perpetuam ... idolorum fabricam*]."
[12] Luther 1967, 37 (= 1891, 292).
[13] Barth 1933, 253 (= 1922, 236).
[14] "Gottes Offenbarung als Aufhebung der Religion", in Barth 1938, 304-97. English translation by G. Green: Barth 2006. Green's translation supersedes the standard version by G.T. Thompson and H. Knight in Barth 1956, 280-361, which is often misleading (not least in its translation of *Aufhebung* as "abolition": see n.16 below). In what follows I give page references in the text in the form: "Green = Thompson-Knight/German original". Green additionally provides a helpful introduction to Barth as a theorist of religion; see also di Noia 2000.

possible misunderstanding, he insists that this is a theological thesis: "because it is intended only to express the judgement of God, it expresses no human disparagement of human values" (56 = 300/327).

Barth's theological critique of religion has what are at first sight surprising points of similarity to New Atheist assessments of religion.[15] It is, in fact, more radical, in that it purports to express a divine judgement; it also shows greater humility, since the critique is inclusive of Christianity and not simply a polemical foray against others; and it is less one-sided, since it is capable of recognising things that are (in human terms) good in religion, as well as what is terrible. It resembles Maximus' inclusivism, in that it interprets all religions in terms of its own truth-claims. From his inclusivist perspective, Maximus reaches the pluralist conclusion that all religions are ways to God. For Barth, by contrast, *no* religion (not even Christianity) is a way to God: all religions are (so far as they concern the position of humanity before God) faithlessness and sin. That may seem an unattractively pessimistic view, by comparison with Maximus' optimistic pluralism. Alternatively, human religion might seem too fragile to sustain any realistic optimism: Barth's theology escapes pessimism by locating the ground of hope in the transformative power of God's grace—which is a pretty solid ground of hope, if God exists.

With the mention of God's grace, however, we move from the negative to the positive aspect of the *Aufhebung*[16] of religion. Does Barth succeed in the delicate and risky task of holding both aspects together? Or is the preceding analysis of religion as faithlessness simply abandoned when he goes on to talk of "true religion" (85 = 325/356)? More specifically, is the reflexivity of that analysis abandoned when he declares that "we must not hesitate to say that *the Christian religion is the true religion*" (85 = 326/357)? Barth is clearly aware of the risks. He is careful still to insist that "religion is never and nowhere true as such and in itself". It remains his "sure conviction" that Christianity is "equally affected" by everything said in the analysis of religion as faithlessness. He firmly denies that the preceding analysis of religion as faithlessness was a polemic against non-

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[15] E.g. Hitchens 2007, 10: "Thus the mildest criticism of religion is also the most radical and the most devastating one. Religion is man-made."

[16] Barth uses *Aufhebung*, if not in a fully Hegelian sense, at least with an awareness of the double meaning which Hegel exploited (English translators usually render it as "sublation" in Hegel). See Hegel 2010, 81-2: "'*aufheben*' ... has a twofold meaning in the language: it equally means '*to keep*,' 'to "preserve",' and 'to cause to cease,' '*to put an end to*'" ("*Aufheben* hat in der Sprache den gedoppelten Sinn, daß es soviel als aufbewahren, *erhalten* bedeutet und zugleich soviel als aufhören lassen, *ein Ende machen*").

Christian religions preparing the way for an attempt "to show that the Christian religion, in contrast to the non-Christian ones, is not guilty of idolatry and works-righteousness, hence is not faithlessness, and hence the true religion—or to show (what comes to the same thing in the end) that the Christian religion is not a religion at all but rather that, in contrast to all religions ... it is in itself the correct and holy, thus the irreproachable and indisputable, form of communion between God and man" (86 = 326/357). What he is trying *not* to do is therefore stated with clarity and emphasis.[17] How, then, does he reach (or fail to reach) his positive goal of maintaining that Christianity is, like all religions, faithlessness, and yet also "true religion"?

Barth's key move is to invoke the Reformation's understanding of what it is to be a justified sinner: a person who is, in his or her own right, simply a sinner, and whose justification before God is due wholly and exclusively to God's acceptance, which is an act of unmerited grace:

> If the concept of a "true religion" is supposed to mean a truth belonging to one religion as such and in itself, it is as incapable of being realized as the concept of a "good man", if his goodness is supposed to signify something of which he is capable out of his own ability ... A religion can only *become* true ... in precisely the same way that man is justified: only *from without* ... Like the justified man, the true religion is a creature of *grace*. (85 = 325-6/356)

It is, for Barth, *only* on such terms that it is possible to speak of Christianity as true religion. So when we consider Christianity as it is in its own right, it is (as he has previously stated) faithlessness:

> It remains the case that the knowledge of the truth of the Christian religion begins with the acknowledgement that it too stands under the judgment that religion is faithlessness, and that it was acquitted of this judgment not by its own inner worthiness but only by God's grace. (87 = 327/358)

Just as the description that religion as faithlessness did not express "human disparagement of human values", so the description of Christianity as "true religion" does not express a claim to superiority in human terms over other religions. When Barth describes Christianity as "true" religion,

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[17] Or so one might think. But it is necessary to underline the fact that the preceding quotation is Barth's statement of what he is *not* attempting to show, since he is widely reported as having maintained precisely the thesis that he repudiates: e.g. Gill 2004, 8 ("Some, following Karl Barth, would reject it on the grounds that Christianity is not 'a religion'"); Wolterstorff 2010, 205 (Barth "insisted that Christianity is not a religion").

therefore, this is *not* a claim about the historical, empirical reality of the Christian churches.[18] It is a theological claim about an act of God—an act to which Christian religion is a flawed and faithless response, since human religiosity is always and everywhere faithless. It is not because Christianity has succeeded in avoiding the faithlessness of human religiosity as such that it is possible to speak of it as "true" religion: it is only because the events to which it is a flawed and faithless response are truly the decisive act in God's dealings with humanity. This fact about Christian religion[19] is, of course, not to be understood as a consequence of, or a positive reflection on, any qualities intrinsic to Christians, any more than the justification of the sinner before God is a consequence of, or a positive reflection on, any qualities intrinsic to the sinner. Like the crater left by an explosion, Christianity is shaped by the events which brought it

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[18] On the contrary: "all this activity of faith ... is not what it intends and pretends to be, a work of faith and therefore of obedience to God's revelation; rather, what we have here ... is human faithlessness, i.e., opposition to God's revelation and therefore idolatry and works-righteousness both in intent and in action" (87 = 327/358-9); "what is visible historically is the attempt undertaken by the Christian, in ever-changing ways, to regard and to validate his religion as a proper and holy work in itself" (98 = 337/369); "what does become visible is ... a part of humanity that contradicts the grace, and thereby the revelation, of God no less because it claims them to be its special and most holy possessions" (99 = 337/369-70); "we cannot expect that the Christian, notwithstanding all his scruples to the contrary, will not again and again prove himself to be an enemy of grace" (99 = 338/370). It is significant that Barth's contribution to an exchange "Atheism, for and against" (Barth 1971, 40-7) is (predictably?) sterile until he turns his attention to his Christian readers: "The atheism that is the real enemy is the "Christianity" that professes faith in God very much as a matter of course, perhaps with great emphasis ... while in its practical thinking and behaviour it carries on exactly as if there were no God ... Who can acquit himself of this third kind of atheism? ... The atheists of the other kind live on the fact that we are not better Christians" (46-7).

[19] *Is* that a fact? Obviously, it is contestable. But Barth is not writing apologetics (that is, he is not trying to convince non-Christians that what Christians believe is true), but Christian theology. Barth believes it to be a fundamental premise of Christian theology that Christ is *the* decisive act of God towards humanity. As a Christian theologian, his task is not to argue for the truth of this premise, but to demonstrate that it *is* a premise and to articulate its implications for Christian faith and practice. That endeavour is (*inter alia*) a precondition for meaningful interfaith dialogue: a dialogue in which the participants do not understand the implications of their own positions would be pointless.

into being, and so bears witness to them, *despite* its being, in itself, empty.[20]

Consider, in this light, a criticism of Barth made in the course of Keith Ward's development of a different Christian theology of revelation:[21]

> Indeed, one can very easily turn the tables on Barth and insist (as it seems very plausible to do) that the belief that everyone else's revelation is incorrect and only one's own is true, is a particularly clear example of human pride and self-interest. Of course one has an interest in thinking one's own religion is the only true one; it enables one to dismiss the others as of no account and so bask in the superiority of one's own possession of truth. One may claim that this possession is by the grace of God alone but this only makes the element of human pride more pronounced, since one is now asserting that grace is only truly possessed by oneself. One can hardly get more proud, more self-righteous, and more short-sighted than that.

An analogy may help to assess the plausibility of this as a riposte to Barth. It has become a journalistic cliché to speak of homicide victims being "in the wrong place at the wrong time": that is, they were not targeted because of who or what they were, and did not contribute to their death by (for example) recklessly exposing themselves to danger; in sum, they bear no responsibility for their death at all. What, then, should we expect of a group of people who, being in the right place at the right time, become (as it seems to them) the recipients of an unmerited act of generosity? They could maintain an ungrateful silence; or they could say, dishonestly, that it was what they deserved; or they could say, honestly, that the generosity was unmerited. Characterising the last as the ultimate in pride and self-righteousness is, to say the least, strange. The strangeness of treating acknowledgement of unmerited grace as pride and self-righteousness is blurred in Ward's formulation by the word "possession". But the infiltration of that term into a criticism of Barth's theology is not in the least "plausible": it is hard to think of anything more thoroughly inconsistent with Barth's understanding of the sovereign freedom of God's grace than a self-congratulatory human claim to ownership of that grace.[22]

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[20] Barth applies this image to the Christian community in his commentary on *Romans* (1933, 36 = 1922, 12: 'nur Einschlagtrichter ... nur Hohlraüme'). Though it lacks nuance, it memorably encapsulates a key point.

[21] Ward 1994, 17. This is not Ward's only argument against Barth.

[22] Note that in the quotations in n.18 "possession" appears only in a description of the *contradiction* of grace (99 = 337/369-70). Cf. e.g.: "the religion of revelation is indeed bound to God's revelation; but God's revelation is not bound to the religion of revelation" (89 = 329/360); "God's grace, which alone is decisive and bound to no human, not even Christian, possession" (112 = 350/384).

Let us return to the comparison of Maximus and Barth. Maximus moves from a sharp critique of the practices of other religions to a recognition of the limits of his own, and from there to an affirmation of the value of all. The reflexive critique, which acknowledges the limitation of his own religion, is not unreserved, since he continues to affirm the superiority of his own religion's practice; but this reservation has no significance with respect to the point of decisive importance, since it remains true that all religions provide an effective way to achieve the same goal. His view of religious practice (and, by implication, of the beliefs associated with it, insofar as they fail to articulate the latent universal knowledge of God) is instrumentalist, but it is theocentrically instrumentalist: God is not a convenience, but the goal. Since Maximus' understanding of that goal, and his explanation of the capacity of all religions to lead us to it, are explained in terms of his own Platonic theology, his pluralism has inclusivist foundations.

Barth's formulation of a Christian theology of religions radicalises the inadequacy of all religions: *no* religion provides a way to God. This critique is reflexive: it applies equally to Christianity as to all other religions. Christianity is distinguished only in the uniqueness of the divine act which left Christianity in its wake. Christianity is not a way to God, but testimony to God's way to humanity. Instrumentalism is given up entirely, since what is achieved is achieved by the grace of God—and this grace is not a primordial endowment (of the kind envisaged in Maximus' Platonist epistemology), but an eschatological hope prefigured in the current paradoxical state of the justified sinner.

What conclusions, if any, can we draw from this comparison about how religious believers could best help resolve the problem of accommodating religiously-grounded morality in a largely non-religious community? We may conclude, first of all, that generalisation about religious believers is not possible: different religions, and different positions within each religion, have different sets of commitments. Those commitments cannot be subordinated to a meta-theory without loss of integrity. The same is true, of course, of the commitments (themselves diverse) of potential non- and anti-religious partners in any enlarged ecumenism. There cannot, therefore, be any uniform prescription: so the initial problem remains unsolved. From the progress of Christian ecumenism we drew the conclusion that maintaining one's integrity, and recognising the right of others to their own integrity, are essential. From Barth's reflexive critique of Christianity one might perhaps draw a further observation: it is possible for people to hold confidently to their own position while at the same time acknowledging their human fragility and

(in consequence) the extent to which they have compromised, and will probably continue to compromise, that position in what they say and do. Dialogue is more likely to be fruitful if it is entered into in a spirit of humility and repentance.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE ORIGINS OF RELIGION: A FUNDAMENTAL EPISTEMOLOGICAL REFERENCE SYSTEM

TONY PACYNA

Most of the naturalist approaches to the origins of religion claim that religion is a by-product of human evolution. No religious spots, God genes or modules have been found. In his book *God Delusion*, the biologist Richard Dawkins concluded that religion is dangerous because of the irrationality of faith. Thus, religion is a product of, or supported by, an ordinary cognitive mechanism. In Dawkins' point of view, these ordinary cognitive mechanisms are the "tendency to believe whatever their parents or tribal elders tell them" (Dawkins 2006, 205). In other words: a believer did not use her mind to pass judgement on an occasion. Instead, she believes in judgements made by her parents or tribal elders, who perhaps have got their knowledge from their parents or tribal elders a long time ago. But how is an extension of knowledge possible, if every human ancestor received her knowledge for judgement by her parents or tribal elders? Dawkins probably would answer that the individual who extended her knowledge became an atheist because she used her mind.

The New Atheists' claim contains the approach that belief of every description is dangerous because of faith, which in itself lacks empirical evidence. The inversion of this argument is that sciences, respectively physics and biology, have the ability to explain every human phenomenon. That is why religion for Daniel Dennett is a natural phenomenon, and Richard Dawkins looks for ultimate Darwinian explanations.

Let us sum up that most of the naturalistic explanations of religion seem to be a project of atheism, and as such lead to atheism.[1] This idea is called *functional decomposition* and has been vindicated by Daniel

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[1] S.a. Aku Visala 2011, 153.

Dennett:[2] "Functional decomposition breaks a function into smaller sub-functions until a level is reached where functions are relatively simple and can be instantiated by some physical system" (Visala 2011, 132). But where did the crusade end? It was Albert Einstein who in 1905 wrote that the existence of atoms could be demonstrated theoretically. It was Ernest Rutherford in 1909 who concluded that most of the nuclear mass is concentrated in the much smaller core of an atom. Since the 1960's, elementary particles like quarks have been investigated, and at the end of the current year the computation of the Higgs-Boson will be completed. Let's have a look at what all this will come to.

My point is that as long as humanity has existed, we have been searching for something that I call knowledge: knowledge about the world, the meaning of life and instructions. What might sound superficial here is the core assumption of the New Atheists about the origins of religion. The New Atheists claim that:[3]

1.   Morality does not require belief in God, and
2.   Humans would behave much better without faith in God.

In *Breaking the Spell*, Daniel Dennett bases the support of morality by doing a good deed on the presupposition of an infinite reward in heaven or the infinite punishment in hell. The absence of God as a moral guard would then result in Hedonism. Consequently, Dennett finds two sufficient reasons why the assumption would not work (Dennett 2006, 279):

i.   It does not seem to be true
ii.   It poses a demeaning view of human nature.

These results come as no surprise. Dennett and Dawkins try to show, however, that morality is in the same way examinable as genes are. It is Dawkins' theory of memes, which he developed in the 1970's.[4] Accordingly, genes as true replicators are pieces of information that generate copies of themselves. In this very same way memes function as cultural replicators. Ideas, beliefs and wishes are – in short – cultural memes that are inherited in a quasi-biological way. Dawkins concluded that, seen from this perspective, religion has developed teleologically in the way it did due to natural selection. In a first step, as a kind of pre-organised religion, some convictions have survived because of the ordinary cognitive mechanism in believing one's parents or tribal elders.

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[2] Daniel Dennett 1991.
[3] John Haught 2008, 66.
[4] Richard Dawkins 1976.