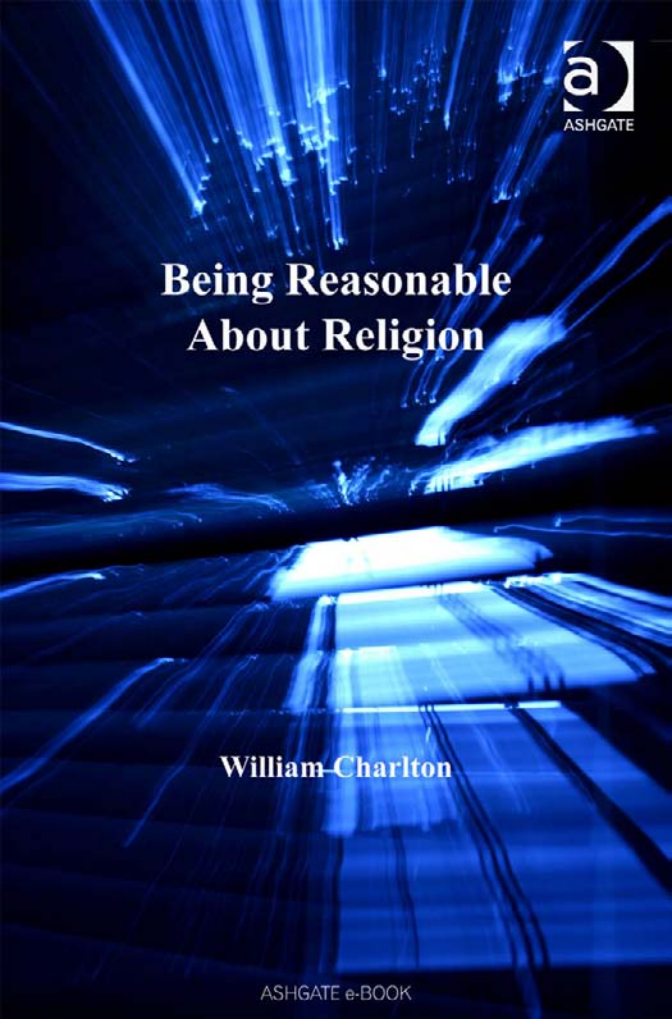
ASHGATE
Being Reasonable
About Religion
William Charlton
ASHGATE e-BOOK

# BEING REASONABLE ABOUT RELIGION

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Being Reasonable About Religion

WILLIAM CHARLTON

ASHGATE

Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Gower House
Croft Road
Aldershot
Hants GU11 3HR
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
Suite 420
101 Cherry Street
Burlington, VT 05401-4405
USA

Ashgate website: http://www.ashgate.com

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**
Charlton, William, 1935-
Being reasonable about religion
1.Religion – Philosophy 2.Reason
I.Title
210

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**
Charlton, William, 1935-
Being reasonable about religion / William Charlton.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-7546-5635-7 (hardback : alk. paper)
1. Religion. I. Title.

BL48.C486 2006
200–dc22

2005031987

ISBN-10: 0 7546 5635 7

Typeset by Saxon Graphics Ltd, Derby
Printed and bound by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

# Contents

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Acknowledgments

This book covers a wide range of issues, and in the last six years most of my friends have been pressed into giving me advice. Alexander Murray, Valerie Flint and Anne-Sylvie Homassel recommended reading that helped me with the historical parts and Aidan Reynolds and Sir Mark Allen drew my attention to relevant work in anthropology. Earlier versions of several theological chapters appeared in *New Blackfriars* and I am grateful to the editor, Fergus Kerr O.P., for permission to reuse the material. Versions of other chapters were read to the Newcastle philosophy group, now organized by Michael Bavidge, known as Applied Philosophy, Ideas Section, and to the Newcastle Aquinas Society: I should like to thank those present for their comments and suggestions. Margaret Atkins, Barbara English and A.C. Everatt read drafts of parts of the book, and Mary Midgley read the whole and gave me much wise advice which I have tried, I do not know how successfully, to follow. Anne Charlton has been a patient critic of my style and given me unfaltering encouragement.

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Chapter 1

# Introduction: Plan of the Book

There is nothing more divisive than religion. It divides believers from non-believers and adherents to one religion from adherents to another. Division breeds animosity, animosity violence and early in this dismal process reason is twisted or cast aside. Is it possible to be reasonable about religion?

In 1793, the revolutionaries of Paris turned Notre Dame into a Temple of Reason and presented Mme Momoro, the wife of one of them, as its Goddess. That was mixing reason and religion with a vengeance. More orthodox believers might say: 'Don't reason about religion; just get on with it.' But they assume that religious beliefs and practices, or some of them, are in fact reasonable. Should we not question that assumption? We might start by asking if there is any reason to believe that God exists or that there is a life after death.

We might, and both believers and sceptics often have. But this is an area in which we ought to tread warily. I have just mentioned religion, reason and God. We think we know what these things are, but if we try to define them we are at a loss. They arouse strong emotions in us, and we approach them burdened with a tangled mass of beliefs about what is and is not reasonable and about what has happened in the past and in other societies. As soon as we get into discussion about religion these beliefs come into play, and we find ourselves talking about pagan gods, magic, superstition, science and intolerance. We are like people groping their way through a dark underground cellar; the cellar is supported by randomly placed columns and scattered with pieces of old machinery; and thanks to our background and education we have strapped to our limbs extensions like the wings of the first aeroplanes, and drag behind us trains of netting that catch on unseen obstacles. To think we can start with a clear-eyed, impartial investigation of the basic claims of religion is quite unrealistic. We cannot be reasonable about religion unless we have first been reasonable about many other things.

Who, in this context, are we? Not hunter-gatherers in the Amazonian forests, not Chinese peasants, but English-speakers who read books. Some of us have been brought up in faith that (to quote Kai Lung) is like an elephant tethered to a rock; others are inclined to apply the word 'religious' to any rationally indefensible belief or practice used to keep people submissive to the powerful. In the century before the birth of Christ the Roman poet Lucretius said of primitive societies: 'Human life lay grovelling in foulness on the ground, crushed by the weight of religion, the horrible face of which pressed down on mortals from the skies.'[1] Humanity cringed in fear of punishments after death and religion inspired revolting crimes like human

[1] *De Rerum Natura*, Book 1, 62–5.

sacrifice – *tantum religio potuit suadere malorum*.[2] As Salomon Reinach put it, 'the history of humanity is that of a progressive secularization which is by no means complete as yet'.[3] Enlightenment first dawned with the philosophers of Greece, many of whom paid the penalty for their scepticism by being prosecuted for impiety. The Roman Republic, with its dignified senators and respect for law provided a political model for a rational society. Rome, at least before the Julio-Claudians made themselves emperors, must have been rather like England in the eighteenth century. But then for a thousand years the march of progress was halted. Christianity became the religion of the empire and within a dozen years, to quote Robin Lane Fox, 'Constantine had damned the free use of reason and had banished poetic imagination'.[4] Most of classical Greek poetry was committed to the flames. The schools of Greek philosophy were dissolved. Education was restricted to the clergy and subjected to the jealous scrutiny of the Holy Inquisition. Scientists were burnt as heretics, witchcraft and sorcery crept over society like weeds across neglected fields and gardens. But at last in the sixteenth century the tide turned. Luther proclaimed freedom of conscience. Galileo defied the Church by declaring that the Earth is not, as the Bible implies, the centre of the universe, but goes round the Sun. Progress started up again. Science gave us industrial machinery and transformed the means of transportation, and today the remotest parts of Asia and South America enjoy the blessings of civilization.

A reader of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* might be excused for thinking that Butler shared this view. In *Erewhon Revisited* he puts the record straight. 'I have never ceased', he tells us in the Preface, 'to profess myself a member of the more advanced wing of the English Broad Church'. He is speaking in his own voice later in the book when he says:

> Our religion sets before us an ideal which we all cordially accept, but it also tells us of marvels like your chariot and horses which we most of us reject. Our best teachers insist on the ideal, and keep the marvels in the background. If they could say outright that our age has outgrown them, they would say so, but this they may not do.

Religion at its best, Butler says, bears witness to the fact that

> beyond the kingdoms of this world there is another, within which the writs of this world's kingdoms do not run. This is the great service which our church does for us in England, and hence many of us uphold it, though we have no sympathy with the party now dominant within it. 'Better,' we think, 'a corrupt church than none at all.'

And he contrasts the types represented by his two characters, the benign Dr Downie and the fiendish Dr Hanky: 'In England Dr Downie would be a Broad Churchman … Hanky is everything that we in England rightly or wrongly believe a typical

---

[2] Usually taken to mean:'Such evils has religion managed to inspire.'

[3] *Orpheus, A General History of Religions*, tr. Florence Simmonds (London, Heinemann, 1909), p. 21.

[4] *Pagans and Christians* (New York, Knopf, 1986), p. 646.

Jesuit to be.'[5] This is indeed a gallant effort at being reasonable about religion. But Butler did not, it seems, make the journey to Farm Street that might have enabled him to verify his beliefs about typical Jesuits. Still less did he realize how precarious were the historical and anthropological assumptions he and his generation had uncritically imbibed.

What assumptions do we imbibe today? First, that the more backward a society is, the greater part religion plays in its life, and the greater part the supernatural is believed to play in the world. Anthropology is supposed to have shown this; but if one eminent anthropologist is to be believed, it was also supposed *to* show it. E.E. Evans-Pritchard towards the end of his life wrote of his predecessors:

> If one is to understand the interpretations of primitive mentality they put forward, one has to know their own mentality, broadly where they stood; to enter into their way of looking at things, a way of their class, sex and period. As far as religion goes they had all, as far as I know, a religious background in one form or another. To mention some names which are most likely to be familiar to you: Tylor had been brought up as a Quaker, Frazer a Presbyterian, Marett in the Church of England, Malinowski a Catholic, while Durkheim, Levy-Bruhl and Freud had a Jewish background; but with one or two exceptions, whatever the background may have been, the persons whose writings have been most influential have been at the time they wrote agnostics or atheists … We should, I think, realize what was the intention of many of these scholars if we are to understand their theoretical constructions. They sought and found, in primitive religions, a weapon which could, they thought, be used with deadly effect against Christianity.[6]

That may be true of anthropologists, but people generally are unwilling to question the picture of primordial ignorance and superstition because they have mistaken or confused ideas about what religion is, what a god is, what magic and superstition are. They think religion and sorcery are objective social phenomena which any observant person can recognize when they crop up and study in a detached way. That is an initial error which, though it forms the basis of our thriving religious studies industry, makes it almost impossible to be reasonable about religion. Classical antiquity had no conception of religion, and we should have none now but for Judaism and Christianity. They are objective phenomena, and we use them as paradigms. To think rationally about religion we must recognize that, if there had never been Jews or Christians, though there might be people doing what Hindus or Buddhists do today, we should not think they had a religion. The position over magic and superstition is rather different. These are pejorative terms and we apply them to practices we think inferior to ours in one or more ways: unscientific, malignant, silly or disgusting. These theses, which I take to be not uncontroversial, are defended in Chapters 2 to 5.

Primitive societies are the stamping ground of anthropology, but the idea that history is a progress away from religion is cherished by some historians, who have then to contend with the fact that Christianity from small beginnings has come to spread over most of the earth and is now the world's most influential 'religion'.

---

[5] *Erewhon Revisited* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1926), pp. 278–80, 288–9.

[6] E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 14–15.

How could the inexorable advance of reason and social amelioration be held up by so weird an aberration? Lane Fox quotes with approval the phrase of Norman Baynes for the Emperor Constantine's religious policy: 'An erratic block which has diverted the stream of human history.'[7] From Gibbon onwards historians have tried to uncover motives of self-interest which people had for adopting Christianity whether they thought it true or not. Many people have perhaps been persuaded that this is the only kind of explanation we can accept as genuine. But the plain fact is that Europe would not have become Christian unless a lot of people had actually thought it true. In Chapter 6, I ask the questions historians dodge: what grounds, in the first millennium after Christ, had people for thinking Christian teaching true, and how rational were they?

The next assumption I examine is that reason has a special connection with science. People think that physical science is the highest achievement of reason, and that to be answerable to reason religion would have to be answerable to at least some of the tests and procedures of science. In Chapters 7 and 8 I trace the history of this idea. Reason starts by being connected with practical experience and knowing what one ought to do. Greek philosophers called attention to intellectual activities like measuring, comparing, evaluating, explaining and using inductive and deductive arguments, and reason came to be associated with them. The most primitive kind of explanation is that of human behaviour, giving people's reasons and purposes, but the Greeks introduced explaining the facts of mathematics by giving proofs and explaining natural phenomena by identifying causes. In time mathematical and causal explanation became fused or confused, and explaining by reasons and purposes, which is what religion offers, was marginalized. Finally science, having been mathematicized, became identified with viewing the world as a closed mechanical system. The result of this historical process is that people think that if God exists he would have to be a supernatural cause interfering with such a system. Some even think that, if consciousness and acting of one's own free will are to be more than an illusion, we ourselves, or our souls, must be like that too. Religious believers, it is generally supposed, believe in supernatural causal agents, whereas religious sceptics do not. To free ourselves from these ideas we must go back to the distinction between the three basic types of explanation – explaining behaviour, explaining in mathematics, and explaining causally – and also distinguish several varieties of cause. I do this in Chapters 11–14, and show what is really at issue over creation by God and over human consciousness and free will.

The reader may notice that, whereas I start by talking about religion generally, Chapters 5 and 6 concentrate on Christianity, and although we expect all religious beliefs and practices to be open to rational discussion, from Chapter 9 onwards I limit myself to Judaeo-Christianity. That is not because I think the beliefs and practices of those who are neither Jews nor Christians are inferior or unworthy of study. But Islam is presented in the Koran (for instance in 'The Table', 5.44 and ff.,) as a reformed or purified version of Judaeo-Christianity, and if the argument of Chapters 2–4 is correct, the beliefs and practices of people who do not accept the God of

[7] *Pagans and Christians*, p. 609.

Abraham are called 'religious' only because they resemble those of people who do. Moreover, writers who make out that religion is irredeemably unreasonable have their sights set primarily on the Bible. They do not write books to show that Taoism was imposed on the Chinese from motives of self-interest or that Hindu beliefs are unscientific. It is they, not I, who think these other religions are not worth powder or shot, and if we are to deal realistically with their arguments we must keep Christianity and Judaism in the front of our minds.

Christianity is sometimes described as the offspring of Athens and Jerusalem, a mixture of Greek philosophy and Jewish religion. It certainly embraced Greek philosophy and used it to justify its religious teachings, but in Chapters 9 and 10 I show that this was not an unmixed gain in rationality. From Plato it took over the doctrine that the soul is naturally immortal, which is in tension with its original message that death was conquered by Christ; and from the Stoics it derived the conception of natural law, something that led to rule-worship and irrational adherence to what are called 'moral absolutes'. Besides having these unfortunate influences on Christianity from the inside, philosophy later brought it into conflict with science by proposing a conception of truth that is tailored to fit science but cannot apply to religious beliefs. If Christian teachings appear unreasonable, part of the blame lies with philosophy: first for giving Christianity a Platonic conception of the soul and Stoic ethics, and then for making us conceive truth on the model of accurate mirroring.

Down to the end of Chapter 14 the book deals with obstacles to rational discussion which arise from confusion about the notions of religion, reason and science. I then pass to difficulties which are, so to speak, native to Jewish and Christian theology. The Old Testament offers us two conceptions of Jehovah, as the universal creator and as the partisan of the Jewish nation, defending it against its numerous enemies, cultivating it as a gardener cultivates a vine, loving it as a husband loves a bride. In Chapters 15–16 I consider how far it is possible to have a coherent concept of Jehovah, and how far the Christian doctrine of the Trinity can overcome the tension between the two Old Testament conceptions.

The central doctrine of Christianity is that we are, or can be, saved by Christ. As I point out in earlier chapters, there is an embarrassing obscurity about what he saves us from: is it sin, Hell or death? He cannot save us from death if, as Plato held, we are naturally immortal: we shall then have a life after death anyhow. Hence (as Hobbes observed in *Leviathan*) the emphasis on sin and Hell. Christians have also held, however, that life after death is a free gift which human beings can receive by sharing through Christ in the life of God, and that the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, play a integral role in this scheme. In Chapters 17–20 I show how this idea could be developed on the supposition that, in the ordinary course of nature, death is the end. This is not standard theological practice, but I think the difficulties of the traditional teaching on Hell and the Eucharist force anyone today who wants to defend the doctrines of salvation through Christ and communion with him in the Eucharist to look for something new.

The last two chapters concern the unwillingness of religious teachers to admit they might be wrong, and their claim to speak with special authority about morals.

The first reaches its extreme in the Catholic doctrine of Infallibility; the second seems particularly unreasonable if, as Hume says, 'the greatest crimes have been found, in many instances, compatible with a superstitious piety and devotion'. I show that, even if the Catholic doctrine of Infallibility is true, it still cannot make the fact that the Church teaches something a rational ground for believing it; to think it can is a simple logical fallacy. On the second point I argue that religious teachers who plead for moral 'absolutes' (that is, for rules of conduct that have no exceptions) are influenced not only by Stoic ethics but by the conception of truth as accurate mirroring, which is described in Chapter 10. Both they and their opponents think that, if statements about what is good or right are to be true, goodness and badness must be objective properties of actions in the way in which red colour and round shape are properties of a ripe tomato. The sceptics think that, since good and evil are not properties of actions in this way, statements about them cannot be either true or false; the religious teachers think that, since these statements *are* true or false, good and evil must be such objective properties. The remedy is a correct understanding of how words like 'good' and 'bad' actually function, and this is not hard to provide.

All the assumptions I discuss, paradoxical as it may seem, are really Judaeo-Christian assumptions. They are peculiar to the heirs of Athens and Jerusalem and Rome; I do not think they are held by anyone outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition in India or the far East, or even in Moslem societies today, though they were in the early days of Islamic philosophy and science. But in the post-Judaeo-Christian world they are accepted both by critics of religion and by its adherents. My criticisms of them, therefore, expose irrationality on both sides of the debate. But I think that for the most part they tell against religion; they are weapons to its assailants, encumbrances to its defenders. Hence, while my aim in the book is to say how we can be more reasonable about religion, not whether religion is reasonable or not, its conclusions are on the whole more favourable to religion than hostile.

Anthropology, history and philosophy are big subjects. If we cannot discuss religion without preconceptions taken from all three, no wonder our discussions seem to get nowhere. For who has competence in all three? Who can bring such a variety of issues into focus?

Maybe no one person today could do important original work in all these fields; ours is an age of specialists, not polymaths. But anthropologists and historians present their findings in books a non-specialist can understand, and no extraordinary qualifications are needed to criticize or ask questions. Then the deepest sources of unreason, both for defenders and for critics of religion, are philosophical – bad ethics, bad philosophy of mind, bad philosophy of science. And philosophers are supposed to be able to take overviews and bring ideas of different kinds into relation with each other. So while the task of examining the full range of assumptions and prejudices that come into play when we discuss religion is certainly ambitious, I do not think it presumptuous for a philosopher to attempt it.

# Chapter 2

# Religion

'There are no peoples, however primitive, without religion and magic.' So said Bronislaw Malinowski in 1925,[1] expressing a belief universal among anthropologists. The modern discipline of anthropology started in Victorian times with people like Sir Edward Tylor, but anthropology from the armchair had been a popular pastime among enlightened amateurs at least since the age of Voltaire and Hume.[2] Early writers, however, when they speculated about the origins of religion, did not ask what it is. Hume rushes into his *Natural History of Religion* without thinking to raise this question. And even today some theologians feel it superfluous. Thus, Jacques Dupuis offers what he calls 'a fresh general introduction to the theology of religions'[3] without any attempt to analyse the concept of a religion.[4]

Hume might have thought such an analysis a waste of time. Was there not a splendid example of religion before the eyes of eighteenth century Europeans, Christianity? Yes, but is religion simply whatever is like Christianity? Is it defined by its paradigm, as quixotism is defined by the character in Cervantes? I think most people imagine that we could define religion satsifactorily without mentioning Christianity, and then observe that Christianity fits the definition. Well, let's try. Religion is a matter of practices and beliefs. What makes a belief or a practice religious?

We might reply: 'It is religious if it has to do with a god or gods.' But then what is a god? 'Water', 'gold', 'antelope' and 'mistletoe' are words for natural substances or species, and their meaning can be explained ostensively. It is easy to tell if a word for such a thing in one language has an equivalent in another, if 'water' means the same as 'eau' or 'aqua'. We cannot do that with the word 'god'. I shall explain why in Chapter 3, but there is no need here, because the difficulty of defining religion and the impossibility of doing so simply in terms of gods are shown by the history of anthropology.

---

[1] *Science Religion and Reality*, ed. Joseph Needham (London, Sheldon Press, 1926), p. 21.

[2] Hume's *Natural History of Religion* and Voltaire's *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations*, the Introduction to which covers the same ground, appeared almost simultaneously in the 1750s.

[3] *Christianity and the Religions*, tr. Phillip Berryman (New York, Orbis, 2003), p. 1.

[4] At the end of the book he lets slip his own opinion, that 'religion and the religions (*sic*) originate in a self-manifestation of God to human beings' (p. 255); who, outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition, would dream of describing Hinduism, Taoism, Shintoism or the cult of the Olympian gods in these terms?

Tylor himself, the first Professor of Anthropology at Oxford, was content to say that religion is 'belief in spiritual beings'. This invites the questions: What is a spiritual being? Is the belief that we ourselves are spiritual beings sufficient for religion? Some people think that now – see Chapter 13 below – but materialism was not so strict in 1871, when he published *Primitive Culture*. Later writers recognize the need to say rather more carefully what they wish to discuss, and the definitions are not only strange but strangely different. Émile Durkheim declared that there is religion where and only where the contents of the whole universe are divided into two classes, sacred and profane.[5] In 1903 Lester Ward could write: 'For want of a better name I have characterized this social instinct, or instinct of race safety, as religion.'[6] Salomon Reinach lists a selection of definitions at the beginning of *Orpheus*: 'a sense of our duties as based on divine law' (Kant); 'an absolute sense of our dependence' (Schleiermacher[7]); 'a faculty of mind which enables a man to grasp the infinite independently of sense or reason' (Max Muller); 'a universal sociomorphism' (Guyau). He himself preferred (p. 3) to define it as 'a sum of scruples which impede the free exercise of our faculties'. J. Arthur Thomson, in contrast, says 'Religion has to do with an aspect of reality that is beyond science'.[8] And whereas Guyau (and Reinach) consider religion essentially social, A.N. Whitehead says that 'religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness.'[9] Whitehead is looking back to William James who in his 1901–2 Gifford Lectures declared he would use the word for 'the feelings, acts and experiences of men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themelves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine'. This might seem to exclude atheists from religion, and quite right too, but James says no: the word 'divine' must be construed widely enough to allow atheists to have a religion if they are Emersonian optimists or Zen Buddhists.[10]

In Chapter 1 I called Evans-Pritchard as a witness that anthropologists mostly consider religion an illusion. Since they disagree about what it is, we need not wonder that they give different explanations of how it arises. Max Muller traces it to a linguistic mistake: words used metaphorically become literal expressions for supernatural powers, and the breath of life becomes a living spirit that animates us. Tylor and Herbert Spencer, reviving a speculation of Hobbes (*Leviathan*, 1.12), think it arises from dreams: dream-experiences of seeing absent people or visiting distant places convince the dreamer there are supernatural beings. According to Ernest Crawley it is not dreams that are misinterpreted but mental images in waking

---

[5] *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Chapter 1, tr. J.W. Swain (London, Allen and Unwin, ND), p. 37.

[6] *Pure Sociology* (New York, Macmillan, 1903), p. 134; quoted by W. Trotter, *Instincts of the Herd* (London, Fisher Unwin, 1917). Ward adds that 'it constitutes the primordial, undifferentiated plasma out of which have subsequently developed all the more important human institutions'.

[7] In *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, Schleiermacher in fact gives a variety of characterizations of religion, all rather mystical; see J. Oman's translation, Harper and Row 1958, pp. 36, 48–9, 71.

[8] *Science and Religion* (New York, Scribners, 1925).

[9] *Religion in the Making* (Cambridge University Press, 1926), p. 16.

[10] *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London, Longmans Green, 1928), pp. 31–4.

life. Freud says the idea of God is a blown-up representation of a human father,[11] others that it is a representation of society or the tribe. The ideas anthropologists say primitive people have about gods and the souls are no stranger or more varied than the ideas they themselves have about primitive people.

Most anthropologists have assumed that there is such a thing as the essence of religion, if one could only get at it. James has some remarks on this which he forgets when he himself gets to work, but which are so sensible that it is worthwhile to quote them in full:

> The word 'religion' cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name. The theorizing mind tends always to the over-simplification of its materials. This is the root of all that absolutism and one-sided dogmatism by which both philosophy and religion have been infested. Let us not fall immediately into a one-sided view of our subject, but let us rather admit freely at the outset that we may very likely find no one essence, but many characters which may alternately be equally important in religion. If we should enquire for the essence of 'government', for example, one man might tell us it was authority, another submission, another police, another an army, another an assembly, another a system of laws; yet all the while it would be true that no concrete government can exist without all these things, one of which is more important at one moment and others at another. The man who knows governments most completely is he who troubles himself least about a definition which shall give their essence. Enjoying an intimate acquaintance with all their peculiarities in turn, he would naturally regard an abstract conception in which these were unified as a thing more misleading than enlightening. And why may not religion be a conception equally complex?[12]

James says that all the institutions he mentions are necessary for 'government' or what we might call a 'state', and his wise man has experience of many 'governments'. What this experience should have shown is that none of these institutions is strictly necessary: all that is necessary, if we are to speak of government or a state, is that a reasonable number of them should be present. The notion is held together, as Wittgenstein puts it, by 'a vast number of overlapping similarities', just as 'what ties the ship to the wharf is a rope, and a rope consists of fibres, but it does not get its strength from any fibre that runs from one end to the other, but from the fact that there is a vast number of fibres overlapping' (*Brown Book*, p. 87).

Religion is similar. There is no one thing necessary and sufficient for religion, but there are several institutions or ingredients in Judaism and Christianity: a transcendent source of the natural world called Jehovah or 'God'; feelings of respect, fear and gratitude directed towards this mysterious being; priests and rabbis; temples churches and chapels; images; ceremonies like public prayers and the Eucharist; prophets; sacred books; a belief in a life after death. There is also something which is less eye-catching but explains the divisiveness that characterizes religion. The Jews do not distinguish between being a Jew by race and being a Jew in religion, between belonging to a particular nation and worshipping a particular God. There

---

[11] *Totem and Taboo* [1912–13] in *Standard Edition*, vol. 13 (London, Hogarth Press, 1986), p. 147.

[12] *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 26–7.

is nothing comparable in other nations – being a Roman does not equate with worshipping Jupiter – though in Britain being a Catholic or a Protestant has been felt integral to belonging to old recusant or reforming families. This conflation of what we might describe as religious, political and family loyalties may have occurred with the Jews because from the end of the Babylonian captivity (539 BC) until the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans (70 AD), the period in which the books of the Old Testament took the shape they now have, the Jews were literally a hierarchical society. They were ruled by their priests and the priestly families were also the Jewish nobility. But whatever the cause, this identification of having Jehovah as the one God and belonging to a particular race or nation had the consequence that Judaism and after it Christianity are both enormously important to their adherents and highly intolerant. Worshipping anyone other than Jehovah seems a betrayal of one's country, one's national traditions, one's very blood. None of these ingredients of Judaeo-Christianity is essential to religion, but if a sufficient number of them is present we say 'Look! Religion!'[13]

What is a sufficient number? That is for each of us to decide. The eighteenth century was well read in classical literature, and did not doubt that the ancient Greeks and Romans had religion. They clearly had priests and priestesses, temples and mysterious persons like Zeus and Aphrodite, the immortal inhabitants of Olympus. Enlightenment writers like Gibbon preferred emphasizing Mohammed's pagan background to his acceptance of the Torah and the Gospels, but the Moslem world to the east and south of Europe with its mosques, public prayers, imams and mullahs manifestly had a religion of some sort. Educated Europeans returning home from the East reported similar institutions in India and China; no prophets but temples containing statues of mysterious beings, and also nuns, temple prostitutes and virgin priestesses. As field work in remote places became safer, travelling anthropologists easily assured themselves of religion in the darkest rain forests and the most delightful Pacific islands.

I am suggesting that we today group together the institutions I have mentioned and, on the basis of that grouping, believe there is such a thing as religion and look for it in other societies, because of the influence on our society of Judaism and Christianity. This runs so counter to what most people think that it may be hard to grasp. People think that religions are like dogs. There are differences, of course, between English dogs such as collies, the sledge-pulling dogs of northern Canada and Chinese dogs such as pekineses, but still they are all dogs, and it is like that with Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism, they are different but all religions.[14] I am suggesting that religions are more like dukes. Dukes are very important in England: they have (or had until recently) castles, vast estates and a big say in the legislature. So we imagine other countries must have dukes too. The French, in fact,

---

[13] So William P. Alston in Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London and New York, 1967), vol. 7, s.v. 'Religion'.

[14] Nicholas Lash suggests that, instead of calling them 'religions', we should call them 'schools' for 'weaning us from our idolatry and purefying our desire' (*The Beginning and End of Religion*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, chs 1–2), but I am not convinced that under the change of nomenclature there is a radical change in thinking.

have dukes very like ours. The Russians had Grand Dukes who are not quite like English dukes, but still dukes of a sort. Translators of Chinese novels give the title of duke to high officials of the Imperial Court, but T'sai Ching the Duke of Lu in *The Golden Lotus*[15] is quite a different sort of grandee from Trollope's old Duke of Omnium. The word 'duke' comes from *dux*, the Latin word for a general, so if every society has to have dukes we might count generals in South American republics as dukes, and since dukes and archbishops are both addressed as 'your grace', in the sovereign German cities on the Rhine the archbishops were dukes. But of course every society does not have to have dukes. It is absurd to look for dukes among the Inuit or in the African rain forest. The notion of a duke we have in England can be extended to some alien societies, but after a while extending it becomes useless and confusing, and a Ming dynasty author would have no concept like ours at all.

The concept of a religion is more complex than that of a duke, and its source is harder to discern, but philology warns us against taking religion as a natural kind. There is no word in ancient Greek equivalent to our 'religion': the nearest words are 'fear of demons', *deisidaimonia*, 'cult', *threskeia*, and 'piety' or 'devotion', *eusebeia.* Herodotus' *History* was written in the fifth century BC and contains the earliest anthropology that has come down to us. Herodotus describes what he calls the *nomoi*, the laws or customs, of various nations (though not, unfortunately, the Jews) and under this heading mentions gods, temples and priests. But he has no word to distinguish *nomoi* we should count as religious from those concerning sex, property or political organization. All, for him, are simply *nomoi*, and a *nomos* is just something that varies from nation to nation, as distinct from something rooted in human nature, *phusis*, which is the same everywhere. The first-century Jewish writers Philo and Josephus follow Herodotus. When they want to talk about what we should call their 'religion', they talk about their ancestral, God-given laws and customs, *nomoi* and *ethe*: these are what distinguish Jews from gentiles and what they want freedom to maintain. See, for instance, Philo, *Embassy*, 115, 117, 200, 210, 236, 362; Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book 16 sections 36 and 41–5; *Apion*, Book 1 sections 43 and 190–1.

Latin possesses the word *religio* but it does not mean the same as our 'religion'. It was sometimes used for a kind of inhibition or fear we should now count as religious. When Lucretius says that *religio* leads to crime he probably means this kind of fear rather than religion in our sense. Since the eighteenth century a number of people have thought that what is central to religion is religious feeling, but different feelings are emphasized by German thinkers like Kant, American intellectuals like James, and English divines, and ancient Roman *religio* does not coincide with any of them. We should hesitate to assume that it coincides with any feeling recognized by us now. The Greek words *aidos* and *nemesis* pick out feelings or states of mind we do not recognize.

In the Middle Ages *religio* was often used for life in a religious order, the life of a monk, nun or friar. Aquinas rather surprisingly treats it as a word for state of

---

[15] Attributed to Wang Shih-cheng (died 1593); tr. Clement Egerton (London, George Routledge, 1939).

character, a disposition to render God his due (*Summa Theologiae*, 2a 2ae, q. 81. a.2). The beliefs and practices of Christians, Jews and Moslems were distinguished from one another, but not from beliefs and practices that were not religious at all. The separating out and labelling of the religious dimension of life hardly go back beyond the seventeenth century. And it was occasioned at least partly by resentment of the privileges and pretensions of the clergy. Our concept of religion owes a good deal to critics like Hobbes, Voltaire and Hume. The paradigm for it is not just Christianity but what they disliked in it.

The concept of religion is quite modern; what of the thing itself? The Jewish *nomoi* Christian converts retained date back at least to classical antiquity, and there were customs similar enough in Persia, Greece and Rome to justify speaking of Persian, Greek and Roman religion. But Judaism flourished and Christianity arose in highly civilized societies: is there any reason to think there must be analogues to them where there is no literacy, social inequality or machinery of law enforcement?

Hobbes thought that religion arises from curiosity about the causes of natural phenomena, and that this curiosity is part of 'the nature of man' and therefore universal (*Leviathan*, ch. 12). Hume objected that primitive man 'has no leisure to admire the regular face of nature, or make enquiries concerning the causes of those objects to which from his infancy he has been gradually accustomed. On the contrary, the more regular and uniform, that is, the more perfect nature appears, the more he is familiarized to it and the less inclined to scrutinize and examine it' (*Natural History of Religion*, s.1). It is Hume's armchair speculations that explorers confirm. When Hobbes's contemporary Jean de Brébeuf went to evangelize the Canadian Hurons he found they had never asked themselves the cause of the earth or the sky; and he also found that they had 'neither temples nor priests nor festivals nor any ceremonies'.[16] What about gods? They had a legendary woman called Eataensis or Aataensis whom Brébeuf counts as a god, but he admits she was 'human and corporeal'. Francis Xavier found a comparable innocence in Central Sulawesi. The people, he reported, have 'no temples, no idols or false priests to hold the inhabitants in heathenism. They adore the sun at its rising, and that is the extent of their religion' (J. Broderick, *Saint Francis Xavier*, London, Burns Oates 1951, p. 241).

Religion among primitive people is partly, perhaps almost entirely, the result of projection. The tendency of anthropologists to project their own gods on the societies they investigate is already manifest in Herodotus. Without a trace of self-consciousness he projects the gods and temples, or rather the *theoi* and *hiera*, of Greece on the non-Greek nations he describes. Egypt, Persia and Syria were fairly easy; barbaric Scythians in the direction of Russia were more difficult, but he happily gives them gods with Greek names, Zeus, Ares and so on, and where there is nothing better available, describes large piles of brushwood as temples (*Histories*, 4.59, 62). Julius Caesar does likewise when describing the 'customs' of the Gauls (*Gallic War*, 6.11, 16–17). Caesar says the Germans were innocent of religion

---

[16] *Travels and sufferings of Father Jean de Brébeuf*, tr. Theodore Besterman (Golden Cockerel Press, 1938), pp. 39–40.

(*Gallic War*, 6.21), but Tacitus finds this intolerable and projects on them Mercury, Hercules and Mars (*Germania*, s.9). Their paradigms were the Olympians; for thinkers of the Enlightenment the paradigm was Jehovah, but they project just as recklessly. Hume begins his *Natural History of Religion* by surmising that 'the belief of invisible, intelligent power' may perhaps not have 'been so universal as to admit of no exception. … Some nations have been discovered, who entertained no sentiments of religion, if travellers and historians may be credited.' But *can* they be credited? A page or two later Hume tells us that, 'If a traveller were to transport himself into any unknown region', and found the inhabitants 'ignorant and barbarous' then without making further inquiry 'he might beforehand declare them idolaters; and there is scarcely a possibility of his being mistaken'.

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Chapter 3

# Gods

If Judaeo-Christianity is our paradigm for religion, the Judaeo-Christian God is our paradigm for a god. When we say that every society has gods we mean every society has something analogous to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But there is a difference. We think that if anything is to be a religion it must have a fair number, as I said, of the features of Judaism and Christianity, and when biblical writers attributed gods to the Babylonians, the Egyptians and others, it is probably on the grounds that these other nations do have beings that more or less resemble Jehovah. But once the practice of attributing religions to other societies has established itself, this condition is relaxed; gods are no longer required to have even a few of the features of Jehovah.

Let us take a brief survey of the things reckoned as gods by anthropologists, and let us start with a society that is well known to us, ancient Greece. I have mentioned the Olympians, and Zeus and Pallas Athene do indeed seem rather like Jehovah; they are immortal persons with emotions like ours. But the Greeks also paid divine honours to dead human beings such as founders of cities and lawgivers, and even to living men like Alexander the Great and the Roman Emperors. Sophocles calls a plague a god (*Oedipus Tyrannus*, 28). The author of the Book of Wisdom points out (12.12) that Hellenistic philosophers applied the concept of a god to basic kinds of matter like fire and air. As late as in the fifth century after Christ men of learning were applying it to the sun, the moon and the stars, so that the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of creation seemed to them blasphemous. And simpler Greeks applied the concept to the sea.

Outside of Greece and Rome, Cicero observes that the Syrians applied it to fish, and the Egyptians to 'nearly every kind of beast' (*On the Nature of the Gods*, 3.15). Zoroastrians, as Herodotus knew, worship fire. The Chinese thought their emperor divine and it is said that some Japanese still think that theirs is. The Spanish understood the Mexicans to believe Montezuma 'a sort of god or *Teule*', though he tried to disabuse them of this idea.[1] In modern times missionaries and anthropologists have credited primitive people with amazing deities. In the Pacific they had no scruples about translating *etua* or *atua* as 'god'. Missionaries to the Marquesans reported that they had innumerable gods, 'one for every island, one for every fisherman,'[2] and not only that but for every disease and every remedy, a goddess of

---

[1] Bernal Diaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, tr. J.M. Choen (London, Folio Society, 1974), p. 194.

[2] Greg Dening, *Islands and Beaches, Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas 1774–1880* [1980] (Chicago, Dorsey Press, ND), pp. 166–8.

syphilis, a god for recovery from syphilis and so forth. In New Caledonia, Ta'unga reported, 'The gods of the young boys are the right hands of their fathers – so that they may become competent fighters when they grow to manhood. Even the young girls have gods. They are the fingernails of their mothers. … The warriors also have gods in the form of the teeth of their deceased chief and their deceased parents. They extract the teeth and divide them among the warriors, and each of them puts his share into his own "war basket"'.[3] The African Pygmies, according to Colin Turnbull in *The Forest People*,[4] have the rain forest as their god.

Is any justification possible for applying the same word 'god' to all these things? They seem to fall into two disparate groups. There are those that exist but are not divine, like fire, the Emperor, the rain forest, and those that are divine but do not exist, like Zeus, Quetzacotl and Bunjil. (Bunjil, Durkheim tells us on the authority of Australian field-workers,[5] has several wives, lighted the sun and made men out of clay.) What do we mean here by 'divine'? Not gods, since ex hypothesi the notion of a god applies to both groups. Perhaps, then, supernatural?

Strictly speaking, 'supernatural' ought to mean 'above what is natural', 'superior to the natural order'. The concept of a natural order, an order of nature, is a sophisticated one. The first recorded attempt to define it was made by Aristotle and it is doubtful whether any society has had it that has not been influenced by Greek philosophical thought. There is an informal, negative notion of the natural, according to which a phenomenon is natural unless it has something about it that makes it special, unless it is an artifact, for instance, or a human institution. But in most people even today this notion is quite unconscious. Primitive people do not have an idea of an order of nature, and therefore cannot think that anything is superior to it. *We* have the idea of such an order, and if we are not too sanctimonious about morals we might say that Zeus is superior to it, but that is not how Homer conceived him. Homer rather conceived gods as superior beings *within* the natural order. He did not think they violated natural laws and went outside what is naturally possible. Their immortality, he says, arose naturally from their diet – nectar and ambrosia instead of bread and wine. 'That is why they are bloodless and are called immortal' (*Iliad*, 5.342). By our standards Zeus and Aphrodite are impossible, and so are ghosts, vampires and demons, but those who believed in them thought they were as much part of the universe as ordinary animals and plants. The only god (apart, perhaps, from Ahura Mazdah) who is supposed to be outside the universe altogether is Jehovah. And this makes it a question whether Jehovah should really be included among gods. Far from being the paradigm of a god, perhaps he is not a god at all.

The concept of a god we use when we say 'Every society has gods' has two sources. Besides the paradigmatic figure of Jehovah there is the classical Greek word *theos*. Although the Greeks applied it to many sorts of thing, I think we can detect something that holds the variety together. 'There are other things much more

---

[3] *The Works of Ta'unga, Records of a Polynesian Traveller in the South Seas, 1833–1896*, ed. R.G. and Marjorie Crocombe (Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1968), ch. 11, pp. 9–101.

[4] London, Reprint Society, 1963.

[5] *Elementary Forms*, ch. 9, s.4.

divine in nature than man', says Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*, *6*, 1141a34–b2), 'of which the most obvious are those of which the cosmos consists'. For the Greeks, a god was something in nature superior to us, and gods are heterogeneous because there are many different ways of being superior.

The heavenly bodies are superior because they are eternal, or at least show no signs of coming into being and ceasing to be. Fire does light up and die out; but it is superior to us because it is is pure and simple and in its simple way more alive. Kings are not pure or simple, and are born and die; but they are superior to us because they embody or express society. A plague is superior to us in that it is more powerfully destructive than a man unequipped with modern weapons of mass destruction. As to the more problematic gods, besides being stronger than we they were all, in Greek thought, immortal. Mortality is among the most lamentable weaknesses to which we are heir, and anything superior to death is a god.

If gods are things in the world superior to human beings, Jews and Christians are the atheists their contemporaries took them to be. Not only is Jehovah not something in the universe; Jews and Christians are unwilling to believe that anything in the universe is superior to us. Obviously cats and crocodiles are inferior. Fire and the stars are stupid, inanimate beings; the longevity of the stars and the activity of fire are merely vulgar. Nor are kings better than ordinary people unless Jehovah anoints them. As for Zeus and Osiris, they are mere fictions, lower than the lowest creature that actually exists.

The unwillingness of Jews and Christians to believe anything in nature is superior to us can be traced back to the first chapter of Genesis: we, and we alone, are made in the image of Jehovah. But if for a moment we try to stand apart both from the believers in Jehovah and from the Greeks, we might say that the things in nature the Greeks thought superior to men are things where a Jew or Christian might think the supernatural touches the natural, things that glow with God's proximity.

The regular movements of the heavenly bodies exemplify the obedience of the world to the Creator's will in one way; the fundamental forces exemplify it in another. Creation flows, so to speak, through the fundamental forces, while the heavens proclaim its constant, law-like character. And to people without much science, the fundamental forces may seem typified by fire and water: they are sources of life in other things, and appear to have a kind of life themselves. Then to those who live in the rain forest, the forest seems to provide all life and nourishment somewhat as a source of nature would; while to the rest of us who live more in the open, the Sun plays such a role. As for the human beings the Greeks thought divine, law-givers, founders of cities, heads of state, even poets and physicians like Aesculapius, they can be thought of as carrying on the work of creation. Civilization, as words like 'cultivation' indicate, is a raising of human life above the savage level and a creator might do this, not by a direct fiat, 'Let there be arts and laws and civil institutions', but through the channels of human intelligence, altruism and social feeling. So what is divine in the Greek sense reaches up towards the Jewish conception of divinity.

This rationalization for projecting our idea of a god onto other people will not work in every case. It is easier to believe those missionaries to the Marquesas who

complained that the inhabitants had no religious ideas at all and could not be made to grasp any of the fundamental concepts of Christianity, than those who credited them with gods for every disease and every recovery from disease. Ta'unga was surely wrong to reckon the relics New Caledonians carried round with them as their gods. Ignorant primitive people need all their intelligence for getting through seasons of scarcity, bringing up their children and surviving. They may, like Brébeuf's Hurons (*Travels*, p. 111), have respect for certain large stones, but we should expect people to come nearer to belief in gods the more leisure they have and the more social organization.

There is a further consideration. We are told that the earliest human beings believed in gods and demons, and that the history of progress is the history of the gradual elimination of these non-existent beings. But we are also told that human beings evolved out of other animals, and that it is a mistake to imagine there is a difference in kind between human and animal rationality. So surely animals should have religious beliefs, and even absurder ones than primitive human beings. But it is never suggested that animals, even the most sagacious animals like chimpanzees, have any religious beliefs at all. They have beliefs, certainly, language possibly, they can adapt means to ends and use tools, but they have no gods or demons. Why not? Because they are too stupid? But among us, belief in gods and demons is the clearest sign of primitive stupidity there is. Because they are too clever? Certainly animals are cleverer than we in many ways, but how did the first human beings lose the cleverness they should have inherited from their non-human forebears? We need a new theory of the Fall of Man. Perhaps some male, against the advice of his mate, ate the fruit of the Tree of Theology.

Animals do have beliefs about human beings. Such beliefs extend quite far down the scala naturae: maybe not to earthworms or woodlice, but sheep and cows surely have expectations of us. Are they the animal equivalent of our religious beliefs? I have not seen this suggested anywhere in print, and there is a difficulty. Animals may have some false beliefs about us, but their beliefs are not completely groundless. Human beings do exist and interfere constantly in animals' lives. Why should we have beliefs about gods if gods do not exist? Is there some advantage to primitive people to have the illusion that there are beings superior to them, and is that why they have these beliefs? If so, that is different from the explanation of why animals believe in human beings, for their beliefs are advantageous just insofar as they are not illusions.

This point may be pressed further. The philosopher A.C. Grayling says that 'the occurrence of supernaturalistic beliefs is best explained by the way brains work';[6] they have 'specialist systems that operate at deep levels of brain structure', and continues, 'Culture is not merely an epiphenomenal outcome of lower-level computational systems in human brains, but in part at least is the result of feedback upon those systems by the high-level concepts and practices that earlier mental activity produced'. These sonorous words seem to imply that religion is inevitable. But whatever may happen at these deep levels of brain structure, in general we expect

[6] *What is Good?* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003), pp. 74–5.

the characteristics of a species to help it to survive. False beliefs militate against survival, especially when they give rise to practices which have no advantage if the beliefs are false. The belief that reality is controlled by 'invisible intelligent' agents that can be influenced only by time-consuming and expensive rituals of prayer and sacrifice, such a belief, if false, must be an appalling handicap. One would have thought that in these Darwinian days it would be incredible that a species should evolve at all, much less come to dominate the world, that started with such a disadvantage.

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Chapter 4

# Magic

Besides gods, primitive societies are all supposed to have had magic. That is what completes the primal darkness, the *tohu* and *bohu*, which nineteenth century anthropologists transferred from the first chapter of Genesis to the evolution of the human species. But if wherever we find religion we find magic or sorcery and vice versa,[1] how are we to distinguish them? On this anthropologists disagree. According to Frazer, magic came first: he speaks of 'that Age of Magic which appears to have everywhere preceded the Age of Religion'.[2] Salomon Reinach takes the opposite view. Magic, 'a false science' but 'the mother of all true sciences', was developed as an auxiliary against 'the thousand spiritual forces' of religion which were already imprisoning mankind.[3] But Freud puts them both right: religion and magic go 'hand in hand'; magic is not, as Reinach thought, the first stirring of a revolt against religion but simply 'its technique'.[4] Durkheim, born a year or two after Freud, is uneasy at the idea of collaboration. He stresses 'the marked repugnance of religion for magic, and, in return, the hostility of the second towards the first'.[5] It is essential for religion, according to Durkheim, to unite believers in a church, whereas magic is essentially an affair of individuals (pp. 43–7). But most anthropologists side with Freud. 'In Egypt', W.J. Perry informs us, 'magic and religion were inseparable';[6] throughout the whole of Oceania 'magical powers are invariably ascribed to gods and culture-heroes'.[7] In the global can of supernatural worms, sorcery and religious belief appear inextricably interwined. But in fact there is an important difference which escapes the notice of these learned men.

The belief that every society has crazy religious beliefs has already been explained. Anthropologists project their own discarded ideas on other people. And missionaries who have heeded the call to 'preach to all nations' find it easier, when they try to bring their religion to an alien society, to suppose that the alien society has an alternative, false religion than that it has none. But this explanation will not work for sorcery. For while Judaeo-Christianity contains paradigms of a God, priests and temples, it contains no paradigm of magic. Attempts have been made to find paradigms and the Witch of Endor and Simon Magus have been dragged into

---

[1] I follow the common practice of using these words as synonyms, though I note below the different meanings Freud gives them.

[2] *The Dying God* [*The Golden Bough*, Part III], (London, Macmillan, 1919), p. 2.

[3] *Orpheus*, p. 21.

[4] *Totem and Taboo*, p. 78.

[5] *Elementary Forms*, p. 43.

[6] *The Children of the Sun* (New York, Dutton ND [1923]), p. 397.

[7] Ibid., p. 403.

the limelight, but magicians were not an integral part either of Jewish or of early Christian society. Why, then, should other societies contain them? Whence our assurance that in other societies belief in sorcery is ubiquitous?

Well, what is sorcery? It is interesting that R.F. Fortune wrote an influential book in the 1930s entitled *Sorcerers of Dobu*[8] without ever raising this question. The concept 'sorcery' expresses is not one that exists in the societies to which it is applied. In that respect it is like the broader concept of superstition. Nobody says (except in light self-depreciation) 'I am superstitious'; '*They* are superstitious' is what outsiders say about us. Similarly, in societies where sorcery is supposed to flourish, nobody thinks that he himself or anyone else is a sorcerer; no word used in the society has the same meaning as the word 'magic', or whatever it may be, used by the anthropologist. The word used by the Azande, *ngua*, which Evans-Pritchard translated as 'magic', actually, as he admits, means something like 'botany'. But anthropologists amateur or professional from outside mark off certain beliefs and practices as magical.

Distinct from sorcery, but still more important in their lives, the Azande have witchcraft. They believe, Evans-Pritchard tells us, that some people are witches.

> I had no difficulty in discovering what Azande think about witchcraft. … Every Zande is an authority about witchcraft. There is no need to consult specialists. There is not even need to question Azande about it, for information flows freely from recurrent situations in their social life, and one has only to watch and listen.[9]

But what is this witchcraft which is a subject of daily discussion? Evans-Pritchard uses 'witchcraft' to translate *mangu*, which actually signifies 'a material substance in the bodies of certain persons. It is discovered by autopsy in the dead' (p. 226). That is certainly not what 'witchcraft' signifies in English and, as Evans-Pritchard warns us, to speak of *mangu* as being for the Azande 'a supernatural agency hardly reflects their own view of the matter, since from their point of view nothing could be more natural' (*Theories of Primitive Religion*, p. 110). The Azande do not think they have magic in our sense of the word.

Valerie Flint starts her excellent study of magic in early medieval Europe with the definition: 'Magic may be said to be the exercise of a preternatural control over human beings, with the assistance of forces more powerful than they.'[10] Conscious, like Durkheim, of tensions between magic and religion, and not wishing to distinguish them by means of the notion of a church, she says that religion involves respect for preternatural powers while magic seeks to control or manipulate them (p. 8). The crucial word here is 'preternatural', which means 'contrary to' or at least 'outside of the natural order'. As I said in Chapter 3, the concept of an order of nature seems to emerge only in classical Greece and would have been still strange to the barbaric magicians of the early Middle Ages and their rustic clientele. Tylor

---

[8] Paperback edition, New York, Dutton, 1963.

[9] *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1950), p. 21.

[10] *The Rise of Magic in Early Mediaeval Europe* (Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 3.

in his article on magic in *The Encyclopedia Britannica* (ninth edition) offers a definition which at first might seem to express a concept everyone could share. 'The word magic is still used, as in the ancient world, to include a confused mass of beliefs and practices, hardly agreeing except in being beyond those ordinary actions of cause and effect which men accustomed to their regularity have come to regard as merely natural.' But what men? Modern Europeans or Stone Age survivals? Not the Azande, if Evans-Pritchard is to be believed. And what concepts of cause and effect are common to both?

I said that there is an unconscious negative notion of the natural according to which something is natural if there is nothing that stops it from being natural. The most obvious alternative to being natural is being artificial, being produced by deliberate human intervention and skill. Anthropology needs a different way of not being natural, which depends on the modern concept of a physical law. A phenomenon is natural for anthropologists if it can in principle be explained in accordance with the laws of physics and chemistry, whether or not scientists have yet come up with the explanation. Natural forces are forces that are described in these laws, and act according to them. Armed with these notions we can define the preternatural as what is outside the natural order in this sense: what is not under the rule of physical laws and perhaps even violates them. A sorcerer is one who manipulates forces the effects of which cannot in principle be explained as our scientists explain rainbows, eclipses and the movements of billiard balls. And of course sorcery is bunk because there are no such forces. People who believe in magic think there are, but that is just the measure of their ignorance.

The eighteenth-century Enlightenment was equipped with these notions, and so was nineteenth-century anthropology; but how many simple Melanesians distinguish between what can and what cannot be explained by Galileo-Newtonian physics? How many Esquimeaux or Pygmies, how many Druids, how many German or Scandinavian barbarians to whom missionaries were sent in the Dark Ages? If magic is conceived in terms of a contrast between what can and what cannot be explained in accordance with some sort of physical law, and it is a mark of being primitive to have no concept of physical laws at all, then the concept of magic can be applied to primitive societies by anthropologists from outside, but it cannot be employed even unconsciously by members of those societies.

Freud, though he does not separate magic sharply from religion, does draw a sharp distinction between magic and sorcery, and he defines both without explicit appeal to concepts of physical science. He defines sorcery as 'the art of influencing spirits by treating them in the same way as one would treat men in like circumstances' (*Totem and Taboo*, p. 78). This is how Samuel Johnson defines both sorcery and magic (which he treats as synonymous): 'The art of putting in action the power of spirits',[11] and Professor Flint's definition is doubtless influenced by this tradition. But magic proper as distinct from sorcery, according to Freud, 'disregards spirits and makes use of special procedures and not of everyday psychological methods'

[11] Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, revised by H.J. Todd, London 1818.

(p. 78). The 'special procedures' rely either on similarity, as when the magician uses images, or on contiguity, as when nail-clippings are pressed into service. It is natural that one more at home with the couch than with the test-tube should contrast these procedures with respectable psychology instead of with respectable physics, but that relying on similarity and contiguity is bad *physical* science is what, of course, makes these procedures 'special'. As for spirits, Freud does not define them but clearly (see pp. 75–6) conceives them as purposive agents not known to reputable zoology. Although his distinction, then, between magic and sorcery is independent of any special notion of physical science, to mark off either of them from respectable practices he relies on nineteenth-century concepts of psychology, zoology and so on.

A number of modern thinkers have felt embarrassment at attributing to the earliest human beings a whole system of false and irrational beliefs. But if magic is not such a system, what is it? R.G. Collingwood deserves credit for criticizing those anthropologists who, as he puts it, conceived magic as pseudo-science:

> It was excusable in Locke to classify savages with idiots as a kind of persons incapable of logical thinking, for Locke and his contemporaries knew practically nothing about them. But it was very far from excusable in nineteenth century anthropologists. … A man who can grasp the relation of causes and effects sufficiently to make a hoe out of crude iron ore is not the scientific imbecile that [E.B.] Tylor's theory, and the grotesque elaborations it has received at the hands of French psychologists, would lead us to believe.[12]

There speaks English common sense. But what positive theory does Collingwood offer us?

He suggests that magic is the art of arousing emotion. No doubt a lot of magic has that effect and is at least unconsciously intended to have it. The same may be said of a lot of reputable medical practice, and Collingwood's theory fits not only the medicine of so-called witch-doctors, but also war dances and much so-called magic connected with agriculture. Today workmen like working to music from the radio; in a more primitive society potentially monotonous tasks can be brightened by singing or 'incantation'.

Collingwood could have strengthened his theory by adverting to the modern growth of individualism. In primitive societies people tackle tasks like hunting, washing and harvesting together, whereas today mechanization and our liberal culture make this unusual. Some practices counted as magical foster emotions that belong to small, closely knit societies. Academics since Collingwood have become more conscious of the importance of society in shaping thought, and Mary Douglas claims that ritual generally, whether religious or magical, has an intellectual, as distinct from an emotional, function. It 'formulates experience', 'creates and controls experience', 'permits knowledge of what would not otherwise be known at all'. That is, it generates concepts of social relations, roles, obligations by symbolizing and articulating them.[13]

---

[12] *The Principles of Art* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 59.

[13] *Purity and Danger* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 64–5, cf. pp. 2, 22.

Still it is hard to believe that even this gives us the whole story. One objection is that it ignores (to borrow a term from grammar) the 'marked' character of sorcery, the fact that, at least sometimes and partly, it is defined *against* something.

Professor Flint's study is helpful here. She notes that magic was disreputable in the ancient world before the advent of Christianity, and comments on a passage in Apuleius: 'Clearly magic is maliciously manipulative. It connotes the dark and the alone, and it connives at the unjust' (p. 15). Sorcery is marked off from unmarked or acceptable skills sometimes by being malignant, *maleficus*. It typically causes sickness, death and destruction. But not invariably. The malefic is just one strand. I should like to suggest that sorcery is like a plant in that there are certain soils which favour it and a certain season at which it likes to grow.

All human beings understand how to produce certain desired effects and prevent certain obnoxious ones. They explain to their children or their apprentices by what action upon what you can make a pot or heal a wound. And they also understand the purposive behaviour of human beings and animals. The fox, they say, came *in order to eat the hens*; my sister did not come *because her child was sick*. They explain such behaviour in terms of reasons and purposes. But the difference in character between these two sorts of explanation is not easily put into words by illiterate people. The taxonomy of explanations has no obvious practical value in itself and would be quite alien to people uninfluenced by ancient Greek thought. And of course there are many things such lucky innocents do not try to explain in either fashion, or in any way at all. They do not ask why the angle in a semicircle is a right angle, why baking clay makes it hard or why animals act to avoid pain and death.

Not only is the distinction beween the two primitive modes of explanation hard to articulate; there are areas where it is unclear which is appropriate. Medicine is the most obvious of such areas today. We do not know how far health, mental or bodily, depends on psychological factors; nor, therefore, are we sure how the success or failure of medical treatment is to be explained. Interpersonal feelings including sexual attraction and antipathy are another area. Though we now talk of 'chemistry' between people, that is just a tribute to the prevailing intellectual fashion for physicalism. Then there is the rearing of domestic animals and the training of hounds, elephants and so on; few people now engage in these primitive pursuits, so it is hardly a live issue with us how far results are due to physical and how far to psychological factors, but the division is certainly unclear. And in the past the growing of plants seems to have been another area. To this day, few people would care to say why seeds grow into wheat-plants or acorns into oaks; the result cannot be explained simply by our action in planting them. It is doubtful if R.F. Fortune's six months among the people of Dobu added anything to human knowledge at all, since he started not knowing a word of their language, he seems to have had no sense of humour, and the Dobuans thought it bad manners ever to contradict anything said to them. But if he did discover anything it was that they thought psychological factors relevant to horticulture. He was told: 'Yams are persons, with ears. If we charm, they hear.' And next day his informant 'showed me the ears, organs of hearing, the several tendril buds about the growing point of the vine'. In case we ourselves should be led astray Fortune warns us, 'The growing

point buds are no more ears than an ear of corn is an organ of hearing'. But the silly islanders, he thinks, could not grasp this: 'In Dobu the ears of the vine are most literally organs of hearing.' Why, he asked, did they charm some plants and not others? 'Seedling yams', said Kinosi, doubtless with a very straight face, 'are as men. They have understood. One says "That there he charms. What about me?" O, he is angry and he shoots up strongly.'[14] No English gardener would speak quite like this; but Rosanna James, wife of a Professor of Medicine at the University of Newcastle, achieved Pseuds' Corner in *Private Eye* by saying that the most important consideration in placing plants was not how they look but that they should be happy.

Magic flourishes in areas where expertise is sought and it is unclear whether success or failure is due more to physical or to psychological factors. What is its growing season? It grows strongly when concepts of physical or material explanations are still rudimentary. It is not immediately obvious that the workings of nature are mathematical or even strictly regular, and people may have no general schema for understanding why their own actions have or do not have a desired effect. And I suspect magic is encouraged by the advent of literacy. The power of the written word is an obvious fact but at the same time mysterious, and may lead people to experiment not only with written charms and curses but also with spoken words like 'abracadabra'[15] that would not have existed but for writing. Literacy opens new dimensions for what we now call 'superstition'. The society described in the *Iliad* seems to be equally innocent of books and of magic. E.R. Dodds says that between the Homeric and the classical periods of ancient Greece there was 'an increased resort to magical procedures'. He surmises that this is 'a reappearance of old culture-patterns which the common folk had never wholly forgotten'.[16] But this seems to be just an expression of faith in the doctrine that all primitive people grovel in superstition. He feels that Homer tries to cover this up: 'There is good reason to believe that the epic poets ignored or minimized many beliefs and practices that existed in their day' (ibid.) but we are not told what this good reason is.

And how, in such areas and at such times, do we outsiders mark off magic from ordinary, unexceptionable skill? One thing is malignance, as Professor Flint suggests. Another is bad associations. The sorcerer is unqualified in the medicine of Galen or Hippocrates, unlicensed by the Institute of Psychoanalysis. He does not believe in the four humours or practise phlebotomy. Or his teachers are Druids or heretics or have other irrelevant but false beliefs. Or his methods are traditional among political separatists. Or they involve things we outsiders think disreputable, things like blood or sex.

Sorcerers according to Freud and others are believed to operate through demons: the sorcerer influences a demon psychologically, by giving it a reason to act, and the

---

[14] *Sorcerers of Dobu*, ch. 2, s.3.

[15] See David Ogden, 'Binding spells, curse tablets and voodoo dolls in the Greek and Roman worlds', in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe, Volume 2, Greece and Rome*, Valerie Flint and others, London, Athlone Press, 1999.

[16] *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1951), p. 45.

demon produces death or destruction or sexual desire by unseen causal action. This fits the nineteenth-century picture well. Demons, like gods, are preternatural agents falsely believed to exist. But demonology is not an exact science. If it is hard to find a unitary concept of a god that applies to all the gods anthropologists detect in alien societies, it is still harder to find a criterion for distinguishing gods and demons. The word 'demon' comes from the Greek *daimon*, but the ideas expressed by that word changed even in classical antiquity. The Judaeo-Christian concept of a bad or fallen angel was a fresh contribution, and it is doubtful how far a notion with this parentage will help us to understand the beliefs or practices of societies untouched by either Greek civilization or by Judaism.

Dodds assures us that 'the daemonic, as distinct from the divine, has at all periods played a large part in Greek popular belief (and still does)'.[17] Demons are certainly not prominent, however, in Homer; A.D. Nock finds 'the first definite theory of *daimones*' in Plato's *Symposium*;[18] and even Dodds concedes that between the times of Homer and Aeschylus demons 'grow more persistent, more insidious, more sinister' (p. 41). They multiply in the upper air, the space between the moon and the earth, during the Hellenistic period. They seem to have been welcomed by Christians, and projected, with value added, onto pagan societies. Pagans have gods, but there is only one real God, Jehovah, so as a compromise, a kind of act of courtesy, Christians say the pagans worship demons. Christians are accustomed to ask God and the saints to help them get well and achieve virtuous objectives; so when (alas) they want to harm their enemies or succeed in evil designs they may look for help from other non-human agents.

Perhaps Christians have not merely projected demons on more primitive societies, but actually exported them. They are technologically ahead of the primitive societies they discover in their explorations, so the primitive people tend to take them at their word and try to imitate their ways of thinking. If missionaries tell credulous savages they believe in evil spirits, they may think they do; but before the Europeans reach them, do societies with rain-dances and planting and reaping songs believe that demons make the clouds come or the plants grow? Dr Johnson made fun of Rousseau for idealizing primitive men; perhaps later Europeans have demonized them in more ways than one. Roy Willis tells us that the concept of an innate capacity to inflict supernatural harm, now expressed by *uloozi*, 'does not exist in indigenous Lungu thought', and that the idea of *majini*, evil spirits sent by *muloozi*, sorcerers, to attack people 'has emerged in Zambian Ulungu in the past thirty years … just after Zambian independence in 1963'.[19] Colourful primitive beliefs can spring up quite quickly under the influence of European fertilizer. Nowadays Lungu thought accommodates 'a large cow's horn decorated with coloured beads … [that] could carry up to five sorcerers for long distances such as to the Copperbelt or Lusaka. It was filled by the blood of their victims and the leading sorcerer steered it with his penis'.[20] Greg Dening,

---

[17] Ibid., p. 40.
[18] *Conversion* (London, Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 222.
[19] *Some Spirits Heal, Others Only Dance* (Oxford, Berg, 1991), pp. 149, 145.
[20] Ibid., p. 130.

the Australian anthropologist who has written with such exceptional sensitivity about the Marquesas, ventures to doubt whether before the Europeans came the Marquesans ever ate anyone, though they were certainly eating people after several decades of French rule. *Tantum Enlightenment potuit suadere malorum.*

# Chapter 5

# Christian Superstition

In the preceding chapter I was concerned with magic and sorcery among pagans. But superstition is also detected among Christians. The original meaning of the word is 'survival' and those who believe that religion is an intellectual weakness universal among the most primitive people will reckon all religion that still survives superstitious. Here, however, I am concerned with a narrow use of the word: its application by some Christians to others.

Christians, like pagans, want health, wealth and success in love and war; and they look to their religion to help them obtain these mundane benefits. Professor Flint has a chapter entitled 'Encouraged Magic' which details early mediaeval devout practices which she herself calls 'magical' and many would call superstitious. They include using stones, bones of saints or dust from their tombs to effect cures and using blessed salt or oil or a consecrated host in connection with sex. These practices not only occur in the same areas as pagan magic, and at times when there is the same ignorance about physical and psychological factors; they proliferate when pagan magic is actually going on: Christians feel they have to compete with it. Professor Flint also seems to count as 'Christian magic' using the sign of the Cross or a candle to control the weather (pp. 185–8). The Christians concerned think that the good result is miraculous, but she observes that 'these Christian methods of supernatural manipulation' are 'very similar' to outlawed pagan magic.

Christians also want to get to Heaven. In order to become holier they pray, sing hymns, some (like the Shakers) dance; they cherish relics and images of saints; they make pilgrimages to holy places; they cross themselves, fast, mortify themselves. Religious devotion provides them with a fresh field in which superstition can flourish; and it is fed not only by uncertainty about what is physical and what is psychological, but also by uncertainty about what is natural and what is supernatural. The most famous of British heretics, Pelagius, at the beginning of the fifth century maintained that we can get to Heaven entirely by our own efforts, and favoured a regime of natural asceticism. His contemporary and opponent, Augustine, said we need supernatural aid from God, which he called 'grace'. Pelagius's extreme position came to be universally rejected; but what parts exactly are played by natural striving and what by divine grace, and how they complement each other, has never been universally agreed.

How, in all this, is superstition marked off from respectable devotion? Plainly people draw the line in different places and use different criteria. Aquinas in the *Summa Theologia*, 2a 2ae qq.92 ff., has an extensive discussion of superstition under four different heads, and puts at the top of his list *indebitus cultus veri Dei*, improper ways of worshipping the true God. Doing more than what is necessary and customary

(the occupational hazard of Christian life which Lane Fox calls 'overachieving') he considers superstitious (q. 93 a.2). He would probably also (q. 96) have objected to the practice[1] of reciting a list of divine names with a sign of the Cross between each; the list includes 'Egg + Calf + Serpent + Ram + Lion + Worm'.

Second on Aquinas's list is idolatry (q. 94); this is superstitious because it is worshipping what does not deserve worship. A principal ground for the charges of superstition brought by the Reformers against Catholics was that their doctrine of the Eucharist was idolatrous. I shall go into this question in Chapter 20.

Mary Douglas[2] has called attention to a strand in Protestant thought according to which true religion is something inner and aims solely at ethical improvement; relying on external forms of worship or pleading with God to intervene in nature is superstitious. These considerations account for antipathy to some practices, but we are naturally social beings, and few people would condemn as superstitious all assembling together for worship according to agreed forms. It is harsh also to exclude all mundane concerns and condemn as superstition any prayer for health or relief from plague, famine and war.

Where the aim is mundane, can maleficence be used as a criterion? Psalms 83 and 129 ask God to harm his (that is, Israel's) enemies, and Christians have traditionally prayed for victory in war. Many Christians, also, have probably prayed for personal success in a competition – for a scholarship, a job, a hand in marriage. The austere may frown on supplication for such things, but it seems excessive to call it 'superstitious' just because the supplicant's gain will be someone else's loss.

Some Christian practices have been intended to control or avert demons. These will be thought superstitious today by Christians who do not believe that any demons exist. But some Christians still believe in a personal Devil, and in the past this was the general orthodoxy; the mere fact that a practice somehow presupposes the existence of demons is not enough to damn it. The late classical word *deisidaimonia*, literally 'fear of demons', could carry, though it did not always carry, disparaging overtones, and the traditional Christian position is that it is not so much belief in demons as fear of them, anxiety that God will not protect us from them, which is superstitious. In the sixteenth century some Christians who believed in demons objected to practices which were apotropaic in character. It might be asked: are the demons to be averted by the words, gestures, relics or what not used, independently of supernatural persons, or does the practice work by what Freud might call 'psychological' means, giving God or an angel or saint a reason for intervening? Averting a demon is not an end in itself. A person using a suspect practice wants to prevent a thunderstorm, say, and thinks that lighting a candle before a saint's image or ringing a bell will help without much caring how or why it will help. But if there is an assumption that the practice works by its own power the practice may cause official eyebrows to rise.

Augustine in his work *On Christian Doctrine* 2.19–20 suggests that, confronted with dubious practices, we should ask: 'Is the object which is tied or fastened in any

---

[1] Mentioned by Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (Yale University Press, 1992), ch. 8.

[2] *Purity and Danger*, ch. 4, pp. 61–2.

way to the body for the restoration of its health efficacious by virtue of its own nature? (If so, we may use this remedy unrestrictedly.) Or does it succeed because of some signifying bond?' This test as it stands may distinguish magic from respectable medicine, but it does not distinguish it from respectable Christian practice. For the water used in baptism, the oil used in anointing the sick, the words used in the sacraments and the sign of the Cross are all supposed to work by virtue of their significance, not by virtue of their natural powers as water, oil or movements in the air.

Aquinas interpreted Augustine as objecting only when what is signified is a pact with demons (*Summa Theologiae*, 2a 2ae, q. 96 a.2). That, of course, is out of bounds completely. But where no demons are involved, the early English Reformers were inclined to turn Augustine's test round. So long as images are understood as 'representers of virtue and good example' and 'kindlers and firers of men's minds' they are commended in the Ten Articles of 1536; they are all right treated as 'laymen's [that is, illiterate people's] books', and so, for a few more years, are sacramentals, creepings to the cross and so forth, understood as 'tokens whereby we remember Christ'.[3] But what understanding is *not* all right? Some Reformers were chiefly concerned at the suggestion that salvation should come through personal intermediaries other than Christ, others that images, relics, blessed substances or human gestures should themselves be 'workers' of salvation.[4] Hobbes was of the latter opinion. *Leviathan* ends with four chapters on 'The Kingdom of Darkness', the drift of which is that the Catholic Church is sunk in superstition; and one of his arguments is precisely that Catholics believe the words and materials used by priests work by their own efficacy. Whether they believe this or not, we may agree that it *would* be superstitious to think that the holy oil, say, or the dust from the saint's tomb, or a beautiful image, has acquired a paraphysical causal power.

I call it 'paraphysical', because it plays the same explanatory role as physical causal powers; that is, it produces effects automatically, without a special divine intervention each time; but its arising cannot be explained physically and it does not fit into a physical system. The concept of such a power looks confused. The physical world allows literal manipulation; we handle physical substances and direct their causal powers. Transferring ways of thinking appropriate to the physical world first to psychology and then to the supernatural is a principal root of much that we call 'superstition'.

Theologians mostly distinguish between miracles and grace. A miracle is an event outside the course of nature (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 110 a. 4), and particularly one contrary to physical laws. If when men are flung into a blazing furnace their flesh is not burnt, or if they walk on water, that is a miracle. Grace operates in the area of psychology, where the application of physical laws is doubtful, and it does not so much run counter to nature as improve upon it or transcend it. Forgiving a deep injury or facing martyrdom calls for grace. But it is not

---

[3] Proclamation of February 1539, quoted by Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p. 421.
[4] Proclamation just quoted.

wholly clear how the distinction applies to devout practices. Some theologians may think that there are natural psychological laws, just like physical laws except that they concern psyches, and that God may suspend them. That could lead to conceiving the operation of grace as a kind of psychological miracle. Others may doubt if a definition of miracle in terms of natural law can be transferred to thoughts, desires and decisions: perhaps in the field of psychology nature cannot be contravened but only expanded. Christian prayers use corporeal metaphors: washing away stains of sin, illuminating blindness, pouring or breathing grace into the soul. There is no obvious alternative to this way of speaking but it offers a physical model, the causal action of one thing upon another, for the operation of grace. In Chapter 14, I argue that creation cannot be modelled on causal action and, in Chapter 19, that sanctification need not be either.

I have suggested that magic flourishes in the no-man's-land between the physical and the psychological, and at seasons when physical explanations are rudimentary. If what I have said just now is correct, superstition flourishes in the same area but at seasons when theology is rudimentary. A good theology of grace and the sacraments should help to keep Christians free from superstition, whereas confused ideas of quasi-physical interaction between the natural and the supernatural might lead to Professor Flint's 'Christian magic'. But just as pagan magicians and sorcerers may be no less effective than respectable physicians, so uneducated, superstitious Christians may be no less holy than theologians.

# Chapter 6

# The Spread of Christianity

Early in Luke's Gospel there is an attempt to fix the time at which John the Baptist started baptizing. We are told that it was in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius; that would be about 28 AD. At that time Jesus of Nazareth had not started his mission, so there could have been no Christians: no one believed or had even heard of the central doctrines of Christianity. Perhaps three years later Jesus was executed, and his surviving followers were few in number, fearing for their lives, and convinced that his mission had been a failure. They thought he was dead and gone, and his teaching had died with him. Three hundred years later Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, and in the centuries that followed it became the sole religion of the Mediterranean world. The Olympian gods lost all their followers, and so did any other gods there may have been on the fringes of the Roman Empire. In the seventh century the followers of Mohammed took over the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, but they worshipped the same God as the Christians and the Jews. How Christianity spread is a question that has engaged many historians, and many books have been written and will be written in the future to answer it. In the present chapter I shall first survey some answers historians propose, and then consider one or two questions they omit to ask or fail to answer.

Evans-Pritchard says of anthropologists:

> It was not just that they asked, as Bergson put it, how it is that 'beliefs and practices which are anything but reasonable could have been, and still are, accepted by reasonable beings'. It was rather that implicit in their thinking were the optimistic convictions of the eighteenth century rationalist philosophers that people are stupid and bad only because they have bad institutions, and they have bad institutions only because they are ignorant and superstitious, and they are ignorant and superstitious because they have been exploited in the name of religion by cunning and avaricious priests and the unscrupulous classes which have supported them.[1]

His words may be applied to history as well as to anthropology. In 1776, the great rationalist historian Edward Gibbon published the first volume of his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In Chapter 15 he offers five causes of the success of Christianity. First, the 'intolerant zeal' Christians derived from Judaism; secondly 'menace of eternal tortures', that is, their threats of hellfire; thirdly their miracle stories, which imposed on credulous pagans; fourthly their asceticism, though Gibbon admits that this could impress only 'the people': 'worldly philosophers'

---

[1] *Theories of Primitive Religion*, p. 15. This view can, of course, be found before the eighteenth century, for instance in Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), chs 46–7.

would have seen clearly that it was incapable of producing either private happiness or public benefit; and finally the power and ambition of bishops. He also throws in for good measure a further explanation. By the time of Christ the Greco-Roman world had lost its belief in the Olympian gods; 'human reason … had already obtained an easy triumph over the followers of paganism'. But 'the practice of superstition is so congenial to the multitude', and 'so urgent on the vulgar is the necessity of believing, that the fall of any system of mythology will most probably be succeeded by the introduction of some other mode of superstition': reason had temporarily deprived the people of their supply of opium and Christianity happened along to fill the gap.

In Gibbon's day history was a pastime for amateurs. Since then a university subject called Modern History has been introduced. It starts at the beginning of the fourth century with the conversion of Constantine. The result is that today historians who try to explain the spread of Christianity divide into two groups. They are either Ancient Historians whose brief stops with Constantine, or Modern Historians whose brief starts with him. Thus E.R. Dodds ends his study, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, in the year 300, and the longer work *Pagans and Christians*, by Robin Lane Fox, also stops in the fourth century, while Richard Fletcher begins *The Conversion of Europe*[2] at 371, and Valerie Flint *The Rise of Magic in Early Mediaeval Europe* in the fifth century. To an outsider it looks[3] as if there is little communication between the two groups and no attempt to pool their findings. And though both take it for granted that Christianity had to displace a sitting tenant called 'paganism', they seem to have different conceptions of what paganism is. The Latin word *paganus* was first used by Christians in the fourth century for people who were not Christians or Jews. The idea of having such a word for the rest of the world was probably taken from the Jews, who had a word for non-Jews: *ethne* in Greek, 'gentiles' in English. In recent translations of the Bible, 'pagan' actually replaces 'gentile' as a translation of this word. Before Christians laid hold of it *paganus* may have meant either a civilian, as contrasted with a soldier, or a rustic, as contrasted with a townsman. Historians now prefer the first derivation, though the old translation 'heathen' depends on the second. Historians do not tell us how they themselves intend to use it, and the same writer may swing between two uses: Lane Fox, for instance, writes sometimes as if paganism were a definite religion alternative to Christianity,[4] sometimes (more correctly) as if the most enlightened atheists are just as much pagans as the most benighted worshippers of Mithras and Mother Rhea.[5] But on the whole, paganism for ancient historians is a matter of worshipping the gods they know from Homer and consulting the oracles mentioned by Herodotus. To modern historians, unfamiliar with the classics, pagans are mostly ignorant peasants or barbarians on the fringes of the empire.

---

[2] London, Fontana Press, 1998.

[3] Or looked until recently. In *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe, Volume 2, Ancient Greece and Rome*, Condon, Athlone Press, 1999, Valerie Flint gives an account of demon-belief from the time of Homer to that of Augustine.

[4] So, for instance, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 622.

[5] For example, ibid., 31, 310, 314, 323.

Dodds agrees with Gibbon that, by the time Christianity appeared, there was hardly any religion left in the ancient world,[6] and adds that the time between 150 and 300 was an age of widespread anxiety, and that the sense of belonging to a community which Christians offered converts was 'perhaps the strongest single cause of the spread of Christianity'.[7] A.D. Nock says that 'the small man in antiquity suffered from a marked feeling of inferiority and from a pathetic desire for self-assertion … By adhesion to a society like the Church he acquired a sense of importance'.[8]

Robin Lane Fox criticizes these and similar theories in Chapter 6 of his *Pagans and Christians*. He speaks of 'Gibbon's unsurpassed account of the rise of Christianity within the [Roman] Empire' (p. 259), and gives his own mission statement in the words 'How, then, can Gibbon's views be enlarged and adjusted?' His main adjustment is to correct the idea that paganism was moribund when Christianity came on the scene. Reason's victories are not so easily won. Down to the end of the third century the oracles were flourishing, new temples were being built, and the gods were making visible appearances everywhere. Lane Fox's enlargements include the tax breaks for Christian clerics instituted by Constantine and the chance of finding, in a newly built church, 'a suitable girlfriend' (p. 669, on the basis of a hint in Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.3).

When we pass to Modern Historians we find Fletcher showing how Christian rulers sometimes tried to spread the faith by force of arms and sometimes by political and economic pressures – tax penalties and reliefs, giving and witholding civil rights and so forth. That leaves us with the question why those rulers themselves accepted Christianity. Fletcher suggests it was because they thought it would give them victory in battle, and the middle classes were influenced by the belief it would bring them material prosperity. He describes these considerations as 'earthy' (p. 242), perhaps because he thinks religion ought to aim at peace, not victory, and humility and resignation in this world in preparation for riches in Heaven.

Could it be that in this case historians have failed to see the wood for the trees? Christianity would not have become the religion of the Mediterranean world if people had not thought it true. Lane Fox himself refers to the two or three years of instruction which preceded the admission of a catechumen to baptism (pp. 316–17); Christianity, he says, won converts 'by conviction and persuasion, long and detailed sequels to the initial proof that faith could work' (p. 330). The practice of historians has been to point to reasons and motives people had or may have had for accepting Christianity whether it is true or not. That is rather like explaining a man's belief that his wife is faithful to him by saying he fears the expense and publicity of divorce. Such considerations could account for his believing in her irrationally, for his failure to give proper weight to reasons for thinking she is deceiving him. But not all connubial trust is irrational. Many people who believe in the fidelity of their spouse have good rational grounds for their confidence, though they may not be able to put them into words. Those who went through years of instruction and

---

[6] *The Greeks and the Irrational*, p. 244.
[7] *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 138.
[8] *Conversion*, p. 213.

discussion before being baptized and who kept their Christian beliefs throughout their lives in the face of very strong reasons for abandoning them surely had rational grounds for thinking Christianity true. What were those grounds? Why do historians not tell us?

No doubt some people may have professed themselves Christians without thinking that the doctrines of Christianity are true; some people may even have forced others to accept Christianity without themselves believing it. But to suppose that the whole thing was a cynical fraud, that the rich and powerful made the poor and ignorant accept a lot of teachings they themselves thought false, and that this went on for century after century, is sheer paranoia. *Beowulf* is a document from a society that was just becoming Christian; there is no hint in it of Christianity's being imposed from above on a populace tenaciously or nostalgically cherishing an older religion. Chapter 40 of the *Laxdaela Saga* (written some 250 years after the event) describes the transition in Norway and Iceland as a matter of King Olaf Tryggvason's winning over a suspicious aristocracy by patience and persuasive words.

'I will not', says Dodds in *Pagan and Christian* (p. 133), 'discuss the intrinsic merits of the Christian creed'. Perhaps historians feel that enquiring into the rationality of beliefs is not their business. They can tell us what people in the past thought and felt and wanted; but it is for philosophers to say whether those beliefs, emotions and desires were reasonable or unreasonable. I have not heard historians saying this – they seldom acknowledge that there is anything philosophers can usefully do – but there might be something in it. Not because philosophical arguments are always the best grounds for holding a belief, for they are not, but because philosophers are qualified to distinguish different ways in which a belief can be reasonable. Considerations of at least three kinds conspire to make people accept Christianity. Pagans of the first century had reasons of a more or less philosophical kind for believing in Jehovah. Whether Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead is a question of historical fact, and people came to think he did on the basis of testimony. And thirdly, from the time of Constantine onwards Christianity seemed to bring with it victory, prosperity, law and education, and this was widely taken as evidence of its truth. I shall now say a little about the first type of reason and more about the second and third.

Cicero offers his readers a thought-experiment derived from Aristotle's dialogue *On Philosophy* (Fr. 13). Suppose there are people who lived in luxurious houses underground but have never been above ground, and suppose these people had heard some obscure rumour of some power of gods: if the earth were suddenly to open and they were to see the sea and the sky and the heavenly bodies, would they not at once think that gods exist and these things are their work? Cicero's report of Aristotle may not be quite accurate, but it reveals a frame of mind that would be ready to welcome a creator separate from the universe. The gods of Greece and Rome, as we have seen, were all part of the natural order. They did not account for it. Judaism accounts for the natural order by postulating something outside it. The Greco-Roman world had no conception of anything outside the natural universe, and once the idea was explained it may have given a feeling of liberation, like

opening a window. Not only did it explain the existence of the world we see; it gave reason to hope for order within it. If the world is the creation of an intelligent and benign person, its workings might be regular and intelligible. Historians have noticed that there also emerged, in the first and second centuries after Christ, the idea of a single nameless 'Most High' (*Hypsistos*) god behind the other gods and responsible for everything. Devotion to this supreme being did not have the exclusivity of Judaeo-Christian devotion to Jehovah, but in the light of it we can understand how before the advent of Christianity many Greeks and Romans went along with the Jews as, so to speak, fellow travellers.

The reverse side of the doctrine that the universe depends on a god outside it is that there are no gods within it. That the Emperor, fire and the heavenly bodies are not divine is clear enough if you connect divinity with creation. They are impressive, but they are better cast for roles other than that of divinity. As for Zeus, Aphrodite and the rest, the crowding of the pantheon did not arise, as Hume rather uncritically supposed (*Natural History of Religion*, ss. 1–2), from a primitive appetite for polytheism. People tend to prefer a single god. But they find that different people address their supplications to different deities and, in the absence of bigotry or certainty of possessing the whole truth about these obscure matters, good manners and caution favoured opening the doors to everyone's gods and heroes. The more of these deities Olympus had to accommodate, however, the more dubious their existence seemed. If they existed at all, they seemed far removed from human beings and deaf to their entreaties: μακρὰν ἀπέχουσιν ἢ οὐκ ἔχουσιν ὦτα, as a fourth century hymn said.[9] From Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* it is clear that, by the first century BC, many Romans thought the Olympian gods did not exist at all. Scepticism may not have been as extensive as Gibbon's optimism led him to think, but it existed. Lane Fox emphasizes that Jews and Christians were commonly regarded as atheists.[10] To people for whom a god was essentially part of the natural order, Christianity may have appealed not as a new variety of theism but as a superior form of atheism.

Was it then reasonable for the ancient world to welcome the Judaeo-Christian idea of a creator outside the natural order? Doubts have arisen of two different kinds. Some people question whether Jews and Christians themselves had this idea before the second century AD. Others say the doctrine of creation has no explanatory power; it merely pushes the problem back a stage. If we account for the universe by saying God made it, how do we account for God? Who made him? Are we not being like the Indian who stars in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690)? This Indian said that the Earth is supported in the sky, that it does not plunge down for ever like Einstein's lift, because it rests on a giant elephant. Asked what supported the elephant he said it rested on a giant turtle, and asked what supported the turtle he

---

[9] 'The other gods are far away, or have no ears, or do not exist, or do not at all attend to us, but *you* we see before us, not of stone or wood but real': hymn of Hermocles (fl. 290) printed in the *Oxford Book of Greek Verse*, pp. 523–4. 'Other' here refers to the Olympians, 'you' to the tyrant Demetrius Poliorcetes.

[10] *Pagans and Christians*, p. 30. Attested, for instance, by Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis*, 3 (second century AD); Eusebius, *History*, 4.13.3 (reign of Marcus Aurelius). See also Hecataeus and Strabo, cited below, p. 57.

could only say that 'he knew not what' (2.23.2, cf. 2.13.19). According to this second criticism, then, we explain nothing by saying that the universe was created by someone outside it, and, according to the first, the Jews did not say this anyhow.

The second criticism needs to be presented carefully if it is not to recoil on the critic. We must not say, 'It is vacuous to explain a phenomenon by giving a cause that itself needs a causal explanation'. For we offer such explanations all the time. Why did the grape crop fail? Because of a freak hail-storm in July. That explanation does not lose its value if we cannot explain the hail-storm. And not only is it common practice to explain phenomena by causes for which we cannot at the time give a causal explanation, critics of the doctrine of creation explain the world we see by causes that have causes *ad infinitum*. Every event that has occurred is the effect of an earlier event which itself had a cause, and with this explanation we ought to be content. We must not hope, they say, to explain events in a causal chain by anything outside the chain.

For that is what the Judaeo-Christian doctrine tries to do. Its explanatory power lies precisely in this, that God is not supposed to need a causal explanation. Causes may be sought for things that come into existence and for material objects generally, but God exists without having previously not existed, and is not composed of any kind of material. Plenty of philosophical questions can be asked about the coherence of such suppositions and the kind of explanation such a being can provide, and I shall consider some of them in Chapters 11 and 14. Here it is enough to say that the giant turtle objection does not hold against the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of creation; if anything, it points to an awkwardness in the claim that there is a scientific explanation for everything.

But how early is the alleged Judaeo-Christian doctrine? Few commentators on Genesis now claim it is present in the first two verses of that sacred book. What the priestly authors believed, we are told, is that Jehovah made the universe not out of nothing but out of pre-existing matter called *tohu* and *bohu*, 'trackless waste' and 'emptiness'. Anthony Kenny finds the first appearance of creation out of nothing whatever in the Second Book of Maccabees (second century BC),[11] and Gerhard May denies it is present even in the New Testament or Philo.[12]

It is certainly not impossible for someone to think that empty space is a kind of material out of which the universe might be made. Plato says precisely that in the *Timaeus*. The things we see, he says, are composed of minute geometrical solids; the solids are composed of triangles; and the triangles are triangles simply of empty space. But it is difficult to believe that the authors of Genesis 1 thought this, even if we assign quite a late date to them. Whereas Indians would have seen elephants and tortoises, no one has ever seen empty space, much less seen anything being made out of it. Why should the Jewish priests suppose there was such stuff as *tohu* and

---

[11] 'Seven concepts of creation', *Aristotelian Society*, Suppl. vol. 78 (2004) p. 85.

[12] *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of Creation out of Nothing in Early Christian Thought*, Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark, 1994. For criticism, see J.C. O'Neill, 'How early is the doctrine of *Creatio ex nihilo*?' *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS, vol. 53, pt 2 (October 2002) pp. 449–65), and, on Philo, see Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum* (London, Duckworth, 1983), pp. 203–10. On p. 194 Sorabji says: 'Personally, I should have thought that the opening of Genesis strongly suggests a beginning of the material universe.' I agree.

*bohu*? And why should they suppose that God made the universe out of anything? Aristotle in the fourth century BC argues painstakingly that we believe that everything that comes into being does so out of something that already exists. Not only is this not a principle he can take for granted, he anticipates people will find it hard even to grasp. They know that some things are made out of others, but they do not have a general concept of matter; that is something he has to introduce. Did the Jewish priests attend his lectures at the Lyceum?

Throughout the Old Testament we find the belief that Jehovah is not part of the natural order but the source of it, the source of everything. We find this in Isaiah 44–5, in Job 38–9, in Proverbs 8, in Psalms 19 and 104, to give just a few examples out of many. To us today that means that God *made* everything, and we think the Biblical writers must have imagined, either that he made everything out of pre-existing matter, or that he made everything out of nothing. But this is to project back on them our notion of a maker. For us, making something is producing it out of something that is already there by some kind of causal action like hammering or heating. Biblical writers apply this notion to human craftsmen, but I shall suggest in Chapter 8 that the Greeks were the first to apply it to the natural world. 'What did Jehovah make everything out of?' is a Greek philosophical question that would not, I think, have occurred to any Jewish author before the first century BC, and it would have directed attention away from the point of the doctrine which is, to use the modern term, Jehovah's transcendence. The authors want to insist that Jehovah is the origin of the natural world and not part of it. 'What kind of origin?' is again a Greek question: perhaps Plato (*Phaedo*, 96–100) was the first person to try to distinguish different conceptions of source and cause. A potter is the source of a pot in that he acts on clay with his hands; he is the source of the movements of his hands in that they occur because he wants them to. The Biblical authors do not draw this distinction, but they are most easily read as thinking the world exists because Jehovah wants it to. That is the doctrine Greeks and Romans were prepared to accept as true.

Besides this doctrine which they held in common with all Jews, the first Christians held some highly contentious beliefs about a historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth. In particular they believed that, after being executed, he came back to life never to die again and, partly on the strength of this resurrection, that he was in some unique and mysterious way the son of God. In what this sonship consisted was something to be progressively clarified over the first four centuries, but the doctrine of his resurrection needed no clarification. According to Acts 15.19, Festus, Procurator of Judaea, understood perfectly well that there was a dispute between Paul and the Jewish authorities about 'a certain Jesus who is dead and whom Paul said was alive'. To Festus this claim was clear and clearly false: if Jesus was dead then he was not alive. It was not obscure and possibly true, a claim that Jesus had revived from death as from a coma or that he was alive in some Pickwickian sense,[13] his work and

[13] 'The Chairman felt it his imperative duty to demand of the honourable gentleman, whether he had used the expression which had just escaped him [the expression "humbug"], in a common sense. Mr Blotton had no hesitation in saying that he had not – he had used the word in its Pickwickian sense (Hear, hear).' (*The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, London, Chapman and Hall 1837, ch. 1).

memory living on. Similarly the Athenians whom Paul addressed in Acts 17.34 took the doctrine literally, though most of them thought it ridiculous.

But did the first Christians really make this astonishing claim? New Testament scholars sometimes say that the Gospel accounts of the appearances of the risen Christ are false and that his followers did not initially claim to be eye-witnesses to his resurrection. According to Acts 2, within weeks of Jesus's death Peter and the rest of the Eleven said in public, 'God raised this Jesus to life and of that we are all witnesses'. But (say the scholars) this story does not report even inaccurately a historical fact. It was concocted at a time when there were no genuine eye-witnesses left to contradict it. To begin with, perhaps, there was a mysterious or at least regrettable disappearance of a body. Then, perhaps, some people felt that the message of Jesus still lived on. But over time the beliefs of a community can change imperceptibly. By the end of the first century what began as a purely Pickwickian resurrection had hardened into a genuine miracle. The fact that accepting this miracle could involve you in a painful death does not make such an evolution improbable, since some people are extremely obstinate and like being martyrs.

Unfortunately for these scholars, there is no evidence whatever outside the New Testament for the origins of Christianity. The process just described has been pulled out of thin air: it is groundless surmise, motivated by a simple faith that nothing outside the ordinary course of nature is possible. A dead man's coming back to life, never to die again, is completely outside the natural order. Jesus apart, it has never happened. But nor has it ever happened, the case of the Apostles apart, that a number of men who are otherwise normal, and who have nothing to gain by a deception, give testimony about something they have witnessed that is false – not just false in points of detail, but false on the central issue of what happened. It is because this too is outside the course of nature that New Testament scholars are unwilling to allow it happened in the case of the apostles. Hume thought the spread of Christianity requires us to choose between two non-natural occurrences, a man's coming back to life and a group's giving false testimony;[14] modern scholars say that neither of these things occurred.

Let us look again at the historical problem. By the end of the first century there are communities of Christians who believe that Jesus rose from the dead. Why do they believe that? Not because they thought that resurrections were unusual but natural occurrences. If they had thought that, they would not have taken Jesus's resurrection as a proof that he was the Son of God. There is no evidence that there were ever Christian communities that did not believe in a real resurrection; no evidence that such a belief grew up imperceptibly, so that one morning Christians found they had it rather as one morning they might find the fields full of mushrooms. The evidence is that it was believed on testimony. The first Christians believed it because they believed the women who went to the tomb and the Apostles; later Christians believed it because they had confidence in existing Christian communities: they thought, among other things, that these had preserved earlier

---

[14] *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1946), s. 10, pp. 115–16.

testimonies without distortion. To understand the beginnings of Christianity we must understand the rationality of trust, both in the words of individuals and in the wisdom of communities.

I said that the most primitive form of understanding is that of rational behaviour. But there are three distinct ways in which we behave rationally. I shall have more to say about the difference between them in Chapter 16; here it is enough to say that we sometimes act in our own interests as individuals, sometimes as members of a society, and sometimes out of disinterested concern for the interests of other people.

The belief that there are no exceptions to the course of nature is a principle that guides us when we are pursuing our interests as individuals. It also guides the scientist, but the search for scientific knowledge, like the practice of an art, is an end in itself to us as more or less isolated individuals. When we are acting as members of a society or out of concern for others we have different principles.

It is part of thinking of you not as a mere mechanism but as a person with beliefs and desires, to have concern for your well-being.[15] Other things being equal, what would benefit you seems good to me and what would be harmful seems bad. But with this goodwill goes trust in your word. I can have reason to think you mendacious, particularly if you are my enemy. But in the absence of reasons for mistrust, reliance on a person's word is part of thinking of that person as an intelligent being and not a mere thing or instrument. We also rely on the readings of instruments like thermometers; but that is because we trust the people that made and supplied them.

Likewise it is part of thinking as a member of a society to have trust in the wisdom of that society. What is customary in our society seems right and good, and what our society forbids seems evil and wrong. Societies have reasons for their customs and taboos, but the reasons are often not decisive and it is part of living within a society to attach a weight to them that they might not seem to have to outsiders. That is what it is to value membership of the society and life in it. But a disposition to think right the things our society thinks right is inseparable from a disposition to think true the things it thinks true. The two together make up respect for the wisdom of the society, just as desire for an individual's well-being and confidence in that individual's testimony make up respect for that individual as a person.

No human being has ever lived a life completely outside of any society, and we cannot guide our thinking solely by the principle that there are no exceptions to the course of nature. We must also have regard to the testimony of individuals and the wisdom of groups. This is a matter not just of psychological necessity but of rationality. Some people believe that genuine altruism is an illusion and all human behaviour is, in the end, self-interested. Why do they think that? Because they hear it from revered philosophers and it is part of the received wisdom of liberal democracies. The same goes for the belief that there are no exceptions to the course of nature.

---

[15] This is argued in *The Analytic Ambition* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1991), ch. 9, s.4.

Perhaps it will be said: 'Yes, we need sometimes to put faith in individual witnesses, this is fundamental to human life; still, where the principle that we must trust witnesses and the principle that nothing occurs outside the natural order appear to conflict the first must give way.' But why? What, after all, is the basis of the principle that nothing occurs outside the natural order? Certainly not our own observations. Nobody is able to do more than monitor a small area for a short time. We rely on other people to tell us what the course of nature is and whether exceptions to it occur. It is only on the basis of witnesses that we believe miracles do not happen everywhere all the time.

If religion engages the whole person we should expect trust in individual testimony to have played a part in the spread of Christianity as well as respect for the wisdom of Christian communities. Believing another individual is something basic and very powerful. If the first Christians believed in a real resurrection on the strength of the testimony of the Apostles, that would give Christianity a powerful start which it would have lacked if they had believed merely in a Pickwickian resurrection. The belief that Jesus is alive in a Pickwickian sense leaves the natural order undisturbed, but it would surely have left the lives of most people in the Roman Empire undisturbed too. And imagining that a belief in a Pickwickian resurrection might have turned by an imperceptible process over the years into a belief in a real one involves a scepticism about the good sense of groups that is difficult to sustain.

As to the spread of Christianity after the conversion of Constantine, I noted earlier how Fletcher emphasizes what he calls 'earthy' considerations: the belief among kings and nobles that Christianity brings victory in war and economic prosperity. He does not, however, say whether, if Christians are victorious and prosperous, that is a reason for thinking Christianity true, or rather a reason for accepting it whether true or not. That is the final question I wish to consider in this chapter.

Whatever we expect of religion today, the Old Testament could not be more explicit that Jehovah fights on the side of his people and gives them victory over their enemies (the Egyptians, Moabites, Philistines and so forth). This is not a peculiarity of Judaism. The plot of the *Iliad* is that some gods favour the Greeks and others the Trojans, that the whole course of the war is directed from Olympus and that the human leaders, Priam, Agamemnon and the rest, are as helpless as the private soldiers were in the trenches during the First World War. The notion of a god, I said, is slippery, but one qualification for being a god is bringing victory.

But is that rational? Victory, like health, is something that lies in the area that straddles the physical and the psychological. Today we are inclined to think it depends simply on technical expertise, on skill in generalship and sophistication in weaponry. The American Civil War, we are told, was decided by the breech-loading rifle. But it has also been held that 'battles are won by the collapse of enemy morale, whether that collapse is due to material or moral superiority or a combination of both'.[16] It was a commonplace in the Middle Ages that in any fight God had a blow

[16] Robert Nichols, *An Anthology of War Poetry, 1914–1918* (London, Nicholson and Watson, 1943), pp. 46–7.

to strike, so that before engaging one should ensure that one had not only greater strength on one's side but also right. To people who thought there was truth in this, that Christians were victorious would be a reason for thinking Christianity true. Today Christians do not think Jehovah so partisan as the Jews of the Old Testament did, but even today confidence in the justice of one's cause is good for morale.

But Fletcher, in *The Conversion of Europe*, puts less stress on victory than prosperity. He quotes (pp. 242–3) a passage from a letter written by Daniel, Bishop of Winchester in the eighth century, to Boniface, who was then trying to evangelize Germany. The Germans should be argued with, says Daniel, not coerced, and among other arguments he suggests this:

> If the gods [of the Germans: Daniel assumes, or accepts from Tacitus, that the Germans have Jehovah-like gods] are almighty and beneficent and just, they not only reward worshippers but also punish those who scorn them. If they do both in the temporal world, why then do they spare the Christians who are turning almost the whole world away from their worship and overthrowing their idols? And while they, that is, the Christians, possess fertile lands, and provinces fruitful in wine and oil and abounding in other riches, they have left to them, the pagans that is, lands always frozen with cold in which these, now driven from the whole globe, are falsely thought to reign. There must also be brought before them the might of the Christian world, in comparison with which those who still continue in the ancient faith are few.

Besides quoting this passage Fletcher refers to Daniel's letter no less than six times, on pages 207–8, 236, 374, 457–8, 485 and 518–19, and by pp. 518–19 he can summarize it in the words, 'Become a Christian and get rich'.

Certainly if accepting Christian baptism were a necessary and sufficient condition of becoming rich, it would be reasonable to accept it even if one believed that Christianity was false. But that is a way of thinking more characteristic of the modern than the Dark Age mind. Daniel's reference to wine and oil makes Fletcher (p. 243) think he got these arguments from southern Europe, perhaps from the Office of Propaganda in Rome. It is far likelier that he took them from the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy Jehovah tells the Jews that, if they keep the covenant, 'he will bless the fruit of your body and the produce of your soil, your corn, your new wine, your oil, the issue of your cattle, the young of your flock, in the country which he swore to your ancestors he would give them' (Dt., 7.13). This theme is taken up by the prophets. Isaiah says Jehovah will plant the desert with cedar trees, acacias, myrtles and olives so that the people may see and know that his hand has done this (Is., 41.19–20, cf. 65.21). Trade too will boom: 'The riches of the sea will flow to you, the wealth of the gentiles will come to you' (Is., 60.5); 'Your gates will always be open, never closed day or night, for the riches of the gentiles to be brought you' (Is., 60.11). The Old Testament Jews certainly believed that fidelity to Jehovah would have economic rewards, and in particular that the Messiah would bring prosperity; and Daniel of Winchester and Boniface thought that Jesus was the Messiah.

But surely Jesus said his kingdom was not of this world; aren't Christians supposed to despise earthly riches and be content with poverty? That may be what

they were told in Victorian England, but in the Dark Ages bishops were less ascetic. When Wilfrid dedicated a church, as Fletcher reminds us (p. 179) he gave 'a great feast which went on for three days and three nights'. Monks might take vows of poverty, but even they were interested in improvements to agriculture. Peace and justice are presented as ideals in the Old Testament; in the Dark Ages the church added another, education. These things may be expected to ameliorate the social and economic conditions of life and it would be asceticism run mad to expect Christianity to pursue them exclusively for their own sake, heedless of material well-being. A religion which did not try to make its adherents rich would hardly be suitable for human beings.

But suppose that Christian nations are richer than non-Christian: is that a reason for thinking that Jehovah exists and that Jesus rose from the dead? Surely their prosperity will be due to the factors just mentioned, justice, peace and education, not to the truth of their religious beliefs. Perhaps, but what nourishes these factors? What makes rulers merciful, conscientious and peace-loving? What makes officials honest and the rich generous? What fills all members of a society with good will and industry? If Christians pray for these qualities, and Christians are prosperous, that might suggest to a simple barbarian that their prayers are answered.

Would the barbarian have to think that God makes his worshippers prosperous by miraculous interventions? The modern concept of a miracle as a violation of a physical law depends on a concept of a physical law which Dark Age barbarians could not have had. But today we have another technical notion, that of grace, and theologians hold that God enlightens people's minds and elevates their desires by grace, which is supernatural but does not violate any law of nature. I shall say more about this in Chapter 19.

The prosperity of Christians would also, of course, encourage trust in their general wisdom and good sense. If a society is right about agriculture and astronomy and knows how to run a good system of justice, its members are clearly intelligent and it is reasonable to take seriously their opinions about other matters. If they think that Jehovah exists and that worshipping him is right and good and conducive to their welfare, their being right about other things does not prove that these further beliefs are true, but is surely a reason for thinking they may well be. Certainly if people are poor, ignorant and addicted to marital infidelity and bloodthirsty feuds, that has been taken as a reason for thinking their religious beliefs false.

Besides saying that kings who accepted Christianity hoped for victory and their subjects hoped for riches, Fletcher argues that the impetus to conversion came from the upper strata of society. The 'new sect' may, as Gibbon puts it (vol. 2, p. 372), have been 'almost entirely composed of the dregs of the populace, of peasants and mechanics, of boys and women, of beggars and slaves', but Christianity spread through the action of kings and hereditary chiefs. They invited in missionaries, followed their guidance about marriage and maintaining order and founded schools. Kings and chiefs are not the heroes of today; we are taught they are greedy, ruthless and stupid. Should we suppose, then, that the Dark Age elite wanted education and law not, like our own admirable officials, in order to improve the life of all members of their society, but in order that they themselves might cut an impressive figure?

And that they adopted Christianity because they thought they could not have advanced technology and an impressive legal system without it?

If so, they were stupid indeed. For technology and law are little benefit to the upper classes. The chiefs in a primitive tribe are just as comfortable and have fully as enjoyable a life as modern western millionaires. And we have only to look round the world today to see that countries can have western technology without western religion: there are plenty of places where Christianity is more or less severely discouraged, but where people wear western clothes and have hospitals, libraries, courts of law and weapons of mass destruction.

Ignorant people whose life is a struggle to stay alive and who have no rights are in no position to improve their lot. When in history has amelioration come except from the top downwards? And it is unrealistic to suppose that primitive rulers have no desire to improve the condition of their subjects if someone will explain how. Magnanimity and concern for the weak are not exceptional among such people. Where they exist there could also be a readiness to believe that the universe depends on Jehovah, and that Jesus rose from the dead and was Jehovah's son. The liberating effect of these doctrines and the hope of changing social life for the better work together.

The missionaries assumed that the barbaric rulers already had gods of their own, and historians, both ancient and modern, follow them in this, but there is remarkably little evidence. Even the correspondence between English missionaries and Pope Gregory quoted by Bede does not mention any English gods, but only 'idols' and the ceremonial killing of cattle for feasts.[17] *Beowulf*, the oldest literary work from northern Europe that survives, contains fabulous monsters but not pagan gods. Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* is one of our best sources for the ancient gods of northern Europe, but he tells us himself in his Prologue that they were not gods but human princes from the period of the Trojan War, and on a natural reading the first part of the *Edda*, which provides the fullest information on Norse gods, is a satire on anthropologists. Gylfi, a Swedish king, who goes off in disguise to do anthropological fieldwork is told a succession of increasingly tall stories, and the title of this part of the work is 'The Tricking of Gylfi'. If we discard the doctrine that every society has gods, and the more primitive a society the heavier its burden of religious beliefs, it is easy to think that the barbarians on the fringe of the Roman world were just getting to a stage where they might start to think about the divine. Christianity could have spread among them not through the miscalculations of blind selfishness and vanity but because it filled a void they were just beginning to feel.

Human psychology is a unity. Qualities of character were distinguished from intellectual attainments by Aristotle, but Aristotle expected them to go together: knowledge and true beliefs aid the formation and retention of moral virtue, and false beliefs about important matters are likely to infect and corrupt the whole psyche. We have yet to see (an intelligent barbarian might reason today) whether education and social justice can really thrive in a society which does not believe in Jehovah.

---

[17] See Bede History 1.33; most of the correspondence is about sex, a subject which, Augustine notes with distaste (ibid., 1.27), already obsessed our 'rude nation.'

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Chapter 7

# Reason

We often hear of attacks on religion, far more seldom of attacks on reason. It is rare indeed for anyone to say that reason is a prime source of repression and human misery. Why is that? Not because reasoning is not needed to repress people or exploit them. There is a cynical couplet that runs:

> Treason doth never prosper. What's the reason?
> That if it prosper, none dare call it treason.

One might say something comparable about reason:

> Reason is ever honoured. What's the reason?
> That if it's honoured then we call it reason.

'Reason' is an honorific term. As the rhyme implies, so long as everyone believes something – that the Sun goes round the Earth once a day, that women are inferior to men, that election by ballot is the best form of government – it is thought reasonable. And we use 'reason' or equivalent words for whatever is the best state we can be in as regards knowing things.

I say 'equivalent words' but what words are equivalent? Old Testament writers use a word we render in English by 'wisdom': that means, not theoretical knowledge such as Newton had or even statesmanship like that of Pericles, but knowledge of what it is right and best for individuals to do. The Greeks used *phronesis* for this, the Romans *prudentia*, words we translate as 'practical wisdom', 'prudence'.

'What shall we do?' is a question that occurs to all of us from time to time, and from a practical point of view, the ability to answer it correctly is the most valuable of human attainments. There is no society so ignorant or so savage that it does not hold it in high esteem. Even today when we contrast acting under the influence of reason with acting under the influence of emotion or passion, by 'reason' we mean primarily this ability to discern the right course of action. But in many societies, including some that are relatively advanced, this ability is not supposed to have much to do with reasoning or even with what we should call intellectual ability. Primitive societies do not differentiate intellectual from other human abilities: they do not draw lines between thinking, perceiving and feeling. In some civilized societies intellectual pursuits are recognized only to be mistrusted or derided. Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical *Libertas Praestantissima*[1]

---

[1] Quoted in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London, Geoffrey Chapman 1999), s. 1951.

says 'reason prescribes to the will what it should seek after and shun', but identifies this with 'the natural law which is written and engraved in the mind of every man' and this, in turn, with 'the eternal reason of God'. According to this conservative moral theology, we see what is right rather by sharing in the divine mind than by using our own. A common secular view is that the ability to discern the best course comes from experience and from knowledge of the customs and traditions of one's society; it is expected among those who have steered their lives successfully into old age. On such a view, going along with the beliefs and rites of Christianity, or Islam, or Buddhism or what you will is reasonable if that is what is traditional and recommended by respectable elderly people; it is unreasonable if you are born into an atheist state like Soviet Russia or if the old men and women who are most revered in your society all say that religion is rubbish.

Such relativism comes easily and need not be cynical, but since the fourth century BC it has been hard to be satisfied with it. Plato drew attention to a number of activities none of which had attracted much notice before and which had certainly not previously been grouped together. These included counting, weighing, measuring, evaluating, comparing, differentiating, reasoning from particular to general and deducing. His work changed humanity's conception of itself. We discovered, or decided, that we were intellectual beings. The activities that interested Plato, which had hitherto been thought of merely as part of any practical pursuit like hunting, farming, waging war or treating the sick, were now thought of as specifically intellectual activities, the work of something called 'mind', 'intellect' or 'reason', *nous*, *logos*, *ratio*. Plato claimed that this is the most admirable part of us; he also claimed that it is the most useful, and that these activities, more reliably than successful experience in life and fidelity to tradition, will give the answer to 'What should we do?' At first he encountered opposition.[2] People thought his theoretical approach useless and childish. But in the end his opinion prevailed. Only an idiot would altogether ignore history, tradition and the experience of those who have made it into respected old age. But civilized people everywhere accept that measuring, comparing, reasoning and so on are better ways of discovering what to do in practical matters than just relying on the elderly and following tradition. Most people also agree that the capacity for these Platonic activities is what puts us above the animals and constitutes our fairest natural endowment. Perhaps Plato puts too much emphasis on the mind and not enough on the heart, but no one would care to be completely mindless.

We now, therefore, have two notions of reason, the original idea that it is the ability to discern the best course of action, whatever may be the source of that ability, and the idea taken from Greek philosophy that it is the capacity for Plato's activities, applying mathematics to the world, making comparisons and drawing distinctions, finding explanations and employing inductive and deductive reasoning.

In civilizations which draw on a tradition of Greek philosophy it is thought that religious beliefs and practices, and moral beliefs and practices too, in order to be reasonable must be open to examination by the intellectual activities Plato commended.

---

[2] See, for instance, Isocrates, *Antidosis*, 261–71 and Plato, *Meno*, 91–3.

I do not think this is accepted in all civilizations, however, and even within the European tradition people may object to submitting deeply held beliefs to whatever academic discipline is fashionable at the moment. Hume makes fun in the person of Demea of the 'rigid inflexible orthodoxy' which holds the attributes of God 'from the infirmities of human understanding to be altogether incomprehensible and unknown to us … covered in a deep cloud from human curiosity: it is profaneness to attempt penetrating through these sacred obscurities' (*Dialogues*, 2). The divines he was satirizing probably knew that Descartes and Spinoza thought religious beliefs could be proved true or false in the same way as propositions in mathematics, and wisely rejected this idea.

By the twentieth century, empiricism had overtaken rationalism in popular esteem, and people were saying that it would be reasonable to believe in the existence of God or a life after death only if these things could be proved empirically or at least subjected to empirical tests. Just at present physical science seems to some people the greatest achievement of human thought, and its methods the best way of arriving at truth. Reason and physical science seem to be almost identical. I said that the original notion of reason connects it with utility; reason is supposed to answer the practical question 'What shall I do?' Its warmest advocates do not pretend that physical science does that, but they do claim it is far more useful than religion in other ways; it has given us aeroplanes and refrigerators, vaccines and anaesthetics. If reason is tied so closely to physical science, to satisfy the requirements of reason religion would have to match science in at least one of two ways: either by explaining things scientists cannot, or by producing better medicines, domestic appliances and the rest – a daunting task.

Religion ought to be open to some kind of intellectual scrutiny, but to what kind and how? Before we say it should be subject to the methods of mathematics or logic or science we should consider what those methods are. Perhaps the nature of mathematics and the nature of empirical science make it impossible for these disciplines to say anything about certain religious issues. Before we declare that modern physical science is the highest form of thought we should be sure about what it is, and that requires considering how it arose and how the understanding that it seeks relates to other kinds of understanding. These are sizable historical and philosophical questions which I shall address next.

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Chapter 8

# Science and Understanding

Anthropologists, as we saw, sometimes ask what religion is; they never ask what science is. Religion, they think, is an odd form of human behaviour which they study from the outside; it would be blasphemous to approach science in that spirit, and in any case some of them think they are themselves scientists. Still, the question, 'What is science?', gets asked: it is a central question for philosophers of science. Why is that? Not because scientists themselves want it answered or feel they cannot get on with their work until it has been. But universities have departments and even faculties of science, scientists are a recognized class of people, and what they do seems to be a special and perhaps specially valuable kind of intellectual thinking. We may all be curious about what distinguishes it from other kinds.

Since science is what the scientists of our society do, the question, 'What is science?', *could* properly be tackled by anthropological field workers, though they might be shooed out of some laboratories pretty fast. But I shall adopt an alternative approach. Although scientists are given the credit for mobile telephones and nuclear bombs, they are not primarily artisans. Their primary activity is not making but thinking, and not just any kind of thinking but understanding or trying to understand. I shall try to explain what science is by saying how western scientific understanding arose and how it differs from other kinds of understanding.

Let me start with some remarks about the word 'understanding'. This is one of a number of interrelated words, a complete little vocabulary. *Understanding* is expressed in *explanation*, and explanation employs prepositions like *for the sake of*, *on account of* and *out of*, conjunctions like *because* and *although*, and modal terms like *possible*, *necessary*, *can* and *must*. Ambiguities in any of these words will run through the others too. If there are different kinds of understanding then there are different kinds of explanation and necessity, different uses of 'because'.

There certainly are different kinds of understanding. The first and most basic kind is understanding of purposive behaviour. We think that other people and such animals as are of interest to us do things or refrain from doing them for reasons and purposes. By 'animals of interest to us' I mean domestic animals like dogs and cows, predators like lions and sharks, prey like pheasants and salmon (and also, perhaps, lions and sharks), nuisances like wasps and so forth. I shall use the words 'reason' and 'purpose' in a slightly technical fashion. In ordinary conversation we might say, 'His reason for going to Paris was to see the Exhibition', but I should say here 'His *purpose* was to see the Exhibition'. We act to cause some events and prevent others, and we refrain from acting lest we cause some events and prevent others. (You refrain from lighting your cheroot lest you prevent the tiger from approaching the tethered goat.) Any explanation of behaviour in these terms I call

an explanation in terms of 'purpose'. I keep the word 'reason' for any real or supposed circumstance because of which an agent with purposes acts or refrains. When we say, 'The badger did not come out because we were there' or 'The bull broke down the fence because there were cows in the next field' we explain the behaviour of these animals in terms of what I call 'reasons'. It will be useful to have a label for explanation or understanding that invokes reasons or purposes, and I shall call it 'teleological'.

A reason for action is something the agent knows or thinks to be the case; a purpose is something desired. To say that Macbeth killed Duncan for the reason that he was King of Scotland is to say not just that he knew this but that his action was an application of that knowledge. If he acted for the purpose of becoming King himself, not only did he want to become King but his action was a carrying out of that desire. These explanations invite us to understand behaviour as a using of cognitive powers and an executing of desires or intentions; we see action, and also inaction, as an exercise of thought.

Does that mean they explain behaviour as the *effect* of knowledge or desire? Understanding something as an effect is seeing it as necessary; teleological explanations enable us to see behaviour not as necessary but precisely as free; acting for a reason or purpose is acting of one's own free will. There is such a thing as practical necessity, necessity in order to avoid harm to oneself or others. A reason may make something necessary in that way, but not in the way an outcome is made necessary by a cause. I shall say more about cause and effect in a moment, and about the relation of action to thought in Chapter 12.

With the possible exceptions of the autistic and of very young infants, all human beings have teleological understanding. Understanding of language is just a special case of it, since it is grasping what speakers *intend* to say, what they *veulent dire*, *volunt* or *boulontai*. Without teleological understanding there could be no societies and no intelligent individuals. But it is not the only kind of understanding that is universal. Everywhere too people possess and transmit skills. The most primitive people want to catch animals and fish, to build huts, to make pots and spears, and they understand and teach each other how to do this. We may call this 'technical' understanding. It consists in knowing not for what reason or purpose anything is done or left undone, but what has to be done or left undone if some purpose is to be achieved. The knitter and the cook know how, that is, *by what action upon what*, a sweater or a pudding is produced. You understand deer-hunting if you know what you must and mustn't do to kill deer.

Teleological and technical understanding are universal and necessary; without them we should not survive. When the necessities of life have been provided, and still more when there is civilization and a leisured class, people give rein to idle curiosity and new kinds of understanding arise.

The ancient Greeks were interested in two quite different classes of fact, mathematical and physical. Having discovered (or been taught by the Egyptians) that if you make a triangle with sides in the proportion 3, 4, 5, it will have a right angle, they wondered why this is so. What counted as an explanation here was in fact a deductive proof of Pythagoras's Theorem. The great compilation of proofs we know

as the *Elements* of Euclid explains a huge range of mathematical facts. Understanding such a fact is seeing how to prove it, which in turn is seeing its logical necessity.

The Greeks also tried to explain natural phenomena. Among primitive people the natural is what does not need explanation; it is what just happens. Why does the sun rise? Why does rain fall? These things are just natural. Even in societies that are not primitive those who enquire into them may expect to encounter derision: 'Do those who engage in them think that when they arrived at knowledge of the necessities by which these things occur, they will themselves be able to make winds and rain and seasons and anything else they may need?' (Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 1.1.15). But the Greeks did try to explain such things. They started with phenomena which, though natural inasmuch as they are not due to intelligence, are unusual and spectacular, like eclipses, earthquakes, lightning, rainbows and magnetic attraction. But they went on to the natural effects of purposive action, of blowing on a fire, of heating clay, dough or gold and so forth. It is part of technical understanding to know by what action a given outcome can be caused or prevented, but there is no need for the skilled craftsman to know why his action has this effect. This further understanding is what Plato tries to offer in the *Timaeus*, 58–61. And by the time of Aristotle Greek thinkers were extending their speculations to the action of non-purposive agents like the sun and to biological processes like growth, digestion and reproduction.

What kind of explanations did they seek? What did they think would count as explaining a natural phenomenon? They started by saying what it is that natural things arise out of. Rain comes from clouds, plants from earth and water. To us today this does not sound much of an explanation, though if we ask, 'Why has Louis Capet such an oddly shaped chin?' we may be satisfied with the answer, 'His father and grandfather had chins like that'. Professor Higgins said that Mr Doolittle's coming from Wales explained his mendacity. But the historically crucial step was to transfer technical understanding to nature. In nature as in craftsmanship there are causal agents that push and pull, heat and cool, though they do so without reason or purpose. The Greeks started to ask what agents cause eclipses and earthquakes, and by what action they produce them and under what conditions. It was soon guessed that the Moon causes solar eclipses by getting between the Sun and the Earth; here the Moon is the causal agent, and its action is passing between the other two bodies. Anaximines surmised that subterranean rocks cause earthquakes by falling from the roofs of vast caverns, and that conditions under which this happens are those of drought or persistent rain.[1] Pushing their enquiries further, and asking why the same action has different effects on different things, Greek thinkers reverted to material factors. Heating ice makes it melt whereas heating clay makes it hard, because ice arises out of water and clay contains earth. Aristotle makes use of fundamental forces. Tiles dislodged from a roof fall because they arise out of earth, and things arising out of earth move downwards without anything acting upon them; you have to act upon them to *prevent* them from moving downwards.

---

[1] *The Fragments of the Presocratics*, ed. H. Diels and W. Kranz (Dublin/Zurich, Weidmann, 1966), vol. 1, p. 488.

Institutions of higher education started in fourth-century Greece, and all the science and mathematics taught in the world today derives from them. Our idea of what constitutes mathematical explanation comes from Euclid's proofs. Central to our idea of science is asking nature the questions we put to the craftsman: 'How do you do it? By what action upon what?' Over the centuries scientific procedures have varied and modern philosophers of science call attention to particular characteristics of scientific method: constructing equations, for example, or formulating hypotheses which can be tested by experiment and shown to be mistaken. But we should not lose sight of the wood for the trees. Teleological explanation enables us to see human and animal behaviour as the operation of thought. Mathematical explanation enables us to see the facts of mathematics as logically necessary. Explanation in physical science enables us to see natural phenomena as effects of causal action and fundamental forces. The action by which a craftsman brings about a desired outcome makes that outcome at worst probable, at best necessary: not just necessary in order to achieve something further, but necessary absolutely. This is physical necessity, and science enables us to see natural phenomena as necessary in this way.

Besides teleological understanding, then, there is mathematical and physical. In our day-to-day lives we explain things in all three ways but this escapes notice because we use the same words, words like 'because' and 'necessarily'. Consider these three remarks:

'I am heavier than you because I weigh ten stone and you weigh nine.'
'I am heavier than you because I eat more chocolates.'
'I eat more chocolates because my lover doesn't mind my being fat.'

The first explanation (if you can call it an explanation) is mathematical; if I weigh ten stone and you weigh nine it is logically necessary that I am heavier than you. The second explanation is causal. The third is teleological: I don't have to refrain from eating chocolates lest I cease to be pleasing in my lover's eyes. We do not misunderstand these explanations, but nor do we normally distinguish between them. Perhaps they were first distinguished only by Plato and Aristotle. But the distinction was vital for the development of mathematics and the sciences, and it is vital also if we are to be reasonable about religion.

We need it, obviously, to determine how science and religion relate to each other. Do they seek the same kind of understanding, or different kinds, or does religion not offer genuine explanations at all? But we also need it to explain certain basic concepts that get bandied about in discussions of religion, notably those of mind and the physical. It is generally admitted that the concept of mind is elusive and that it takes a philosopher to pin it down. But we tend to take the concept of the physical for granted. I believe both have to be analysed in terms of kinds of explanation. In Chapter 12, I argue this about mind; perhaps I had better say something about the physical right away.

We talk of physical objects, processes and laws. Do we start with a clear idea of what makes an object or a process physical? If so, we can then say that a physical

law is one that governs such things, and physical necessity is the necessity of conforming to such laws. That sounds simple, and we may be tempted to define the physical as what can be perceived, or even as what is real and not imaginary. But this temptation comes from the modern reverence for empiricism, and I think the logical order really runs the other way: our concept of the physical starts with the kinds of explanation sought in science. Cars and guns are physical things, but not all the laws that govern them are physical laws; what makes a law physical is the way it works, the role it plays or the kind of explanation in which it plays that role. We have no idea of the physical apart from our idea of a certain family of explanations, roughly speaking, explanations in terms of causal agents, causal action, causal conditions and the materials things contain or arise from. Physical laws are laws to which explanations of this kind appeal. A change in something is physically necessary insofar as it is explained by action upon that thing from outside and by the thing's material. And objects and processes are physical just insofar as they can enter into such explanations and be explained by them.

Our basic notion of physical science, then, is taken from technical understanding, and when we ask whether science can explain life or consciousness or the origin of the universe we draw on this notion: can it, we wonder, be shown that there is some action of something upon something which renders these things inevitable? Philosophers, however, have developed a different account of scientific explanation and this has led to our also having today a different conception of science.

Philosophers since the eighteenth century have thought that to explain something scientifically is to show that it could have been predicted. As Alexander Bird puts it, 'explanation is prediction after the event, and prediction is explanation before the event'.[2] How does the explanation or prediction work? What we want to explain is shown to be deducible from two premises, one containing a natural law, the other a statement of fact. An example may be borrowed from Rom Harré, a critic of this view. Why does this flame turn yellow? It is enough, allegedly, to say, 'All sodium-affected flames turn yellow, and this flame has been affected by sodium.'[3]

This theory of scientific explanation makes it possible to give scientific explanations of purposive behaviour. I take an example from Hume. I drop my wallet, and returning an hour later I find it gone. Why? It is a well confirmed law that, if valuable objects are left in a public place, people appropriate them. My wallet contained money, and I dropped it in a public place. Here we have the same pattern of deductive reasoning, but whereas the colour-change in the flame was the inevitable effect of introducing sodium, the wallet is taken by someone of his own free will. Until recently most philosophers were quite happy with this theory of explanation. They thought human behaviour can be explained in the same way as the phenomena of chemistry and physics. Human actions and physical events both have causes, though the causes were different in the two sorts of case. This seemed to pose no threat to traditional ways of thinking, not even to traditional religious beliefs.

---

[2] *The Philosophy of Science* (London, University College, 1998), p. 72.
[3] *The Principles of Scientific Thinking* (London, Macmillan, 1970), p. 20.

Then, however, the idea gained ground that explaining something scientifically is not just showing it can be deduced from a general law and a statement of fact, but showing it can be deduced as a state of a closed mechanical system. By that I mean a system or set of objects that interact with each other but are not affected by any force from outside and do not lose any force to anything outside. Such a system is purely ideal: it does not exist in the real world. But there are real systems that approximate to it: the Solar System, or the molecules of gas in a container, or billiard balls on a good table between the time when you play your shot and the time they all come to rest. If we know how the bodies in such an ideal system are moving at any moment we can work out how they will be moving at any later moment. Given the position of the Moon on Monday, for instance, we can work out what its position will be on Tuesday, and the calculation, like any other piece of applied mathematics, carries the force of logical necessity. We have passed from the relatively innocuous idea that science consists in showing things can be deduced from general laws to the idea that it consists in showing they can be deduced as states of closed mechanical systems.

If the only mode of explanation which is truly scientific is explaining things as states of closed systems, it follows that *if* we are to explain something scientifically we must view it as such a state. Science, we may say, requires us to view anything we want to explain scientifically in this way. It does not, however, require us to think that scientific explanation is the only genuine kind of explanation, still less that everything can in fact be explained scientifically. These are not scientific principles; at best they are philosophical theses, at worst acts of faith. To see this, consider a parallel. Mathematical explanation explains things as logically necessary, but it is not a principle of mathematics that mathematical proof is the only genuine kind of explanation or that everything that is the case is logically necessary. Descartes hoped that 'all the things than can fall under human knowledge' can be deduced in the way geometers deduce the properties of geometrical figures,[4] but he did not pretend that this follows from the nature of geometry.

It would not follow, if science were limited to explaining things as states of closed systems, that the whole of reality is such a system and everything that happens can be explained in this way. Nevertheless, many philosophers today believe that these latter things are true. Since it was usual in the past to say that human actions can be explained in the same way as physical events, it is not surprising that philosophers go on saying this, but most people resist the idea that they are billiard balls being knocked about by blind natural forces, and our tendency to waver between these two concepts of science, the one derived from technical expertise and the other from mathematics and closed mechanical systems, makes it harder to see how science and religion are related.

---

[4] *Discourse*, p. 2, *Oeuvres*, ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris, Vrin, 1964–74), vol. 6, p. 19.

# Chapter 9

# Accommodation with Philosophy

Christianity as we know it is the result (not, of course, exclusively, but in part) of a fusion of Jewish religion and Greek philosophy: it is heir both to Athens and to Jerusalem. So much is generally agreed. But just what did it inherit from each and how were the legacies integrated? A complete answer could fill a shelf with books. All I shall do here is call attention to a few pregnant Greek ideas which were taken over without being very closely examined, and had an unforeseen impact on Christian theology.

According to Acts 17, Paul tried to interest Athenian philosophers in Jehovah but made little headway. Despite the presence of Jews throughout the Greek world for two hundred years, it appears that Athens, the centre of ancient higher education, had never heard of Jehovah. The best information was that Jews had no gods strictly speaking, but attributed divinity to the sky[1] or the universe as a whole.[2] As for the good news of the Resurrection, this excited derision. Paul seems to have been discouraged since, in I Cor. 1. 17–2.14, he more or less writes philosophy off. God has turned the wisdom of this world to folly; Christian faith depends not on philosophical arguments, *peithoi sophias logoi*, but on the power of the Spirit of God. The earliest Christian documents after the New Testament show no interest in philosophy. Then, in the mid-second century, the Platonist known as Justin Martyr became a Christian, and suddenly there is an accommodation with philosophy. From then onwards, Christian writers nearly all have a philosophical training. The change is quite abrupt and neither preceded nor endorsed by any official discussion or decision.

Plato argues in the *Phaedo* that the human soul is immortal, that when we die our souls are not destroyed but, at least if we have led good lives, enter on a state of bliss that consists not in bodily but in intellectual delights. This sounded very like what Christians believed. In several dialogues Plato speculates on what happens after death. In the *Gorgias*, souls are judged by divinely appointed judges, the good proceed to the Isles of the Blessed, the curably evil are cured by punishments, and the incurably evil are sent to Tartarus where they undergo 'the greatest, most painful and most frightening sufferings for all time', providing a salutary example to others (525c). Similar conjectures are offered at the end of the *Phaedo* (109–14) and the *Republic* (10, 614–21). And Plato's orthodoxy is confirmed by his introducing (in

---

[1] Hecataeus (c. 300 BC) *apud* Diodorus Siculus (c. 60 BC), *History*, 40.3.4.

[2] Strabo (c. 63 BC–21 AD), *Geography*, 16.2.35–7. Instead of *theos*, 'god', Strabo uses the phrase *to theion*, 'the divine'. His and Hecataeus's reports show how essential it was to the Greek concept of a god that gods belong to the natural order.

the *Timaeus*, 28–30), a cosmic Craftsman, a Demiurge, who made the universe in which we live out of pre-existent, restless, disorderly matter. That sounds like an approximation to the account in Genesis 1 with its *tohu* and *bohu*.

Today people often speak as if souls are by definition immortal, so that the important question is not whether they perish at death but whether they exist at all. Christians believe in souls, atheists profess not to. Plato understood by 'soul' or *psukhe* whatever it is that differentiates living things from non-living. Living things were by definition *empsukha*, animate or ensouled, and the important question was not whether they have something differentiating them from artifacts and things like stones but what this is. Is it just complexity of physical structure? Is it certain powers which may or may not be purely physical? Or is it an additional thing present in the living organism that is absent from artifacts and stones – an extra component or even a kind of inhabitant? Plato chose the last option. He thought that the difference between a living human being and a corpse is like the difference between an occupied house and an empty one. People who take this view are apt to identify themselves with these occupants. 'My true self', they say, 'is not a living organism but an intelligent being dwelling, or imprisoned, *in* the organism.' Plato himself slides between speaking of our need to take special care of our souls and speaking of us as *being* our souls.

Second-century Christians welcomed Plato as a forerunner of Christianity and were happy to use as much of his philosophy as they could. Something similar had already been done by non-Christian Jews: Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus, gives a Platonic account of the soul. Plato thought that souls exist before birth as well as after death and are reincarnated sometimes in men, sometimes in animals; these ideas are elaborated in *Phaedrus*, 248–9. Philo and the early Christian Fathers thought they could pass over this part of his teaching in silence and adopt the rest without alteration. This involved no special difficulties for Jews, but the Fathers should have considered the implications for their doctrine of salvation.

Christians call Jesus of Nazareth 'Our Saviour': they think he has saved us. From what? From sin, death and Hell. But these are three very different things. Hell, a place of frightening pain 'for all time', may not exist. The Epicureans, at least, were vigorously denying its existence at the time of Christ, and what Anglican bishop today is prepared to declare publicly a faith in eternal punishment? So we may not need saving from that. Sin exists, but we may not want to be saved from sin. Philosophers, like the legendary Calvinist minister, are against it, but it can seem fun. 'Let me abandon it', prayed the youthful Saint Augustine, 'but not yet.' Death exists, and we do normally want to be saved from death. Christ, however, does not save us from death as a doctor might if we had a life-threatening disease or as a lifeboat might if we were shipwrecked. The cured patient, the rescued mariner, will die eventually. The early Christians seem to have thought Christ saves us in a different way. He does not prevent us from dying but he stops death from being the end and gives us an unending afterlife. But if Plato's ideas about the soul are right, death is not the end anyway: the soul is of its very nature immortal. Christ cannot give us a life after death if we already have it.

A possible solution is that, just as Christ rose only in a Pickwickian way (p. 39 above), so he saves us from death only in a Pickwickian way. Sin, though occasion-

ally pleasant, is death to the soul. Plato suggests, and Philo develops the suggestion, that death for the soul is entombment in the body. Sin and sensuality keep the soul in this world, prevent it from flying away to a bodiless existence of contemplating unchanging truths. But this is death in a Pickwickian sense indeed. Sade, in *The 120 Days of Sodom*, says, 'Once a man has disgraced himself, besmeared himself through excesses, he has imparted something of a vicious cast to his soul, and nothing can rectify that situation. … That heart which of old contained some virtues, no longer recognizes a single one.' Philip Mollon quotes this to describe the perpetrators and victims of satanic child abuse, and speaks of

> a constellation of mental attitudes characterised by extreme destructiveness, the pursuit of power, an envious hatred of life and love, a gross narcissism that opposes concern for others, a hatred of vulnerability and weakness, extreme pride and arrogance, and above all *a devotion to lies and confusion* as opposed to truth. … Evil seems not passive, not merely an absence of good, but an active and intelligent aspect of mental life.[3]

We might not wish to become like this, but do we need Jesus of Nazarus to save us from that fate?

Some theologians question whether salvation is salvation from anything at all. It 'has to do', says Jacques Dupuis, 'with seeking and reaching fulness of life, wholeness, self-fulfilment and integration'.[4] All moral philosophers offer us salvation in this sense.

The first Christians seem, as I say, to have claimed that Christ rose from the dead in a non-Pickwickian way. C.S. Lewis emphasizes this eloquently in his book, *Miracles*.[5] On the face of it, Christianity apart, death completely extinguishes us. Many non-Christians have believed that, after death, there may be some shadowy existence for ghosts of the dead. But ghosts do not come back to life and their existence, if they exist at all, is thin and disagreeable: worse, says Homer, than the life of a slave of a landless man. The presence of a few wraiths does not alter the fact that death has conquered. The point about Jesus's resurrection, which made it such good news, was that death did not conquer him. As the Sequence of Easter Sunday puts it, 'Life and death met in an amazing battle; the general of life died, yet reigns alive'. The message that Jesus really overcame death, drew its sting and turned its victory into defeat, makes a powerful appeal. It kindles the hope that what everyone hitherto had feared might now be avoided. But it fits badly with Plato's view of the soul.

Justin Martyr may have sensed this difficulty at the start. Though he follows Plato in taking the soul as a living thing conjoined with the body, he denies its pre-existence and says it lives only as long as God wants it to.[6] The difficulty has still to

---

[3] *Multiple Selves, Multiple Voices* (Chichester, John Wiley & Sons, 1996), pp. 178, 184.

[4] *Christianity and the Religions*, tr. Phillip Berryman, London, Darton Longman and Todd, 2003, p. 168.

[5] Glasgow: Collins, 1976, ch. 16.

[6] *Dialogue with Trypho*, s.5, Migne PG 6 pp. 486–7. Migne's translator, Prudentius Marani, somewhat imprudently alters 'not *all* souls perish' to 'not *any*'.

be resolved. Hobbes denied what he calls 'the natural immortality of the soul' in *Leviathan* (chs 38 and 44), but he is hardly an official Christian spokesman, and though he professes the orthodox doctrine that the souls of 'the elect' live eternally 'by special grace', his general theory of the soul is too crudely materialistic to satisfy modern philosophers, let alone theologians. Most Christians today have a Platonic conception of the soul. They do not believe in reincarnation, but they think that at conception, or between conception and birth, God creates the individual soul and plants it in the embryo like a seed in a flower-pot. Western medieval theologians often paid lip-service to a different view of the soul–body relationship that derived from Aristotle and to which I shall come in a moment. But in their hearts, it might be argued, they clung to Platonism, and they certainly held that the soul is by nature capable of existing apart from the body. This leaves little room for a non-Pickwickian interpretation of how Christ saves us from death.

Plato's doctrine of the soul is not the only piece of Greek thought the Christian Fathers adopted rather hastily. They also took on board some heavy pieces of Stoic moral philosophy.

Moral philosophy underwent a profound change at the end of the fourth century BC. It had started in the fifth century in Athens. Athens was a city state in which the powers of making laws, conducting foreign policy and administering justice through the courts were wielded by the entire citizen population: that is to say, by all those Athenian adult males who had citizen rights. Although certain executive officers called 'generals' were elected by ballot every year, major legislative and executive decisions were taken by the assembly of the entire citizen body, and other functions were discharged by committees chosen from that body not by ballot or by party leaders but by lot. Adult male citizens were only a minority, of course, of the inhabitants of Athens, which housed, besides women and children, many slaves and resident foreigners. Still, every adult male citizen took legislative, juridical and executive decisions which in a modern democracy are taken only by a handful of people elected by ballot and by their appointees. Everybody, therefore, had to consider what to legislate, what to condemn and what collective action to take. Inevitably issues of principle arose and became the subject of arguments. Some people claimed that one thing was right or just or sensible, others another, and there seemed no rational way of settling such disputes. It was in this context that Socrates started trying to define such things as justice, temperance, courage and knowledge, and to develop trustworthy forms of reasoning. His enquiries gave rise to moral philosophy and, indeed, to everything we now call 'philosophy'. They were continued by Plato, another Athenian, and Aristotle, a Greek from northern Greece who lived and worked in Athens. The productive lives of these three intellectual pioneers spanned more than 100 years.

The primary purpose of their moral philosophy was to improve public life in a democracy of the Athenian type. Incidentally, Plato and Aristotle produced brilliant theoretical treatises, but their first aim was practical. Athenian democracy, however, had always been a rare and slightly exotic plant; it flourished only under the shelter of Athenian military and naval power; and after the death of Aristotle in 322 it became extinct – not because of Aristotle's death, but because of that of Alexander

the Great the previous year. Alexander's rule had stretched from Greece to India and from the Black Sea to Egypt. He had believed in city states and founded them, on lines recommended by Aristotle, wherever he went. His successors had no interest in democracy of any kind, still less in Utopian political experiment, and in the fragments of his empire the functions Plato and Aristotle had expected citizens to discharge were concentrated in the hands of kings and their ministers. Some kings were enlightened and beneficent, others tyrannical or inept. But there was no more use for the moral philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, and the Stoics developed a moral philosophy for private persons or subjects as contrasted with citizen-rulers.

One difference between the earlier moral philosophy and the Stoic lies in their attitude to law. In democratic Athens the chief problem was what to put into it; in the Hellenistic period the problem was how to have it respected: law and order were preferable to corruption and chaos. The earlier thinkers opposed law, which we make ourselves, to nature, which is how things are independently of us; and they contrasted doggedly following general rules, which can never be more than blunt, imperfect tools, with thinking for oneself, the only way of determining what is right or wrong in particular circumstances. The Stoics introduced the idea of natural law, and gave it an almost divine status. Chrysippus, one of the founders of the school, begins a treatise on law as follows:

> Law is the king of all things, divine and human. It ought to be the guardian of good and evil, the ruler and leader, and thereby the standard of what is just and unjust, enjoining upon animals that are by nature political [i.e. human beings] what they should do, and forbidding what they should not do.[7]

As the Roman Republic was turning into the Roman Empire Cicero wrote:

> True law is right reason, agreeing with nature, diffused through all, constant, everlasting, so that by ordering it may call to duty and by forbidding deter from fraud. … This law may be neither weakened nor modified in part nor repealed as a whole. … There will not be one law at Rome and another at Athens, or one law now and another later, but one law everlasting and unchangeable will hold in check all people at all times (*De Re Publica*, 3.33).

The Stoics did not have a personal god like Jehovah. Nor, however, did they dispense altogether with the divine. The Stoic Cleanthes (whose name Hume borrows in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*) composed a hymn to Zeus that begins: 'Zeus, most famous of the immortals, addressed by many names, always almighty, lord of nature, governing all things with law.' They tended to equate god and reason, taking reason, however, not as limited to human individuals but as diffused through the universe and governing everything with providence. 'The common nature and common law [*logos*] of nature', says Plutarch,[8] 'is fate and providence and god.' In

---

[7] A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), vol. 1, 67 R.

[8] *Greek Philosophy*, ed. C.J. de Vogel (Leiden, Brill, 1964) vol. 3, p. 64 (*De Stoicorum Repugnantiis*, c. 34).

Stoic thought, god, reason and law merge in a cocktail that different thinkers could mix in the proportions and to the strength they preferred. But Christians deriving their theology from the Old Testament could feel that they had common ground with the Stoics, and the rather severe morality the Stoics not only professed but to some extent practised seemed as congenial to them as it was to educated Romans. The only alternatives were Epicureanism – not for Christians – and some blend of licentiousness and superstition – still less.

Christianity took two things from Stoicism which, while they do not, like Plato's conception of the soul, conflict with Christian theology, do not support it and would prove a burden. One is the idea that behaving rightly is a matter of behaving in accordance with general rules. Christianity adopted and developed the idea of natural law. Law plays a large part in Judaism. The first section of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch, is the book or books of law. But the laws of the Old Testament Jews are commands issued by a personal God who inflicts upon people who disobey him punishments beyond the natural consequences of their deeds. The first law is to worship Jehovah and no other god. The natural law of the Stoics was immanent, not imposed from outside, and much closer to what we consider the laws of physical nature. Stoicism preached a life 'in agreement with' nature, meaning by that a life of behaviour in accordance with our nature as human beings. Christians, however, identified the Stoics' universal law of nature with the commands of their personal God. And when, after the Middle Ages, Enlightenment dawned and the idea of a personal God was edged out of ethics and jurisprudence, it was replaced by an increasing reverence for law and general rules. This can be seen in Grotius and Puffendorf and reached its high-water mark in Kant's moral philosophy. Not being pleasing to God, but the mere formal possibility of being made into a general rule, is for Kant what makes a principle right. Since the time of Kant rule-worship has been a prominent feature of Christian thought, though it takes different forms among Catholics and among Protestants.

A second thing Christians took from Stoicism was what Isaiah Berlin calls 'the retreat to the inner citadel'.[9] Besides telling us to live in agreement with nature the Stoics recommend freeing ourselves from desires we cannot fulfil and from 'irrational'(*aloga*) and 'excessive' (*pleonazonta*) passions. These precepts might be thought contradictory: surely it is all too natural to desire what you cannot have and to experience strong emotions. But the Stoics said that 'reason is by nature law',[10] that it was natural for a rational animal to follow reason,[11] and it is not reasonable to want what is unattainable, while passion is excessive precisely when it is contrary to reason. Arguable in theory; but living at the mercy of arbitrary authorities and frequent public disorder Stoics tended to retreat into themselves and say that the truly rational man sets himself a goal and ideal that is not just within his power but within himself: an inner moral perfection. Stoicism, say Long and Sedley,[12] offered a man 'a moral character that guaranteed his happiness in all circumstances'. Berlin,

---

[9] *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1958), s.3.
[10] Long and Sedley, 67 L.
[11] Ibid., 65 J.
[12] Ibid., vol. 1, p. 345.

less sympathetically, calls this (p. 24) 'a sublime but unmistakable form of the doctrine of sour grapes'.

This way of thinking seems to have appealed to Christians from the earliest times. Paul in his letter to the Romans, chapter 6, speaks of the 'slavery of sin'; what he calls 'sin' the Stoics called 'excessive passions'. In the first three centuries Christians often suffered persecution, torture and death, and believed this was worthwhile for the sake of an inner good. Berlin observes that an inner self-sufficiency that consists in being governed by reason and reason alone is an ideal for writers in the liberal tradition at least from Rousseau. He calls this kind of liberalism 'a form of secularized Protestant individualism' (p. 23); it is confined neither to Protestants nor to those living in the world. Catholics too and cloistered devotees have been attracted to a moral or spiritual equivalent of body-building. The original purpose may be to please a personal God or be worthy of the divine Bridegroom, but there is a risk of narcissism.

Plato's concept of the soul fits ill with the basic Christian doctrine of salvation. Stoic emphasis on law and inner perfection is not in tension with any Christian doctrine, but introduces certain questionable tendencies into Christian thought and practice. The last philosophical borrowing I shall mention is a lesser hazard; it has simply caused technical troubles for Catholic theologians.

Hellenistic philosophical thought was syncretistic: philosophers were as generous as possible to the great thinkers of the past, and played down their differences. When Christians started philosophizing they chiefly used Plato and the Stoics; but they did not think Aristotle's philosophy incompatible with Plato's and at least by the sixth century they were drawing upon Aristotle's conceptions of form and matter and applying them to the relationship of the body and soul. Aristotle says that the human soul is the form of a human being and the body the matter. By the Middle Ages this had become official orthodoxy, though theologians continued to work, more than they realized, with a Platonic conception, and that is still the situation in the Catholic Church. Medieval theologians also invoked the notions of form and matter for other purposes. They used them to develop their theology of the sacraments generally – each sacrament has its own form and matter – and of the Eucharist in particular.

Unfortunately, Aristotle's notions of form and matter are extremely elusive. They look simple. If you take a brazen sphere (his own example), the bronze is the matter and the spherical shape is the form. But there are great difficulties in using this model to explain the soul–body relation. The human soul is certainly not the human shape. Is it then our physical structure? Is it what is encoded in our DNA? If so, it obviously cannot survive death. Is there any other way of being a form? Modern philosophers mostly think Aristotle's theory of the soul completely rules out an afterlife. The sixth-century Christian Philoponus suggested we have two souls, a soul responsible for our biological and animal functions, which fits Aristotle's notion of form, and a soul responsible for intellectual functions that does not depend on the body and which is a form only in the Pickwickian sense in which a steersman may be called the 'form' of a ship. How hard it is for Catholic theologians today to reconcile official respect for Aristotle with their tacit Platonism and

give a clear and coherent account of the soul may be judged from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ss.363–6. 'In Sacred Scripture', we are told by the seven expert but anonymous bishops who drafted the final text, 'the term "soul" often refers to human *life* or the entire human *person*'; but it 'also refers to the innermost aspect of man' and 'signifies the *spiritual principle* in man. … The unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the "form" of the body: i.e. it is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body. … The Church teaches that every spiritual soul is created immediately by God.'

There are are even greater difficulties in applying Aristotle's notions to the Eucharist. The theologians who did this in the Middle Ages believed in a special kind of matter they called 'Prime Matter', *materia prima*, and used this idea not only in theology but in physics and metaphysics. As I shall explain in Chapter 20, Prime Matter is fundamental to the doctrine of transubstantiation that played an odd part in English history. In 1673, the English Parliament passed an Act requiring anyone who wanted any 'office, civil or military' or any 'command or place of trust from or under his majesty' to swear, 'I do believe that there is not any transubstantiation in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper or in the elements or bread and wine at or after the consecration thereof by any person whatsoever'. The purpose of this act was to exclude Catholics from all official posts, and loyal Catholics refused the oath, though perhaps neither they nor those who drafted the Act knew what the word 'transsubstantiation' (which Parliament misspelt) meant. Today pretty well all philosophers, whatever their religious beliefs, consider Prime Matter indefensible; but Catholics have no agreed theology of the Eucharist which dispenses with transubstantiation.

Christianity has drawn great strength from philosophy. No other religion (except perhaps Buddhism) has a philosophical dimension, or aspires to meet the perplexities of people who think of themselves as intellectual beings. Conversely, philosophy has been kept alive by Christianity. Since 529, when Justinian closed the non-Christian Neoplatonist school in Athens, hardly anyone outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition has been interested in the subject. The accommodation, then, between Christianity and philosophy has been a benefit to both. But it took place without much reflection, and the philosophical ideas I have mentioned planted themselves in the flesh of Christianity like splinters that have not grown out but continue to cause irritation. I shall return to them in later chapters.

# Chapter 10

# War with Science

Christianity and philosophy might have been enemies but in fact, after some sharp words by Paul and Tertullian, they reached an accommodation. For a thousand years the accommodation extended to science. The physical and biologial sciences were pursued in Alexandria and elsewhere round the Eastern Mediterranean before the coming of Islam and in Western Europe from the foundation of the universities, without any conflict with Christianity. Hostilities broke out in the seventeenth century and have continued sporadically ever since. In this chapter I shall first say something about the causes and character of the conflict and then go briefly through some points on which we are sometimes told science has proved religion wrong. A brief discussion will suffice, because claims that science has refuted religious belief are simplistic.

To speak of war between science and religion is to speak metaphorically; scientists and religious believers have never mustered armies against each other in the same way as Christians and Moslems or the French and the Germans. And the metaphor is misleading if it suggests that scientists and Christians are mutually exclusive groups. The word 'science' as used colloquially covers not only theoretical disciplines like physics and biology but also medicine; doctors like to describe themselves as men of science and medicine as a science, even if in fact it is more of an art. Until recently nearly all scientists and physicians were believing Christians, Jews or Moslems, and perhaps the majority still are. Nor is that an accident. People have been encouraged to study medicine by their religious beliefs: attending to the sick is supposed to be an act pleasing to God. Pure scientists have thought that there is an intelligible order to be discovered in nature because nature was created by God, and their pleasure in scientific research has been increased by the belief that they are admiring the handiwork of the Creator. On the other hand someone who thinks that the natural world is just there and that there is no purpose behind it is more likely to pursue riches, honours or pleasure than scientific knowledge: knowledge for its own sake is an unworldly if not an otherworldly ideal.

If conflict between religion and science arises from no natural opposition, how did it come about? Not from disagreement about whether everything is a closed mechanical system of the kind described in Chapter 8. That is a very recent phase in a long-standing conflict. Historians like to refer conflicts to political or economic causes, and, if academic politics can be counted as political, both played a part in this case.

To take economic considerations first, in the early nineteenth century the clergy both in Catholic and in Protestant countries enjoyed a good deal of wealth, power and prestige. In England, for example, bishops sat in the House of Lords, the

governing bodies of the universities consisted of men in holy orders, and the beneficed clergy often received large incomes, lived in large houses and were accorded high respect. So long as Christianity was generally believed true these privileges could be enjoyed with a good conscience; but what if the doctrines of Christianity were false and the events related in the Bible never happened? In the English Reformation thousands of monks, nuns and chantry priests had lost their livelihood largely because one minor doctrine, that of Purgatory, was called into question. In the eighteenth century the chief threat to Christian belief came from philosophy. Science had indeed proved that the Earth is not the centre of the universe and that it turns on its axis, but this seemed less damaging than the arguments of Hume and Spinoza. But in the nineteenth century Darwin showed scientifically that the account of the creation of the world in Genesis was completely mistaken. Did it not follow that bishops should be removed from the House of Lords and clerical incomes drastically reduced?

It is ironical that the enlightened sceptics who thought Christianity false did not draw this conclusion. Just before the French revolution, Jacques Necker, Louis XVI's finance minister, had published *The Importance of Religious Opinions* in which he argued that, in societies which tolerate or actually depend on great inequalities, Christianity is the only thing that will keep the lower classes peaceful and law-abiding. The Terror of the 1790s, in which priests and enlightened sceptical landowners perished on the same scaffold, was a dramatic confirmation of his thesis, and it was accepted by responsible atheists down to the end of the nineteenth century, as Samuel Butler's remarks, quoted in Chapter 1, attest. It was the believers, and especially the old-fashioned clergy, who rejected this pragmatism and declared war on science.

Once hostilities had begun, however, the sceptics raked up the case of Galileo and other sixteenth-century clashes between scentists and religious authorities. The source of these clashes, however, was quite different. What was at stake was not clerical incomes but academic reputations.

Before the advent of telescopes and microscopes (round about 1600) science was known as 'philosophy of nature' or 'natural philosophy' and regarded as a part of a group of studies which also included what we call 'philosophy' today – logic, metaphysics, ethics and so on. Scientists who used the new instruments, and carried out experiments in mechanics with pulleys and pendulums, were a threat to professors of the old school who relied on Aristotle and still more on the corpus of commentaries on Aristotle that had been accumulating for thousands of years. When appropriate arguments failed them, some bated conservatives had recourse to charges of heresy. That sounds shocking but not all academics are models to be imitated. In the twentieth century, German professors, the princes of the academic world, cooperated in excluding Jews from universities; in the fifteenth century, the University of Paris, which led the world in philosophy, played a decisive part in getting Joan of Arc burnt for heresy. Young academics were fair and easy game. If there was a wider animosity between science and religion in the seventeenth century it was part of the secession of empirical science from the more a priori parts of philosophy.

Academic rivalry and jockeying for position between the clergy and the nobility, between the first and the second estates, could go on more or less independently of any opposition between religion and science. A factor of quite a different kind was a new conception of truth.

The invention of printing in the fifteenth century is usually said to have brought education and new kinds of knowledge to classes of society that had not previously had these benefits. No doubt it did, but it may also have promoted a new credulity. Illiterate and untravelled people are of a sceptical turn of mind. They know well (or think they know) how to manage their households, produce food and ply their trades; but not only are they more or less ignorant of matters outside their daily experience, about the past and about relatively inaccessible places; they doubt if knowledge of such things is possible; the limits of historical knowledge are set by what their grandparents can remember. When Bibles started to flow from Gutenberg's press in Mainz, the people into whose hands they came were not only inclined to believe everything they read; they unconsciously acquired a new conception of truth.

Richard Rorty in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* identifies the concept of mind with that of a mirror of nature, and suggests that this idea dates back to the seventeenth century. The mind, he says, was invented by philosophers of that time, chiefly Descartes and Locke. I think he runs together two things that should be kept apart. The mind is indeed an invention, but not of the seventeenth century. It was invented by Plato two thousand years earlier. What seventeenth-century philosophers introduced or rather embraced and fostered was an idea of truth as accurate mirroring or representing. Primitive people have no general idea of truth. They know the difference between an animal's being a horse and its not being a horse, and between truthfulness and mendacity or deceit. They do not know the difference between being and not being generally or between truth and falsehood. The new printed books, dealing with every kind of topic, near and remote, and often, like the Nuremberg Chronicle (1493–4), illustrated with naturalistic woodcuts, seemed to offer detailed pictures of the whole universe; they purported to reflect reality as accurately as the mirrors of the new microscopes and telescopes reflected objects that had never been seen before. This idea has roots in ancient philosophy, but for its flowering it had to await the invention of printing, which made the written word part of everyone's life, and the invention of microscopes and telescopes, which employed mirrors.

Accordingly, the Bible was treated as history and cosmology. This was not something totally new. Josephus worked out that the interval from Adam to Moses was 3000 years (*Apion*, 1.39). Bede tried to extract from Genesis a series of dates for his chronicle of the Six Ages of the World. But the last chapter of that chronicle shows an indifference to whether people accept his calculations that is quite alien to the age of Calvin and the Council of Trent. 'If they don't like them', he says, 'they don't have to read them', *si displicet, non legant*. Bede was a good historian by the standards of his day, but it was not a day that had our expectations either of historiography or of cosmology. The printed Bibles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries seemed to be offering a verbal picture, correct in every detail, of the origin

of the universe and of events in the Middle East before the Trojan War. As time went on believers adopted the sloppy practice of seeking in the Bible for truths that should have been ascertained by proper historical and scientific research; and researchers made the disturbing suggestion that these sacred writings contained falsehoods. Today the only alternative we can imagine to history and science is myth. If people do not treat the Bible as literally true, we think, they must treat it only as a kind of fairy tale. But this stark choice did not present itself to people who lacked both our conception of literal truth and our optimism about obtaining it.

The enlargement of knowledge which came from microscopes and telescopes not only reinforced the mirror-concept of truth but helped generate the idea that to attain such truth is the highest form of knowledge. That idea ought to have been resisted by Christian thinkers. For it would be more in keeping with Christianity to place interpersonal understanding at the top of intellectual achievements, and grasping someone's reasons or purposes cannot be a matter of mirroring or depicting. You can have a pictorial representation of something I do, but not of my doing it for a particular reason or purpose. In fact, however, Christians tended to accept the ideal of mirror-like truth. To justify their religious beliefs they then had to enter into competition with the users of microscopes and telescopes. Some simply became scientists. The Society of Jesus always had a taste for straight astronomy. Others invented sciences of their own: scientific theology, scientific biblical criticism, scientific comparative religion. And others set themselves the King Canute-like task of trying to stem the tide of biological discovery. But there is bound to be conflict between science and religion so long as accurate representation is assumed to be the only genuine kind of truth, because, as will become clearer as we proceed, beliefs about God are all similar in character to beliefs about human beings and their purposes. Their truth cannot, then, consist in any kind of mirroring.

Since Kant and Schleiermacher there have been Christians who have given up claims to religious knowledge altogether. Religion, they say, is an affair not of knowledge but of feeling. Declarations of religious belief do not aim at truth but at sustaining believers and making them happier, better people. The totality of truth can then be ceded gracefully to scientists. But this policy of appeasement has not produced peace between Christianity and science. The ground left to religion is too narrow for a tolerable existence, and church-going Christians will simply not stand for a thorough-going Pickwickianization of their beliefs. They feel it makes them look crazy. Fairy tales are all very well, but we do not build special buildings like Cathedrals for them or wear bizarre clothes like copes and mitres. So long as truth is conceived in a way that gives a monopoly of it to physical science, science and religion are bound to appear opposed, and appeasing Christians are as much the prisoners of that conception as hawkish atheists like Professor Richard Dawkins.

So much on how the conflict between religion and science came about. Let me now turn to the issues on which they seem to disagree. There is a difference here between a kind of popular orthodoxy to which people feel it necessary to pay tribute if they are writing for the press or speaking on the television, and what professional philosophers and theologians take to be crucial issues. I shall here deal with popular ideas and leave the professionals to later chapters.

Popular orthodoxy continues to treat the Bible as religion's attempt at science. The main errors it has been proved to contain are as follows. First, it says that the universe was created some four thousand years before the birth of Christ. Science has demonstrated that this is out by a factor of millions: the universe came into existence at least *fifteen thousand million* years ago. A howler indeed; but the important question is surely not how long ago the universe was created but whether it was created by God at all. That question I address in Chapter 14.

Secondly, the Bible says that each living species was created separately, and the first man was miraculously produced from dust, whereas Darwin has proved that species arose out of one another, and the human species like the rest. It should be fairly clear that the question whether one species arises out of another is of no importance to religious believers. A question which might seem important is whether there can be a complete physical explanation of the emergence of life and of psychological powers, including consciousness and intelligence. To this too I return below.

Thirdly, the Bible says that the Sun goes round the Earth once a day, and the phenomena of sunrise and sunset are due to that. Science has proved that on the contrary the Earth goes round the Sun. Most people who say this will also say that the phenomena of sunrise and sunset are due to the Earth's going round the Sun. If you tell them that in fact the Earth goes round the Sun only once a year, and the phenomena of sunrise and sunset are due to its rotating on its axis, they are apt to think that that is a silly quibble. The main point is that the Church got it wrong. But if the difference between rotation and revolution does not matter, how can it matter that the Biblical writers made a mistake about it? This is a point on which the irrationality generated by questions concerning religion is slightly comical.

But though no religious doctrine depends on the hypothesis that the Earth is the centre of the Solar System, the basic Christian doctrines were formulated at a time when the Ptolemaic system held the field, and when it was thought that the whole width of the universe was not many times greater than the distance between the Earth and the Sun. The traditional conception of God is tailored to fit a small geocentric universe; now that science has proved that the universe is vast and the place in it of this planet insignificant, is that conception not discredited?

These considerations are weak. It is hardly for creatures to tell the creator what would be a suitable size of universe to create and how best to lay it out. But a further point may be made about time. Not only, it may be said, would it be wasteful to have a universe running for thousands of millions of years before the advent of life. If the world we see had really come into being in a period of only six days, only six thousand years ago, that would be a staggering miracle, so it was not unreasonable for people in the first centuries of the Christian era to believe in a personal creator. But it is unreasonable for us today because we now know there has been no such miracle: the universe reached its present state in a natural way over a vast period. This way of thinking is confused. We have to suppose that the early Christians both believed that the universe started in 4000 BC and possessed our knowledge of the laws of physical nature, since it is in the light of those laws that a recent origin of the universe is miraculous. In fact, not only did they not have our scientific knowledge,

but they did not believe that the origin of the universe was recent. Many educated people in the Greco-Roman world believed the universe had existed for an infinite stretch of time, and Christian theologians down to the time of Aquinas argued that that was compatible with its having been created. The tendency in antiquity was to exaggerate time-lapses; Deucalion, Zoroaster, and other such shadowy figures, for example, were widely thought to have lived long before the date Bede calculated the Bible gives for the creation.

Finally, the Church teaches that Christ was conceived without a human father, worked various miracles and rose from the dead. Science has proved that miracles are impossible, that a child cannot be conceived without a father, and that a dead man cannot come back to life. The irrationality of this complaint is pointed out by C.S. Lewis in *Miracles*.[1] Christian belief rests, not on the supposition that it is quite natural for virgins to conceive and dead men to rise, but precisely on the supposition that these things are contrary to the natural order and physically impossible.

It is sometimes said, not that science has proved religion wrong, but that it has failed to prove it right on certain crucial matters. Space probes have failed to find God in the sky, and despite the efforts of societies of psychical research there is no scientific evidence for a life after death. People who say this sometimes fail to distinguish between failing to prove something true and succeeding in proving it false. Thus Communist ideologists were inclined to say that the space probes had demonstrated that God does not exist. Perhaps they thought that the distinction I have just drawn is mere logic-chopping, but it is not. If science had proved that God does not exist and that there is no life after death, that would be bad news for religious believers. That science has not proved that God or an after-life exists is not bad news but good.

Science can prove the existence only of what is physical. Microscopes and telescopes reveal the existence of objects which act physically upon our senses through them, and scientific reasoning can establish the existence of things such as fields and fundamental forces which, though they do not themselves stimulate our sense-organs, explain phenomena that do. As Rom Harré explains in detail in *The Principles of Scientific Thinking*, scientists make advances by first constructing a model that would explain the observed phenomena, and then claiming that there really exists a mechanism of that kind. Since Jehovah is not supposed to be any kind of physical mechanism, science could not possibly prove his existence. And the same goes for human persons who have survived death. If science did prove their existence, they would have to be physical objects or mechanisms, and that, according to religious belief, they are not.

The class of things of which science proves the existence is in fact quite small – much smaller than the class of things the existence of which is known more or less empirically. Let me show that with three examples.

First, science cannot prove the existence of ordinary macroscopic objects like microscopes and telescopes. It uses them, scientists assume they exist, but the assumption is not formulated in any scientific work and cannot be proved by

[1] Op. cit., pp. 49–51.

scientific experiment. Science can prove that a given object consists of certain material, that a given vessel is made of glass or that a given liquid contains alcohol. But to prove this it uses other things, and it does not prove the existence of those. Of course we know the things we see and hold exist, and since we know this our admiration for science may lead us to think it must be scientifically provable. But in fact the question 'How do we know they exist?' is philosophical, and has to be answered, if anyone wants to press it, by some rather intricate philosophical argument.

Next, science does not prove the existence of intelligence or even sentience. Scientists think and prove; but they do not prove either that thinking or that proof exists. That also is the business of philosophy. Science can discover that certain processes go on in the sense-organs or in the brain; but that these processes actually *are* thinking and perceiving must be shown, if it can be shown at all, by philosophers.

And of course science cannot prove the existence of entities like departmental committees, mortgages or grand slams at bridge, though scientists may occasionally sit on committees, take out mortgages and go down in slams, doubled and vulnerable.

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Chapter 11

# Explaining the Physical Order

In the preceding chapter I considered the view that science has exploded religion by proving that the cosmology of the Bible is all false. A different view is that science cannot explode religion because their spheres are completely separate. Some Christians, as we have seen, say that religion does not try to tell us anything that is true or false at all: it addresses the heart, not the head. The most militant atheists have no objections to that. Others, however, say that science tells us *how* things happen while religion tells us *why*. That can arouse protest. For surely science does tell us why phenomena like rainbows and eclipses occur, and also why certain action has certain effects, why wax melts when heated and clay hardens.

At this point the argument, which has been winding its way over the broad uplands of anthropology and history, has to plunge into the philosophical narrows. It will emerge into the lush meadows of theology only in Chapter 14. There are three things which religious believers often say science cannot explain and which critics of religious belief say it has explained or will soon explain or could in principle explain. These are the origin of the entire physical order, its continued existence, and mind or consciousness. Some people may wonder whether this is really an important issue. It would be in keeping with one Anglican way of thinking to say it does not matter if science explains these things: what matters is fidelity to Christ's moral teaching and a sense of respect for the numinous. I think that the issue is important. But it turns on deep philosophical questions to do with the concept of a cause, the limits of causal explanation and the concept of mind. Non-philosophers, and philosophers themselves too, have great difficulty in getting a purchase on these very abstract topics, and becoming confused or despondent, retreat to intuitions which are quite irrational. They just know that they are right and their opponents wrong. In concrete practical matters of which we have experience, intuition is a useful guide; in philosophy it is a disastrous cop-out. We must either leave these issues alone or tackle the philosophical concepts properly.

I said in Chapter 8 that there are three main kinds of explanation, teleological, physical and logical, and the question 'why?' may be a request for any one of them. Explanations in mathematics are all logical. If we ask, 'Why if a number is divisible by 3, do its digits add up to a number divisible by 3?' we want a proof that they do. Explanations in physical science are all causal; that is what makes them scientific and physical. Religion does not offer either causal or logical explanations. If the existence of God can be proved deductively, the proof must be sought from philosophy; it cannot be provided by religion. Religious explanations are all teleological, that is, they say for what reason or purpose things exist and action goes on. (The converse, of course, does not hold. The explanations we give every day in terms of the purposes

of human beings, dogs, sharks and so on, are teleological but not religious; religious explanations bring in the purposes of supernatural agents such as Jehovah.)

Since religion and science offer explanations of different kinds, they cannot collide head on. There would be a head-on crash only if science said something was caused by one causal agent, and religion said it was caused by another, or if religion said that something had one purpose, and science said it had a different purpose or no purpose at all; and this cannot happen. But which kind of explanation is appropriate for the origin and continued existence of the physical universe?

Science does try to show how the world as we see it today came into existence. The current wisdom is that it started in a big explosion some fifteen thousand million years ago. Anyone familiar with the history of cosmology over the last 2500 years may feel this is unlikely to be the wisdom of 2500 years hence, but let us suppose it has the most perfect, mirror-like truth. A simple question then remains. How do we explain the initial explosion? Has it a causal explanation or not? Modern physics may place technical obstacles connected with time-measurement to explaining it in quite the same way as later events, but if it has a causal explanation there must have been some prior event or state of affairs that made it inevitable. If there was, so that the great explosion was not the first member of the chain of causes that reaches down to us, how do we explain whatever was the first member of the chain? Not causally, since the causal explanations science offers are in terms of prior events. Physical science cannot explain a first event.

The usual reply to this is that there is no first event. That is a philosopher's reply. No cosmologist argues that the universe has existed for an infinite length of time or that every event had a predecessor. How could there be any empirical evidence for such a claim? A philosopher, however, may say: 'At least it's possible; we *might* be in a series of events that has no first member.' If that is indeed possible, then it is possible that there is a causal explanation for everything. There cannot be a cause for the whole infinite series, because that would have to be an event before the first event and we are supposing there is no first event; but there would be a cause for every finite series within the whole series.

'It might be that every event has a predecessor' is a philosophical claim. Is it true? In the nineteenth century Cantor gave us a good understanding of the mathematics of infinite numbers and series. For every finite number there is a greater finite number, and we can say, 'There have been as many successive cosmic explosions' (or whatever events we like to mention) 'as there are finite numbers'. 'As the series of numbers 1, 2, 3, … has no end, so the series of years BC1, BC2, BC3, … has no end.' We can say this, but can we believe it? Numbers are not things like horses or chairs or stars. Numerous horses and stars exist, but numbers do not exist independently of numerous things. When we say that for any finite number there could be a greater we mean that for any set containing a number of things there *could* (in some sense of 'could') be a set with a greater, but still finite, number of members. But it is one thing to say that and another to say there could be a set containing an infinite number of members.

Let us investigate this different claim. Could there be infinitely many stars? Could there have been infinitely many cosmic explosions? Mathematicians say that

an infinite set is one that can be put into one to one correlation with a subset of itself. Take the set of integers, 1, 2, 3 etc.; the even numbers 2, 4, 6 etc. form a subset of this. The whole set is infinite because for every integer there is just one even number that is its double, while for every even number there is just one integer that is its half. So there are just as many integers not counting the odd numbers as there are counting the odd numbers. If there are infinitely many stars then there are just as many stars not counting Sirius, for example, as counting it. That is surely a good reason for thinking that there could *not* be an infinite number of stars.

Infinity attaches only to possibilities. If a train goes from London to Paris, the number of stops it might make not counting Amiens is as great as the number it might make counting Amiens. But those are possible stops. The number of actual stops between London and Paris, including Amiens, will be greater than the number it actually makes not including Amiens. Physical reality is finite. Every set of physical objects, every sequence of physical events, has a determinate number of members, just as every individual physical object is of determinate size and every physical process has a determinate duration – and infinity is not a determinate number or amount. But if the physical is finite in this way, there *was* a first event, and there can be no causal explanation of that.

There are two possible reactions to the idea of a first event. One might say 'Why not? There may be no causal explanation of such an event, but does there have to be? Might it not just have happened? Perhaps that's just the way the universe is: one day, up it pops.' This is too accommodating. It cannot be in the nature of anything just to come into existence. Wax becomes liquid when heated, boys grow facial hair as they get older, massive bodies approach each other without being acted upon by anything else; these things are in their nature. But coming into being is not like melting, growing hair or even moving; things must already exist to behave in any of these natural ways. In the 1950s cosmologists suggested that particles appear and start to interact in regions of space between bodies where no particles were observed before, but not because it was their nature to come into being. And when we speak of a first event we are not talking of the abrupt appearance of some new thing within the universe, but about the origin of the whole order of things in which some appearances are natural and others not.

An alternative reaction is to say that there could not be a first event because, if there were, something *would* be just popping up. Not only is it not in anything's nature to come into existence; it is plumb impossible for anything to come into existence unless there is something already there from which it is produced. Theists say the universe started because God wanted it to, but if coming into existence out of nothing is impossible, it cannot be made possible by God's wanting it to happen.

If the first reaction was too indulgent, this is too austere. What sort of impossibility is supposed to block coming into being out of nothing? Not logical. There is no contradiction in saying, 'Particles come into being, but there is nothing already there out of which they are produced'. Nor physical. The arising of one thing out of another can be physically necessary or impossible. Water arises necessarily out of ice that is heated, whereas it is impossible that butter should; cream when churned

long enough must turn into butter and cannot turn into ice. But that ice or butter should arise out of nothing at all is neither physically necessary nor physically impossible; it is just physically inexplicable.

The Presocratics said, 'Nothing arises out of nothing', but how is that principle to be interpreted? Most easily as setting limits to scientific explanation. Something's coming into existence can be explained physically or causally only insofar as it arises out of something that is already there. Such a limitation is reasonable. Science investigates what is natural. That wine should arise out of grapes is natural, that it should arise, like silk, out of mulberry leaves eaten by caterpillars is contrary to its nature; but that it should arise out of nothing whatever would be neither natural nor unnatural, though of course it would be very nice.

We are tempted to understand the Presocratics as saying that it is against the nature of things generally to arise out of nothing. But things generally have no nature. Chemical substances have natures, and so have biological species, but things do not have a nature simply as things. Philosophers have believed that they have, and looked for a kind of necessity that is like physical necessity in being rooted in reality but like logical necessity in being discernible by pure reason and having a diamond-like hardness and clarity beyond anything attainable by swirling muddy matter; but that is a chimera.

There are different modes of causal explanation. Up to now I have been taking it that the thing explained is caused by some prior event. That is the kind of explanation people usually have in mind in these discussions. But a first event could have a cause of a different sort. Action like pushing or pulling or heating can be given as a cause of a process that is contemporaneous. Suppose I get from London to York by train in two hours. The train causes me to travel 200 miles, and it does so by being in northward motion and pulling me with it for two hours. It is in motion between London and York, not at either point. Yet its motion explains not only my travelling 200 miles, but also the terminal events, my leaving London and my reaching York. The train's action is contemporaneous with my journey, not prior to it; it is not prior even to my starting to move in London.[1] If the universe starts with a bang, the first period of expansion and cooling that we care to mention may be given as the cause of its starting to expand and cool, but it does not precede that primal event. In general, the going on of change in the universe may be said to account causally for particular processes and events.

But what causes the going on of change? This brings me to the second claim I undertook to defend, that science cannot explain the continued existence of the universe or the continuation of the natural order.

The issue here concerns closed mechanical systems. Let me recall the example I gave of such a system in Chapter 8. Suppose I play a successful shot at pool: I hit the white ball, and the white ball hits the red, and the red ball goes into the pocket. We say the white ball makes the red ball move by hitting it, but in fact the movement of the two balls after the impact is a kind of continuation of the white ball's

---

[1] Since the train is not perfectly rigid, the engine is in motion before the part on which I stand; but that part is not in motion before I start to move.

movement before. As Locke puts it, 'When the ball obeys the motion of the billiard stick, it is not any action of the ball but bare passion: also when by impulse it sets another ball in motion that lay in its way, it only communicates the motion it had from another, and loses in itself so much as the other received' (*Essay*, 2.21.4). The total quantity of motion or momentum is conserved throughout the affair. Since the seventeenth century, philosophers have been fascinated by this as a paradigm for physical explanation. 'Here', says Hume, 'is a billiard ball lying on the table, and another ball moving towards it with rapidity. They strike; and the ball which was formerly at rest now acquires a motion. This is as perfect an instance of the relation of cause and effect as any we know.'[2] The best explanation of a process, philosophers think, will show it as a continuation of an earlier process. With the billiard balls this is obvious. But if we investigate the structure of a piece of glass we can see that its becoming deformed and fragmented is a continuation of the movement of a stone that hits it. The universe is a closed system (unless God or some other transcendent being squirts force into it) and later processes generally are a continuation of earlier.

We certainly give the movement of the billiard balls before the impact as the cause of their movements afterwards. But when a later process is a continuation of an earlier, do we think the earlier is always the cause of the later, and makes it physically necessary? Imagine a missile travelling through empty space that passes through a point 100 million miles from the Earth. If nothing interferes with it, its movement beyond that point will be a continuation of its movement up to that point; but we should not normally say the earlier movement was the cause of the later. Why not? Because, as I said in Chapter 8, we want science to explain natural events in the way an articulate craftsman can explain how to produce desired effects. He says, 'If you heat butter, add flour and milk and stir, white sauce is bound to result'; 'If you cast your fly like this, you may catch a trout'; 'If you cover your skin with this oil, sandflies can't bite you'. Scientists do explain a variety of natural phenomena in this way, by saying what action upon what makes something necessary or possible or impossible. A stone can break a window by flying through the air and hitting it, so we can accept its flight through the air as a cause. But the earlier part of its flight is not action on anything that renders the later part of the flight inevitable.

But perhaps we are too squeamish. According to the philosopher J.L. Mackie, when a later process is a continuation of an earlier we *ought to* say the earlier causes the later. 'If the concept of cause and effect do not cover them, it should: we can recognize immanent as well as transeunt causation.'[3] I think Mackie believed that later phases of a process follow earlier by natural necessity; that there is a law of nature which says processes must have continuations. What law could that be?

Newton's first law of motion states that a body in motion keeps moving in the same direction at the same speed, and a body at rest stays put. This principle has affinities with the Presocratic principle mentioned just now: the Presocratics held not only that nothing arises from nothing but that nothing passes away into nothing.

---

[2] *An Abstract*, p. 251.
[3] *The Cement of the Universe* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 156.

If the Presocratic principle sets limits on what can be explained physically, so does Newton's. It states that what calls for explanation is *change* in a body's state of motion or rest, not *continuation*; scientists do not have to explain a missile's continuing to move uniformly, but only its accelerating or decelerating. 'If it's not broken, don't mend it' is a principle of applied mechanics and 'If it's a continuation, don't explain it' is a principle of theoretical mechanics. But Newton's law does not say that every process must have a continuation, or that, if a moving body speeds or slows up, there must be something acting on it in such a way that later stages of the whole system, the missile and the further agent, are a continuation of the earlier.

There is an elegant quatrain that runs:

> There is no force, however great,
> Will stretch a line, however fine
> Into a horizontal line
> That will be absolutely straight.

This is a kind of physical law. It might be thought that the Presocratic principle is similar, that it states that there is no force, however great, that would have the effect of causing anything to pass away into nothing. But the justification for the quatrain is that gravitational force will always have some effect on the line, whereas no physical force makes it physically impossible for something to pass away into nothing.

If the electric lights were to go out without a power cut, we should think it a miracle, a violation of natural law. Wouldn't it be a still worse violation if the whole universe suddenly ceased to exist? It would not. The laws of nature say that if an electric current is passed through certain wires they become incandescent, and if the lights went out though the power supply continued our bulbs would indeed be defying a natural law. But ceasing to exist cannot be a defiance of any kind of law. A natural law tells us how things must behave as a matter of physical necessity if they exist; no law can tell us that things *will* exist or that there will always be behaviour for it to apply to. In that respect laws of physical nature are like the laws of human societies. The laws of England tell us how the English must behave as a matter of social obligation. It is not a law of England that England shall continue to exist and that there shall always be people to obey the laws of England. Parliament is capable of any tyranny, and a megalomaniac government might force through laws ordering Englishmen to have children and forbidding them to emigrate. But if there ceased to be any Englishmen, who would be breaking the law, and whose law would be broken? The laws of England are not attached to the soil within our boundaries; they are the laws we enforce within our boundaries. Newton's law tells us that *if* a moving body continues to exist and nothing interferes with it, it will keep moving uniformly; it does not tell us it will continue to exist for ever.

Descartes claimed that God exists because it is his nature to exist; and at one point he ingenuously admits that we here form the idea of something that is both causally and logically necessary: God's nature explains his existence both causally and logically.[4] Philosophers today are agreed that Descartes was confused; but

[4] *Reply to the Fourth Set of Objections*, *Oeuvres*, vol. 7, p. 238.

many of them feel that, though it is not in anything's nature to exist, it is in the nature of things that already exist to stay in existence. That is the law Mackie needs in order to say earlier phases of a continuing process cause later.

Whatever philosophers today may think, Hume was quite clear that earlier phases of a continuing process cannot make the later phases necessary. He insisted that it is just a brute fact that the sequence of natural events continues, and (though he would not have thanked you for telling him) he here followed Aristotle. Aristotle said that strictly speaking an earlier event can never be cause of a later.[5] He makes the point that something can always occur between the two to prevent the second. There is also something repugnant in the idea of action over distance. Physicists dislike the idea of action over a spatial gap, the idea of action at one place having an effect at another unless there is some connecting process. It is equally objectionable to suppose that what happens at one time should affect or influence what happens at a different time. Hume drew the sceptical conclusion that causal understanding is all an illusion: 'It is not reason which is the guide of life but custom.'[6] Aristotle avoided Hume's scepticism by accepting as causes periods of causal action, periods of pushing, pulling, heating and so on, which are contemporary with the processes they make inevitable.

What about these periods of causal action? What causes them? If that means 'What earlier period makes a later inevitable?' it is a simple ignoring of what had just been said. If it is a kind of desperate expostulation against the idea of an uncaused period of causal action, we should reflect that causal action is the causing of something else. Do causings need further causings? Movements, changes of temperature and other physical processes can be thought of either as causes or as effects. When we think of a movement as a movement from one place to another, measurable in miles or metres, we think of it as an effect, something that can be caused or prevented. When we think of it as a period of motion, measurable in hours or minutes, we think of it as the causing or perhaps preventing of something else. We cause and prevent things by moving or otherwise acting for periods of time. Time, as Shakespeare says in the Sonnets, brings things about: not, however, as a causal agent, a 'bloody tyrant'; rather as causal agency or causal action itself. We cannot think of a movement in both ways at once: we cannot think, 'The train covered a distance of two hundred miles *for* two hours.' Nor can we think of anything both as a cause and as an effect simultaneously. A period of action or a period of time as such is a cause, and the question, 'What causes it?' cannot coherently be asked. Something may make it necessary for a purpose, necessary in order to cause or prevent something else. But nothing can make it necessary *sans phrase*. It may or may not have a teleological explanation; it cannot have a causal.

---

[5] *Posterior Analytics*, 2.12.

[6] *An Abstract of a Book lately published entitled* a Treatise of Human Nature [1740], in *Hume, Theory of Knowledge*, ed. D.C. Yalden-Thomson (Nelson, 1951), p. 254.

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Chapter 12

# Explaining Mind

As it is debatable whether science can explain the entire natural order, so it is debatable whether it can explain mind. In the former case, however, it is easy to say what needs explaining: it is the origin and continued existence of the physical universe. In the latter it is not; what would an understanding of mind be an understanding of?

One way of approaching the issue is this. Ordinary observation can tell us a good deal about things we see or know, things we want or fear, things we strive to obtain or to avoid. What about seeing and knowing themselves, and desire and aversion? What are they? Science offers to explain *how* we see things – it tells us the mechanism of vision – and psychologists try to explain why we want some things and fear others, and how desire and aversion control our behaviour. But something still eludes us. Observation scientific or ordinary can tell us only about the things of which we are, in one way or another, aware; we want to grasp the nature of awareness, of *being* conscious of objects, of *having* desires and purposes. That, roughly speaking, is what an explanation of mind would have to explain; if we want a word for it, we may call it 'subjectivity'.

Of course, consciousness and purpose are themselves things of which we are aware. We see them in ourselves (or so we think) by introspection: otherwise we should not be curious about them, and when we ask if computers or visitors from outer space have minds, we are asking if they have these things we see in ourselves. Can we then discern the nature of mind by introspection? That was the belief of philosophers from Descartes to Bertrand Russell, and of nineteenth-century psychologists. Today psychology rejects introspection as a method, and philosophers are deterred from appealing openly to it by the arguments of Wittgenstein. But I think it was reliance on introspection that led their forerunners to regard mind, or subjectivity, as primarily a matter of having sensations, and many philosophers still think that. They may not realize it is a philosophical view; they may think it is just obvious. Still, it *is* a philosophical view – non-philosophers have no views at all on what a theory of mind would be a theory of – and it leads directly to the conclusion that science will eventually explain mind.

Why is that? Because by 'sensations' philosophers mean primarily bodily sensations of pain and pleasure, the sensations that come from being burnt or cut or having sex. When Russell in *The Analysis of Mind*[1] made out that belief and desire are sensations he was claiming they should be conceived on the model of pain. Wittgenstein himself gives 'a pain's growing more or less' as a paradigm of a mental

[1] London, Allen & Unwin, 1921, chs 3 and 12.

process,[2] and Donald Davidson and Saul Kripke are among many more recent philosophers to give pain as a typical example of a mental state.[3] But pain and other bodily sensations are in fact *bodily* states. Painful sensations are states of which we are aware as things we want to be rid of, states to be ended or alleviated independently of any further consequences, and pleasant sensations, pleasant warmth, sexual thrills and so on, are states of which we are aware as things to be preserved independently of any further consequences. That being so, sensations in themselves are purely physical states, even though to explain the *concept* of sensation we have to mention such non-physical things as purpose, desire, aversion, good and evil. (To give a parallel, loot is something physical, though to explain the concept of loot we have to mention such non-physical things as war and property rights.) So science can explain sensations in a way. The bodily states of which we are aware have causes, and scientists can ferret those causes out. Faith that they can is what keeps doctors and pharmacists in business. If I am in pain and do not know what is causing it, I consult one. But giving the cause of a sensation is not explaining mind, since sensations have to do with mind only insofar as we are aware of them as good or bad, things to be fostered or shunned.

Everyone knows what it is like to feel pain, and those who are not blind or deaf know what it is like to see colours and hear musical tones. Some philosophers today see in this the key to mind or subjectivity: 'The fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all*', says Thomas Nagel, 'means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism. … Fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to *be* that organism.'[4] I have spoken of what it is like to see colours and hear musical sounds, whereas Nagel speaks of what it is like to *be* a certain sort of organism, a man or a bat, but there is something it is like to be a human being only if there is something it is like for us, or rather something it *feels like to us*, to see the blue of the sky, to hear a high note on a trumpet, to feel pain or dizziness. The essence of mind is whatever it is that we know by introspection when we know what these things are like or feel like. So the question whether science can explain mind is the question whether it can explain the fact that there is something these things feel like.

It is sometimes suggested that at this point we need a kind of faith. Science might explain mind without our being able to see that it has done so. It might explain how physical processes in living organisms become more complex and acquire a certain physical character. Their having this peculiar character could be what it is for there to be 'something it is like' to see blue and hear the trumpet note.

---

[2] *Philosophical Investigations*, I, 154.

[3] Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 211 and *Essays on* Davidson *Actions and Events*, ed. B. Vermazen and Merill B. Hintikka (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 246; Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1980), pp. 146–7; see also Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 17; Paul Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA, Bradford Books, 1984), p. 3; Peter Carruthers, *Introducing Persons* (London, Routledge, 1986), pp. 10–13.

[4] 'What is it like to be a bat?', in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 166, his emphasis.

But we might never be able to satisfy ourselves of this because we know the neurological facts only by observing them from outside while we know what it is like to see the colour blue and hear the sound only by introspection. 'We may not have even a rough idea of how the two referential paths could converge', says Nagel and so 'an air of mysticism surrounds the identification.'[5]

Colin McGinn strikes the same note in a recent book.[6] He declares that the *philosophical* (his emphasis) mind–body problem is 'the problem of explaining how the brain gives rise to consciousness in the first place'. The task for philosophy, in other words, is not to decide *whether* consciousness has a physical explanation, but to show *how* it has. The solution, he tells us, must first say 'what consciousness *is*, and that statement would have to be *conceptually* necessary'.[7] By that he means it must analyse consciousness 'in such a way that we could see how consciousness could arise from the brain with the force of conceptual necessity. It would have to be as obvious that consciousness could arise from the brain as it is obvious that bachelors are unmarried males.' But alas, not only have we not yet arrived at an analysis which makes this obvious; McGinn seems to think there never can be such an analysis. 'It is part of the very essence of consciousness that it is not to be perceptible by the kinds of senses we have, but that means it can never be integrated with an object – the brain – whose essence it is to be perceptible.'[8] 'So we are left with an introspection-based view of consciousness and a perception-based view of the brain, staring at each other across a yawning conceptual divide.' This being so we shall never actually see that consciousness is the sort of thing for which there could be a physical explanation. 'We know we have minds and we know that brains are somehow responsible for them',[9] but we shall never be able to see why this is true or even possible. Religious people say it is a mystery how God created the universe, and we must just accept he did on faith. True rationality may require us to say it is a mystery how neurology explains consciousness and just believe it does.

I am ready to agree that I know what it *is* like to see the blue of the sky or hear a high trumpet note, or, indeed, to feel giddy. For I occasionally *have* felt giddy, heard trumpet music by Michael Haydn, looked up on a cloudless day. It is the mark of a poet to be able to put these experiences into words. I am less ready to say, 'There is something it *feels* like to feel giddiness; there is something it feels like to listen to Haydn's trumpet music'. These slightly convoluted claims that 'feelings like' exist sound like the preparation for taking off into some dubious metaphysical speculation. And I am still more reluctant to ask, 'What explains the fact there is something this feels like?' We are now airborne on a course away from philosophical insight into the nature of mind, and without noticing it we have acquired a physical model, the existence or emergence of some kind of physical object or characteristic, for what we want to understand. The appeal to introspection to confirm that there is 'something it feels like' only confirms the physical character of the model. Locke

---

[5] Ibid., p. 177.
[6] *The Mysterious Flame*, Basic Books, 2000.
[7] Ibid., p. 215.
[8] Ibid., p. 51.
[9] Ibid., p. 197.

describes introspection as a 'source of ideas' that 'every man has wholly within himself: and though it be not sense, as having nothing to do with external objects, yet it is very like it, and might properly enough be called internal sense' (*Essay*, 2.1.4). Every man, or at least every Englishman, wants to have a little piece of territory within himself in which nobody can dictate to him and he alone has ultimate authority. But since introspection is 'very like' sense, and anything apprehended by sense is physical, anything apprehended by introspection will be 'very like' something physical. The vital 'what it feels like' comes to be conceived (I take the words from Nagel but he is not the only philosopher to use them) as a 'phenomenological fact' about an experience, as a 'quality' or 'specific character' of 'an experience', where experiences themselves are things apprehended by introspection as trumpet notes are by ordinary hearing. These qualities and characters, the experiences they qualify, and the phenomenological fact that they so qualify them, are all entities known only to philosophers: conjured into existence by what philosophers call 'existential quantification' and critics of philosophy call 'playing with words'.

> David Hume [they say] ate a swingeing great dinner
> After which he grew fatter and fatter,
> But even so the shocking old sinner
> Denied there was either spirit or matter.

Hume was wrong; but his error should warn us that the notions of mind and matter are themselves philosophers' notions. Non-philosophers do not use them, and they seem more elusive than they really are; they tend to generate a kind of double vision.

Our concern is with mind, but it will be helpful to look at matter first. How an object is affected by action upon it depends on the material which it contains or from which it is made. A ball of wax is affected by heat in one way, a ball of clay in another. So it is tempting to say that that in an object by virtue of which it interacts causally with other things is its material or matter. If we say this, causal powers, powers to change other things and be changed by them, are attributed to objects like balls of clay and tins of petrol; and since clay, petrol and such materials are familiar to us we have a good idea of these powers.

But then the suggestion that the materials *are* causal powers seems too simple and shocking. Surely the power really *belongs* to the material. So the material becomes a thing composed of further, more primitive material. But this more primitive material and its supposed powers are more elusive. We try to use properties like shape as a model for the powers. But whereas we can conceive materials independently of shapes, we cannot conceive them independently of powers, nothing like shape will do the work of causal powers. When you strike a billiard ball it moves in a straight line because of its shape; if, like the Mikado's billiard balls, it were elliptical, it might go anywhere. But the shape of the ball explains its moving in a straight line only if it is composed of something like ivory and not of something like smoke. And the further we go in multiplying materials and powers the more puzzled we are. Medieval philosophers ended up with Prime Matter, a material we shall encounter in Chapter 20, which is supposed to be like gold or water except that in itself it has no properties whatever. Descartes, following Plato, ended with geometrical solids

possessed of shape, structure and velocity; but geometrical solids as such have no causal powers and cannot acquire them by being supposed to move with velocity. The only way out of this bewilderment is to return to the beginning: our ideas of materials are already ideas of that in objects by virtue of which they interact causally; already ideas of active and passive causal powers and fundamental forces.

Now for mind. We act for reasons and purposes. Anything that acts in this way must have a mind and some measure of subjectivity. If matter is that in a thing by virtue of which its behaviour is explainable causally, perhaps mind is that in virtue of which our behaviour is explainable in terms of reasons and purposes. That would make the analysis of subjectivity quite easy. If we want to explain what it is to be aware of objects or states of affairs, the answer is simply that it is for them to be reasons for action. If we want to explain what it is to desire a certain outcome, we may say it is to have it as a purpose. The difference between mind and matter is that the various kinds of matter – water, air, gold and so on – are obvious and causal powers and fundamental forces seem elusive, whereas with mind it is the other way round: reasons and purposes are obvious, and that in us by virtue of which we act for reasons and purposes seems elusive.

But somewhat as we turn material of which an object is composed into something which is composed of further material and itself has powers, so we turn the beliefs, desires and the mind itself into a further set of things of which we are aware, a whole psychological order running parallel to and reflecting the physical order. Being a subject with thoughts and feelings, we feel, is something *presupposed* by acting for reasons and purposes: mind is a kind of *source* of rational behaviour. As it is too simple to say that our ideas of the various materials just are ideas of causal powers and forces, so it is too simple to say that our ideas of rational behaviour just are ideas of thought and desire. We are prepared to say that rational behaviour is in some sense the carrying out of desire and the exercise of thought, but we still think that thought and desire must be something over and above behaviour: either causes of it, or a kind of effect of it like a shadow on the wall or the reflection of rippling water on a ceiling. The commonest thing is to model thought on pictures painted on a wall or projected on a screen; we then struggle helplessly with the problems of how there can be non-physical pictures with nothing contemplating them.

To escape from this bewilderment we must say that, insofar as behaviour is teleologically explainable, it already is thought, desire and aversion. To say it is the exercise of thought or the carrying out of desire is not to imply that thought and desire themselves are something over and above behaviour. It is expressing in slightly technical terms the point that, insofar as our behaviour is teleologically explainable, it is analysable into thought and desire. The presence of mind in nature is not something invisible and hidden except to introspection, but the most palpable thing there is. Purposive human action *is* human thought (and if religious believers are right the continuation of physical processes generally *is* a kind of divine thought).

If thought is not impalpable states and processes duplicating the physical order, but simply acting for reasons and purposes, to explain the existence of thought

would be be to explain our acting for reasons and purposes. Since scientific explanation is causal, science cannot possibly do this. There can be no causal explanation of why any particular thing is done for a reason or a purpose. There can be a cause of a wheelbarrow's moving: I push it. And I may push it for a reason or a purpose. But there can be no cause of my pushing's being purposive, nothing that causes my action to be for a purpose or reason.

But it is a fact that some of our behaviour really is purposive; it is a fact that teleological explanation applies. Can we not ask for a causal explanation of this? We seek causal explanations of natural phenomena like earthquakes and eclipses. It is not a further natural phenomenon that natural phenomena are causally explainable, that objects act upon each other and thereby cause changes, that the world contains causation and admits of scientific understanding. So we cannot explain this causally: there is no causal explanation of the existence of causal connections. I have just claimed that there is mind if and only if teleological explanations apply. The applicability of teleological explanation is no more a natural phenomenon than the applicability of causal, and it is chasing as wild a goose to seek its cause. If science cannot explain why there is causation in the world, still less can it explain why there is mind. One might as well ask it to explain why there are logical and mathematical truths.

But there has not always been mind, at least in the natural order. Before there were living organisms of a certain complexity, nothing acted for reasons or purposes. Surely science can be asked to explain how purposive acting started? Perhaps, but it can explain this only up to a point. That teleogical explanation came to have application is not an event calling for explanation like the turning of ice to water. But it may be that an organism could not act or refrain from acting on purpose if it did not have a certain structural complexity: movable parts, and organs sensitive to reasons for moving. So there can be a causal explanation of the formation of objects capable of acting for reasons and purposes. And of course that is precisely what scientists offer. The theory of natural selection is a theory of how objects capable of moving and staying motionless on purpose arise out of objects not capable of this.

There can be a causal explanation of how the physical conditions necessary for purposive behaviour come to be satisfied. But if there can be no cause why, when these conditions are satisfied, an organism *does* behave purposively, what will explain this? Need anything? The idea that sentience and sentient life need a cause is accepted by many religious believers; they say some kind of divine intervention alone can explain these things, and they conceive this intervention as a kind of non-physical causal action. But if the analysis I offered of the physical is correct, the notion of non-physical causal action is incoherent. I suggest that no explanation is needed of sentience or purpose. In one context this is already recognized by some philosophers. When you do something like write a sentence or walk a mile, we assume that you do this of your own free will unless there is something to suggest the contrary. We do not think that there has to be something additional to action or special about it to make it voluntary; we think there has to be some special factor – ignorance, constraint, a muscular disorder – to prevent it from being voluntary. Actions are voluntary unless there is some reason to think they are not, rather as

objects are real unless there is some reason for thinking them fake or illusory. Teleological explanation is the kind that arises first as a matter of history and is most familiar to us. Why should it not apply unless there is something to prevent it? Having no movable parts would prevent a thing from acting purposively. A thing cannot act for reasons if it has no sense organs by which it can become aware of reasons for moving or keeping still. So perhaps we should ask for a causal explanation of why a thing's behaviour cannot be explained teleologically, but not for why it can be. Death is ceasing to be able to act purposively, and an inquest is a causal enquiry into that.

I am suggesting that teleological explainability is the norm, that we may expect there to be some reason for what happens unless we have some ground for thinking it happens for no reason. This may seem hideously retrograde. For is it not animism? Do not the most benighted savages believe that all causal action in the world is for reasons and purposes?

It certainly does not follow, because teleological understanding is the primary form of understanding, that we may expect to understand every occurrence teleologically unless there is a reason for thinking it is purposeless. But although the second proposition does not follow from the first, they may both be true. And accepting the second will not make us animists unless we are slow or reluctant to discern reasons for thinking things mindless. There are plenty of reasons for thinking that landslides, avalanches, falls of rain, gales and so on have no purpose but are quite mindless. They are not the work of organisms with sense organs. Nineteenth-century anthropologists were quick to see animism in every primitive culture but I think primitive people mostly draw the line between the animate and the inanimate very much where we do. The best example on record of an animist is the man usually hailed as the founder of modern rationality, Thales: allegedly he explained magnetism by saying the stones that have it have souls. In any case, the question at issue here is whether, if the physical conditions for an organism's acting purposively are satisfied, we need any further explanation of why it does act purposively. The only physical obstacles have now, ex hypothesi, been overcome. The human intellect is hospitable to teleological explanation: should we suppose some kind of stubborn opposition to it in physical nature?

I have now argued that science cannot explain the origin of the physical universe, its continued existence, or mind. These are limitations arising from its methods, which are to seek out modes of causal action that render events necessary, and show that what appear to be new processes are continuations. Can religion explain these things? Since its method of explaining is teleological, it cannot explain mind; we cannot ask for what purpose things are done for a purpose any more than we can ask what causes things to be caused. Religion cannot tell us that we *do* act for reasons and purposes; that is something we all take for granted. Nor can it tell us that sentience and consciousness are a matter of acting for reasons and purposes: that is a philosophical thesis. What it claims to do is give us reasons and purposes we should not otherwise have. It introduces a supernatural beneficiary and supernatural benefits, sets us the goals of fulfilling God's desires for us and attaining eternal life. To put it another way, religion cannot explain purposive behaviour generally; but

there is a religious explanation, an explanation in religious terms, for some of the purposive behaviour of religious believers.

About the origin of the universe and its continued existence, religion can be, and indeed is, more dogmatic. Judaeo-Christianity claims that physical processes generally go on because that is Jehovah's wish or will. For what purpose does Jehovah want nature to continue? The Old Testament does not make that very clear; there is a suggestion that it is for his own amusement: the creator is like a pianist playing for the delight of playing.

> I [the divine Wisdom] was beside the master craftsman, delighting him day after day, ever at play in his presence, at play everywhere on his earth, delighting to be with the children of men (Pro 8.30–1).

But Christians are inclined to say that Jehovah wants physical process to go on for the benefit of us human creatures, for the benefit of intelligent beings elsewhere in the universe, if there are any, and perhaps for the benefit of other sentient creatures like lions and earthworms.

In Chapter 14, I shall ask on what grounds someone might believe this to be true. First, however, there is a question about human behaviour which earlier I set aside. If I do something for a reason or purpose, can my doing it also be explained causally, and not just causally, but as a continuation of physical processes stretching out from my body into the rest of the universe and back in time to before my birth?

# Chapter 13

# The Last Exorcism

From the seventeenth century to the twentieth, most philosophers thought that when we act of our own free will our actions have causes. Hume argued brilliantly for the compatibility of freedom and causal necessity in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, s.8. But the causes of our actions were not thought to be physical events. They were non-physical events called 'volitions' or 'acts of will'.

> What is an action? [asks John Stuart Mill] Not one thing, but a series of two things; the state of mind called a volition, followed by an effect. The volition or intention to produce the effect, is one thing; the effect produced in consequence of the intention, is another thing; the two together constitute the action. I form the purpose of instantly moving my arm; that is a state of my mind: my arm (not being tied or paralytic) moves in obedience to my purpose: that is a physical fact, consequent on a state of mind. The intention followed by the fact, or (if we prefer the expression) the fact when preceded and caused by the intention, is called the action of moving my arm.[1]

These volitions too had non-physical causes. Mill and earlier thinkers like Locke and Hume conceived themselves, in the words of Gilbert Ryle, as

> duplicating for the world of mind what physicists had done for the world of matter. They looked for mental counterparts to the forces in terms of which dynamic explanations were given of the movements of bodies. Which introspectible phenomena would do for purposive human conduct what pressure, impact, friction and attraction do for the accelerations and decelerations of physical objects? Desire and aversion, pleasure and pain seemed admirably qualified to play the required parts.[2]

In the twentieth century philosophy took a physical turn. Instead of duplicating the world of physics to explain mind, philosophers made it include mind. It seemed intolerable that any physical movement should have a non-physical cause. Those who felt they had a mission to get rid of the supernatural saw human beings as its last refuge. A complete exorcism, it was felt, required us to admit that all our bodily movements, even those of our hands when we write and our tongue when we speak, are mere continuations of purely physical processes just as when one billiard ball hits another their movements after the impact are a continuation of their movements before. Our movements are caused by physical events in the brain, firings of neurones, and these have prior physical causes stretching back in time to before we

---

[1] *A System of Logic* (London, Longmans, 1967), 1.3.5.
[2] *Dilemmas* (Cambridge Unversity Press, 1954), p. 56.

were born or conceived. We can still say that we have feelings and beliefs and make acts of will; but only on condition that these too are physical. They are really states of the brain which arise from sensory stimulation and result in activity of the motor nerves. Our brains, like pocket calculators, are physical structures; and just as when we tap 2 + 2 = into our calculator, out comes the answer 4, so when light stimulates our eyes and sound our ears, out comes the Parthenon, The Art of Fugue or a new book on philosophy.

I think this change in philosophical orthodoxy has passed most non-philosophers by.[3] The traditional belief that actions are caused by thoughts, though it involves some confusion about causes, seems to most people reasonable enough. The new suggestion that in reality there are no thoughts, but only physical events in the brain which we think of as thoughts, is hard to take seriously. Philosophers themselves, it may be felt, do not believe it. They say that all is the unrolling of an already written scroll of physical events, but they labour night and day, reading, writing and lecturing, for the purpose of proving this and releasing us from false beliefs. Taxed with the apparent inconsistency, they happily apply their theory to themselves. They cannot help writing these books; nor can they help taking an 'intentional stance'[4] and explaining them in terms of disinterested concern for their readers and aversion to the sophistries of their adversaries. But what takes this stance? What is in danger of being deluded? Descartes and Augustine before him reasoned that if there are no minds it cannot be falsely believed that there are. Modern philosophers seem to favour a Humean view. There are no minds, only sensations and beliefs which are somehow self-intimating, like pictures contemplating themselves. In Chapter 12, I said we are sometimes invited to accept that the physical *accounts* for consciousness just on faith. But that is not the whole of it; we are also asked to bow our heads before the *fact* of consciousness as before the Incomprehensible.

What reasons are we offered for understanding all actions as continuations of physical processes? In physics the direction of explanation is from the small to the great. The objects we see and touch – chairs, cats, boulders, lakes, clouds, stars and the rest – are composed of particles. Living organisms consist of cells. Cells and inorganic substances consist of molecules. Molecules consist of atoms, atoms of protons, neutrons and electrons, electrons of quarks, and so on, perhaps, indefinitely. In physics, as Mill put it, 'the composition of causes is the universal law'.[5] That is, the behaviour of a whole is not only the sum of the movements of the parts, but it is the result of whatever causes these component movements. Wholes 'have no properties but those that are derived from, and may be resolved into, the laws of nature' governing the parts, and 'however complex the phenomena, all their sequences and

---

[3] Philosophers like Jonathan Bennett and David Papineau (see below, p. 92) offer conditions for attributing beliefs and desires to people which do not involve identifying these beliefs and desires with physical states; but the conditions have to be formulated in terms solely of physical events and causal connections, and this requirement makes them so complicated that it is hard for non-philosophers to understand them.

[4] A favourite phrase of D.C. Dennett; for his sense of 'intentional' see, for instance, *Brainstorms*, Brighton, Harvester Press, 1981, Introduction.

[5] *A System of Logic*, 6.7.1.

coexistences result from the laws of the separate elements'. So the movements of the Moon, for instance, are the sum of the movements of the atoms that make it up, and must be explained by the laws that govern those atoms. Surely the same goes for the movements of human beings. If we simply want to predict the movements of a living organism, we may do well to consider it as a whole and note the large-scale circumstances that constitute reasons and objectives. But to *understand* its behaviour we must look inwards. Our movements, says science, are caused by neural impulses, and the neural impulses by events in the brain, by the firings of individual neurones. Each such event must take place in accordance with the laws of physics and must therefore have a cause at the level of neurones or at some even deeper level.

*If* we are to give a physical explanation of all our movements, they will be explained by whatever explains the movements of our constituent particles. But *that* all our movements have a physical explanation is what the exorcist has to show. It does not follow from the fact that physical explanation moves from the small to the large. Mill, at least, did not draw the inference, since he thought our voluntary movements are caused not by events at the atomic level but by the non-physical events he called 'volitions'. But anyone today who says 'All our behaviour must be due to forces acting between particles *because* physical explanation moves from the small to the large' is begging the question. One might as well say that the downward movement of a climber whose rope breaks is to be explained by beliefs and desires because teleological explanation moves from beliefs and desires to behaviour.

Next, exorcists appeal to the conservation law which states that every process is a continuation of an earlier, and the state of the universe at any time is a determinate function of its state at any other time. Has this been confirmed by observation? I dare say no telescope or microscope has revealed a change in a body's state of motion that could not be accounted for by earlier physical action with the appropriate force; force has never been spotted entering a system from nowhere or leaving a system for nowhere. But we are not asking if the conservation law holds for inanimate nature. Common sense distinguishes between sentient organisms, to which we attribute at least the rudiments of purpose, and the rest of the world. Men and animals look like discrete islands in the sea of physical continuity; and the question is whether they are indeed marked off by the fact that in them there are processes that are not continuations. Nobody has yet traced anyone's movements back through the pathways of the brain to physical processes going on at remote times and places. The exorcists have the intuition that there is never discontinuity, but their opponents may claim to have an intuition on their side that where there is intelligence and purpose there must be. Each side sticks to its intuitions as if it were a matter of life and death, on the one hand for pure reason, on the other for free will and the soul. But whether there is really any inconsistency in holding that the same movement is made for a purpose, and is the inevitable effect of a long chain of earlier causes, is what we are here enquiring.

Sometimes it is argued that it is a conceptual truth that anything done for a reason or purpose *has* a physical cause. The simplest argument goes like this. When we say 'Othello killed Desdemona for the reason that she loved Cassio' what we really mean is 'Othello killed her *because he believed* she loved Cassio'. And what

that means is 'The belief that she loved Cassio *caused* his action'. So far the argument treads in the footsteps of Mill, Hume and, indeed, Spinoza. To bring it to the modern conclusion we say: 'A complete causal explanation of Othello's movements is provided by events in his brain. There cannot be two complete causal explanations of the same thing. So if his movements were caused by his belief, his belief must be identical with the causally crucial events in his brain.'

There is no need to probe the last part of the argument because the first part is wrong. The word 'because' in 'because he believed' does not introduce a cause. It is not like the 'because' in 'Othello died because a knife went into him'. The whole phrase means 'for the reason that, *as* he believed'.

Recently more subtle ways have been found of suggesting that we think actions done for reasons or purposes are caused. You can make a missile that locks onto a target: if the target moves, its movement causes the missile (perhaps by affecting its radar) to change direction in such a way that it still hits the target. When we say 'Romeo climbed the ladder in order to see Juliet', we mean that his brain was 'locked onto' Juliet. If she went somewhere, her going there affected his sense organs (directly or through messages from people like Friar Laurence) and he couldn't help going after her. Or an appeal is made to the Theory of Natural Selection. We have eyes because our ancestors, whose genes gave them eyes, were better than eyeless organisms at finding mates and avoiding predators; and their eyes made them better at this because they transmitted to their brain information about where predators or likely mates were. When we say that eyes exist 'for the purpose of' transmitting this information, we mean 'We have eyes because eyes do transmit this information, and this helped our ancestors to survive and breed'. And when we say, 'Romeo crossed the Capulets' hall for the reason that Juliet was beautiful' we mean 'His eyes were stimulated as they would be by a desirable mate, and that caused his movement'.

Of course we do not *mean* this. Primitive people perfectly understand the behaviour of lovesick youths, but have no knowledge of smart missiles or natural selection. The most that can be claimed is that we *ought* to mean this, that this is the only thing a rational person *can* mean when offering an explanation in terms of reasons or purposes. That it is not, however, can be seen if we consider belief.

Besides having reasons for doing things we have reasons for thinking things. What are called the 'grounds' for a belief are reasons for holding it. Suppose I notice that a china ornament has disappeared from my mantlepiece, and though I did not see you take it, I nevertheless believe you did. If that belief is to be rational I must have a reason for it. My reason might be that there is a bulge the right shape in your pocket. But for this to be my reason, it is not enough that I see the bulge and believe you took the ornament. I might see the bulge but think you took the ornament because, as I happen to know, you are a kleptomaniac who takes anything that's not nailed down. The bulge is the reason for my belief only if I hold the belief because, as I can see, your pocket bulges. But does that mean that my belief must be caused by seeing the bulge? It does not. We do speak of beliefs as having causes. I might say, 'Your belief that someone had fired a shot was caused by a car's backfiring', or 'Your belief that the light is fading is caused by fish poisoning' – fish

poisoning does make the world grow dim. But whereas a reason for thinking something makes it reasonable or right to think it, a cause merely makes it inevitable, and in the examples just given the claim that your belief is caused carries a strong hint that it is false. It does not *follow*, if a belief is caused, that it is false, and it might be that the same belief is both caused and reasonable; but 'My reason for thinking you took the ornament is that, as I can see, there is a bulge in your pocket' does not mean 'I am made to think you took it by seeing the bulge'.

What then *does* 'for the reason that' mean in the context of beliefs? Suppose I believe that we are not naturally immortal, and my reasons are that no living organism is naturally immortal, and we are living organisms. Then my belief that we are not naturally immortal arises out of the two other beliefs, and may be analysed into them. 'For the reason that' introduces ingredients or components, and these are not the cause of what they compose. A cake arises out of eggs, butter, sugar and flour, but these ingredients do not cause it; it is caused by a cook or by his action in mixing and heating them. Similarly, if I say, 'Othello's reason for thinking Desdemona unfaithful was that she could not produce the handkerchief', I offer a analysis of his belief. Her infidelity does not follow logically from her inability to produce the handkerchief, but that inability entered into Othello's jealous conviction.

If that is true of belief, then there is no need to bring in causes, much less natural selection, to say what we mean by reasons for acting. They too are offered as components. 'Othello killed Desdemona for the reason that she loved Cassio' means 'His killing her arose out of that belief'. It is an analysis, though perhaps not a complete analysis, of his action. That was implied in Chapter 12. I said that thought is not a cause of action; rather action *is* thought. Othello's action can be analysed into the belief that Desdemona has betrayed him and a desire, a feeling that it is necessary, to kill her.

We may also say that the belief is offered as an analysis of that desire. That may sound confusing: is the belief a component of the desire or of the action? Of both, but in slightly different ways. Aristotle, the first person to try to explain the relations between components and what they compose, liked to use the example of a house. A house is a shelter composed of stones, beams and tiles or comparable materials. We can say that the materials compose a shelter, and we can also say that the materials and the purpose for which they are put together – to provide shelter – are components of our concept of a house. In the same way Othello's belief that Desdemona has betrayed him is an integral component of his feeling that he must kill her 'lest', as he puts it, 'she betray more men', and that belief and his desire to kill her (or his aversion to her betraying more men) both enter into our understanding of his action: we see it as comprising both the belief and the desire.

So much on the case for exorcism; what can be said on the other side? If we cannot prove that all our movements are determined by earlier causes, can we prove that some are not? It is tempting to argue as follows: if all our movements are continuations we are like billiard balls. But when we act intentionally we act of our own free will, and when we act of our own free will we could have acted otherwise. Our movements, then, cannot be mere continuations. Take Romeo. He goes to Juliet's chamber for the purpose of making love to her. Could he, instead, have gone

to Rosaline's chamber, or stayed in his own reading Aristotle? Not if his going was determined by early states of the universe, since it could not have been determined that he should be in different places at the same time.

This line of reasoning is unsound. If everything is just a continuation, what is determined is not merely that Romeo finds himself in Juliet's chamber, but that he has the temperament, the experiences, the tastes and the character that he has. His birth into a noble family in renaissance Verona, his education, his encounters with other Veronese youths, male and female, which terminate in his being an ardent fifteen-year-old to whom it seems that Juliet 'hangs upon the cheek of night like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear', are all continuations of earlier processes. If he did not like Juliet better than Rosaline, was not young and impetuous, did not know of the hostility between her family and his, and the rest of it, he would not be going to her of his own free will; and if he *does* like Juliet better than Rosaline, *is* impetuous and so on, he would hardly go to Rosaline's chamber of his own free will, still less stay brooding over Aristotle. In a way, of course, he could act differently; he has not been rendered unable to act otherwise by bodily incapacity or physical restraint. But it is not clear that, given his experiences and character, he could do anything of his own free will other than what he does. What we do of our own free will is not as luck would have it. It is determined by our character and the circumstances as we take them to be. We do not conceive this determination as causal, like that of the billiard balls. Rather it is moral; the circumstances (as we take them to be) mark out a particular course as best. But the question remains whether what is indicated by rational conditions as best may also be fixed by long past physical states of the universe as physically necessary.

I do not know of any proof that it cannot. I think that most people, once they understand the claim that all our movements are physically determined, are inclined to resist it. But I shall now argue that both they and the heroic few who declare themselves billiard balls are the prisoners of too mathematical a view of the issue.

Past thinkers who supposed that our movements are caused by volitions thought the volitions must somehow activate a kind of physical trigger, a first part of the brain or body, which in turn moves others. Descartes identified this crucial part as the pineal gland.

> Although the soul is joined to the whole body, there is yet in that a certain part in which it exercises its functions more particularly than in all the others … [and this part is] not the heart, nor the whole brain, but only its innermost part, which is a certain very small gland, situated in the middle of its substance, and so suspended above the channel by which the spirits in its cavities communicate with those outside, that the smallest movements in it can greatly change those spirits, and conversely the least changes that arrive through these spirits can greatly change the movements of this gland.[6]

The 'spirits' to which Descartes refers were not, of course, targets for exorcism but liquids playing the part in his physiology which nerves play in ours. So Descartes thought that movements from the eyes and ears affect this 'gland', a kind of dangling

[6] *Passions of the Soul*, 1.31; *Oeuvres*, vol. 11, pp. 351–2.

strip of tissue in the brain, and the soul imparts movements to the gland which set the limbs in motion, but the movements the soul imparts to the gland are not just a continuation of the movements that reach it from the eyes and ears; there is a sharp break in continuity.

There is a lot wrong with this account. The physiology is erroneous and, more serious, the idea of causal action by something non-physical is incoherent. Descartes would have done better to say that the gland just moves as the soul wants without being acted upon. But it is worthwhile to quote his account because he expresses with great clarity two things that people still think must be the case if some of our movements do not have a complete physical explanation. First, there must be a sharp division between movements that are not a mere continuation of earlier physical processes and movements that are. Secondly, there will be a single small part of the body where the movements that are not continuations begin, a single point or tiny area at which the non-physical soul touches the physical body. The first idea is the more important, but, before challenging it, let me examine the second.

Suppose my soul is a spirit with the quasi-causal power to make matter move, and wants to write a letter. Its best plan will be to act directly on a pen. But a child equipped with fingers finds it difficult to get a pen to write neatly and legibly; would it not be even harder for a spirit equipped merely with the power to move matter to get the pen into the right initial position and steer it through the movement needed to produce the word 'Dear'? We are not to suppose it can say to the pen, 'I wish you'd do whatever is necessary to write "Dear"'. It would have to plot a route for it in terms that are well defined physically: 'I wish you'd move 1.2 mm in a direction 15 degrees east and describe an arc of 40 degrees.' But my soul is not allowed to act directly on the pen; it can act only on the pineal gland or some other small region of the brain; and by doing so it must not only move my fingers but keep my body sitting properly in a chair. To win a point at tennis it cannot just move the ball. It must make my eye muscles follow the movements of the ball, get my feet to move across the court, cause my arm to swing the racket in the right direction. How can it do all this by manipulating Descartes' gland? 'It has to learn', we may be told; 'it's an acquired skill'. Manipulating a tennis racket is an acquired skill, and it is difficult enough to see how someone with eyes, ears, hands and feet manages to acquire it. How a soul without organic parts might acquire it defeats imagination, which is why people actually imagine souls as wraithlike three-dimensional images of bodies that can so to speak fit onto them and control them at every point. My soul writes a letter because it has a ghostly hand that interpenetrates my bodily one.

When we use a computer the input is transformed into a sequence of signs in a binary system, 'ons' and 'offs' like the 0s and 1s in a binary numerical system. The computer performs operations on these, and the resulting sequence is translated back into numerals or words that are displayed. Might this serve as a model for soul–body interaction? The brain turns the stimuli of eye and ear into a sequence of 'ons' and 'offs' that are printed off non-physically for the soul to read; the soul sends back another sequence that, crossing the mind–body frontier, operates the neurones that controls the muscles. The trouble with this account is not just that the idea a non-physical soul could act on a brain as a physical organism acts on a

computer is incoherent. There is no small part of the brain in which all sensory stimuli are registered and from which all motor impulses to muscles are distributed. At the least we must suppose that the soul acts on the whole brain, if not on the whole body. Even if there is sharp discontinuity between movements which are not continuations and movements which are, we shall still need need a sizable physical system similar to the nervous system we actually have.

But if some of our movements are not just continuations, must there be a sharp division between those that are not and those that are? Our first instinct is to say there must, but that is because we are inclined to apply ideas taken from arithmetic.[7] Consider the series of rational fractions between 1 and 2, fractions like 6/5, 3/2, 13/8, 23/12, arranged, like those examples, in ascending order of magnitude. There are infinitely many such fractions, and the series has no first or last term. We can, however, cut it cleanly into two groups so that every fraction belongs to one and not the other. There are, in fact, at least two ways of doing this. There is no fraction that is exactly the square root of 2. So the fractions between 1 and 2 can be divided without remainder into those that are less than $\sqrt{2}$ and those that are greater. In that case there will be no last member of the first group and no first member of the second. Or we can take a particular fraction, say 3/2, and divide the fractions between 1 and 2 into those that are less than 3/2 and those that are not less than 3/2. Then the first group will have no last member but the second will have a first, namely 3/2 itself. The integers, of course, can be divided into two groups of which the first has a last member and the second a first; 82 is the last member of the integers smaller than 83, and 83 is the first of those not smaller than 83.

In the debate about whether any of our movements are not mere continuations of physical processes both sides assume that, if any are, then all our movements, or all events in our body, can be divided without remainder into two classes, those that are continuations of processes going back as far as you please, and those that are not. Is this really true? So long as we keep our eyes on arithmetic it seems inevitable; when we turn to the physical and still more the biological sciences we find concepts that resist these Dedekindian cuts.

Chemistry does not regard things like chairs and pebbles as three-dimensional continua ending in continuous surfaces. When we look at clouds from the ground they seem sharply differentiated from the sky, but when we enter a cloud in an aeroplane we cannot tell exactly where it starts. Similarly, to the chemist a piece of wood or a human body is a buzzing swarm of molecules without a limiting surface. It is not the case that every point in space either is or is not within it. I compared sentient organisms to islands in the sea of inanimate nature, but where exactly does an island stop? At the highest tide-mark, at the lowest, or at a mean?

More important, a biological species does not have a sharp beginning in time. We think that any member of a species must be the offspring of parents of that species; if I am a human being then I have human parents. But we also think that the species

---

[7] See Russell, *Principles of Mathematics* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1964), ch. 34. The ideas originate with Richard Dedekind, *Steigkeit und irrationale Zahlen* (Brunswick, 1892) and Georg Cantor, *Contributions to the Founding of the Theory of Transfinite Numbers* [1895], tr. Philip E.B. Jourdain (New York, Dover, 1955).

now in the world did not always exist but arose out of other species. If that is right, organisms cannot be divided sharply into those that are and those that are not members of a given species. There are horses now and there were no horses, let us say, 200 million years ago. Every horse had parents that were horses. Not only, then, was there no first horse but the quadrupeds that have lived on the earth (which unlike the fractions between 1 and 2 are finite in number) cannot be divided into two groups, those that were and those that were not horses. Ability to interbreed is a criterion of belonging to a species. The horses of today can interbreed with each other and with those of yesterday. Those of yesterday could interbreed with those of the day before. But if we go back far enough we shall find ancestors of today's horses with which today's horses could not have interbred. Might we, in this backward time-travel, find a first stallion with which our mare Colleen could not have interbred? I am not sure how we decide whether or not Colleen could have interbred with a given stallion that died 5 million years ago; but suppose there were such a first stallion. Still, it would have been able to interbreed with mares which could interbreed with later stallions with which Colleen can interbreed, so it would be captious indeed to say that this particular stallion of 5 million years ago was not a horse.

As there is no sharp date for the beginning of a biologial species so there is none for a biological change like puberty. Still less is there one for a psychological change like becoming honest or dishonest or literate. When I was born I was certainly not literate, now I certainly am, but a man's life does not divide sharply into a non-literate and a literate part: as Plato observes in the *Theaetetus* (207–8), there may be a first time when Theaetetus spells his name correctly, but there is no first time when he spells it correctly, not by chance but knowing how to spell it.

Purposive movements of parts of the body are all exercises of acquired skill. This applies equally to the utterance of vocal sounds, which children usually learn in their second year, and movements of their legs, which they begin to learn before they are born. What we call 'control' over our movable parts is a matter of degree, gradually acquired. Whether it is compatible or incompatible with determination by past physical processes and states, its beginning is not sharp. Our life is not divided into times at which we have control of our hands or vocal organs and times when we have not. Some movements are definitely purposive, some are definitely not, and some are neither. It is not just that with our present equipment we cannot tell which they are; there *must* be movements which are neither made for a purpose nor made for no purpose, just as there must be animals about which the question 'Was it a horse or not' has no answer.

The exorcist may say that however it is with such soft and woolly concepts as those of a horse or literacy, electrical activity in the brain belongs to physics. Even if the activity which results, say, in my writing a word is complicated, still it comes down to the firing of individual neurones, and either every firing is a continuation or at least one is not. So it might seem to a philosopher with some knowledge of arithmetic; it might not seem so simple to a neurologist. The same movement can be caused by the firing of different neurones and what it takes to make a given neurone fire is not always the same: repetition, such as occurs when someone is gradually gaining a new muscular skill, makes a difference.

If movements divide without remainder into those that are continuations and those that are not, then either we are parts of a closed system or we escape this fate only by virtue of rare discontinuities, by spasmodic miniscule events hidden deep in the labyrinth of the brain. But if some neural events are neither definitely continuations nor definitely not, freedom and spontaneity need not be confined to dubious little fits and starts, but can characterize those broad swathes of behaviour we believe to be free and spontaneous.

# Chapter 14

# Creation

'God made heaven and earth': these words, or words to this effect, are often on the lips of the religious. But theologians tell us that God did not make the universe out of pre-existing material. They sometimes say he made it out of nothing, but by that they mean, not that there was something called 'nothing' out of which he made it, but simply that there was not anything out of which he made it. When we make something, say a pot, there is something out of which we make it, and we make it by acting causally on this pre-existent thing. God is responsible for the existence of the universe, we are told, without having made it in this way, by causal action. Theologians sometimes also tell us that God is the efficient cause of the universe, but that is inconsistent. What they mean by an 'efficient' cause is precisely a causal agent, a cause that 'makes' in the sense in which we make one thing by acting on some other thing that is already there. Paradoxical as it may seem, the assertion that God created the universe is a denial that he made it.

In what way, then, *is* he responsible for it? We saw the answer to this in Chapter 11: the universe exists, and physical processes generally continue, because that is his desire or will, that is what he thinks best. This doctrine does not depend on any cosmological suppositions that are now supposed false. The Jews of the Old Testament and the early Christians may have believed that the earth is the centre of the universe and that the stars are small and not very far away. They may have fitted Jehovah into a cosy, anthropocentric universe. But no mistaken cosmology is implied in saying that the universe exists because God wants it to.

How are we to understand this claim? On the model of claims about human behaviour. We say that some of our movements are the carrying out of our desires; that is, they occur because we want them to. This does not mean, I argued earlier, that they are caused by desires or other thoughts. But they go on because they benefit us. When I walk, my legs move because I want them to, because I want to avoid something or get somewhere or enjoy the exercise.

It might be objected that, while we are responsible for some of our movements, we are not responsible for our existence, and creation is supposed to be bringing things into existence. But what is existence? Neither a room into which things can be carried, nor an activity into which they can be coaxed. If particles interact, they must exist; but they do not exist before they start interacting: the idea that objects might exist for stretches of time in which nothing whatever happens is incoherent.[1] Nor is existence *physically* necessary for interaction as a sharp edge is for carving beef. The notion of it is what philosophers call 'second-order'; its primary use is in logical

[1] This has been disputed; I defend my view in *The Analytic Ambition*, ch. 5, s.3.

analysis. To speak of things as interacting is to speak of them as existent. Part of the puzzlement people feel about creation comes from inability to accept this. There must, they feel, be such a thing as existing; surely it is some kind of act.

There is no more to the existence of the universe than the going on of natural processes; whatever is responsible for the latter exhausts responsibility for the former. But can we really think that any process goes on just because someone wants it to? Far from being unthinkable, that is perhaps the most basic conscious thought we have. We think that our moving our hands and feet and lips and our acting upon objects with tools or other instruments *can* be a fulfilment of a desire. But we start by saying this of the movements of human beings; it is a big step to transfer it to the movements of inanimate objects like stars and molecules. Even if in general change can continue because someone so wishes, can we say that physical processes continue because that is the will of God?

The chief objection to this that I can see is that the movements which occur because I so desire are movements of my limbs. If processes throughout the universe go on because God so desires, will it not follow that the universe is God's body? Must we not say that all the material in the universe makes up God in the way an animal's limbs and sense-organs make up the animal?

That God is simply identical with the universe, with all that exists, is what is called 'pantheism', a doctrine Jews and Christians reject: they say God is separate from the universe. And that the whole universe is a kind of living organism sounds like a contradiction in terms. For we conceive a living organism as one material object among others, acting with its organic parts on things other than itself. The totality of all that exists could not make up an organism, since there would be nothing on which it could act. And even if the notion is not incoherent, it is wildly fanciful, since on the face of it the universe does not have the unified structure we find in plants and animals. Distant galaxies are not connected with one another as our eyes and ears are connected with our hands and tongues. But does saying 'Natural processes generally go on because that is what God wants' have these awkward consequences?

We think that an animal is *constituted* by its bodily parts. I am not something separate from the legs that move because I want them to; they are parts of me. Why do we think this? Not just on the grounds that they move because I want them to. A prominent purpose of human beings is *self*-preservation. We act to prevent our limbs and organs from being harmed and to make them more efficient. This care for the preservation of our bodies is most easily understood as care for ourselves. We do care also for our tools, and some philosophers have wanted to say, not that our bodies are identical with ourselves, but that they are the indispensable tools by which we inform ourselves about the world and change it. But this is unconvincing. We act upon tools with parts of our bodies, most of them we hold in our hands. In what do we hold our bodies? With what do we manipulate them? And why are our bodies indispensable? Plato tells a myth in which people get condemned to the limitations of bodily life for crimes committed in a previous existence, but this can hardly be taken seriously. The obvious explanation of why we depend as we do on our eyes and ears, hands and feet, is that we are agents constituted by them. If phys-

ical processes generally, however, go on because God wants them to, and the purpose for which he wants them to go on is that agents other than himself should arise and live and act purposively, we do best to regard him as an agent separate from the organisms he acts to benefit.

We think something like this about human beings when they act altruistically. People sometimes act to benefit others independently of whether the action will benefit themselves. They face pain, injury, death or rejection by their societies in order to save other individuals. In doing so we may say that they separate themselves from their own bodies; they identify themselves with the individuals they are trying to help; they make the thriving of those individuals their goal. That is what the theist claims about creation. The processes that go on because God wants them to are all exclusively for the benefit of creatures; the thriving of those creatures is God's only goal. Human beings act as agents separate from their bodies only in acting altruistically, and perhaps human action cannot divest itself of dimensions that are not altruistic. If the hero does not act in order to minimize his own suffering or in order to win social approval, at least he acts in spite of suffering and in spite of disapproval. If the creator has no organs that can be harmed and no public opinion to regard, creation is purely altruistic, and hence the creator is wholly separate from the created order.

There is a further reason for thinking we are not separate from the parts that move because we want them to. These movements occur because of special circumstances that make them desirable, and these circumstances affect other parts of us which we call 'sense-organs'. Suppose I jump for the pavement because a lorry is hurtling down the road. You think my legs move because I want them to. But you think this because the lorry is threatening these legs, not some other limbs on the other side of the globe, and because it stimulates my eyes and ears, eyes and ears plugged into the same brain as the nerves in my legs. If no circumstance which makes a movement desirable is registered in my sense-organs, that movement cannot occur because I want it to. The fact that the limbs I move belong to the same body as the organs which register my reasons for moving them makes good sense if I simply am that body. The movements that theists attribute to God are not like this. They are movements of fundamental particles throughout the universe, and they do not occur because special circumstances make them advantageous to particular organisms. They occur in the regular ways scientists discover and describe. Creation does not require eyes, ears or sensitive patches. The theistic explanation is that physical processes occur in order that living things generally may thrive. This explanation is similar in form to the explanations we give of our limb movements, but the processes are not movements of parts of animals, much less of a single, all-inclusive animal.

It sounds strange to say God wants anything to happen among particles, and people have believed that the world exists because that is God's will without having any idea of what we call biological and physical processes, much less of subatomic particles. The kernel of the doctrine of creation is that the universe exists because God wants there to be living creatures that act for reasons and purposes. It is in them that he is interested. But if we analyse this doctrine we find that what it attributes to

God's will is the natural processes, whatever they may be, that science tries to uncover. Scientists today tell us that rocks, pools of water, clouds of gas and the rest have causal powers that are not spread through them continuously, but distributed in more or less discrete, interacting centres of force. They also describe the processes by which living organisms are nourished and grow. Someone today who wants to say that the universe exists because God wants it to will take this as equivalent to saying that these physical interactions and biological processes go on because God wants them to. A seventeenth-century theist might have said that corpuscular atoms bounce off each other like billiard balls because God wants them to. An early Christian, educated in Athens or Alexandria, might say that the four elements, earth, air, fire and water, change into each other because God wants them to.

Up to now I have been arguing that this doctrine is neither unintelligible nor pantheistic. But are there any reasons for thinking it true?

It might be thought that, before we ask whether God created the universe, we should ask if God exists at all. But that would be a mistake. The question whether this or that person or thing exists is not a straightforward question about it. 'Did Shakespeare write *Hamlet*?' is a straightforward question about Shakespeare; 'Did Shakespeare exist?' is not. Writing a play is something a man can do; existing is not. As I said just now, the verb 'exist' has a use in analysing thoughts or utterances. The belief that Shakespeare exists is implicit in wondering if he wrote *Hamlet*, not a complete belief standing on its own. We think of things as existing in attributing physical properties to them or speaking of them as causing or undergoing change. I speak of the Moon as existing in asking 'Are solar eclipses caused by the Moon?' But God is not supposed to have any physical properties, or to cause or undergo change. We can speak of God as existing only by speaking of him as a purposive agent, only by speaking of something as happening because he wants it to, or as being done for his benefit. Any statement in which God is spoken of as existent, as a real person, must be teleological, and the question whether God exists cannot be separated from the question whether the universe exists because he wants it to. God may not have to create, but we have to think about creation to think about God.

All statements about God, then, have the character of teleological explanations. They are true or false, not in the way in which it is true or false that Othello killed Desdemona, but in the way in which it is true or false that he killed her for the reason that she loved Cassio, or that he pressed on the pillow for the purpose of killing her. Such statements are true if the action explained is indeed for the reason or purpose stated. But how do we prove something like that? Not in the way in which we establish a mathematical fact, or show that a causal explanation is correct.

There is no universally applicable way of showing that something done by a human being was intentional, but that does not matter too much because, as I said earlier, in general we do not need to prove this. If you cut an enemy's throat we assume you do it on purpose unless you can show otherwise, unless you can point to some peculiarity of the case that excuses you. The burden of proof is on those who say this is *not* intentional: they have to show that it was done in ignorance, or because of some physical abnormality, or something like that. But this does not

help the religious believer who says that natural processes generally go on because that is God's intention or desire. God is not, like a human being, a causal agent within the universe, and the causal agents – stars, subatomic particles or what not – the action of which is supposed to be the fulfilment of God's desires are not parts of God in the way our hands are parts of us. So the burden of proof is on the theist.

Archaeologists dig up things which might have been produced on purpose, and decide that some are indeed artifacts even though the supposed artificers are long dead and have left no records. A traveller in a strange country might come across an area with fruit trees and flowers and short grass, and decide that it was planted and tended by people, though there is no trace of them or their tools or abodes. In these cases we reach a decision by weighing up the possibility that this should arise without human intervention, and the degree of adaptation to human wants and needs. Can we argue in the same way that the universe is created by God: pointing out that natural processes do enable living organisms to arise and thrive, and calculating that this would be highly unlikely without divine intervention? An argument of this sort is offered by Xenophon in his *Memorabilia*, 1.4, and versions appear in Cicero and Christian writers, but there are two important differences between these cases and that of the universe. In the first place the archaeologist and the traveller have to choose between attributing what they find to human skill and attributing it to ordinary natural processes. But the issue over creation is whether the natural processes themselves go on because God wants them to. It is not whether God interferes with them or harnesses them as craftsmen and gardeners harness and interfere with natural processes. Secondly, we know what capacities human craftsmen have and the sort of tools they use; this gives us a basis for judging whether what we find in the forest glade or the excavated tomb has a teleological explanation. We do not have a comparable knowledge of God's capacities and ways of working.

A better model, I suggest, than the dilemma of the archaeologist or the traveller is the uncertainties of social intercourse and affection. How can I tell whether someone I know is a friend or an enemy? We do best to assume our acquaintances are friends unless their actions suggest otherwise. But if I like you, how do I know whether you like me, and consort with me because you like my company, or find me a bore, and consort with me out of pity, in spite of disliking my company? If I am in love with you, I may become jealous. How do I know that you are true to me, and tell me the truth about what you do when out of my sight? I do not doubt you are a purposive agent, but I may wonder whether a particular action has a purpose, and if so whether that purpose is to get closer to someone else without my knowing. The way in which we try to read the behaviour of those we love is comparable to the way in which we view natural processes generally when we wonder if the universe is created by God. Believing it created is like trusting your beloved; thinking it is not is like believing you are not loved.

The parallel appears closer if we consider what belief in creation amounts to. The belief of the archaeologist or traveller that something results from human purpose depends on thinking of it as useful, well adapted to the needs and wants of human beings and other organisms for which human beings have concern. We do not judge something was done for a purpose unless we see some good in doing it,

unless we can share the purpose ourselves up to a point. Similarly, thinking that the universe was created for the benefit of living organisms involves thinking not only that natural processes do enable living things to thrive, but that living things are good as ends in themselves, and acting in order that they may thrive is worthwhile. We must think that the universe is one to which it is good to belong, that it is populated by living things that are good, and that the processes which go on naturally have the merit of being well adapted to their needs. This view of the universe, I suggest, is very like a lover's trust in the beloved's love. The believer has trust in natural processes and God as a lover trusts the beloved's actions and the beloved. On the other hand if we think that living organisms do not really act for purposes at all, or that they do act for purposes but they are cruel and ugly and hateful, not only will we not believe that the universe was created by God, but we shall feel about it as we might feel about the actions of someone we mistrust.

These beliefs have practical implications. If I think of an artifact or a garden as something worth making, other things being equal I will treat it with care and try not to spoil or damage it. Equally if I think that living organisms are good, I must have some respect for them, and hold them in esteem. Other things being equal I shall not harm them. Does the converse hold? If we respect living organisms must we think that God made the universe? That sounds false. Many people profess both to respect all living things and to be atheists. And it is arguable that everyone naturally respects living things. For respecting other living things, wanting to benefit them or being averse to harming them, is what I call 'altruism', and altruism seems natural and more or less universal, though it does not always prevail over other motivations.

We are inclined to think that believing that God created the universe is simply a matter of being prepared to say he did. But we can have reason to assent to a declaration without believing it true or even understanding it. People profess to believe in God who seem to have very little altruism with regard even to other human beings, let alone living creatures generally; whether they really believe that natural processes go on because God wants living creatures to thrive is quite questionable. The altruistic atheist professes to think that living things are so good that if there were a God it would be well worth his while to create a universe for them; but that as a matter of fact natural processes do not go on for any purpose at all. What does this negative belief amount to? Not, we are supposing, to a callous disregard for sentient animals generally. Is it more than an antipathy to organized religious worship? That antipathy, I think, has nothing to do with the doctrine of creation; it has to do with the doctrines that God has a special covenant with the Jewish nation and became incarnate in a member of that nation. Apart from an aversion to acts of worship, the belief that the universe might have been created for living creatures, but in fact was not, seems to be almost vacuous. It would not be vacuous if purposive action in general needed some further explanation or cause, if processes could go on for a purpose only if something made them go on for a purpose. But I have suggested that purpose should be regarded as the norm and, if something happens, then it happens for a purpose unless there is some reason for thinking it does not. If that is so, then to say, 'Nothing gives us reason to think that the universe doesn't depend on a creator; but still I don't think it does' sounds captious.

I have offered reasons earlier for doubting whether all human societies, however primitive, have gods. Perhaps, however, most human beings have believed, if unconsciously, in a creator. It is not easy to give a precise description of the feeling of respect for natural things which is implicit in the belief that God created the universe. It is more than the care we have for artifacts and gardens, and it is different from the honour given in society to people with a certain position or role. But I think that we have examples of it in the respect for trees and rivers and certain animals which Christians found in pagan societies and thought to be evidence of belief in gods. These pagans did not believe in God or, I suspect, in gods, but they did have an implicit or unconscious view of the universe not substantially different from the view we express by saying the universe depends on a purposive agent separate from it.

The question that prompted these comparisons was: 'What reasons are there to think it true that God created the universe?' What light do they shed? In the first place, any reason for thinking this true must be a reason for thinking living organisms good enough for it to be worthwhile to create a universe for them. That is the starting point. It is only if we already have some respect for them and want them to flourish that we can usefully consider whether natural processes are in fact well adapted to their flourishing. Hume, in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, proposes various ways in which the universe might be improved without a word about whether it is worthwhile improving it. He assumes it is to be improved for the benefit of eighteenth-century western Europeans, but this assumption is not stated, much less examined. Those scientists from Aristotle onwards who have marvelled at how well adapted natural processes are, have started by feeling admiration for quite simple organisms.

> Let us speak [says Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals*, 1. 645a6–14] of that part of nature which consists of animals, and to try to omit none of them however high or low. For even in those of them which do not charm the senses, creative nature provides amazing pleasure for those who in contemplating them can discern explanations and love study for its own sake. It would be absurd if we took pleasure in looking at likenesses of them made by skilful painters and sculptors, but did not delight in contemplating the things themselves as they exist in nature still more. … We should not recoil childishly from examining the lower animals, for in all natural things there is something wonderful.

Secondly, the decision whether the universe is good is like the decision whether one's beloved returns one's love: a decision that can be difficult. Some of us may think that fidelity is the norm, that most spouses are faithful; others that it is just an ideal, and that most spouses are unfaithful from time to time. That is a difficult issue to settle, though it is presumably one of fact. Jealousy is painful, and for that reason alone sensible people try to trust those they love and do not agonize over the possibility of deception. But sometimes the trust is misplaced. Every kind word and action is evidence of love, but not a decisive proof. There is much beauty in nature and many good moments in many people's lives, but we can resist the conclusion that God exists without inconsistency. Perhaps, however, it is wisest to believe that the universe depends on a benevolent principle unless we find ourselves forced to think otherwise.

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Chapter 15

# Conceiving Jehovah

When we say 'Every primitive society has gods' we use 'god' as a common noun the meaning of which I discussed in Chapter 3. In the sentence 'God created heaven and earth' 'God' is a proper name like 'Aphrodite' or 'Julius Caesar'. Proper names refer to individuals, and as 'Julius Caesar' usually refers to the Roman Dictator who was assassinated by Brutus and Cassius, so 'God' on the lips of Jews, Christians and Moslems is intended to refer to the creator of the universe. 'Jehovah' refers to that individual too, and to avoid confusion I shall sometimes use that name.

If the universe depends on a purposive agent separate from it, how are we to conceive that agent? Left to ourselves, we cannot begin to. All our concepts are derived from things within the universe: how can we have any idea at all of anything outside it? But we are not left to ourselves. We are heirs to three thousand years of Judaeo-Christianity. That gives us a start, though not, perhaps, a very promising one. The Old Testament does not offer a single, unified picture of Jehovah, but on the whole it represents him as a partisan who favours the Jews against other nations and as a prey to human emotions like anger and jealousy. The difficulties of this conception are obvious, but that of the first Christians may seem hardly less objectionable.

They endowed him with the most exalted characteristics they could conceive. The Roman Empire was nearer to a monarchy than to a modern republic, and attached a high value to justice, order and the rule of law. The state did not prosecute people for ordinary crimes; the victims of such crimes were expected to bring civil actions; but you could get into bad trouble for sacrilege and for offences against the Emperor and the 'majesty' of the Roman People. It was natural, then, to apply to God the concept of a super-king administering perfect justice, showering riches and high position on those who served him well, and punishing lèse majesté (a Roman expression, laedere majestatem) with super-punishments. Today, however, absolute monarchy is out. Educated people favour a more or less republican constitution and call for freedom of speech and opportunities for individuals to develop their individuality. A modern Christian needs a new ethico-political model for Jehovah. But unfortunately there seems to be no social role in our world that will provide one; we admire film stars and successful tycoons, but as models for Jehovah they are even worse than an upright absolute monarch.

That Christians have conceived God as a kind of king is true, but there has never been much justification for this and it involves a confusion of Christ's divine and human natures. Christ claims for himself the roles of ruler, legislator and judge. But these roles belong to him at best as the second person of the Trinity, not to the Trinity of which he is the second Person, and I think that in fact they belong to his human nature. This can escape notice because the society in which he is a king is,

he says, 'not of this world'; it is supernatural. But his role of king goes with his role of priest. Again he is not a priest of a human society – he was apparently related through his mother to a priestly family but he never acts as a Jewish priest. Rather he is a supernatural priest, exercising a priesthood which is beyond that of the Jews, and still further beyond that of the gentiles, if they can properly be said to have priests at all. Like the Jewish priests, however, he prays and sacrifices to the one God. Obviously he must do this not as himself God but as a man. If that is true of his priestly role, it should be true also of his role as king and judge; he is king and judge not as a Divine Person but as a human being who is also divine.

I do not think Christian monotheism is inextricably bound up with any outdated system either of cosmology or of political theory. There is, however, another difficulty about the Christian conception of God. This arises from the doctrine of the Trinity. Other gods are all straightforwardly conceivable; we can ask how we are to conceive fire, or the Emperor of Japan, or Zeus. But the doctrine of the Trinity prevents us from asking this question about Jehovah. The words 'How are we to conceive …' needs to be completed by a noun or pronoun or noun-phrase with what grammarians call *number*: it must be singular or plural. The doctrine of the Trinity states: 'There is only one God but in that God there are three Persons' or (a slightly embarrassing variant), 'There is only one God, but that God subsists in three Persons'. This rules out completing 'How are we to conceive' with either a singular or a plural expression; indeed, it rules out constructing a 'What …?' question with either 'is' or 'are'.

At first, this may be thought an absurd quibble. Surely natural theology provides us with a coherent, even if limited, conception of Jehovah. Not being part of the natural order, Jehovah is non-spatial and non-temporal, but since the natural order exists because that is his will, he is a person with desires. But in fact the notion of a person with desires is purely formal. It is the notion of the subject of a sentence containing teleological conjunctions. We think we have an idea of a purposive agent because we have an idea of a human being. But our notion of a human being gets all its content from the human body. Wittgenstein said the human body is the *best* image of the human mind; there is, in fact, no other. If Jehovah has no body or bodily needs or powers, we can have no conception of him. Following a hint in Aristotle, theologians suggest that he knows that he exists and also knows that he knows this; and he rejoices in this self-knowledge. This is a little like the mathematical process of multiplying 0 by 0.

Not only is the natural theologian's concept vacuous; if the doctrine of the Trinity is correct, it suffers from a disturbing ambiguity. Is it a concept of the one God in whom there are three Persons, or of one of the three persons, the Father? The creeds seem to attribute creation to the Father – they say, 'the almighty Father, maker of Heaven and Earth' – but Aquinas says more accurately that creation is 'common to the whole Trinity', not 'proper to any one Person' (*ST*, 1a, q. 45 a. 6).

The problem is not confined to creation. Christ in the Gospels addresses prayers to a being he calls 'Father' and tells his auditors many things about a being he calls 'your Father in Heaven': that he sees what we do in secret, knows our needs and will provide for them (Mt. 6). He also speaks of 'my father' (for example, Jn. 8, Jn. 15),'the

father' who sent him and who is united with him (for example, Jn. 6, Jn. 14), and it is natural to take some characters in his parables, the father of the prodigal son, the owner of the vineyard with the bad tenants, as models for this being. But is this being one Person in the Trinity, God the Father, or the one God in whom we now distinguish three Persons? I think Christians today tend to take it in the first way, but Christ's hearers, orthodox Jews who knew no doctrine of a divine trinity, must surely have taken it in the second. When Philip says, 'Show us the Father,' and Christ replies, 'He who has seen me has seen the father … I am in the Father and the Father is in me', are they both using the phrase 'the Father' with the same reference? As long as we think it makes sense to ask how we are to conceive the one God and the three Persons, these questions continue to arise; they can be stopped only by saying that the doctrine of the Trinity rules out all talk of conceiving God.

Does it really do that, or does it rather allow us to have one concept of the one God, and three other concepts, one for each of the Persons? It has become fashionable to say that the inner life of God is social. Dennis Billy, for example, in a recent article,[1] says that God's rest after the work of creation was completed 'is an eminently social activity. Father, Son and Spirit celebrate each other and the work they have accomplished together. They dance in perfect harmony in both their internal self-relations and their external economic activity in the cosmos'. And he quotes with approval Robert Farrar Capon's fanciful description of the celebration: 'For ever and ever they told old jokes, and the Father and Son drank their wine *in unitate Spiritus Sancti*, and they all threw ripe olives and pickled mushrooms at each other *per omnia saecula saeculorum*.' Whatever else we may think of this description, it is plainly tritheistic. The party described is just like a party on Olympus except that Homeric kings and queens have been replaced by middle-class Americans.

It would be unfair to take too seriously these lighthearted writings on the Trinity, but any attempt to form concepts of three Persons must be tritheistic. We can try conceiving the Father not as the atemporal self-contemplator of natural theology but as the loving father described in the Gospels, the father who sends his son to save us. We then conceive the Son as a loving, dutiful person like Isaac in Genesis. This takes us straight to Olympus with its family relationships. And when we try to fit in the Spirit, imagination gives out, the Spirit disappears like steamy breath on a cold morning, and we are left speechless before the ineffable.

To attempt to give such accounts of the three Persons is to model the Trinity on the First Triumvirate. We have a clear conception of the Triumvirate as a board of three men, and clear conceptions of Caesar, Pompey and Crassus as men. But if we use this model we have to conceive the Trinity as a board of three gods, and the orthodox doctrine asserts that Father, Son and Spirit are not three gods but a single God.

---

[1] 'The Call to Holy Rest', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 82, no. 962 (April 2001), pp. 182–7. A full-length and authoritative development of the idea is Jurgen Moltmann's *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (1980), effectively criticized by Karen Kilby in 'Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 81, no. 956 (October 2000), pp. 432–45.

The words 'one' and 'three' do not signify incompatible predicates; rather they quantify subject-expressions. A conception is a conception of one, two or three things: whether men like Caesar, Pompey and Crassus, trios like the First Triumvirate and the Second Triumvirate, or numbers like one, two and three. The doctrine of the Trinity rules out both a conception that applies to one God, since it says that God is three, and a conception that applies to three distinct Persons, since it says that the three are one. Or we might say that it gives three different conceptions of the one God, and no conception at all of any of the Persons.

This requires an important qualification. Christ, Christians believe, was both God and man, and insofar as he was a man we can form a rich conception of him. Not only was he a human being; if what I said a moment ago is correct, it is as a human being that he had the social roles of ruler and priest.

It sounds a hard doctrine that we have no proper concept, either of any of the Persons or of the Trinity. But that is because we crave a concept that will be like our concepts of natural kinds. Those concepts are not only derived from empirical study; they have a practical use. Animals consist of bodily parts with causal powers and biological functions. Our dealings with animals consist in taking advantage of the ways in which they are useful to us, avoiding the harm they can cause us, and helping them to flourish for their own sake. Scientific knowledge of natural kinds helps us to do these things. Jehovah is not a causal agent within the universe and has no biological functions that we can assist. The only knowledge we need for practical purposes is grasp of his purposes and especially of how he wants us to behave. Like all understanding of purpose, this knowledge is inseparable from action; we have it in acting to further or frustrate the divine purpose, and we see into the divine mind insofar as we conform to it. Any idea of what God is like in himself has value only as an aid to this practical understanding.

Once we see that an idea of God is to be judged in this way, Christians will be found to have quite a detailed and vivid idea of God. They are taught that Christ reveals God not only by telling us about him but in his actions; he is himself 'the image of the unseen God' (Col. 1.15, cf. Heb. 1.3). The trouble is that they do not always use him as an image in this way, because he does not fit the preconceptions that come from outside Judaeo-Christianity. Zeus is a king of gods and men; divine emperors are usually also priests; gods are usually strong and goddesses beautiful. Christ was not a human king or a Jewish priest, rather he was a member of the rural artisan class in an unimportant country subject to the Roman Empire; and hence he is no help in conceiving God as a kind of super-king ruling in super-splendour. But I have just conceded that such a notion of God is on the wrong lines anyway. We should set aside preconceptions and start from Christ's recorded life. He comes into the world, not as a ruler progressing round his kingdom or as a law-enforcer surrounded by guards and police, but as a baby in a manger, conspicuously lacking both in physical strength and in intellectual attainments. He dies a shameful and painful death. Like the servant in Isaiah 53.2–3 he has no beauty or charm. And the crucifixion is the culmination of his work, the moment of triumph in which he accomplishes the salvation of mankind. It is in the helpless infant and still more in the naked figure nailed to the cross and covered with blood and flies that we should

seek an image of the principle, as Aristotle puts it, on which the universe depends. So says theology, and such is the practice of Christian art.

This bears on what is considered a difficulty for the doctrine of creation, the presence in the world of suffering and evil. The difficulty seems greatest if the Creator is conceived as rapt in blissful contemplation of his own existence. For such a conception some statues of Buddha would be good images. A crucified man experiences the extreme of bodily pain and social rejection. If Christ shows himself most like God when he is on the cross, we can no more draw on human happiness to conceive Jehovah than on human strength or beauty. He does not just admit responsibility for all that is evil in creation; he takes it into himself and suffers it. The doctrine of redemption by suffering which most people find so deeply mysterious is absolutely central to the Christian conception of God and the universe.

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Chapter 16

# The Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity is not a kind of optional ornate cadenza in Christian theology but a theme of central importance. Upon it hang the doctrines of the Incarnation, salvation and the sacraments. Believers, however, describe it as a deep mystery, and non-believers sometimes dismiss it as totally unintelligible. 'Here meaning vanishes in the murk cast by a thousand tomes of theology,' as A.C. Grayling puts it.[1] It does, as I said, prevent God from being conceivable in the way other things are conceivable; but I do not think it is unintelligible in itself.

Early theologians proposed various models for the Trinity. Tertullian suggests a spring, a river and a stream taken from the river, or the Sun, a ray of the sun and the tip of the ray. Gregory of Nyssa suggested a flame that starts in one lamp and is transmitted through a second to a third. Augustine took models from the human psyche: a mind, its knowledge and its love, or memory, understanding and will. The model I find most helpful[2] lies in three kinds of rational motivation that we have. First, we act in order to preserve ourselves as living organisms, and have a good time as sentient, intelligent individuals. Secondly we act as members of society, with respect for the rules and customs of our society. Thirdly, we act altruistically in order to benefit other people and other living organisms, whether or not our action is socially acceptable and whether or not it is advantageous to ourselves.

Each mode of action is associated with a different kind of purpose. In the first case, the goal is avoiding painful sensations, experiencing pleasant ones, and having an enjoyable life as an intelligent but more or less lone individual. In the second it is the well-being of our society and participation in its life. In the third case it is the well-being of those for whose benefit we act: discerning *their* goals we make it *our* goal that they achieve them. For the sake of completeness I should add that we can also act out of disinterested malice, the suffering, frustration or destruction of other people can be an end in itself. This, however, is not a fourth kind of motivation but parasitic on the third and a frightening distortion of it, so for our present purposes it may be ignored.

Corresponding to each kind of goal there is a different sort of reason and standard of rationality. By 'a reason', as I said in Chapter 8, I mean a circumstance, real or supposed, that makes a line of conduct good or bad, reasonable or unreasonable. Hot sun or icy wind can make a course reasonable for an individual organism, and we reason as individuals if we say, 'Don't let's leave because there's still wine in

---

[1] *What is Good?*, p. 65.

[2] For a fuller development of this interpretation, see *The Physical, the Natural and the Supernatural* (London, Sheed and Ward, 1998), ch. 8.

the bottle' or 'We must get some netting because rabbits are eating our plants'. Society attaches duties to various relationships and roles. If you are my wife or my patient or my employer, that makes it reasonable for me as a social being to do some things and refrain from others. As altruists we do not have reasons of a further kind, but reasons of the first two kinds weigh with us in a further way. The presence of a cobra on the verandah makes it silly for me as an individual to waltz out barefoot, and unfriendly to let you waltz out. Helen's being married to Menelaus made it wrong for Paris as a member of Homeric society to go off with her, and kind for Sarpedon as a disinterested friend to try to dissuade him.

There are three kinds of purpose and reason, and also three kinds of feeling. The gut feelings of bodily fear, thirst and sexual desire affect us as individual organisms. Fear of public opinion, desire for rank and honour, and feelings of guilt and shame affect us as social beings. As altruists we fear for others in their trials, and rejoice in their successes.

These three kinds of motivation have been noticed by the best psychologists. Plato distinguishes what he calls a 'calculating' part of the soul, a 'passionate' or 'spirited' part and a 'desiring' part. On the whole his calculating part (to which he gives authority over the others) coincides with the agent as an altruist, his spirited part is the agent as a social being, and his desiring part is the agent as a lone individual. The same is true of Freud's Ego, Superego and Id.[3] Freud and Plato at times speak of these psychic parts as located in different places in the organism or its brain. They may employ different parts of the brain, but they are not separate agents. A human being is not a committee composed of a self-interested individual, a social being and an altruist but a single agent whose action has three dimensions. Nevertheless, each kind of motivation gives us a slightly different conception of a person. A person is a rational purposive agent. But since purposes and reasons differ in kind, we have different conceptions of a person as a pursuer of individual self interest, as a participant in social life, and as one who identifies himself (or herself) with other individuals. What holds a human being together, and makes us say each of us is one person and not three, is the human body. Whatever kind of purposive agency you attribute to me I am a causal agent only as a single, unified flesh and blood organism, the organism composed of my hands and legs and eyes.

The three divine Persons in the one Christian God may be compared to these three Platonic or Freudian 'parts' in the one rational human agent. God is one as the human being is one; God is three as the lone individual, the society member and the altruist are three.

Which divine Person corresponds to which? I said that the creator acts disinterestedly for the benefit of creatures. Not, however, for their benefit as individuals. Processes generally go on in order that there may be living organisms, not in order that any particular one may thrive. The creator does not identify himself with any creature in the way human altruists identify themselves with their beneficiaries. We

---

[3] On Plato and Freud, see A. Kenny, 'Mental health in Plato's *Republic*', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1969; A. Price, 'Plato and Freud', in C. Gill, ed., *The Person and the Human Mind* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 247–70, and my 'Trisecting the psyche', *Philosophical Writings*, no. 1 (January 1996), pp. 92–106.

act to benefit living organisms that are already there. There are no organisms for the creator to benefit apart from his creative activity. The creator acts alone as the separate source of everything. He is like a novelist or poet, and artistic creation, like pure science and scholarship, is something we engage in as lone individuals. Since Christians connect creation most with the Father we should say that the Father is God as an agent acting alone.

The Old Testament represents Jehovah not only as the creator of everything but as the national god of the Jews, making agreements with them, entering into an intimate relationship with them comparable with that of marriage, fighting on their side against other nations and even enjoining genocide. The two pictures, of the universal creator and the loving, savage partisan of one particular nation, are extremely hard to reconcile. The god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, however, is certainly a social being. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity allows us to say that in the one God, besides a creator acting alone, there is a social being who enters into communication with creatures. This second divine person is naturally identified with the Son. Christians identify the Son as the Word of God who was made flesh and dwelt among us. If the Son, then, is a divine Person, the Son is God as a social being.

Does that mean that the tribal god of the Old Testament is the Son? This inference was drawn by some of the early Christian Fathers (so, for instance, Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.2.7–13, Irenaeus, *Contra Haereses*, 4.10.1) though it is not official Christian teaching today. If God as a social being is the Son, then it should be the Son, if it was God at all, who liberated the Jews from their various captivities and gave them their laws. This question, however, is theologically peripheral. Central to Christian theology is the idea that we can share in Christ's life and through that in God's. This is most easily intelligible if the divine life of Christ is God's life as a social being.

The third divine Person is the Spirit. The English word 'spirit' translates the Latin *spiritus* and signifies breath. The Old Testament speaks of God's breath as the breath God breathes into creatures to give them life. The New Testament sometimes speaks of the Spirit as a gift, and this gift, it appears, is not ordinary life, the life of an intelligent animal, but supernatural, divine life. One human being can benefit a second in two ways. I can fight off your enemies, dress your wounds, feed your dependants, things it would be good for you to do yourself if you could; or I can help you to do such things by giving information or encouragement. But though I have your acting as an objective, I can help only from outside. I cannot give you life from inside or live within you. A Christian may say that God gives divine life from the inside to those who are willing to receive it and does thereby live within them. Insofar as God acts in this way, his action is comparable to the altruist's, and God as acting in us and dwelling in us is the Spirit. Paul describes Christians as 'temples of the Holy Spirit', not of the Father or the Son.

There are two perils which a theologian expounding the doctrine of the Trinity must avoid. One is called 'dividing the essence', the other 'confounding the persons'. We divide the divine essence if we say that each of the Persons is a distinct god, so that there are three gods. We confound the persons if we say the Father is the same person as the Son and the Son as the Spirit, so that the three Persons are,

as the word 'person' suggests (it comes from the Latin *persona*, the word for the masks actors wore on the ancient stage), like three different masks the one God wears in playing the roles of creator, saviour and sanctifier. Does the model I am proposing entail either of these errors?

Not the first, since I as a self-preserving organism, I as a social being and I as an altruist are not three human beings but one. The basic Judaeo-Christian belief is that the universe depends on a single principle, that there is one creator. Creation is fundamental to the Judaeo-Christian idea of God, and the Father, Son and Spirit would be three gods only if they were three creators.

There might seem to be more risk of the second error. For a human agent does seem like an actor that wears three masks, one self-interested, one social and one altruistic. But a human being is a single causal agent. The causal agent, the human body, provides an analogue to the actor who wears successive masks. The agent who acts as a self-interested organism is the same causal agent as the agent who acts as a social being and the same causal agent as the agent who acts altruistically. The Judaeo-Christian God does not have a body – the body of Jesus is not the body of the one God, nor is the whole universe. So we cannot say that the agent who creates the universe is the same causal agent as the one who enters into relations with creatures and imparts divine life to them. He is neither the same causal agent nor the same person, if a person is either a solitary being or a social being or an altruist. A theologian may want to say that the Son's becoming incarnate and the Spirit's dwelling within us are not separate from the Father's creative action; but talk of aspects and dimensions is less appropriate here than talk of fulfilment and perfection. Raising natural life to a higher level carries on and completes the work of creation.

Using the three modes of rational human agency, then, as a model for the Trinity would not commit Christians to an unorthodox understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity itself; I hope to show below that it would help them to understand and defend other Christian doctrines.

# Chapter 17

# Salvation

In Chapter 6 I said that there are three things from which Christians want Christ to save us: sin, Hell and death. Christian teaching puts a lot of emphasis on the first two; but the doctrine, I suggested, which most attracted early converts was that Christ triumphed over death and offers us the ability to do the same. It is on this doctrine that I shall concentrate here, but first a few words about Hell and sin.

R.C. Zaehner in *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*[1] has argued eloquently that we owe the doctrine of Hell to Zoroaster. Zoroaster was a monotheist. He believed that everything is created by a single being he called 'the Wise Lord', Ahura Mazdah, and that Ahura Mazdah judges human beings when they die and gives the good 'the best existence' and the wicked eternal torment: 'darkness, foul food and cries of woe' (pp. 55–7). Later Zoroastrians in the time of the Parthian Empire believed that at the end of the world the wicked would be purged by fire and live happily, but Zoroaster's own view was that they would be miserable for ever. This doctrine reached the Jews, says Zaehner, when they were captives in Babylon (when it was not yet mitigated by the promise of purgation and final redemption), and Josephus says that, while the Sadducees of the first century did not believe in an afterlife at all, the Pharisees believed the wicked after death are 'consigned to perpetual chains and darkness' (*Antiquities*, 18.2). No doubt Christians took the idea from the Pharisees.

Writers of the Enlightenment used to say that the hold of religion on people's minds depends on fear of hellfire. Today, however, many Christians think it incompatible with God's goodness to inflict eternal torment on any creature, however wicked, and hellfire sermons have gone out of fashion. If Zaehner is right about the origin of the doctrine of Hell, perhaps the orthodox need not insist on it too strongly.

The position over sin is rather different. A cynic might say that what most people want to be saved from is not sin but the punishments that follow sinning. A less cynical view is that serious and repeated sin makes people into moral monsters; they become unable to see that what they are doing is evil, and unable to appreciate goodness in other people; and everyone wants to be saved from that. But the trouble with this line of thought for a Christian apologist is that it is not clear salvation from sin can come only through Christ. Professed atheists try to save people from becoming habitual evil-doers and take up penal reform. 2 Samuel 11 contains the story of David's treatment of Uriah the captain of his bodyguard. While Uriah was fighting David's wars, David slept with his wife and then had him stationed in battle

---

[1] London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975.

where he was sure to be killed. That might weigh on the conscience of a basically decent man, and perhaps no human counsellor could free him completely from the burden; but in our day tyrants have done worse things and apparently suffered no remorse.

If the existence of Hell is dubious, and salvation from sin may be possible without Christ, why do not Christian spokesmen today say that Christ saves us from death? Not because we obviously go on dying. The Christian claim was never that we should escape death altogether. If that claim has ever been made, it is by modern medicine. Christians said not that Christ escaped death but that he suffered and overcame it, entering on an afterlife in which death had no power; and it was life after death that converts might attain through Christ. The reason why Christians do not say this now is the one I gave in Chapter 9: they believe that the soul is naturally immortal, so that we shall have life after death, Christ or no Christ. This accounts also (as Hobbes saw) for their retaining a belief in Hell. For if the wicked die hating God and determined not to share in his existence, their afterlife will be hell even without the gratuitous torments which medieval painters and poets liked to imagine. If, on the other hand, survival of death is possible only by sharing in God's life and having him live in us, how can there be eternal damnation? Does God live in the damned too? Do they also share his existence? Unending misery surely requires an existence for the damned separate from God.

In the next four chapters I shall show how Christians might develop – and how some Christians actually have developed – the idea that Christ saves us from death without assuming that we are by nature immortal. To some people that may seem perverse: surely the natural immortality of the soul is a fundamental doctrine not only of Christianity but of every religion. Dodds quotes Frazer with approval as saying that, on personal survival, 'sceptical or agnostic peoples are nearly, if not wholly, unknown'.[2] But academic orthodoxy has changed since Frazer's day. The Jews are now held to have been a people who until the time of the Maccabees were 'sceptical and agnostic' – among whom scepticism persisted, indeed, into the time of Christ. Frazer grew up in a society where Christians were inclined to argue that God exists and there is a life after death *ex consensu gentium*, on the ground that all nations believe these things. He and his fellow-anthropologists rejected the conclusion but did not challenge the premise. Today we are sometimes told that God does not exist and that there is no life after death because nobody any longer believes these things. This is a good illustration of how hard it is to be reasonable about religion.

But even if not everyone believes that the soul is naturally immortal, most Christians certainly do; so before we detach this belief from the doctrine of salvation through Christ we should ask if there are any good arguments for it. I use the words 'soul' and 'immortal' but the issue could be put more simply: 'Is death the end? Or is there a life for us after death, a life in which we are the same individuals?' Theologians arguing for the answer 'Yes' try to show that it is some kind of

---

[2] *The Greeks and the Irrational*, p. 136, n.4. Dodds himself thinks belief in a survival may arise 'not by any process of logical thought … but rather by a refusal to think', a kind of *creatio ex nihilo*.

conceptual truth that an intelligent being, a person capable of generalizing and reasoning, will continue to exist after the destruction of its body. I shall not examine the arguments they offer, but make three comments. First, the arguments do not convince everyone who studies them: many fair-minded people find them unconvincing. Secondly, theologians are inclined to rely on six lines of Book 3 of Aristotle's work *Concerning Soul*, which may be translated:

> It [the part of the soul which thinks] must therefore, since it thinks all things, be unmixed, as Anaxagoras says, in order that it may control, that is, in order that it may get to know. For what is alien, appearing alongside, impedes and gets in the way. So nor can it have any other nature but this, that it is potential [or, perhaps, capable]. Therefore that in the soul which is called 'mind' (by 'mind' I mean that with which the soul thinks and understands) is not in actuality anything that exists before it thinks (429a18–24).

Aquinas uses different arguments in different works, but in the *Summa Theologiae*, Part 1, Question 75, which is usually regarded as his last word on the subject, he relies on what Aristotle says in these six lines to prove that whatever it is in us that thinks intellectually is 'incorporeal and subsistent'. A narrow foundation for such a skyscraper of a doctrine. Thirdly, a point on the other side, failure to prove we are by nature immortal does not amount to a proof that life after death is completely impossible for us; failure to prove that we *must* survive death is no proof that we *cannot* survive it.

I start, then, from the assumption that we are living organisms made up of heads and bodies, arms and legs, sense-organs, organs of digestion, heart, lungs and the rest. In this respect we are like chimpanzees, golden eagles, whales and other more or less sagacious animals. It may be that we alone are capable of speech and certain intellectual functions, but even if that is true it is not obvious that speaking and thinking should save us from the common lot of living organisms, which is to cease to exist at death. How can Christians hope that Christ has saved or will save us from this fate?

They might start from the Old Testament thought that God is like a gardener who changes wild plants into domesticated plants. As the gardener improves wild grapes, figs, plums and apples or wild grass, and makes them bear larger, sweeter fruit and seeds we can make into bread, so Jehovah cultivates his chosen race, the Jews, and makes them a special people, superior to other human beings.

This takes us only a certain way. The Jews are superior to the rest of mankind not in that they will survive death and gentiles won't, but in that they are holier than gentiles, a race of priests. The idea of an afterlife appears in the Maccabean books, but is not connected with the idea of a gardener or with God's special relationship with the whole Jewish nation; the particular Jews who prefer death to breaking God's law are to be brought back to life as a recompense (Mc. 2.7). The books of Maccabees do not reveal a Platonic conception of human beings as non-bodily persons temporarily imprisoned in bodies – the followers of Judas Maccabaeus, who objected to Greek athletics,[3] would have been horrified at any proposal to

[3] Josephus, *Antiquities*, 12.

adopt Greek philosophical ideas, and took human beings to be living organisms. They could conceive a life after death only as revival, dead men standing up again. The Greek word *anastasis* which we translate as 'resurrection' signifies this kind of revival, and the mother of the martyred brothers tells them, 'The Creator of the world, who made everyone and ordained the origin of all things, will in his mercy give you back breath and life' (Mc. 2.7.23). Further details are not supplied.

The New Testament introduces a completely new idea: that Christ has eternal life from God, and we can share in it through him. That Christ himself has a kind of life which transcends death is shown by his *anastasis*: he not only came back, but came back with a kind of life superior to that of a mortal organism. Christ says that he lives through 'the Father' (Jn. 6.57), that 'I am in the Father', he says, 'and the Father is in me' (14.10–11; cf. 17.21). How we are to share in his life is explained by means of the Old Testament image of the vine, but this is now used in a new way. Whereas in the Old Testament the vine represented the Jews collectively as a nation, and the point was that it is cultivated and improved by God, in the teaching reported by John, the vine represents Christ and is a model for how individual human beings share his life. 'As a branch [*klema*, a word also used for a cutting] cannot bear fruit of itself, if it does not stay in the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches' (Jn. 15.4–6). At 17.22–3 Christ prays to God that his followers 'may be one as we [he and God] are one … I in them and you in me' (17.22–3).

Let us examine this model. At first it may seem unsatisfactory. A vine is a single organism. A branch, while it is part of a vine, is not an organism and does not have a life of its own, though a cutting when taken from it and planted can have a life of its own and develop into an organism. But whereas a vine has interests as an individual organism, in that it takes in nourishment and produces seeds that germinate into offspring, an unsevered branch has no interests of its own. At best it contributes and at worst it may be sacrificed to the interests of the whole. We should hardly wish to be related like that to Christ. We do have individual lives and interests of our own, and while we may sacrifice these to the interests of our friends, that is not the same as being sacrificed to the interests of a larger whole. It might seem that, if we should be incorporated into Christ like grafts into a tree, we must lose our identity as distinct persons.

In fact it is not quite true that a grafted cutting has no life of its own. It produces fruit different from those the tree would have produced on its own and superior to them. The cutting is domesticated, the stock is wild. If we press the analogy, though the divine life of Christ is not inferior to the natural life of human beings grafted into him, rather, it is superior, at least the actions of the engrafted cuttings, the fruit they bear, will retain something distinctive of them. Still, that does not completely overcome the difficulty, and the model can also be used in a different way.

It will serve, up to a point, as a model for a society. The members of a society like a family or a state have complementary roles and depend upon one another rather as do the roots, branches and flowers of a plant. And they have a further need for society. An exceptional adult may be able to live indefinitely without any social contacts with other human beings, but not only do most people fail to survive when

separated from society; nobody could learn to speak or acquire the main characteristics we think distinctive of human beings without starting life in some society or other. The Church is a society. Paul often (for instance Rm. 12.4–5, 1 Cor. 12.12–27) speaks of members of the Church as making up one organic body, and speaks of this as the body of Christ. Do Christians, then, share in Christ's divine life through belonging to the Church and sharing its life?

This too may seem unsatisfactory at first. A society is not an organism. It does not (whatever totalitarian political theories may say) have interests of its own as a whole, distinct from the interests of its members, and its life is different in character from the life of an organism. We share in the life of a society by discharging the roles we have in that society and by living with regard to its rules and customs. Christians can certainly share in this way in the life of the Church. They do that in doing anything the church prescribes, in refraining from anything it forbids, even in breaking its rules if they do so with misgivings. But the life of a society is really nothing but an aspect or dimension of the lives of its members. My life as a social being is the social dimension of my life as an intelligent agent, and this with the lives of other members of the society as social beings makes up the life of the society. The life of a society is no more eternal than the lives of its members. And sharing in the life of the Church is not sharing in Christ's life. How could it be? Christ is a *member* of the Church. The roles of priest and king are social roles which he has within a society. And when we share in the life of a society, we do not share in the life of any of its members. France is a state headed by a President; Frenchmen share in the life of France in driving on the right, but they do not share in the life of the President.

The phrase 'the body of Christ' is ambivalent. We use the word 'body' in several different ways. It can mean a corpse, as when we say 'His body is in the mortuary'; or a torso, as when we speak of heads, bodies and tails. Scientists use the word for any material object, and call the sun and the moon 'bodies'. And philosophers use it for a human being considered simply as a material object, for instance when they ask, 'How is my body related to my soul or mind? Could it be that I just *am* my body?' Now in which sense of 'body' is the Church the body of Christ? If Christ is the head of the Church, he is one member among others; the other members are at best the torso, and the torso does not share in the life of the head. If Christ is the whole organism of which his followers are parts, they are his body in the philosophical sense, and analogy does require them to live with his life. But then, as we have seen, the Church must be something more than a society, and we are back with the earlier difficulty that sharing in Christ's life will involve loss of identity. Paul seems to want the Church to have features both of an organism and of a society, but we have yet to see how that is possible.

The parts of a biological organism do not share in the whole organism's life of their own free will, whereas members of a society share its life voluntarily. They may not choose to belong to a society – infants certainly do not – but we share in social life not by attaching ourselves to a society but by living with regard to its rules, and we do that of our own free will. If the parts of an organism stayed in it voluntarily, it would be a kind of society. Christians want to share in Christ's divine

life. If this desire is not an empty one, its fulfilment will have features both of sharing in the life of a superior whole, and of sharing in the life of a society.

That will become clearer if we consider that Christ is supposed to be not the incarnate Father or Spirit but the incarnate Son. I argued that the Son corresponds to the social element in the human psyche. The Son is that in God which communicates with other persons and enters into relations with them. If that is right, not only is the Son the appropriate divine person to become incarnate; the divine life that can be shared through him will be precisely God's life as a social being.

But God's life as a social being cannot be quite like ours. God does not depend on other people as we do. He cannot just be one member of a society among others. Other persons with whom he has relations are not outside him. They depend on him totally. If God is to belong to a society he must be present in the whole of it, or, to put it the other way round, the whole of the society must be immanent in him. As a social being, then, he must stand to creatures not as parent to children or ruler to subjects but in the intimate way in which a whole organism stands to its parts. In the natural, biological order that would be impossible. A biological organism can have social relations with other organisms but not with its parts, and their participation in its life is non-voluntary. God is not a biologial organism, and participation in his life can only be voluntary. If the life which is communicated is not God's life as a lone individual but his life as a social being, the distinction between sharing it as a part of an organism and sharing it as a member of a society no longer has a place. The two models, or the two uses of the model, coincide.

But is it possible to share someone's life as a social being? We can, in a way, share someone's activities as a social being: I can enter into partnership with you as merchant or lawyer, and we can act out these social roles together with shared responsibility. In that way I can also share your activities as an altruist; I can give you information and support. But this is sharing your life only metaphorically. We literally share the life of a society to which we belong, but the only way in which it is possible literally to share in the life of a person is the way in which the parts of a living organism share in the life of the whole.

Christ was a living organism. His arms and legs shared in the life of the whole. Or did they share only in his *human*, biological life? Do we really want to say that his bodily parts, his flesh, blood, skin and so on lived with the eternal life of God? That is precisely the doctrine of the Incarnation. It asserts, not that God came to dwell in a man as a flu-germ might, or as an owl might come to live in a hollow tree, but that God became a man. The union of God and man in Christ is supposed to lie in this, that one and the same organism has both human and divine life.

The doctrine of salvation as I am trying to explain it depends on the doctrine of the Incarnation. The model of the vine does not show how we could share in God's life directly, independently of sharing in Christ's life as an organism. The life of an organism can be shared; a grafted cutting shares in the life of the whole plant; and we can share in God's life if we can be grafted into an organism that is both human and divine.

But not simply grafted as a surgeon might do it. Christ's limbs literally shared in his life; and if another human being had given Christ a blood transfusion or a kidney,

that blood or kidney would have come to share literally in his life. But a donated organ has no will of its own, and ceases to be part of the donor. Is there any way in which other human beings might literally share Christ's life of their own free will, while retaining their identities? Or is this a wholly unreasonable aspiration?

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Chapter 18

# From Natural to Supernatural

Theologians are at pains to insist that salvation or eternal life is a free gift from God. They make technical use of the word 'grace', Greek *kharis*, Latin *gratia*, to cover not only divine life but any kind of excellence or beauty in human beings that is superior to what is natural; and this word means both something beautiful or pleasing and something that is a free gift. It implies that life after death and whatever it is in us that makes us capable of it are not natural consequences of anything we have done entirely by our own efforts. It does not follow, however, that God could bestow eternal happiness on any human beings he pleases independently of what they are and do.

That is suggested even by talk of gifts. We cannot give gifts to anything inanimate like a stone or a cloud; anything to which we give a gift must be capable of receiving it, and receiving it not just in the passive way in which a house receives a coat of paint. It is also suggested by the Old Testament image of the gardener. The gardener does not give plants greater size or sweetness as a gift and plants do not accept domestication; but he works on life that is already there. You cannot graft into or breed from plants that are dead. If this is to be an image of what God does, God must work on natural life, not, that is, on natural biological life, but the natural life of rational agents. That must surely require some rational cooperation on their part.

In the Old Testament God is represented as giving the Jews laws; they are supposed to become prosperous and holy by complying with these. As the Psalmist puts it, 'He showeth his word unto Jacob, his statutes and his judgements unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any [sc. gentile] nation' (Ps. 147.19–20). Josephus (*Apion*, 2) and Philo (*Legation*, 210) confirm that Jews in the first century took their laws to be of divine origin. If there is anything in their history comparable to the domesticating of a wild plant, it will have been schooling by these laws.

There is no discontinuity between the life of wild plants and domesticated life; there is no first domesticated apple or ear of corn. Was it like that with the Jews, or was there an abrupt break with the purely natural past? According to the Torah, God spoke audibly to Moses and gave him the law. That would be a datable event. Scholars who are averse to miracles do not believe God spoke audibly. Perhaps they think the Mosaic law developed gradually over a long period, rather as Christian doctrine did over the first ten Christian centuries. Even if the narratives of Exodus are true, however, the effect of the laws upon Jewish life must have been gradual. A child born into a society does not share in the life of that society in its first weeks. Its social life starts when it starts to act with regard to the rules and customs of its family, and there is no precise moment at which it does that. If living by Mosaic law is superior to natural life in society, however the law came to be formulated there will have been no first moment at which Jewish life became supernatural.

The life of domesticated plants is superior (at least from our point of view) to that of wild plants. It is not, however, human: the gardener improves their existence but does not give them a share in his own. The model contains three things, wild life, domestic life and human life. If we contrast the natural not with the supernatural (which does not enter into the model at all) but with what is due to human intervention, the life of domestic plants is not natural. It is a product of the gardener's intelligence. But it is not intelligent in the way the gardener's actions are intelligent. When we apply the model, God is analogous to the gardener and divine wisdom to human intelligence. The Jews might claim that their life is a work of divine wisdom, and to that extent supernatural. They did not claim it was divine, and would have thought such a claim blasphemous or absurd.

In point of fact, the analogy must be applied primarily to the Jewish nation. It is the whole nation that is compared to the domesticated vine or fig. It is hard to see how a nation could possibly share in divine life, and what the Jews thought was merely that their nation was superior to gentile nations and holier. But individual Jews would also be superior by virtue of the social dimension of their lives, by keeping the Mosaic law.

Someone who thought that the Judaism is all nonsense would think this whole analogy absurd. If there is no Jehovah, if the Jewish laws developed in a perfectly natural way, it is a waste of time to look for anything supernatural about the Jewish nation. Christians believe that Jehovah does exist and that he did enter into a special relationship with the Jews. But looking at the history of the Jews, can anyone seriously assert that they are as different from other nations as domestic plants from wild? Does their history really show signs of divine wisdom? As I said earlier, it does have a unique feature: the Jews were, in the words of Exodus 19.5, 'a kingdom of priests', and did not distinguish between their race and their religion. Whether or not because they were ruled by priests, their writings are strongly religious in character; even the love songs known as The Song of Songs lend themselves to a religious interpretation. Perhaps to some people today this 'holiness' does not seem remarkable; we should look and see if the Jews were kinder than other people, or cleverer or better looking. But if plants could think, wild plants might not consider the life of domesticated plants greatly superior to their own. Domesticated plants are often less hardy, less proof against predators, even less prolific. It is from the gardener's point of view that domesticated plants are better: they produce fruit that suits him. The analogy requires that the Jews should be better adapted than gentile nations for God's purposes. What were they? Christian hindsight claims that he wanted human individuals to share in divine life, and the Jewish nation produced a man who was the first to do this. 'Before the coming of faith we were locked up in prison by the Law waiting for the coming faith to be revealed. So the Law was a tutor (pedagogue) leading us to Christ. … For you are sons of God through faith in Christ' (Gal. 3.23–6).

The doctrine of the Incarnation is that God in the person of the Son 'took flesh' from the virgin Mary and became a man; Mary's son Jesus had both human life and the life of the divine Son. Could God have become incarnate in a gentile? He could hardly, at least, have become incarnate in a rabbit or a horse; but why not? Those

animals are less intelligent than we, but why should divine life be impossible for an animal without intelligence? Perhaps because it would have to be a kind of development of intelligent life. Could God have become incarnate, then, in a human being who was vicious, depraved, with low moral standards and a radically mistaken view of the universe in general?

Christians have a doctrine of what they call 'original sin'. This seems to have two origins. One is scriptural. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says:

> Through one man [*anthropos*, a word embracing male and female, old and young] sin came to the universe, and because of sin death, and in this way death came to all men, because all had sinned. … If through the fall of one person death acquired sovereignty through that one, all the more do those who receive the superabundance of grace and the gift of goodness acquire sovereignty in life through the one person Jesus Christ. Just, then, as through the fall of one man, all men came to be condemned, so through the good action of one man, all came to the justification of life. For as through the disobedience of the one man all were established as sinners, so through the obedience of one all were established as good (Rm. 5.12–19).

The intention of this slightly convoluted passage is to create a neat antithesis between the one source of sin and death, Adam, and the one source of grace and life, Christ. But did Paul mean that Adam's sin was the source of sin in others exactly as Christ's death and resurrection are the source of life in others? Christ is not the source of life merely because he was the first human being to triumph over death, and we follow his lead. Elsewhere in Paul he is the source of life in that we share his life. So if we want the analogy to be exact, we should be sinners not just by sinning in imitation of Adam, which of course we often do, but by sharing in his sin. Whether Paul meant that and, if so, how he supposed we could share in Adam's sin, is not clear from this passage.

A second source of the doctrine was a desire to insist that divine life is a free gift, as contrasted with something we can obtain by natural means, a natural consequence of good behaviour. How does the doctrine of original sin help here? Not at all, if we are by nature mortal, if by nature we cease to exist at death. In that case divine life will be a free gift, sin or no sin. But as I said earlier, if we take the Platonic view that we are by nature capable of life without bodies at all, it seems to follow that life after death does not need any special gift from God. To explain why we need God's grace we must suppose that something stands in the way of life after death. What Calvin (*Institutio*, 2.1) calls 'a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul' meets the need.

Original sin is traditionally held to be transmitted by parents to children in the act of procreation, that is, in the same way as a bodily peculiarity.[1] This is a difficult idea. 'The transmission of original sin', says the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, s.404, 'is a

---

[1] By 'propagation, not imitation': for texts from Augustine and other Fathers, see Rouët de Journel, *Enchiridion Patristicum*, 586, 1077, 1456, 1715; for the Council of Trent (1547), H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 36th edition (Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder, 1976), p. 1513.

mystery that we cannot fully understand.' A mystery because we think that in procreation parents transmit to children only what is encoded in DNA, and acquired characteristics cannot be transmitted because they cannot be encoded. The sins, vices and culpability of the first human beings would have to count as acquired characteristics.

The English believe that, if you injure a Sicilian or a Corsican, not only you but all your family, including new members as they are conceived, become objects of enmity to the family of the injured person and legitimate targets for murder. But even if this is true of Sicilians and Corsicans, it is hard to believe that the Creator would engage in such a vendetta with a created species.

There is a different way of understanding the doctrine of original sin which not only avoids these difficulties but also gives the doctrine a point even if we are not naturally immortal. We are social beings, and our principles of conduct, our ideas of right and wrong, are inevitably influenced by our upbringing and by the laws and customs of our society. A society may permit evil institutions which are transmitted to successive generations. Slavery is an example. It would have been extremely hard for children born into slave-owning families in ancient Greece or Rome to think it wrong to own slaves or to credit slaves with rights the law denied them. We can see how in our own time young people have inherited opinions about the ethics of abortion which were alien to our grandparents. Then how far people live up to ideals depends partly on example and custom. Even if we honour marital fidelity in theory, fidelity is uphill where it is seen to be unusual; integrity is more difficult for officials in a society in which corruption and venality proliferate. And social life allows bad situations to develop for which no single individual is responsible. Poor countries are exploited by rich; their natural resources are drained from them, and their people are kept in poverty and find themselves working harder and under worse conditions than before the Europeans intervened. In rich countries there are substantial numbers of people who are homeless and destitute, and whose freedom to help themselves to the food and shelter that are available around them is strictly curtailed by law. These are not exactly social institutions like slavery or polygamy, but they might be described as social sins or crimes. So society can give people bad principles, it can impede their living up to good principles, and it can create crimes for which there is collective guilt. In these ways, if not through their chromosomes, people may inherit sin. In 1530, Melanchthon presented the Lutheran understanding of Christianity in the Augsburg Confession. He said, 'All men, born according to nature, are born with sin'. He assumed that that sin is transmitted through procreation, not through society and nurture; but since our nature is social and nobody can grow into an intelligent adult without society and nurture, his words are defensible.

But does every society have bad laws, encourage bad practice, and generate crimes? Some are better than others, just as some individuals in any given society are better than others, and it could be argued that the Jews of the first century BC had quite a good society as societies go. Inherited sin may well have been lower than in gentile societies. The Catholic Church teaches that Mary the mother of Jesus inherited no sin at all, that she was 'conceived without sin'. If the divine gardener had done a good job on the Jewish vine, that a Jew should inherit no sin at all from society does not seem impossible.

The doctrine of Mary's 'immaculate' conception, though it hit the headlines only in 1854, has the support of tradition. But does it help us understand the doctrine of salvation through Christ? If divine life is to be given to a creature, that creature ought to be completely free of guilt and vice. A Christian might well want Christ not to have inherited any sin. If sin is transmitted socially, God ought to become incarnate in a society that is as little as possible encumbered with bad principles, lax practice or collective crimes. Indeed, he ought to be born into a sinless family. But the traditional insistence on Mary's sinlessness may be connected with a further idea.

It could be a condition of receiving divine life not just to have intelligence and be free from vice, but to receive it willingly. Not only should there not be unwillingness; there should be be some active readiness. The Old Testament prophets, besides modelling God's relation to the Jewish nation on that of a gardener to a wild plant, model it on that of a bridegroom to a bride. Whereas wild plants do not want to be domesticated and have no duties to the gardener, the Jewish nation has duties of fidelity to Jehovah, which the prophets accuse it of neglecting, and the Jews are exhorted to welcome Jehovah as a sensible bride will welcome a glamorous, loving bridegroom. It is likely that Jews came to apply this model up to a point to Jehovah's relationship to them as individuals: that they envisaged a kind of interpersonal relationship with him. Homer has no difficulty in portraying Odysseus as having an interpersonal, though asexual, friendship with Athene. Why should not a Jew desire such friendship with Jehovah? Married happiness depends on the parties' responding to each other. They must receive gifts and pleasure from each other out of love, because the other wishes to give. If human beings are to receive divine life, this should be a development of such an interpersonal response.

But how could that happen with Christ? The theologians say that God 'took flesh from the Virgin Mary', meaning by flesh whatever cells or tissues in her received the divine life. But cells, ova or gametes are not capable of purposive action at all, much less of receiving divine life of their own free will. The only free acceptance possible in this case is by the mother: if anyone is to welcome the divine bridegroom it is she.

That is just what we are told in the following famous passage in Luke:

> The messenger Gabriel was sent from God to the town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man called Joseph, of the house of David. The name of the virgin was Mary. Going into her house he said: 'Hail, favoured one: the Lord is with you.' She was disturbed at this speech and pondered on what this greeting could be. The messenger said to her: 'Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favour with God. Look: you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus [Saviour]. He will be great, and will be called the son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will be king over the house of Jacob for ever, and his royal rule will have no end.' But Mary said to the messenger: 'How will this be, since I have no knowledge of any man?' The messenger answered and said to her: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. And therefore the holy son who is born will be called the Son of God. And look, your cousin Elizabeth, she too has conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; because there is no word of God that will not have power.' Mary said: 'Behold the slave-girl of the Lord. Let it be done to me just as you say.'

There could hardly be a more explicit acceptance. If this account is correct, Mary understood that God wanted her to conceive a son by some special divine intervention, a son who would save the chosen race and rule as king for ever, concepts well within the grasp of a first-century Jew, and Mary not only agreed to this but compared her relationship to Jehovah with that of a slave-girl to a king. The Old Testament writers sometimes compare the Jewish nation to a bride who is a princess, Mary applies to herself personally a word meaning a slave-girl (*doule*), that is, an inferior being not fit for a royal marriage, but still one capable of an interpersonal relationship. The words which Luke puts into her mouth when she visits her cousin Elizabeth are those of a passionate lover of her people and of Jehovah. 'My spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour because he has turned his gaze on the lowliness of his slave-girl. From now on all generations will call me blessed. … He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has taken up Israel his child, as he promised our fathers.'

But are Luke's narratives true? Many New Testament scholars consider them fiction. One reason for rejecting them is that they contain miracles: the conception of a child without a human father and mysterious messengers or 'angels' sent by God. I have already said something about the view that it is unreasonable to accept any report of anything outside the ordinary course of nature. But a less *a priori* ground for disbelief is that the history is wrong. Luke dates the conception of Christ to the reign of Herod 'King of Judaea' (1.5) but his birth to when Quirinius was 'governor' (*hegemon*) of Syria and carried out a census (2.5). But Herod the Great died in 5 or 4 BC, and Quirinius became legate of Syria and conducted his census in 6 AD. There is a further difficulty. Luke says Mary was living in Nazareth but she and Joseph had to register in Bethlehem some 70 miles away on the far side of Jerusalem: no Roman census would have required this.

These difficulties have been the subject of debate for more than a century and are lucidly presented by Lane Fox in *The Unauthorized Version.*[2] Different historians will feel them differently. There were more Herods than one, and Luke could have confused them. Ordinary Jews had no dating system like ours and Jesus's family could hardly have said in what Olympiad or how long after the foundation of Rome he was born. Quirinius was a middle eastern expert; he was in the eastern part of the Roman Empire on and off and for one reason or another from 12 BC onwards. Augustus was keen on censuses. In his monumental autobiography, the *Res Gestae*, he boasts of having organized three.[3] I do not think we know enough about them to be sure there was none that could have affected Joseph and Mary before 6 AD when the Jews came under the rule of a Roman Procurator, or that people residing in Nazareth could not have been required to register at Bethlehem. Lane Fox says that the registration would have to have been based on ownership of land. Doubtless ownership of land was important in Roman times, as it is now. But Lane Fox is just surmising when he says (p. 31) that if Joseph and Mary had had any interest in land at Bethlehem they would not have wanted a room at the inn. One can have various

[2] London, Penguin, 1992, pp. 27–32.

[3] *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 2.8. None of these coincides with a census in Judaea of 6 AD; Augustus dates the second to 8 BC.

reasons for not staying with relatives or tenants. Jesus seems to have had a lot of cousins. Perhaps his uncle's home in Bethlehem was full of them, and Mary wanted space and quiet for her confinement. In any case it is hard to believe that Luke and his readers knew less about Roman censuses and taxation than historians today.

If the giving of divine life requires willing acceptance, the person accepting must not only have some understanding of what is being offered but good motives. It would not do to want it for selfish purposes, to prolong the recipient's life as an organism or to increase the recipient's ability to manipulate nature. In Luke's narrative Mary wants to benefit her unborn child 'who will be great and given the throne of David', her race, 'the seed of Abraham', and her divine master, whose 'word is to be done'.

The preceding line of thought may be summarized as follows. The supernatural covers both the lifting of natural life to a higher level though divine intervention and the imparting to creatures of God's own life. The former precedes the latter: receiving divine life depends on being willing to receive it, and creatures will be willing to receive divine life only if their life has already been improved. The Old Testament shows God cultivating the Jews through the Jewish law and making them into a relatively sinless people, at least relatively free of the shortcomings and guilt transmitted from generation to generation in societies. A Jewish mother was therefore in a position to accept divine life, or whatever in her understanding came closest to it, for an unconceived child. Christians believe that God did in fact become incarnate in Jesus, and that they can share in God's life through him; we must next ask how an incarnation which began with him could be extended to other human beings.

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Chapter 19

# Baptism

I have suggested that to receive divine life human beings must be free from sin and already enjoying a kind of life superior to what is natural. Some Jews might have fulfilled these conditions, but the first Christians included people who were not Jews and who, it must be supposed, belonged to corrupt societies and had themselves acquired vices. How could they be saved?

The Jews, unlike the classical Greeks, attached importance to repentance, to change of heart or *metanoia*. John the Baptist preached this; Philo made a virtue of it.[1] Repentance could make up for evil-doing and cure vice. John the Baptist, as the name implies, used washing as a sign of repentance and getting rid of guilt, and Christians believe that when the sign is performed God does in fact take away the effects of evil-doing and makes the baptized person sinless. The sacrament of Baptism enables the baptized to satisfy the first condition. It frees them from all sin and guilt, whether inherited or not. It also makes them members of the Church. The Church is for Christianity what the Jewish nation is to Judaism. It is a hierarchical society with rules based on those of Moses. If belonging to the Jewish nation could give people a life superior to what is natural, so could belonging to the Church.

Christ, according to Jn. 3, said to Nicodemus: 'If someone has not been born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God' (Jn. 3.3). Christians have traditionally taken this to imply that baptism is necessary for salvation: that those who are not baptized cannot enjoy happiness with God after death but are either blotted out or, if we are naturally immortal, relegated to the Inferno. In this chapter I shall first consider this doctrine that baptism is necessary for salvation (or, what comes to the same thing, that there is no salvation outside the Church) and then ask whether it is sufficient. The distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions is sometimes overlooked by theologians, but is crucial for a theology of salvation. The German Reformers may have thought that, because human efforts do not entitle us to salvation, they are not necessary in order to receive it.[2] Conversely the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, s. 1257, having said that 'Baptism is necessary for salvation', continues: 'The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude', implying that baptism *does* assure entry, and is therefore sufficient.

---

[1] *De Virtutibus*, *Works*, Loeb edition, vol. 8.

[2] The Augsburg Confession says good deeds are necessary but only because God commands them (*Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. H. Bettenson, p. 298); Luther says that, if we have faith, they will follow as a necessary consequence (Weimer edn., 1962, 12.559).

If, as Christians say, God has unlimited love for all creatures, why does he restrict the opportunity of happiness after death to Christians? The same question may be put to Jews: why were Jehovah's favours restricted to a single nation? Believing theologians like Jacques Dupuis have been troubled by the apparent injustice no less than sceptics. The idea that unbaptized infants and virtuous adults who never had a chance of being baptized are condemned to eternal torment is so repellent that in the early Middle Ages Christians adopted the idea of Limbo, a place or state free from pain but without hope of union with God.[3] More recently it has been held that people who would have asked for baptism if they had known about it can be counted as baptized by a 'baptism of desire'.[4] These further doctrines, however, have a makeshift air, especially as they have no scriptural authority. Dupuis in *Christianity and the Religions* plays down the necessity of baptism by distinguishing it from the need for saving work by Christ. That belonging to the Church, however, is necessary for salvation is suggested by the line of thought developed in the last few chapters about the continuity of creation.

If there are levels in creation, each rests on the next beneath it and grows smoothly out of it. Organisms with intelligence, we are told, are descended from organisms that are merely sentient; intelligence is not poured into plants or stones like wine into a jug. All teaching requires a response from the pupil, and the higher the subject matter, the less like conditioning it is, and the more free a response it needs. The Jews must have been an organized society, a people with natural human laws and customs, before they acquired those of Moses – as, indeed, the Pentateuch makes out. A further advance will require further use of our higher faculties, and not just in meeting our needs as individual organisms. The highest uses of intelligence are in social life and altruism.

I said just now that the Church is for Christianity what the Jewish nation is for Judaism. It engages the social part of human nature. But there are differences. The letter to the Hebrews argues at length (chapters 7–10) that Christians have in Christ a high priest of a higher order than the high priests of the Jews: a single eternal priest offering a single perfect sacrifice. The life of the Church includes sharing in Christ's unique ministry and access to Jehovah. It also includes passing on Christianity to children and to non-Christians. The Jews teach their laws and customs to their children, but they do not have a tradition of sending missions to gentiles. The risen Christ, according to the Gospels (Mt. 28.19, Mk. 16.16, Lk. 24.47), told his disciples to preach to everyone. As I said in Chapter 6, belief in Christ is based on testimony, and the giving and receiving of testimony to his resurrection is a special part of a Christian's life as a social being. This is connected with what is perhaps the most important difference. Whereas the Jews thought of their nation as the vine of which they were parts, Christ presents himself as the vine, and this breaks down the distinction beween being a member of a society and being a part of an organism. The life of the Church is not itself the life of Christ, but it aspires to a greater unity than a society united only by laws. A number of different

---

[3] Dante's picture in *Inferno*, Canto 4, is quite orthodox.

[4] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1258–60. Unfortunately there are philosophical difficulties about what makes a closed or unfulfilled conditional statement true.

societies could have the same laws, and in fact at the time of Christ there were gentiles living partly by Jewish laws and sharing the benefits of the Mosaic covenant without belonging to the nation. But the social life of Christians is centred on a single person and has to prove its divine origin by its unity: 'May they all be one as you, Father, are in me and I in you, so that they too may be in us. … I in them and you in me, so that they may be completely one, so that the world may know that you sent me' (Jn. 17.21–3).

These are lofty theological considerations which hardly form a part of daily Christian thinking. But everyone has social roles of various kinds, as a member of a family, an organization, a state. If our nature as a whole is to be brought closer to God's we must have a religious life as social beings and not just as individuals; our religious life must be integrated with our secular in every dimension. In a society which is uniformly Christian and has no religious divisions this goes unnoticed. In our pluralist western societies it is difficult for believers to coordinate the practice of their faith with other social activities, and this probably contributes more to the decline of religious practice than the intellectual difficulties raised by sceptics.

Baptism enables salvation to work through the social part of our nature. What of the altruistic part? It is natural to act to benefit other living organisms: your beloved, your friend, even an animal that awakens your tenderness. People have needs as individuals, but we can also help them as social beings and as altruists, and we can help them as altruists in two distinct ways. Suppose you care for some third person, say your sister. You want her to flourish; and I may help her to flourish not just for her sake but for yours, because *you* care for her. That is one possibility; the second is more complicated. You may care for *me*. You may want me to be an admirable person who acts kindly towards others. I may act kindly towards others, not just for their sake, nor because you care for them, but in order to be the sort of person *you want me* to be.

What theologians call 'charity' is a disposition to act like this with regard to God: to benefit others because God cares for them, and try to be the sort of people God wants us to be for God's sake. Doing this to please a parent or a human friend is natural. Doing it to please God goes beyond what is natural. It involves faith: if I act to please God I must believe God exists. And to place the purposes of God above all others requires the exceptional fortitude that is sometimes called 'hope'.

Here too baptism has a role. In the first place, baptism is 'in the name of Jesus' (Ac. 2.38; 8,16), and the name of Jesus is a particularly prominent feature of early Christian teaching (Ac. 4.16). This prominence is significant because it sounds bizarre to talk of friendship with the Creator. Aristotle dismissed the whole idea of friendship with gods[5] even though he took gods to be part of the natural order. There is no difficulty in being friends with a human being, and many people, the disciples, the Bethany family and others, were friends of Jesus in the most ordinary way. It is because the Church centres on that historical individual, that the altruistic part of the psyche can be engaged. The Christian saints loved Christ, and Jehovah through

[5] *Nicomachean Ethics*, 8, 1158b29–1159a5.

him. Without a human incarnation the idea of acting out of love of God remains, so to speak, up in the sky.

Besides saying that his hearers must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, Peter says in Ac. 2.38 that they will then receive 'the gift of the Holy Spirit'. It is at baptism that what Paul calls indifferently the Spirit of God (Rm. 8.9) and the spirit of Christ (Ga. 4.6) comes to dwell in us. In Chapter 14, I suggested that the Spirit should be thought of as God acting within people in the way in which we ourselves might wish to act within those for whom we feel disinterested concern. Paul at Rm. 8.6–15 speaks of the Spirit as dwelling within us and guiding our behaviour. In Jn. 14, Christ speaks of the Spirit as a spirit of truth (v.16), teaching us everything (v.26). Isaiah 11.2 says the Messiah will have 'the Spirit of Jehovah, the spirit of wisdom and understanding' and Paul is inclined to describe the actions of Christians as works of the Spirit, not of Christ: 1 Cor. 12.4–11, Ga. 5.18–22. When divine life is thought of as eternal bliss, it is spoken of as received through Christ, but when as a source of action here and now, it is spoken of as the Spirit.

How is this presence in us and guidance of the Spirit to be conceived? Christians sometimes speak of the voice of conscience, suggesting that the Spirit is like someone whispering to us except that this divine whispering is done inside the head or even inside the mind. That is to model the presence of the Spirit on schizophrenia, a state in which sufferers do seem to hear voices in their heads. Such a conception leads to a regress. Suppose I am wondering what to do and God whispers to me: should I not still need his help to believe what he said and act upon it? The presence of the Spirit is not well conceived as a sharing of one body by two people holding a conversation, or even as a pair of voices perfectly but precariously in unison. Rather, to receive the gift of the Spirit is to have one's own voice become divine; to see with God's eyes. Christians also say that the Spirit illuminates the intellect and strengthens the will, or that grace is poured into the soul. Here the models implied are forms of physical interaction: stimulating parts of the brain, filling a tank with petrol. If we conceive the guidance of the Spirit in this way we may come to feel it really involves some non-physical manipulation of the brain. In Chapter 13, I rejected the idea that purposive movements generally are caused by non-physical action, and, if that was right, we need not attribute such action to the Holy Spirit.

But however we conceive it, special guidance does seem to be needed to act out of love of God. Pleasing God is a purpose that supervenes on other purposes, not one that competes with them. The devout may set aside time for acts of private devotion; but they ought to do this with regard for other duties and for other people's needs. On a reasonable view, God wants us to be well-coordinated agents, whose activities as individuals, as social beings and as altruists are in harmony. This higher level purpose, together with concern for others because they are of concern to God, introduces an additional complexity into moral deliberation. We need additional wisdom to choose right.

We now have three reasons why Christians might hold that baptism, or being a Christian, is necessary for salvation. First, salvation must have a social dimension: the social part of our life must be transformed, and that requires not just a society

but one that has laws and customs at least as improving as those of Moses. Secondly, we need an object of disinterested love that is divine, and that seems to call for a human being who is an incarnation of the divine. Thirdly, acting out of love for this person requires a supernatural kind of intelligence which Christians describe as the presence in us of God's Spirit, and which they believe we receive in baptism. Are these considerations, if sound, enough to establish the necessity of baptism? Only if we cannot have love for the Creator without accepting an incarnation, and if we cannot have divine guidance without belonging to the Church. I think it would be very temerarious, having regard to people who lived before Christ or who were unable in conscience to accept Christianity, to make these further claims. But rather than pursue that issue, let me turn to my second question: is baptism sufficient for salvation?

It is Christian orthodoxy that anyone, even a newly born baby, who dies after baptism but before committing any sin, will enjoy eternal life. But this belief is linked to the belief that we are naturally immortal, and cannot be supported by the words to Nicodemus at Jn. 3. Jesus says that we cannot enter the kingdom without being born again of water, but not that anyone who is so reborn will enter it. Jesus also speaks of believing in the name of God's only son, and newly baptized infants cannot do that. If they are capable of acting with regard to the rules of the Church, and out of disinterested love of God, it is only in the way in which, as Aristotle puts it, they are capable of becoming generals.[6]

If the Spirit of God dwells within us from when we are baptized, then we may indeed be said to live with divine life. But if continuity extends both through the natural order and from the natural to the supernatural, it may also run from the supernatural to the divine. I modelled the distinction between the merely supernatural and the divine on the distinction beween the life of domesticated plants and that of the gardener. There is discontinuity between the life of domesticated plants and human life because between them we have the life of animals. But there seems to be nothing comparable between the supernatural and the divine. Just as we can suppose that the life of the Jewish nation was supernatural without supposing there was a moment at which it became supernatural, so we may suppose that the life of an individual who wants to please God can become divine without there being a moment at which the Spirit starts to act in that individual. There is a moment at which a visitor crosses the threshold of a house, and having crossed it, the visitor may stay in the house doing nothing but twiddle his thumbs; but this is not an inspiring model for the reception of the Spirit at baptism. Baptism is a rite that has an important place in the society instituted, as Christians believe, for our salvation. But the reception of the Spirit is being animated with a divine breath that blows, we are told in John 3.8, where it pleases.

Paul sees Christian baptism as an image of Christ's burial and resurrection:

> Are you unaware that when we were baptized into Christ Jesus we were baptized into his death? We were buried with him, then, through the baptism to death, so that just as Christ

[6] *De Anima*, 2, 417b31–2.

> was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too shall walk in the newness of life. For if we have become of one nature [*sumphutoi*] with him in the likeness of his death, we shall also be in that of the resurrection (Rm. 6.3–9).

The idea reappears at Colossians 2.12–13, and guided the construction of early baptisteries: descent into the font was an image of Christ's descent into the tomb. But Paul is addressing adults who had asked for baptism, and he presents a sinless life now and sharing in Christ's life with God after death as forming a kind of continuum. I doubt if he meant that receiving baptism in itself makes us 'of one nature' with Christ in the sense that it gives us a share in his divine nature as the second Person of the Trinity. That is traditionally connected more closely with a different sacrament. In John 6, 53–7, Christ says that a necessary condition of having eternal life is eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

# Chapter 20

# The Eucharist

From the earliest times (Acts 2.42; 1 Cor. 11. 17–34) the Eucharist, or the 'breaking of bread', appears at the centre of Christian life. In the first centuries it was treated as a kind of secret for which long preparation was needed and from which the uninitiated were excluded. But though its centrality is still recognized, it is controversial. There has been bitter disagreement among Christians about how it should be understood, and it has been the chief occasion for the charge of superstition levelled by non-Christians against Christians and by some Christians against others.

'By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.' These words are said by Catholic priests at every Mass. In this chapter I shall offer an interpretation of the Eucharist which shows how it might enable people to share in Christ's divine life.[1] There are other interpretations which are better known, but they do not give the Eucharist this function, and I shall argue that charges of superstition arise from concentrating on some of them.

When Christ ate bread and drank wine, the bread and wine were digested and, to put it simply, turned into flesh and blood. The flesh and blood were *his*, that is, they were part of the flesh and blood in his body, alive with his life. According to the doctrine of the Incarnation, they were alive not only with human life but with the divine life of the second person of the Trinity: that is what it means to say that the Son became incarnate.

The institution of the Eucharist is described by three evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke, and by Paul in Corinthians 1.11. Here is Matthew's version:

> While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to the disciples said 'Take, eat. This is my body.' And taking the cup, having given thanks he gave it to them saying: 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the removal of sins' (Mt. 26.26–7).

The disciples will have understood that the bread and wine were going to turn into his body and blood. What else they thought at the time is unclear. Paul, however, in 1 Cor. 10. 16–17 says:

> The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a sharing [*koinonia*] in the blood of Christ? And the bread we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because it is one bread, we many are one body.

---

[1] For a fuller account, see my 'The Real Presence', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 82, no. 962 (April 2001), pp. 161–74.

The understanding of the Eucharist which I propose (and which these words make me think Paul had) is that insofar as we are nourished by the bread and wine consecrated at the Eucharistic meeting we are, so to speak, engrafted into Christ; our flesh and blood are one with his in the literal way in which, throughout his life, the flesh and blood which arose from his food and drink were one with the rest of his body. We share Christ's life in the way we should if, by some feat of perverse surgery, we became Siamese twins with him.

This is a startling doctrine in two ways. First, if I give you food and you eat it, you are not engrafted into me, and it is absurd to pretend that the flesh and blood into which the food turns are mine. It was *my* bread but it is *your* flesh. Gardeners know that grafting is a mechanism by which a cutting can be given the life of a different plant; medicine recognizes blood transfusion as a kind of mechanism for sharing the life of another organism. But eating food given by another organism is not a recognized mechanism. So this doctrine leaves the sharing in Christ's life miraculous or at least mysterious. That the flesh and blood in us are alive with human life is obvious. That they are alive with God's life is not obvious and must be believed, if it is believed at all, as a matter of faith. The same is true, of course, of the flesh that was pierced by nails on Calvary and the blood that flowed out: that they were human was clear; that they were alive with the life of the divine Son had to be taken on faith.

But if Christians have no natural reason for thinking they share Christ's life in receiving the Eucharist, why should they think it at all? Is it not startling that any such idea should cross their minds? An answer to that is provided by Christ's words in John 6: 49–57:

> I am the bread of life … anyone who eats this bread will live for ever, and the bread I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the cosmos. … The person biting into [*trogon*] my flesh and drinking my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. He who bites into my flesh and drinks my blood has life in me and I in him. As the living Father sent me, I too live through the Father, and anyone who bites into me, he too will live through me.

As they stand, these words are puzzling, and we are told that they puzzled hearers at the time. Perhaps the disciples did not have them in mind at the Last Supper. But if later they put them together with the words 'Take, eat. This is my body' and the solemn blessing and breaking, they might well think that Christ's intention was that they should share his life by eating and drinking the consecrated bread and wine. If the resulting flesh and blood are Christ's then we are in him as branches in a vine, and live with his life.

This understanding of the Eucharist would not have seemed strange to the early Fathers. Gregory of Nyssa (writing c.385) says:

> Just as what is destructive when mixed with what is healthy renders useless the whole mixture, so also the immortal body [i.e. Christ's body], coming to be in what receives it, changes the whole to its own nature. … That one body was changed to divine dignity by the indwelling of the Word of God. Rightly, then, we believe that bread which is made

> holy by the words of God is changed into the body of the Word of God. For indeed the bread Christ ate was that one body potentially, and it was made holy when he ate it by the indwelling of the Word who dwelt in his flesh. So whatever it was by which the bread in that body was changed and given divine power, by that same thing the same happens now. By the economy of grace he sows himself into all the faithful, being mixed into their bodies through the flesh which is constituted of wine and bread, so that by union with what is immortal human beings too may share in being indestructible.[2]

Let me summarize this interpretation. When Christ said, 'This is my body', the bread before him underwent a change which was not physical but nevertheless real: when the disciples ate it, the flesh that resulted would be not just theirs but Christ's, alive with the divine life he shared with the Father. The same is true of bread which is consecrated by priests today, but not of bread that has not been consecrated. Receiving the Eucharist requires a choice by the individual receiving it and an act by the community in the person of the priest. This may or may not be a reasonable doctrine, but it coheres with the Christian teaching about salvation through Christ discussed above.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, Thomas à Kempis wrote: 'Beware of a persistent and useless examination of this most deep sacrament, if you do not wish to be immersed in deep doubt. Faith is asked of you, and an honest life, not loftiness of intellect, to plumb the profundities of the mysteries of God.'[3] The warning was timely. In the sixteenth century disputes about the Eucharist broke out which have not been resolved yet.

Some people held that the Eucharist is simply a memorial, as Hobbes said (*Leviathan*, 44), 'to put men in mind of their redemption by the passion of Christ', by a kind of dramatic representation of the events of Christ's last supper and death. This is a reasonable enough view to take in itself, but it amounts to a denial of what is called Christ's 'real presence' in the sacrament. What is a 'real' presence? As I said earlier, reality is not a kind of special property things possess, but things are real unless something special stops them from being real. A real lion is a lion that is not a bronze lion or a toy lion or a picture of a lion, and a real presence is one that is not a representation of a presence: in Aquinas's words, Christ is really present if he is present 'not solely by way of figure or as in a sign' (*ST*, 3a, q. 75 a.1). What difference does it make whether Christ is really present? Clearly if he is present only in that his last supper and death are represented, receiving the Eucharist cannot be expected to give one a share in his life. One might as well suppose that eating popcorn at a showing of the film *Henry V* gives a share in the life of that monarch. It may be added that the leading reformers were not of Hobbes's mind: The Shorter Lutheran Catechism says that the sacrament is 'The true body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ' and Calvin (*Institutio*, 4.17) speaks of 'that sacred communion of his own flesh and blood by which Christ pours his life into us'.[4]

---

[2] *Oratio Catechetica*, ch. 37; Migne, *Greek Fathers*, 45.94 ff. See also Cyril of Jerusalem (c.350) in *Greek Fathers*, 33.1100.

[3] *Imitation of Christ*, 4.18.

[4] These passages are translated in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson, London, Oxford University Press, 1943.

The Catholic Fathers of Trent went, it might be said, to the opposite extreme from Hobbes. They declared in 1551 that, as soon as the priest has finished pronouncing the words of consecration, the bread and wine are no longer present on the altar at all but have turned into the living body and blood of Christ.[5] They probably believed, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church asks Catholics to believe today, that from that moment Christ is present in the way in which he was present in the house at Bethany or on the road to Emmaus; and, moreover, that the whole of him, his whole body and blood, is present both in the chalice and in every consecrated host in the ciborium and in every part into which a host is divided 'by that manner of existing which, even if we can hardly express it in words, we can accept as possible for God by thought illuminated by faith [*possibilem tamen esse Deo cognitione per fidem illustrata assequi possumus*]'.

It is this view which has led Catholics, and anyone else who wants to say that Christ is really present in the Eucharist, to be charged with superstition. Catholics offer the consecrated host worship, and to some Protestants that has seemed like the idolatrous aberrations castigated by Old Testament prophets. They worship a piece of bread! Dr Johnson said correctly that Catholics do not think they are worshipping bread; they think they are worshipping Christ who is present but looks like bread. Many people, however, feel that that is such an unreasonable belief that by itself it makes Catholics superstitious. As I pointed out in Chapter 5, 'superstitious' is a pejorative term applied on various grounds.

I shall not ask whether the Tridentine doctrine is really unreasonable:[6] but, reasonable or not, it goes no distance at all towards explaining how the Eucharist might enable us to share in Christ's life. On the Tridentine view we eat his living flesh in exactly the way in which we eat the living flesh of a live oyster. We drink his blood in the way in which mosquitoes drink ours. But we do not become oysters and mosquitoes do not become human. (In fairness to the Tridentine Fathers it should be said that they were not trying to explain how anyone might become divine. Catholics like to think that Christ is present in their churches in the gracious, intimate way in which the Queen is present in a village hall she comes to visit;[7] and the Tridentine doctrine explains that.)

As I said earlier, the Tridentine doctrine was confused by the English Parliament with a doctrine called 'transubstantiation' which was also accepted by the Tridentine fathers, but is logically distinct from the doctrine just described. The doctrine just described is that the bread and wine turn into Christ's body when the priest consecrates them, not when they are taken and eaten. At the Last Supper they were already Christ's body *before* he ate and drank. The doctrine of Transubstantiation is that the change of bread into Christ's body in the Eucharist is quite different from the change

---

[5] Denzinger, 1640–1.

[6] There is incisive criticism of it, not from a hostile point of view, in P.J. FitzPatrick, *In Breaking of Bread* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[7] 'He lives there very quietly, a prince in incognito', *The Pastoral Sermons of R.A. Knox*, ed. Philip Caraman S.J. (London, Burns & Oates, 1960), p. 219. Cf. p. 228: 'If our Lord consented to be present once a year, at one particular altar in the world, what a condescension it would be.'

that occurred when he ate during his life. When people eat, according to Aquinas and other medieval philosophers, the food does not strictly speaking pass away into flesh; it is merely transformed. The food consisted of a material called Prime Matter which is a substance like gold or water except that, whereas gold and water have certain causal powers – mass, ability to nourish and so on – Prime Matter has no causal powers of its own. Causal powers are forms which Prime Matter can acquire or lose. When we eat bread, the matter of the bread (they thought) loses the form of bread and, in the course of digestion, acquires that of flesh. In the Eucharist, by contrast:

> The whole substance of bread [that is matter and form together] is converted into the whole body of Christ, and the whole substance of the wine into the whole substance of the blood of Christ. Hence this conversion is not formal, but substantial. And it is not included among the species of natural change but can be given the appropriate name of 'transubstantiation' (*ST*, 3a, q. 75 a. 4).

Whereas for Gregory of Nyssa the change of consecrated bread into Christ's body is like what happened when Christ ate, and what is mysterious is that the body into which it turns is Christ's and not just ours, the doctrine of Transubstantiation rejects this model and makes what is exceptional the change itself. If when I ate bread ordinarily the matter of which the bread is composed turned into the matter of which *my* flesh is composed, that would be transubstantiation.

The doctrine of Transubstantiation depends on a conception of Prime Matter and a metaphysics of change which no philosopher today would consider defensible. But it neither explains how the Eucharist gives us a share in Christ's divinity nor, so far as I can see, does it give any support to the Tridentine doctrine of *when* the consecrated bread and wine turn into Christ's body and blood. Hence it has only a historical interest, and does not bear on the general reasonableness of Christian belief.

A cutting that is grafted may not take at all. If it takes it still does not become part of the vine immediately; there must intervene a period during which it draws nourishment from the roots. Christians do not believe that once they have received the Eucharist they are saved once and for all. Christ's own limbs, the Pauline letters say, had the 'fullness' of divine life, but this amounted to two things. First, Christ knew what God wanted him to do and did it with unswerving courage out of love of God; and secondly he rose from the dead. To discern what God wants, to do it for his sake, and to become able to share his life in eternity are a programme to fill the whole of our earthly existence. The traditional belief is that Christ instituted the Eucharist in order that repeated receiving of it should play a central, easy and pleasant part in that process of development.

This may be unreasonable but, if so, it is because it is unreasonable to think that human beings can ever share in the divine nature. And what threatens to make that unreasonable, perhaps surprisingly, is the Judaeo-Christian conception of God. The Greeks and Romans with the idea of an Olympus within the natural order have no difficulty in supposing that some mortals might scale its heights.[8] But the gap

---

[8] Augustus will do it, says Horace, *Odes*, 3.3.9–12; but Aristotle thinks it is something we had better not wish for our friends if we want to retain their friendship (1159a5–8).

between the Creator and creatures seems vast. A seamless piece of texture runs from the Incarnation to the Eucharist; we shall accept it or reject it for the same kinds of reason and in the same way as we accept the doctrine of an intelligent Creator.

# Chapter 21

# ‘The Whole Truth’

Isaiah Berlin was once asked in a television interview his opinion of Christianity. While expressing deep respect for it he said he could not bring himself to believe that anyone was in possession of the whole truth. Imagining themselves to have the whole truth is something with which Christians are often charged, but what does it amount to? They do not pretend, not they, to any truth at all about a great many things, such as openings in chess or life at the bottom of the sea; and they freely admit that even their knowledge of God is severely limited. The charge really comes down to two counts: they think that nobody else possesses any religious truth that they lack; and they will not admit that they themselves have ever been wrong.

These attitudes are not peculiar to Christianity. Stalinist Russia was inclined to claim that every important scientific discovery ever made was made by Communists. Josephus argued that the Jews had little to learn from the Greeks about historiography (*Apion*, 1), and nothing about ethics or political justice: the ‘laws and customs’ given by Moses were what God wanted and could not be improved (*Apion*, 2, 170, 184–90). Similarly today: Jacob Neusner wrote recently, ‘Our religion is built upon the Torah, whole and complete and perfect’.[1] And it is human nature not to admit mistakes. What government ever does? If the Catholic Church, we may feel, were to declare itself fallible it would not be a human society at all. In fact, however, it declares itself infallible. The First Vatican Council (1870–72) announced that when speaking *ex cathedra*, that is, as ‘the pastor and teacher of all Christians’, the Pope ‘enjoys the same infallibility that the Divine Redeemer wished his church to have’. That it possesses the whole truth, apparently, is itself part of the whole truth the Catholic Church possesses. Any claim of this kind, I believe, is bound to be unreasonable, and I shall examine the Catholic claim because it is at once the clearest and the most notorious.

The Catholic Church teaches that its judgments, and the official statements of the Pope as its head, cannot be false or erroneous.[2] This differs from all the religious doctrines we have considered up to now in two ways. First, it is what philosophers call ‘second order’. What does that mean? Roughly speaking, a first order belief or statement is about things, while a second order one is about beliefs or statements

---

[1] ‘The claim of Judaism correctly to interpret scripture in accord with scripture’s own imperatives and narrative’, *New Blackfriars*, vol. 84, no. 986 (April 2003), p. 204.

[2] The first mention of the Church’s ‘infallible judgement’ recorded in Denzinger’s *Enchiridion* is in a letter from Pius IX to the Archbishop of Munchen Freising in 1863; the phrase is repeated in the 1864 *Syllabus of Errors*. The word and doctrine, however, are to be found two hundred years earlier in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, ch. 47; did Pius IX believe that *fas est et ab hoste doceri*?

about things. The following doctrines are first order: the universe exists because God wants it to; there are three persons in God; God became a man; Jesus was conceived without a human father; he died and came back to life; he gives a share in divine life to those who receive the Eucharist. These purport to tell us about people that exist and events that occur independently of anything we say or think. The doctrine of Infallibility, in contrast, concerns what certain people think and say about these things.

The second peculiarity of the doctrine is that it is what is called 'modal'. Roughly speaking a modal statement is one that says, not just that something *is* the case, but that it *must* be or *can* be or *cannot* be. The other doctrines we have seen are not modal: they say not that it is possible that the universe should exist because God wants it to, but that it does; not that it is necessary that Jesus rose from the dead, but that he did. The doctrine of Infallibility, however, *is* modal; it does not say that the Church never in fact makes a mistaken judgment or that the Pope never in fact says anything *ex cathedra* that is false. It says the Church *could not possibly* arrive at a false judgment or the Pope make a false statement.

What is the purpose of this exotic doctrine? Why does the Catholic Church want us to think it true? There seem to be two possibilities. One is that we should think it reasonable to believe things the Church teaches, even though we are not given rational grounds for believing them. The other is that we should think that the Church's teaching something is itself a good ground for believing it.

The difference between these possibilities may be brought out by a parallel. 'Did Desdemona', Othello wonders, 'spend last night with Cassio?' If Desdemona was in Cyprus whereas Cassio was engaged in a sea-fight off Rhodes, that is a good ground for concluding 'No, she didn't'. Being in both places would have been impossible. But if Desdemona says, 'I didn't' that is not a good ground for the conclusion. She could say this and still have spent the night with Cassio. The fact, however, that she is married to Othello gives Othello a reason for taking her word, even though it is not a good ground. Marital trust consists in believing certain things one does not have good grounds for believing. It is rational to trust friends and relations in this way, and perhaps it is rational to trust the Church.

The doctrine of Infallibility, however, does not look like a simple exhortation to have confidence in the Church's pastors and teachers. Rather it seems to provide the major premise of a piece of reasoning. If everything the Church teaches about theology is true, and the Church teaches a certain theological doctrine, it follows logically that the doctrine is true. So if we have reason to believe the general proposition, that everything the Church teaches is true, does not the fact that the Church teaches, say, that Mary was conceived without sin, give us reason to believe that she was conceived without sin? This reasoning is fallacious. It is like the following:

> If God knows something will happen, it must happen.
> God knows everything that will happen.
> So everything that will happen must happen.

We have here what logicians call a mistake of 'scope'. Mistakes of scope are easily shown in modern symbols. There is a visible difference between

$$\Box\,(P \rightarrow Q),$$

which may be read as 'It is a necessary truth that $P$ implies $Q$' – $P$ and $Q$ being any two propositions – and

$$P \rightarrow \Box\, Q,$$

'$P$ implies that it is a necessary truth that $Q$'.

Modern symbolic logic had not got under way at the time of the First Vatican Council. The Council fathers were probably ignorant of the non-modal theorem:

$$((P \,\&\, Q) \rightarrow R) \rightarrow (P \rightarrow (Q \rightarrow R)),$$

which we may read 'If two propositions together imply a third, then the first implies that the second implies the third'. They would not have distinguished this from the dubious modal theorem:

$$((P \,\&\, Q)\,\Box \rightarrow R) \rightarrow (P \rightarrow (Q\,\Box \rightarrow R)),$$

which for present purposes we may read: 'If two propositions together make it reasonable to accept a third, then if the first is true the second by itself makes it reasonable to accept the third.'

I suspect that the doctrine of Infallibility is intended at least to enable Catholics to reason as follows: 'Everything the Church teaches is true. It teaches so-and-so – the Immaculate Conception, for example. So the Immaculate Conception is true.' This is bad reasoning and leads to bad theology.

How it leads to bad theology may be seen if we consider the following argument:

> All the statements in this pamphlet are true.
> That wine counteracts heart disease is a statement in this pamphlet.
> Therefore wine counteracts heart disease.

If the pamphlet in question is issued by the Government after consultation with the best doctors we have some reason to think the first premiss true, and the second we can verify for ourselves. So it would not be irrational to visit the Off Licence. But if it is a serious question whether or not wine counteracts heart disease, nobody would think it a rational way of finding out, to see if there is a Government statement that says it does. A rational way of finding out is to set up a full-scale research programme, with force-feeding of chimpanzees, control groups of medical students and the rest of it. Our confidence in the statement by the Government is rational just insofar as we have reason to believe that such a research programme has in fact been carried out. The Government statement gives no rational grounds for belief apart from this; it cannot be more trustworthy than the work of the scientists on which it is supposed to be based. And if it turned out that the scientists, instead of engaging in genuine medical research, had done a document scan to see if any

Government paper in the past declared that wine counteracts heart disease, it would be completely irrational to accept the conclusion of our argument. For it is not in general a reliable way of discovering whether a regimen is beneficial or harmful, to see if there is some kind of statement saying it is.

The moral is obvious. If the doctrine of infallibility leads theologians to try to answer doctrinal questions by searching through Denzinger's *Enchiridion* or the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* they will have abandoned theology and it will be irrational to believe what they say. It is rational to believe what the Church teaches just so long as there is reason to think that the teaching is arrived at by reliable methods.

What about the Cumaean Sibyl? It is not a reliable method of ascertaining the future to write on leaves and let the wind blow the leaves about. Suppose, however, she predicted the winners of horse-races in this way and her prophecies always turned out true, would it not be rational to believe what she says in spite of the unreliability of her method? It might be rational to believe what she says, but not because she says it; rather, her success rate gives reason to suspect there may be more to her method than appears. But the position with the Church's teaching is not quite like that. We do not know that everything the Church has taught hitherto is true in the way we could know that every past racing prediction by the Sibyl, if she made such predictions, was true.

I said that the reasoning which begins with the premiss 'Everything the Church teaches is true' not only leads to bad theology but is bad in itself. It has the same defect as a fallacy identified by Lewis Carroll and called, in memory of him, the fallacy of 'What the Tortoise said to Achilles'.[3] Carroll imagines the Tortoise setting out the following argument:

(A) Things that are equal to the same are equal to each other.
(B) The two sides of this triangle are things that are equal to the same.
(Z) The two sides of this triangle are equal to each other.

Achilles and the Tortoise agree that someone might accept the premisses but still not accept the conclusion on the grounds that it does not follow from the premisses. And the Tortoise shows that it will not then help to add the further premiss

(C) If A and B are true, Z must be true.

No matter how many such further premisses are added, the recalcitrant reasoner will not be forced to accept (Z). The reason is that what (C) asserts, that the form of the inference is valid, must not itself be a premiss of the inference. That the form of the inference is valid is a kind of presupposition of the argument, not a premiss of it. The same is true of other presuppositions of arguments. In particular, that the premisses are true is a presupposition, not a premiss. The reasoning that starts from 'Everything the Church teaches is true' tries to make a premiss out of what is a kind of presupposition. Everything which anyone states is stated as true. Nobody, unless

[3] *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll* (London, Nonsuch Press, 1939), pp. 1104–8.

trying to set out the Cretan Liar paradox, says, 'What I am saying is false'. Every doctrine of the Church is put forward as true, but that every doctrine of the Church is true ought not itself to be a doctrine of the Church.

Perhaps this criticism of the doctrine of Infallibility may be felt not to do justice to its modal character. For the doctrine is not that everything the church teaches is true, but that the church could not possibly teach anything false. This doctrine is grounded on considerations about the purposes of Christ. 'In order to preserve the Church in the purity of the faith handed on by the Apostles', says the 1999 *Catholic Catechism*, s.889, 'Christ who is the Truth willed to confer on her a share in his infallibility'. This is a perfectly proper theological conjecture which needs to be judged on its own merits like any other. Catholic theologians may argue that it would be unreasonable for Christ to intend the Church to teach if he was not going to ensure that they never taught anything false. But one way of testing this idea is to see if the Church ever *has* taught anything false. Some people think it has, particularly in the area of morals: that it has taught, for instance, that it is morally permissible to keep slaves, or that it is sinful to join in prayer with non-Catholics.

It may be that the Church has never taught anything false. Suppose, however, that we are not sure whether something it has taught is false or not. The more reason we have for thinking this particular thing false, the more reason we have for thinking false the doctrine of Infallibility. The reasons for doubting the suspect doctrine have to be weighed against the reasons for accepting the doctrine of Infallibility; we cannot automatically give the latter precedence over the former. The position is similar to that over miracles. People sometimes argue that God would never allow the laws of nature which he himself instituted to be violated by miracles; but their arguments have to be weighed against the evidence that miracles have in fact occurred. We can no more make it a fundamental principle that the Church cannot err than we can make it a fundamental principle that miracles cannot happen.

As a matter of fact it is not irrational to commission people to teach unless you can ensure they will never teach anything false; we do it all the time. We hope the teachers we appoint will teach nothing false, just as we hope they will not misbehave; but unless all human behaviour is determined in the billiard ball fashion, it is impossible to be sure a teacher will never stray from the path of virtue and outside Western Europe attaining truth about God and about good and evil would not normally be thought independent of good character and even sanctity. Jews look for truth to humble, devout rabbis, Hindus and Buddhists to what it is natural to describe as holy men. The doctrine of Infallibility depends on the seventeenth-century conception of truth described in Chapter 10. Mirrors have no moral qualities. If truth consists in exact mirroring and belief has no implications for behaviour, the Church's teachers can be as depraved as you like: all that is needed to preclude error is that Christ should keep their minds smooth and well polished.

Classical Latin contains no such words as *fallibilis* or *infallibilis*, but Victorian England was always being offered 'infallible' remedies for this or that. Recourse to the Holy Office was then, as recourse to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is now, an infallible means of resolving controversies: whatever question you put you can be sure of a definite answer. But what people need is truth, and if God

exists, truth about him consists not in a mechanical mirroring, but in interpersonal understanding, a sympathetic and progressively deepening grasp of his purposes. Infallibility is a Victorian extra, an additional protection with which one could dispense, like galoshes.

# Chapter 22

# Religion and Morality

For the Old Testament Jews religion, morality and political organization were all the same thing. The Torah taught them about God, taught them what is right and what wrong, and gave them a code of laws for their state. The Koran similarly offers a system of life in which worship, ethics, and civil obligations are all homogenized. But in Ancient Greece the three were quite separate. The Homeric gods take vengeance for injuries to themselves, and the priests of a particular god or goddess can tell people what to do to placate him or her. But they are not concerned with human behaviour generally. This disengagement reaches its limits with Epicureanism. The divine nature, says Lucretius (1.47–8), 'strong in its own resources, needing nothing from us, is neither won by merit nor touched by anger'. And in the classical period the laws of states were contrasted with what is morally right or wrong. Laws are essentially general, they are made up by human beings and they vary from society to society; what is right or wrong is so whether people think it is or not, but cannot be captured in any general rule, since it depends on the circumstances of the time and place. Christians, like Jews and Moslems, think that their religion has the last word on morality. How reasonable is that belief? How are religion and morality related?

People think they know what religion is until they try to define it, and the same is true of morality. In ordinary speech (at least when the language is English) morality is connected with sex. Immorality is having sex with people with whom you shouldn't, and a moral man is one who refrains from this himself and denounces it in others. No doubt this notion is too narrow. But does any clear concept lie behind our inclination to distinguish what is morally good or right from what is good or right in other ways?

We have a notion of the practical according to which it is a practical question what it would be best to do. The practically right course may be contrasted with the course that is best for achieving some ulterior purpose. It is a technical question how to drive a tunnel through a mountain or grow a black tulip, a practical question whether to try to do these things at all. We might also distinguish what is practically advantageous or useful from what is aesthetically pleasing. Philosophers sometimes ask whether morality is anything more than enlightened self-interest. If this is to be a genuine question there must at least be a conceptual difference between the moral and the merely practical. It is only if 'moral' means something different from 'practical' that we can advance it as a serious thesis that what is morally right or best is simply what is practically right and best. Some societies have no word to distinguish what is morally good from what is good in some other way, and these societies may be suspected of having no inkling of morality. Sin is either the same

as moral evil or a special kind of moral evil, and early missionaries to the Marquesas reported with dismay that they had found a society that lacked any notion of sin. It is sometimes said that a society has morals only when it acquires the notion of guilt as distinct from shame.[1]

The distinction between the three kinds of rational motivation provides a way of capturing the notion of morality. It is not morally wrong, though it may be practically disadvantageous, to do what is contrary to your interests as an intelligent organism. A decision on what course is best for you as an intelligent organism is not a moral decision. But it can be morally wrong to act against the rules of your society or to do what is harmful to another individual. A circumstance which makes an act socially impermissible is a moral reason against it, and so is one that makes it injurious or unkind. The balancing of such reasons against one another and against considerations of self-interest is moral deliberation. So the moral is that part of the practical which involves social life and the interests of other organisms.

If that is right, religion impinges on morality in at least three ways. First, as I said in Chapter 12, it supplies people with new purposes. Those who believe in Zeus or Poseidon will offer sacrifices in order to please them. At Leviticus 19.18 the Jews are told, 'you must love your neighbour as yourself', and Jews may have tried to help their neighbours, not only out of concern for those neighbours themselves, but to please Jehovah. Christians who believe that God created the universe partly in order that intelligent organisms might share in his life may act in order to fulfil this design; they might receive the Eucharist, for instance, not just in order to obtain eternal life, but out of love for the God who wants them to obtain it.

Secondly, the Torah says that Jehovah gave the Jews rules of behaviour, and Christianity preserves some of these rules and adds others. By living with regard for such rules, Jews share in the life of the Jewish nation and Christians in the life of the Church; but they also help people to make correct moral choices. They guide us when we have to balance the interests of other people against one another and against our own interests as individuals; they also guide us when we have to balance social obligations, including religious duties, against the needs of individuals for whom we have concern. This point does not apply, of course, to religions which have nothing to say about morals.

Thirdly, Christians talk of conscience and grace. Different denominations have slightly different teaching about these things, but the underlying idea is that God helps individuals to discern what is morally best, that this one-to-one tuition complements the help provided by general rules. No doubt self-deception is possible here: people can think God is speaking to them when he is not, especially if they have the schizophrenic model for the guidance of the Spirit. But participation in God's life, if it is to have any practical consequences, must carry with it some share in the divine wisdom.

Religion is related to morality in these three ways: religious belief gives people special moral aims, organized religion supplies rules of conduct, and if certain reli-

---

[1] Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, University of California Press 1993, contains a helpful discussion of this with bibliography.

gious beliefs are correct, individuals have divine help in their moral deliberations. But we saw that some religions claim to have the last word on moral questions; nothing that has been said yet shows whether or not this is reasonable.

There are some matters concerning which almost every society has rules and customs: injuries done by one member of the society to another, sexual relations, and the treatment of the young and the old. But even if every nation or tribe has some set of rules about these things, there is no set that every tribe or nation has. Good rules and customs should help people to prosper as individuals, enjoy social life and benefit other persons for whom they have concern. But conditions vary, and what is best at one time or place is unlikely to be best at another. What is good for an agricultural society may be bad for an industrial; what suits a tribe in the snow-bound north of Canada may not suit a tribe in the Arabian desert. The biological facts about sex and reproduction are the same for all human beings, but they do not of themselves dictate any particular rules about incest, endogamy, exogamy, polygamy, polyandry or homosexuality, and nor does the altruistic principle that we ought not to cause people harm or distress. Religious teachers, however, often say that there are rules on these matters laid down by God himself which are immutable and admit of no exceptions, 'moral absolutes' as they are sometimes called. Obeying these laws is right always and for everyone and breaking them is wrong always and for everyone. In recent years the Catholic Church has insisted strongly on this. The encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (1993)[2] draws a distinction between laws which enjoin something, for instance to honour parents or to go to church on Sunday, and laws which forbid something, like murder or eating meat on Friday.

> In the case of the positive moral precepts [the encyclical says] prudence always has the task of verifying that they apply in a specific situation, for instance in view of other duties which may be more important or urgent. But the negative moral precepts, those prohibiting certain concrete actions or kinds of behaviour as intrinsically evil, do not allow for any legitimate exception (S.67).

The prohibition of meat on Friday would not fall into this class, because it is a mere rule of discipline, but the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, s.1756, gives as examples of 'acts which in and of themselves, independently of circumstances and intentions are always gravely illicit … blasphemy and perjury, murder and adultery' and the encyclical takes other examples from the Second Vatican Council, including abortion and slavery.

If these acts are forbidden by God, are they wrong because he forbids them, or does he forbid them because they are wrong? Locke took the former view. The only thing, he thought, which is good in itself is happiness or pleasure, and the only thing evil in itself is unhappiness or pain. Actions are good or bad according as they lead to happiness or misery; and they are *morally* good or right if they lead to happiness as a reward for obedience to some law, and morally wrong or evil if they lead to misery as a punishment for law-breaking:

---

[2] English translation, London, Catholic Truth Society, 1993.

> Morally good and evil is only the conformity or disagreement of our voluntary actions to some law, whereby good or evil is drawn on us from the will and power of the law-maker (*Essay*, 2.28.6).

Among laws which bring rewards and punishments the most important is Divine law:

> that Law which God has set to the actions of men, whether promulgated to them by the light of nature or the voice of revelation [i.e. the Old Testament]. That God has given us a rule whereby men should govern themselves, I think there is nobody so brutish as to deny. He has a right to do it, we are his creatures: he has goodness and wisdom to direct our actions to that which is best: and he has the power to enforce it by rewards and punishments of infinite weight and duration in another life (*Essay*, 2.28.8).

Locke, then, held that what makes an action wrong is its bringing down on the agent suffering that is specially inflicted by God and is not simply, as he puts it, 'the natural produce of the action itself' (2.28.6). Modern Catholic theologians take the opposite view. God forbids actions, they think, because the actions are evil in themselves. Their badness does not consist in contravening a rule or drawing down on us weighty punishments; it is an intrinsic property of them. *Veritatis Splendor* means 'the splendour of truth' and from the many references to truth in the encyclical of that name it is clear that the authors think that evil must be an intrinsic property of blasphemy or adultery if the statement that these acts are evil is to be objectively true. If evil does not belong to them in themselves, the statement that they are evil can be no more than an expression of aversion or distaste on the part of the speaker; at best it can be true only for him or her; 'each individual is faced only with his own truth' (s.32).

The Catholic Church, then, teaches that there are exceptionless moral rules, and that goodness and badness are intrinsic properties of kinds of act. These are not religious but philosophical doctrines, and I do not think any philosopher today who is not teaching under the eye of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith would accept them. It is they more than anything else which give Catholic moral teaching the appearance of being unreasonable.

But perhaps the Vatican theologians are right and the philosophical world generally is wrong. I shall now say why I think this is not the case.

To start with moral absolutes: Plato said:

> Law can never capture in one prescription what is best and most right for everyone. The dissimilarities between men and between their actions and the fact that human affairs are pretty well always changing make it impossible for any skill whatever to lay down anything simple in connection with anything that will hold for all cases and at all times (*Statesman*, 294 a–b).

If a doctor were going away for a long time, he continues, he might think his patients would not remember his precepts, and might write them down. But, he asks, if he came back early and found changed circumstances had unexpectedly made his patients better,

> would he hold rigidly that he must not prescribe anything different from his old rules and his patients must not venture to go against what he had written? Would that not be extremely ridiculous? (295 c–e)

Aristotle agrees. In matters of conduct,

> Nothing is fixed any more than in medicine. … The agents themselves must decide in each case as it comes, just as must doctors and steersmen (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1, 1104a3–10).

One might have thought that this is so obvious that no one would ever question it. People without philosophical training, however, are apt to be confused by philosophical terms like 'absolute' and 'relative' and 'subjective' and 'objective'. They hear philosophers describe as subjectivism or relativism the would-be irenic but actually silly opinion that what makes an action right is the agent's honestly thinking it right; and they confuse this with two doctrines which are almost self-evident. First, 'good' and 'bad' are relative terms. What is good or bad must be good or bad *for* some beneficiary or *for* some purpose. Socrates is supposed to have said: 'If you are asking me whether I know anything good which is not good *for* anything, I neither know nor wish to know' (Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 3.8.3; cf. 4.4.7–9). Secondly, as Plato took pains to insist,[3] a particular action is right or wrong only in relation to the circumstances in which it is performed. The same judicial award, for example which is just in one case will be unjust in another; the same movement which is courageous in one situation will be cowardly in another. One inducement, then, to accept moral absolutes is a failure to distinguish different ways in which good and evil may be thought relative. Secondly, and as I said in Chapter 8, the Stoics introduced the idea of natural law. The early Christians, who already had the Jewish respect for the laws in the Old Testament, equated the natural law with the law given by God. Protestant philosophers of the Enlightenment, like Grotius, Locke and Puffendorf, simply followed in their steps, as do Vatican theologians still.

But is it true that there are no species of action that are always wrong? There are several things which may give rise to belief that there are. First, there are what may be called defeasible misdeeds. Murder is an example. What is murder? Not just killing someone, or even killing someone intentionally. What, then, has to be added to killing someone intentionally to make it murder? I think nothing has to be added to make it murder, but something has to be added to prevent it from being murder. If I kill someone intentionally, not by accident or inadvertence, then that is murder unless I can show some reason to the contrary. A similar account could be given of lying. Lying is not just saying something false, or even saying something you do not believe true with the intention of deceiving; but saying something you don't think true with the intention of deceiving is lying unless you can give some reason for saying it is not. Cruelty too: causing pain or suffering is cruel unless there is some reason to think it not. This notion of a description that applies unless there is reason to think otherwise is quite familiar in philosophy. Voluntariness is like that: if I do

[3] For example at *Republic*, 5 479a.

something knowingly I do it voluntarily, of my own free will, unless there are grounds for thinking otherwise. Similarly knowledge: if you think something is the case, and it is, I say you *know* it unless there is some special reason for thinking your true belief does *not* amount to knowledge.

If murder, lying and cruelty are to be defined in this way, they are not definite species of acts, and hence not examples of acts that are always, in all circumstances, wrong. Intentional killing, saying something with intent to deceive, causing pain and suffering, can be legitimate in some circumstances. But we can consciously or unconsciously build wrongness into them. We can say that murder is *wrongful* killing, that lying is deceiving people about matters *about which they have a right to the truth* from you, that cruelty is causing pain or suffering *without justification*. In that case we can say they are always wrong, but saying that wrongful killing, for example, is always wrong is not announcing a moral absolute but uttering a harmless tautology.

Secondly, there are actions which are *pro tanto* bad. Any act which causes harm or pain to another sentient being is *pro tanto*, to that extent, unkind. As altruistic agents we have a reason to refrain from it. The same is true even of any act which thwarts another agent's will. And since it is in our interest to be correctly informed about matters of practical importance to us, matters that give us reasons to act, misinforming or deceiving people is unkind. But while these acts are, as such, bad, we often have overriding reasons to do them, and so there will be circumstances in which they are not wrong absolutely. Some acts which may seem at first to be always wrong absolutely are in fact only *pro tanto* bad, but they seem wrong absolutely either because they are associated with bad institutions and practices or because it is hard to imagine circumstances in which they might be justified. Suppose rape is defined as having intercourse with a woman against her will, and overcoming her resistance by force. The definition includes acting against the woman's will and constraining her, so rape is *pro tanto* bad by definition. There is no known condition of mental or physical ill-health which would justify this as there are conditions which, doctors believe, justify electric shock treatment. So we are inclined to say it is always absolutely wrong. But we are influenced by knowing that rape is usually done for the sake of sexual gratification, and that in times of war rape is used as an instrument of terror and revenge.

In these cases the belief that an act is always wrong rests on a judgment that it is not justified by a particular purpose or type of reason. This judgment can be quite general. We may think that it is never right to force intercourse on a person purely for sexual gratification, or to castrate a man merely in order to have an attendant on women who cannot sleep with them. But sometimes these judgments are not strictly universal but offered only as holding for the most part. Even when they are universal, they may be controversial. Charles I held that it is never right to kill a person simply for holding particular religious beliefs. But his Parliaments disagreed, and so did his predecessors: James I, Elizabeth I and of course Mary Tudor all burnt people for heresy. Even if some of these judgments are universal and non-controversial, still they do not provide moral absolutes. For they do not concern simply the thing done; they also concern the reasons and purposes for which it is done. The controversial

claim is that there are actions always wrong independently of the agent's reasons and purposes.

So much on moral absolutes. The idea that rightness and wrongness are intrinsic properties of actions is supported, as I said on p. 6, by the belief that truth is accurate mirroring. This belief is held both by Christian theologians and by their critics. The difference is that the critics say goodness and badness are not mirrorable properties of actions, and infer that moral teaching cannot, strictly speaking, be true or false; whereas the theologians hold that Christian moral teaching is true, and therefore try to maintain that good and evil are mirrorable properties of actions which reason discerns.

In fact Othello's belief that it was right to kill Desdemona was correct if it was right for him to kill her, and incorrect if it was wrong for him to kill her; our belief that it was wrong for him to kill her is correct if it was wrong, and incorrect if it was right. That is obvious, and that is all that needs to be said.

The theologians and their critics go wrong in wanting to ask, 'But what makes it *true* that it was wrong for him to kill her? What makes badness *true* of his action?' These questions are improper because wrongness and badness are not things that can themselves be true or false of anything. Not because they are somehow bogus, 'queer' properties as J.L. Mackie called them in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*,[4] but because they are analogous to truth and falsehood.

How do truth and falsehood get a footing in speech? The simplest ways of speaking truly or falsely are to say that one thing *is* another, or that one thing *is not* another. To take an example from Plato (from whose dialogue the *Sophist* this account derives), I may say that Theaetetus is seated or that he is not seated. In the first case I *assert* something of Theaetetus, I say that something is *true of* him, in the second I *deny* that same thing of him, I say it is *false of* him, I say that he *lacks* a property (the seated position, the property of being seated) which in the first case I say he *has*. We speak truly when we assert of things what is true of them, or deny of things what is false of them; we speak falsely if we do the reverse, saying that something *is* what it *is not* or that something *lacks* a property that it *has*.

Theaetetus can become seated as well as be seated; the seated position can be acquired or lost; and as it can be true or false of him that he has it, so it can be good or bad for him to acquire it.[5] If it is good for him to acquire it, it is right for him to sit down, and we speak rightly in saying: 'It would be good if Theaeteus were to become seated; he ought to sit down.' If it would be bad for him to acquire it – obviously that depends on the circumstances; in some circumstances it is good to sit, in others bad – then it would be wrong for him to seat himself and we should advise wrongly in saying 'Sit down, Theaetetus'. But just as we cannot ask what it is for being seated to be true of Theaetetus – it is true of him if he *is* seated, if he *has* the posture, but being and having are not relations between a thing and what it is or has

---

[4] London, Penguin, 1977.

[5] It can be good in various ways: pleasant for him if he is tired, customary if he is in a dentist's waiting room, beneficial to me if I am sitting behind him at the theatre; for simplicity we may imagine the first case.

– so we cannot ask what it is for becoming seated to be good for him: neither being true nor being good are themselves things that are good or true.

The analogy between goodness and truth is hard to see because thinking something good is a matter not so much of belief as of desire. Thinking it would be good to bring something about is wanting to bring it about, and thinking it would be bad is being averse to bringing it about and trying not to. Desire and aversion can be strong or weak, but we find it hard to see how they can be correct or incorrect. If thinking good is really wanting, then (we feel) it is not thought at all but some kind of blind impulse; if it is to be correct or incorrect, it must be a kind of belief, the belief that some action or outcome has the property of being good or right.

That is because we continue to model all thinking on mirroring or depicting, and desire conforms to the model less well than belief. But in fact belief does not fit it either: we have negative beliefs, beliefs that something is not the case, whereas we have no negative pictures. And desire and aversion are genuine modes of thought. We are aware of possible outcomes as things we desire or fear no less than we are aware of properties as had or lacked. Once this is recognized desire and aversion can be seen as right or wrong and the analogy is marked. Desiring what is good is rightly desiring, and being averse to what is bad is being rightly averse. 'Right' and 'true' are different words, but neither kind of correctness is more objective than the other.

Could there be one without the other? Could there be just belief that things are or are not the case, and could thinking things good or bad, right or wrong, be a kind of illusion? Not if the account of thought advocated in Chapter 12 is correct. I identified belief that something is the case with wanting to act, or fearing to act, for the reason that it is the case. Believing and wanting are two aspects of a single, seamless exercise of thought.

Medieval philosophers held that the notions of being, truth and goodness form a special group apart from other concepts, and if later theologians had developed this idea instead of being swept away by the tide of fashionable seventeenth-century thought they would have been better able to defend the objectivity of good and evil.

It is not reasonable to hold that there are moral absolutes or that goodness and badness are intrinsic properties of actions. So long, however, as religious leaders recognize this, there is no reason why they should not propose rules for their own followers, or try to influence legislation affecting other people in their society. On the contrary, taking part in social life consists not in obeying laws blindly but in thinking them good or trying to change them to fit new circumstances and new insights. As I said, we can raise general questions about morals: is it *ever* right to do something simply for a particular reason or purpose? Should considerations of one particular kind *always* carry more weight than considerations of another? It is hard to secure unanimity on such questions, but we can argue rationally about them, and good arguments work their way through to legislation and practice: for example those of William Thompson[6] and John Stuart Mill[7] in favour of women's rights.

---

[6] *Appeal of one Half of the Human Race* [1825] (London, Virago, 1983).

[7] *The Subjection of Women* [1869], in *On Liberty* (London, Oxford University Press, 1960).

Arguments for changing a society's rules or customs are strengthened by business-like enquiries and studies. Responsible governments commission such investigations; religious bodies are well able to do the same, and ought to be less influenced than governments by economic expediency.

According to Chapter 21, however, religious teachers cannot count on more infallibility than anyone else. Each part of the psyche, as I said, has its own emotions. As social beings, when someone breaks the rules of our society we are outraged; when we ourselves do, like Godwin's Mr Falkner,[8] we feel shame and fear ostracism. This is particularly true of rules concerning sex and property, which themselves attract social emotions. Sexual desire in itself is not a social feeling; it is something we experience as individual organisms. But the sexual behaviour of human beings is not motivated just by sexual desire. Equally important are feelings of disinterested concern for the beloved and the social feelings of desire for conquest, desire for the esteem of one's peers and fear of ridicule. But the horror we feel at deviations from our society's sexual rules make it hard to believe that the deviant are moved by anything but lust or can be held in check by anything but iron will-power, asceticism and dread of punishment. Religious teachers are at least as attached to the customs of their society as sceptics, and therefore as liable to have their judgment clouded by turbulent social emotions.

Something similar happens in the economic sphere. Money is certainly a means of meeting our needs as individuals, of getting food and shelter. But in affluent societies people crave it not just for these purposes but because it brings honour and influence, whereas poverty and shabbiness are shameful. Social emotions drive people to accumulate, and success generates arrogance in those who succeed and bitter envy in those who do not, even when they are amply provided with necessities. Among the poor, peer pressure as much as cold or hunger leads to delinquency. But religious teachers no less than laissez-faire liberals are inclined to think that individual need and greed are the great motives to lawbreaking and that laziness rather than fear of rejection by their friends keeps people from taking certain kinds of legitimate work. Good behaviour is attributed solely to slightly obscure virtues of honesty and industry.

That having been admitted, it should also be said that religious bodies draw strength from being themselves societies, something that totalitarian regimes recognized clearly enough during the twentieth century. Their own loyalties and traditions fortify them against the pressures of the civil societies to which they belong – witness the history of the Jews. Critics of religion sometimes suggest that the world would be better off if Christianity had never existed. I do not think it possible to form any comprehensive idea of what the world would be like if Christianity had not existed. But I feel sure that, wherever there was civilization, social inequality and coercive force, there would be slavery.

Civilized societies have always produced people who without religious beliefs have cherished high ideals, and worked courageously and disinterestedly for those

---

[8] William Godwin, *Things as they are* or *The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, London 1794.

less privileged; and these humanitarians often like to think that their attitudes are gradually gaining ground and will result at last in a truly humane and happy world that is wholly secular, resting on reason and unbuttressed by hopes or fears concerning the supernatural. But this optimism overlooks two things: the hold on most members of the middle classes of the social emotions I have mentioned, especially desire for status and fear of losing it; and the power which advances in weaponry and techniques of surveillance put in the hands of governments. There is no need now for religion in order to make the lower classes acquiesce in social inequality; what hope have they of withstanding modern armed forces and police? But something is needed to extend beyond what is natural the proportion of privileged people willing to risk their privileges and style of life. Poets say that there is nothing stronger than true love. Perhaps nothing is stronger than the social emotions except true love of God.

The subject of this book is being reasonable about religion. It is not the reasonableness of religion, still less the reasonableness of Christianity. If what I said in Chapter 14 about the character of religious beliefs is correct, and they are like belief in one's spouse, it is not within the competence of philosophy to pronounce on them. Locke wrote a book entitled *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), but it was a work rather of theology than of philosophy, and he was trying to show, not that it is reasonable to be a Christian, but that it is more reasonable to believe Christ was the Messiah than that he was God incarnate. It is for ordinary, practical people to decide whether religious beliefs and practices are reasonable. A philosopher may feel disinterested concern for his contemporaries and write a book to put them right on this subject. J.L. Mackie[9] and Antony Flew[10] have written urging that theism is unreasonable, while many believing philosophers and theologians have argued that it is reasonable. Their books are themselves attempts to be reasonable about religion, and my concern has been chiefly with their assumptions and with the broader issue whether religion should be regarded as a lingering on of primitive darkness or an infallible source of light. In Chapters 14 to 20 I considered how the most characteristic doctrines of religion – those concerned with creation and salvation – might be freed from outdated philosophy and gross internal tensions. But elsewhere I have stuck to identifying preconceptions which make it hard to be reasonable about religion and trying to correct them.

And if they are corrected, what of practical significance emerges? People in primitive societies are not in general curious about natural phenomena. Nor do they have religion. They often have a respect for nature, they often have a lively imagination and like making up bizarre stories. But they are not invariably demon-ridden and they tend to be agnostic about matters beyond their own observation and that of people they know.

---

[9] *The Miracle of Theism* (London, Oxford University Press, 1982).
[10] *The Presumption of Atheism* (London, 1976).

In the fifth century BC, a civilized nation in Palestine, the Jews, had a more or less autonomous theocracy. Worship was paid in a handsome temple to an unseen being called Jehovah who was conceived both as the source of the whole natural order and as the teacher, cultivator and special friend of one particular part of that order, the Jewish race. The priests of this being were the rulers of the people, and the laws and customs they maintained were supposed to have been given by him.

At about the same time in Greece, philosophy got under way. People uninfluenced by Greek philosophy think that things are or are not the case and that deeds should or should not be done; but even if they are highly civilized they have no general ideas of truth or goodness, nor any general ideas of intellect, belief or desire. Greek philosophers called attention to these things, persuaded the Greeks that we are intellectual beings, and applied themselves to explaining natural phenomena and the facts of mathematics.

In the third century BC, Jews started leaving Palestine (some had never returned from captivities elsewhere) and settling in cities first throughout the former empire of Alexander, and later throughout the western empire of Rome. They retained Jewish customs, and so even if they acquainted themselves with Greek thought they formed small communities separate from the surrounding population, which were later to be seedbeds for Christianity.

The Jews provide us with our concept of religion, the Greeks with our idea of reason. The two came together in the civilization of the Roman Empire. This civilization after the collapse of the Empire's political organization was transmitted by Christian rulers and scholars without any real discontinuity to modern Europe. From the sixteenth century it became globalized. It is globalized now inasmuch as civilized non-European countries use European science, medicine and technology and have adopted European clothes and a more or less European style of life, though not all have adopted the Greek concept of reason or the Jewish concept of religion.

Philosophy and the worship of Jehovah nevertheless are the twin pillars on which this globalized civilization was erected. Perhaps that is a historical accident. There is plenty of evidence, documentary and archaeological, for what happened to the Greeks and the Jews from the fifth century onwards, and historians are therefore well placed to debate how accidental it all was; but the fact is plain. Today people are asking whether both pillars are still necessary. Eastern monotheism, it might be suggested, has discarded the Greek concept of reason (though it cherished it into the Middle Ages); western secular humanism rejects the worship of Jehovah.

The question whether we need both pillars is not purely academic; it is one of practical importance, even urgency. But how is it to be tackled? The question how it should be tackled is not separate from the question itself. This book is written on the assumption that at least we need the pillar of reason; it assumes that we can, and should, be reasonable about religion. That assumption is compatible with the conclusion that we need both pillars, and my personal opinion is that we do. Pure reason is not strong enough to stand indefinitely against the pressures of society, or sustain us through poverty, loneliness and suffering. I think the natural order exists because God wants it to, and that, life after death apart, we can cope with the complexities of civilized life only in union with him.

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Bibliography


Alston, William P., 'Religion', in Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 8 vols, London and New York: Macmillan, 1967, vol. 7.

Baynes, N.H., *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church* (1921), 1972.

Berlin, Isaiah, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958.

Bettenson, Henry (ed.), *Documents of the Christian Church*, London: Oxford University Press, 1943.

Billy, Dennis, 'The Call to Holy Rest', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 82, no. 962 (April 2001), 182–7.

Bird, Alexander, *The Philosophy of Science*, London: University College, 1998.

Brébeuf, Jean de, *Travels and Sufferings of Father Jean de Brébeuf*, tr. Theodore Besterman, London: Golden Cockerel Press, 1938.

Broderick, J., *Saint Francis Xavier*, London: Burns Oates, 1951.

Butler, Samuel, *Erewhon* (1872), London: Jonathan Cape, 1921.

Butler, Samuel, *Erewhon Revisited* (1901), London: Jonathan Cape, 1926.

Cantor, G., *Contributions to the Founding of the Theory of Transfinite Numbers* (1895–7), New York: Dover, 1955.

Carroll, Lewis [C.L. Dodgson], 'What the Tortoise said to Achilles' (1895), *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll*, London: Nonsuch Press, 1939.

Carruthers, Peter, *Introducing Persons*, London: Routledge, 1986.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999.

Charlton, William, *The Analytic Ambition*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991.

Charlton, William, *The Physical, the Natural and the Supernatural*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1998.

Charlton, William, 'The Real Presence', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 82, no. 962 (April 2001), 161–74.

Churchland, Paul, *Matter and Consciousness*, Cambridge, MA: Bradford Books, 1984.

Collingwood, R.G., *The Principles of Art*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964.

Crawley, A.E., *The Idea of the Soul*, London: Adam and Charles Black, 1909.

Davidson, Donald, *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.

Dening, Greg, *Islands and Beaches, Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas 1774–1880*, Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1980.

Dennett, D.C., *Brainstorms* (1978) Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981.

Denzinger, H. and A. Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1976.

Descartes, *Oeuvres*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, Paris: Vrin, 1964–74.

Diaz, Bernal, *The Conquest of New Spain* (1576), tr. J.M. Cohn, London: Folio Society, 1974.
Dodds, E.R., *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951.
Dodds, E.R., *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, Cambridge University Press, 1965.
Douglas, Mary, *Purity and Danger*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.
Duffy, Eamon, *The Stripping of the Altars*, Yale University Press, 1992.
Dupuis, Jacques, *Christianity and the Religions* (2001), tr. Phillip Berryman, New York: Orbis, 2003.
Durkheim, Émile, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), tr. J.W. Swain, London: George Allen and Unwin.
*Essays on Davidson, Actions and Events*, ed. B. Vermazen and B. Merill Hintikka, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.
Evans-Pritchard, E.E., *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (1937), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950.
Evans-Pritchard, E.E., *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965.
FitzPatrick, P.J., *In Breaking of Bread*, Cambridge University Press, 1993.
Fletcher, Richard, *The Conversion of Europe from Paganism to Christianity 371–1286 AD* (1997), London: Fontana, 1998.
Flint, Valerie, *The Rise of Magic in Early Mediaeval Europe*, Princeton University Press, 1991.
Flint, Valerie and Richard Gordon, Georg Luck and Daniel Ogden, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe, Volume 2, Ancient Greece and Rome*, London: Athlone Press, 1999.
Flew, Antony, *The Presumption of Atheism*, London: Elek, 1976.
Fortune, R.F. *Sorcerers of Dobu* (1932), New York: Dutton, 1963.
Frazer, James, *The Dying God* [*The Golden Bough*, Part III] (1911), London: Macmillan, 1919.
Gibbon, Edward, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1776.
Godwin, William, *Things as they are* or *The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, London: 1794.
Grayling, A.C., *What is Good?*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003.
Harré, Rom, *The Principles of Scientific Thinking*, London: Macmillan, 1970.
Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan* (1651), ed. Michael Oakeshott, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
Hume, David, *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), in *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, vol. 2, London, 1772.
Hume, David, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946.
Hume, David, *An Abstract of a Book lately published entitled A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740), in *Hume:Theory of Knowledge*, ed. D.C. Yalden-Thomson, Edinburgh: Nelson, 1951.
Hume, David, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (c.1751), in *Hume on Religion*, ed. Richard Wollheim, London and Glasgow: Collins, 1968.

James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), London: Longmans Green, 1928.
Josephus, *Works*, Loeb Library, London: Heinemann, 1926.
Journel, M.J. Rouët de, *Enchiridion Patristicum*, Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1951.
Kenny, Anthony, 'Mental Health in Plato's Republic', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1969.
Kenny, Anthony, 'Seven concepts of creation', *Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 78 (2004), 81–92.
Kilby, Karen, 'Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 81, no. 956 (October 2000), 432–45.
Knox, R.A., *The Pastoral Sermons of R.A. Knox*, ed. Philip Caraman, London: Burns & Oates, 1960.
Kripke, Saul, *Naming and Necessity*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980.
Lane Fox, Robin, *Pagans and Christians* (1986), New York: Knopf, 1987.
Lane Fox, Robin, *The Unauthorized Version*, London: Penguin, 1992.
Lash, Nicholas, *The Beginning and End of Religion*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
*Laxdaela Saga*, tr. Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson, London: Folio Society 1975.
Lewis, C.S., *Miracles* (1947), Glasgow: Collins, 1976.
Locke, John, *Works*, 9 vols, London, 1824.
Long, A.A. and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vols, Cambridge University Press, 1987.
McGinn, Colin, *The Mysterious Flame*, New York: Basic Books, 2000.
Mackie, J.L., *The Cement of the Universe*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.
Mackie, J.L., *Ethics*, *Inventing Right and Wrong*, London: Penguin, 1977.
Mackie, J.L., *The Miracle of Theism*, London: Oxford University Press, 1982.
Malinowski, Bronislaw, 'Magic, Science and Religion', in Joseph Needham (ed.), *Science Religion and Reality*, London: Sheldon Press, 1926.
May, Gerhard, *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of Creation out of Nothing in Early Christian Thought*, Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1994.
Mill, John Stuart, *The Subjection of Women* (1869), in *On Liberty, etc.,* London: Oxford University Press, 1960.
Mill, John Stuart, *A System of Logic* (1843), London: Longmans, 1967.
Mollon, Philip, *Multiple Selves, Multiple Voices*, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1996.
Moltmann, Jurgen, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (1980), London: SCM, 1981.
Nagel, Thomas, *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press, 1991.
Necker, Jacques, *The Importance of Religious Opinions*, tr. Mary Wollstonecraft, London: 1788.
Neusner, Jacob, 'The claim of Judaism correctly to interpret scripture in accord with scripture's own imperatives and narrative', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 84, no. 986 (April 2003), 199–204.

Nichols, Robert, *An Anthology of War Poetry, 1914–1918*, London: Nicholson and Watson, 1943.
Nock, A.D., *Conversion*, London: Oxford University Press, 1972.
O'Neill, J.C., 'How early is the doctrine of *Creatio ex nihilo?', Journal of Theological Studies*, NS, vol. 53, pt 2 (October 2002), 449–65.
Perry, W.J., *The Children of the Sun*, New York: Dutton, 1923.
Philo, *Works*, Loeb Library, London: Heinemann, 1929.
Price, Anthony, 'Plato and Freud', in C. Gill (ed.), *The Person and the Human Mind*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990, pp. 246–71.
Reinach, Salomon, *Orpheus, A General History of Religions*, tr. Florence Simmons, London: Heinemann, 1909.
Rorty, Richard, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.
Russell, Bertrand, *The Analysis of Mind*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1921.
Russell, Bertrand, *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903), London: Allen & Unwin, 1964.
Ryle, Gilbert, *Dilemmas*, Cambridge University Press, 1954.
Schleiermacher, Friedrich, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1799), tr. J. Oman, London: Harper and Row, 1968.
Sorabji, Richard, *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, London: Duckworth, 1983.
Spenser, Herbert, *The Principles of Sociology*, 1876–96.
Sturluson, Snorri, *Edda*, tr. Anthony Faulkes, London: Dent, 1992.
Ta'unga, *The Works of Ta'unga, Records of a Polynesian Traveller in the South Seas, 1833–1896*, ed. R.G. and Marjorie Crocombe, Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1968.
Thompson, William, *Appeal of one Half of the Human Race* (1825), London: Virago, 1983.
Thomson, J. Arthur, *Science and Religion*, New York: Scribners, 1925.
Trotter, W., *Instincts of the Herd*, London: Fisher Unwin, 1917.
Turnbull, Colin, *The Forest People*, London: Reprint Society, 1963.
Tylor, E.B., *Primitive Culture* (1871), New York: Harper, 1958.
Vogel, C.J. de, *Greek Philosophy*, vol. 3, Leiden: Brill, 1964.
Voltaire [Arouet], *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations*, 1756.
Voltaire [Arouet], *Philosophical Dictionary*, ed. and tr. Theodore Besterman, London: Penguin Books, 1979.
Wang Shih-cheng, *The Golden Lotus*, tr. Clement Egerton, London: George Routledge, 1939.
Ward, Lester, *Pure Sociology*, New York: Macmillan, 1903.
Whitehead, A.N., *Religion in the Making*, Cambridge University Press, 1926.
Williams, Bernard, *Shame and Necessity*, University of California Press, 1993.
Willis, Roy, *Some Spirits Heal, Others Only Dance*, Oxford: Berg, 1991.
Wittgenstein, L., *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953.
Wittgenstein, L., *The Blue and Brown Books*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958.
Zaehner, R.C., *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975.

# Index