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Forms of Religious Thought Transcript

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RELIGION AND EXPERIENCE: A PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATION

Forms of Religious Thought

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In these lectures I have tried to trace experiences of transcendent value in art and morality, to find a rational framework for these interpretations of experience in philosophies of Idealism and in some of the speculations of modern physics, and to suggest that personal knowing is closely analogous to a distinctively religious form of knowing. In this lecture I will explore the nature of religious knowing itself, and try to support its claim to be a genuine form of knowledge.

The field of religion in general is a very diverse and complex one, and it is quite impossible to talk sensibly about all religions in less than an hour. What I will do is to pick some themes which are central to many religious forms of life, and which make claims to personal awareness of a supremely valuable mind-like reality which underlies and is expressed in and through the world of human experience.

It is not difficult to identify such themes in a number of religious traditions, when the object of religious awareness is stated in these rather vague terms. But it is also fairly easy to understand why more precise descriptions of the religious object differ, and why the more precise one gets, the more differences become apparent. My general argument will be that there is a recognisably common object of religious awareness in many developed religious traditions, and that the differences that occur do so in intelligible and systematic ways that are only to be expected of human beings. This will lead to a suggestion about how to deal with religious dispute and diversity in the modern world.

At first it seems reasonable to take the wide variety of religious beliefs, which often contradict each other, as evidence that none of them is likely to be true. There seems to be no way of resolving such disputes to the satisfaction of all wise, knowledgeable and morally concerned people. So it is tempting to remain agnostic and refuse to make a choice between them. On closer inspection, however, this is not so reasonable. For whatever view we have about religion – even if we regard it all as superstitious nonsense – we are holding a widely disputed view. Yet we have to take some view. To put it simply, if we never pray, or seek to know and respond to some supreme spiritual being, that commits us to the view that it is either impossible or unimportant to do so. And since it is of the essence of belief that knowing the Supreme Being is the most important thing in life that commits us to the belief that this religious view is false. We must in practice commit ourselves to the truth of some belief in this area. Therefore there is not a good argument from the unresolvable diversity of religious beliefs to the falsity of them all.

Nevertheless, some explanation of the diversity of beliefs is called for, together with some suggestion of how a rational choice between them could be made. I think an obvious starting point is that the situation precludes any claim that God has clearly revealed the truth just once, and left the world in no doubt about it. If there is a God who has revealed anything, it is not clear and indisputable to everyone. There are many claims to revelation. Some show signs of mental instability in those who say they have received revelations. Others seem sane and even illuminating, yet they are contradicted by others. Buddhists are not convinced there is a creator God; Jews are not convinced Jesus is the Messiah; Protestants are not convinced that the Pope is ever infallible; and some Catholics are not convinced that Mary was a perpetual virgin. These things could have been made clear, with many neutral witnesses and publicly undeniable miracles. But the miracles of one religion are denied by other religions, and the profound experiences of one religion are regarded as delusions by others. The outlook does not seem good for holding that there is just one obviously and undeniably revealed religion.

That does not entail that there are no profound experiences, revelations, or astounding and religiously significant events (miracles). But it does strongly suggest that they are all affected by ambiguity and human interpretation. That is just what one would expect if religious beliefs are rooted in specific experiences, and if your philosophical starting-point is that all knowledge begins with experience, but all experience needs interpreting. In my last lecture I argued that a widespread, but not universal, interpretation of some human experiences is that they mediate a transcendent reality that seems to be of supreme value and to be mind-like in some significant respect. Further, these experiences demand commitment in response to the demands they seem to make and the ideals they seem to set for human action.

Each interpretation of experience needs to have an objective element of 'givenness', rooted in some non-human reality. And it also needs to have a subjective element of 'reception', which seeks understanding of what is given in terms that are reasonably familiar from the expedients historical and social background.

Human societies have specific histories, and they tend to emphasise specific values and ways of life, just as

human individuals have specific biographies, which prioritise specific values and behavioural practices. For instance, a small society under constant threat of attack from surrounding enemies and in competition for scarce food resources will tend to prioritise military virtues of courage and physical strength. Whereas a large and secure society with abundant food supplies, or at least with a secure and wealthy aristocratic elite, may tend to cultivate values of artistic excellence, friendship, and mutual support. I am not here propounding some sort of law of how social ideals develop, but just pointing out that different circumstances and histories will tend to promote different sets of basic values, and that this is entirely natural and comprehensible.

There is no reason to suppose that the situation is different in religion. If experiences of a valuable, mind-like, and demanding reality occur, they will do so in situations where there are specific pressing social and personal problems, to which some specific responses are required. Both the problems and the sorts of responses which have been built up through custom and habit will influence the interpretation of 'religious' experiences. I will take three illustrative examples which make this clear.

The Hebrew Bible give us the much later memories, shaped by a fairly long period of reflection and imagination by many different thinkers, of key events in the history of the Twelve Tribes, where specific moral demands were felt to have been made on their predecessors. Those who encountered those transcendent demands came to be called 'prophets', mediators between the problems of their present and the ideals by which they felt called to shape their future. Their interpretation of these encounters was framed in terms of 'statutes and ordinances', laws by obedience to which their society could find a promised fulfilment. It is important that the laws promised fulfilment, and are not just arbitrary commands. So the moral demand is accompanied with a moral promise, that the demanded goal can and will be achieved. Over many centuries this compound of law and promise generated a view of the supreme Good as a law-giver and Lord of nature, and so as a moral and causal agent, in the end a creator God.

A very different tradition developed in India, but it too posits a demanding ideal and a promise of fulfilment. The Buddhist traditions, especially, regarded a personal creator as a rather primitive idea, shaped too much in the human image, and unable to cope adequately with the existence of suffering. So the Buddhist ideal tends to be one of freedom from desires which attach one too closely to the world. There is no Law, but there is a Way – the eightfold path – which shows how to escape attachment and attain an existence beyond suffering. This existence is not relation to a personal Lord but entrance into a state of being beyond individual ego, and beyond proper description, yet having the characteristics of intelligence and bliss. There may be no creator God, but there are enlightened souls who have passed beyond destructive desires and achieved a higher state of supreme mindfulness. Gautama Buddha is one of those, and in some Buddhist schools can even be identified with the supreme (but impersonal) Mind of this and every universe.

My third example is taken to show that I realise that not all religious systems are morally sublime and intellectually sophisticated. It is that of Jihadist Islam (I could have taken similar examples from both Christian and Buddhist traditions). This is certainly in opposition to both traditional and most modern Islamic movements, but it is a religious view and it does exist and needs to be accounted for. The view is that there is a creator, who places before humans a demanding ideal of justice, purity, and brotherhood. The supreme bliss of Paradise is promised to those who respond to this ideal by a total commitment to obeying God.

So far, this may seem like other faiths in the Abrahamic tradition. But the moral ideal requires the ruthless imposition of religious Law (shari'a), interpreted in a very literal and inflexible way. And the intellectual ideal is that, since all human knowledge is corrupted, the doctrines of the Qur'an taken as literally as possibly must be accepted on authority.

In addition, Jihadist Islam adds to the Qur'an many requirements concerning gender and the use of indiscriminate terror to enforce its rule over everyone, and these seem to most Muslims to contradict the whole spirit of respect for all human life and the necessity of compassion and mercy which mark the teaching of the Qur'an. Nevertheless, Jihadist Islam is an interpretation of an Abrahamic religious faith which aims at a moral ideal which subordinates selves to a higher moral authority, and at an intellectual ideal which expresses humble obedience before the revelations of an all-knowing God. Most Muslims would think this interpretation is perverse, even a corruption of the spirit of Islam. But it expresses the veneration of a supreme Mind and the pursuit of its goals very well. What that shows, I believe, is that human moral sense and orientation towards truth are easily perverted. That should cause us all to be very aware of possible perversions in our own faiths or basic moral and intellectual beliefs, religious or not. Religion does not come to us without interpretations, and interpretations are liable to corruption. This is a major reason for learning to be very self-critical, and for listening hard to see if there is anything to learn from those who see our faith as corrupted and corrupting.

So far I have argued that no-one can in practice avoid taking a view on the claims of religion, and that there is a basic experiential claim common to many religious traditions, which is awareness of a mind-like reality (or realities) of great value, conscious relation to which can transform human life for the better. However, religious traditions are very diverse. There is not just one crystal clear set of beliefs, whether revealed by God or not, which is overwhelmingly apparent to all intelligent, morally sincere, and informed people. And virtually all religious beliefs are subject to a great degree of human interpretation, which means that such beliefs are influenced by very different cultural norms and social histories. Each person is born into a specific culture and place in history, so that there is, as the philosopher Thomas Nagel put it, no 'view from nowhere'. None of us stands in a neutral

position, judging between religious beliefs with supreme impartiality. We see things from a particular and limited social, historical, and psychological position. So what we are required to do is not adjudicate between the whole gamut of competing religious beliefs, but come to greater awareness of our own presuppositions, try to locate them within a wider global history of religious ideas, and see what problems the beliefs we have learned may raise and what improvements may be made to our understanding of them, in the light of wider and deeper knowledge.

To take an example from Christianity, the rise of evolutionary biology has brought into prominence the conflict of literal interpretations of Biblical texts with modern science, and led to a reformulation of beliefs which tries to resolve that possible conflict. On the moral front, an increasing acknowledgment of gender equality in many modern cultures has caused Christians to consider anew the place of women in religion and in society, and so to address a whole set of moral problems that have only recently come into prominence.

For some people, these historical changes simply render Christian beliefs obsolete. For others, Christian faith remains steadfast, but becomes increasingly alienated from the dominant modern culture. A third response is to reformulate some Christian beliefs to take account of what is seen as genuine new knowledge. This is the approach suggested by my discussion so far, and it enables us to see a religious belief-system as a web of interconnected beliefs, with some relatively unchanging beliefs at the centre, while as beliefs move further out towards the circumference of the web they will be more liable to reformulation or they may even be discarded. Within Christianity, belief in a mind-like source of the cosmos, a source that is of supreme value, is at the centre; particular interpretations of distinctive but rather complex doctrines like the Incarnation lie a little further out; and maybe ancient beliefs about the subordination of women or the necessity of strict retribution may be dropped altogether.

This of course raises the issue of when a belief-system has moved outside Christianity, or away from the formulations of a particular Christian church, and serves to increase the diversity of available religious interpretations. But this is not, or at least it should not be and it usually is not, simply a matter of individuals choosing to believe whatever they like. It is a matter of individuals feeling the pressure of specific problems with the beliefs they have been taught (often very badly, it must be said), and trying to find a set of beliefs that are coherent, consistent, nearer the truth, and morally fruitful. None of us are infallible, and it is reasonable for us at least to begin by accepting as true what we have been told by people whom we believe to be wise and informed and morally outstanding. It would be stupid to ignore the wisdom of many generations of morally sincere teachers. Yet it would be unreasonable to ignore the fact that knowledge in many areas has grown, and that ancient teachings often just cannot fit new situations adequately. So we all inherit traditions, whether religious or non-religious, and we all face new problems with those traditions, and we all have to find our way between ancient wisdom and new insights. There is no fool proof method for doing so. What is required is practical judgment and critical yet sympathetic enquiry. It is not at all surprising that total agreement will never be reached, but this fact in no way implies that there is no truth to be found, or that we can just believe whatever we like. It only implies that truth is hard to find, and that we must try our best to find it, without ever claiming that we alone possess the truth in all its fullness.

If this is the case, we might expect that each person will find some moral values of immense importance, and some factual beliefs to be central to their whole view of reality and their place within it. These values and beliefs are unlikely to be shaken, even if people admit the theoretical possibility that they could be mistaken. But if people accept that the finally adequate truth is hard to find, and that they have not yet found it, they will not cease to look for factors which may extend their understanding of truth, or perhaps correct some of their mistakes or misunderstandings. In the field of religion this will include the attempt to learn from religious (and non-religious) traditions very different from their own.

I want to urge that the experiences of committed, intelligent, and morally outstanding teachers in many different religious traditions are genuine sources of knowledge. But they are forms of what may be called 'knowledge by acquaintance', rather than forms of unambiguously formulated 'knowledge by description'. In human affairs, I can meet someone and learn much from them, while being mistaken about many things about them – particularly about their past and private lives, and even about their real place and function in society. It is perfectly possible to meet a person who is the Prime Minister and be impressed by what he or she says, yet not know that we have been speaking to the Prime Minister, and not knowing much about many of the political opinions of that person, whom we may properly say we know to some extent, and in some perhaps rather unusual and crucial context.

I think the same thing can be said of knowledge of a supreme spiritual principle, apprehension of which may bring us new insights and values, which may even transform the way we live, though we remain ignorant or mistaken about much of its nature. A Jew may speak of an intense and transforming encounter with God, though he or she may not know much about the nature of God, and may only know that there is a sense of moral demand and promise of human fulfilment in the experience. How exactly the understanding (or misunderstanding) of this demand and promise is developed over many years and centuries is not something contained in the encounter itself. For ancient Israelites, the notion of laws promulgated by a monarch, and of liberation from oppression – key features of their historical experiences – are important factors in interpreting prophetic experiences.

It is important to see that I am not reducing the experience of spiritual reality to historical or social factors. I am saying that such factors enter into the interpretation that is given to experiences of spiritual reality. The experience itself may be intense, dramatic, and life-changing. But a vital element of the experience is that it is an experience of Mystery, of something beyond the full grasp of intellectual comprehension, and therefore the object of experience is not clearly and precisely describable.

In the Buddhist tradition, the notions of monarchical law and historical liberation do not have the same significance. Laws are rather seen as human constructions often promulgated at the whim of arbitrary rulers, and historical liberations are seen as temporary alleviations of some of the enduring miseries of life. Ascetic traditions of the renunciation of self-lead to a down-playing of individual selfhood, and the idea of a god is seen as too anthropomorphic to be acceptable as a description of ultimate reality. Nevertheless, there are dramatic and life-changing experiences like that of the Buddha's enlightenment under the Bo tree. The interpretation of these experiences is not typically associated with encounter with a personal Lord. It is construed in terms of release from the 'three fires' of greed, hatred, and ignorance, and entrance into a state of wisdom, compassion, and bliss – Nirvana. There is a moral demand, but it is construed not as a quasi-personal command, but as the arising of universal compassion in view of the sufferings of human existence. There is a moral promise, but it is seen as the entrance into a state of supra-individual consciousness, beyond the reach of all egoistic desires.

Short descriptions such as this are bound to be slightly stereotypical, and in reality things are much more subtle and nuanced. All I am trying to do is to explain how diversities of interpretation arise naturally from cultural and historical differences, and yet how one can speak of genuine religious knowledge, despite all those differences. Religious knowledge will be a form of personal knowledge, an engaged and self-involving knowledge by acquaintance that is compatible with growing divergences of doctrine, as different traditions develop, and often, it must be said, compete with and misunderstand one another.

Of course, there is a responsibility to attempt to conceptualise such experiences and understand their object more fully. This will entail a continuing search for coherence with growing knowledge in other fields, and with changing moral perceptions that arise from further experience and reflection. As I have said, there is little hope that just one tradition will achieve a full and final understanding of truth and goodness. Yet it cannot be said that every view is as good as every other, and choices must often be made. These choices will not just be between a set of contradictory claims. They will be made within major historically developed religious traditions, which embody different basic ways of construing the relation between spiritual and material reality. There are, I suggest, six logically possible ways of depicting such a basic relation.

First, it can be held that nothing but matter exists, that there is no separate reality that can be called mind, consciousness, or spirit. Some religions do accept this, but usually this view is regarded as non-religious.

Second, it can be held that nothing but spirit exists, and that matter and individuality is an illusion. If this is the case, knowing the truth about reality involves overcoming illusion, and seeing the sole reality of spirit. The Indian tradition of Sankara, *Advaita Vedanta*, is one form of such a view.

Third is the view that both spirit and matter exist. Often called 'dualism', views of this sort often teach that the world of matter is to be overcome or transcended, perhaps by ascetic and self-denying practices. Jainism would be a good example of such a view.

Fourth is 'monism', which holds that spirit and matter are not totally different sorts of existence. They are different aspects of the same reality. For such views it becomes a religious goal to ensure that these aspects are in harmony, and work together in such a way that matter expresses the true reality of spirit. Far Eastern and Chinese forms of religion like Mahayana Buddhism and Taoism might fit this pattern.

Fifth is the belief that spirit is the primary reality, but it generates matter for some specific reason. Thus human and other souls are created by a Supreme Spirit, and remain as distinct individuals, though they ought to relate to the Supreme Spirit in obedience and love. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam spring to mind.

Sixth is the view that matter generates spirit, perhaps as some sort of emergent reality. This view is not widely held, though some religions have held that the gods emerge from some sort of chaos or primal undifferentiated reality.

In practice, the first and sixth possibilities are very minority views, but the other four each represent major religious traditions which can seem simply to contradict one another. I suggest that it is more appropriate to see them not as contradictions, but as developments within different cultural and historical contexts, filling out a discernibly similar spiritual pattern of finding ways to transcend egoistic self-interest and become aware of a deeper spiritual reality which can lead to enduring human fulfilment.

As will be apparent from these lectures, my own view would be that both material and spiritual realities exist (so matter is not an illusion), that material reality has a positive role to play in the self-expression of reality (so it is not just to be renounced), that human souls are relatively free, unique, and enduring (so they are not just parts of one supreme Self), and that souls are capable of being united to the divine (so they are not wholly other than God). This means that I find a blending of the fourth and fifth types of view most adequate.

For me, it is also important that religious beliefs should be compatible with advances in scientific knowledge and with at least some of the changes in moral beliefs in the modern world. Thus religious beliefs must take account of advances in evolutionary biology, modern cosmology, and neuroscience, and of changes of moral outlook with regard to human freedom and autonomy, gender and racial equality, purely retributive punishments, and the requirements of global justice.

Finally, there is the question of one's view of revelation in religion. For some religious views, there is an inerrant revelation which sets out definitively such things as the nature of the divine and the way to achieve a positive relationship with the divine. It should be apparent by now that my view of revelation is one that could be called synergistic. There is a 'given' element of divine encounter, and there is also a 'reception' element of human interpretation. So what is taken to be revealed is a co-operation, or working together, of divine and human elements. Revelations spring from experiences that occur to humans who have extraordinary gifts of insight, intense awareness of spiritual reality, and the ability to mediate spiritual presence and power. These experiences can range from inspired speech to an overwhelming sense of God or of liberation from ego, and to the expression of unique powers of healing and moral achievement. The founders or originators of great religious traditions are believed to experience new forms of liberating relation to spiritual reality, and their lives and teachings become patterns of life for their disciples. For most disciples, some revelatory figures, perhaps only one, will mediate the most fully adequate ways of relating to spiritual reality. Nevertheless all of them will work within cultures and at historical times which shape the specific forms of their teaching. In this way, one can understand how Jesus and Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), for example, may both be human mediators of a spiritual reality of wisdom, compassion, and bliss, while their specific teachings will be formed within traditions of the expectation of a liberating Messianic King and of a self-renouncing liberator from *samsara*, the wheel of suffering, respectively. In both cases, there is a blend of divinely given truth (by acquaintance) and a tradition of interpretation, though it should be noted that there is not a clear and definitive boundary between 'givenness' and 'reception'. This is the view which is most compatible with recognition of 'personal apprehension' as the heart of experiences of transcendent spiritual reality, and of the many diverse interpretations of those experiences that exist throughout the world.

There is a whole spectrum of possible views from the completely final and inerrant view held by some Christian fundamentalists to the view sometimes stated by John Hick that the spiritual Real is completely unknown in itself, so that all we have in effect are purely human interpretations. I would be somewhere in the middle of this spectrum, but there are many possible places where someone might stand, so it is obvious that there will never be complete agreement in religious matters. In that situation, a couple of things are of great importance. One is that we should work towards the elimination of religious hatred, a toleration of diverse religious views, and a protection of the freedom to believe and practice any religion that is not harmful. The other is that those members of various religious traditions who are able to accept a synergistic view to some extent at least should work positively together to promote mutual understanding and common action for justice and human flourishing. It should be possible, also, for different traditions to interact and influence one another, and so a sort of spiritual convergence may become a realistic prospect for many believers, as they explore different complementary ways of understanding and relating to spiritual reality. Since neither of these things is universally accepted in the modern world, and since the promotion of mutual understanding between religions is actually rather rare, there is much to be done to make religion the positive and life-enhancing force that it ought to be.

It is important to do these things, if it is true that there is a supreme spiritual reality, and that human life can now be fulfilled in conscious relation to it, and may even be eternally fulfilled by union with it. In these lectures I have defended the view that there is such a reality, by appeal to artistic and moral experience, to Idealist philosophy and some aspects of modern science, to introspective knowledge of ourselves and encounter with other persons, and to experiences of transcendence in the various religions of the world. Beginning from the position that all knowledge is based on experience, and that experience needs to be interpreted, I have suggested that the idea of 'God' is the idea of a mind-like reality of great value, which integrates various types of interpreted experiences - namely, those which may be called experiences of transcendence - in a coherent, comprehensive, and morally fruitful way. If this is true, then belief in God makes a practical and experiential difference to human life, and is an important basis for claims to human uniqueness, responsible freedom, and moral commitment. This alone makes a strong case for a serious, critical, and empathetic study of the idea of a spiritual dimension to the world, and of its interpretation in terms of God, the mind-like reality of supreme value which religious believers think underlies and is expressed in the natural world of human experience.