

Presidential Address

THE RISE OF MODERN ATHEISM AND THE RELIGIOUS *EPOCHÉ*

1. Introduction

In one of his more engaging biographical lectures, Bertrand Russell pays tribute to the *Autobiography* of John Stuart Mill for, one might say, waking him from his religious slumbers. My transposed metaphor from Kant may be totally inadequate to the event. It is hard to think of Russell as religious, but nigh impossible to think of this vigorous genius as slumbering. Nevertheless, Lord Russell honors the memory of the book that worked his freedom. For so historic a moment, a theologian can do no better than to cite the descriptions of the grateful philosopher:

I may say that when I was a young man and was debating these questions very seriously in my mind, I for a long time accepted the argument of the First Cause, until one day at the age of eighteen, I read John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*, and there I found this sentence: "My father taught me that the question 'Who made me?' cannot be answered, since it immediately suggests the further question 'Who made God?'" That very simple sentence showed me, as I still think, the fallacy in the argument of the First Cause. If everything must have a cause, then God must have a cause. If there can be anything without a cause, it may just as well be the world as God, so that there cannot be any validity in that argument.¹

And that was that!—however much other philosophers might insist that the premise Russell had demolished was a caricature. A usual apologetic response has been to move in on Russell's witty misconstrual of causality; to insist that only the conjunction of disjunctive elements—as articulated in a synthetic proposition—demands a cause; and so to dissect Russell's argument line by engaging line. The gifted Frederick Copleston followed something of the latter project. But this morning, I should like to step back from that kind of discussion, and ask a prior question: why are we doing this at all? Why are we arguing philosophy or fencing sophistically about what in our life is foundationally and

¹Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (London: Unwin Books, 1971) 15. It should be noted that Russell designates his own position as agnostic, rather than atheistic. See "The Existence of God: A Debate between Bertrand Russell and Father F. C. Copleston, S.J.," p. 138.

primordially religious conviction? Or, to adapt the more ancient question of Tertullian: Why are we asking the Stoa to justify what we usually attend to in the Porch of Solomon?²

The performance of Bertrand Russell or John Stuart Mill is by no means idiosyncratic. In a much more recent and thoughtful set of reminiscences, the former Master of Balliol College, Anthony Kenny, describes his own development into theistic agnosticism. Educated in Rome and ordained a priest, this learned man locates two major reasons for his change. Over and over again his autobiographical reflections bend over the metaphysical problems entailed by the doctrine of transubstantiation—accidents adhering in no substance; he can make no sense of it.³ More importantly looms the greater problem of the warrant for asserting the existence of God. Again, let us allow the author speak for himself:

In order to resolve the uncertainties of agnosticism, the most important step . . . was to examine the proofs of the existence of God to see whether any of them was valid. . . . Having come to have a great respect for St. Thomas Aquinas as a philosopher, I decided that the best place to start would be with an examination of the five ways in which he says, in his *Summa Theologiae*, that the existence of God can be proved. If anyone was likely to have offered a really convincing proof of the existence of God I reasoned, St. Thomas, with all of his genius, must surely have done so. So I studied his proofs with great care. . . . None of the arguments, on close examination, seemed to be successful in demonstrating the existence of God. . . . I was surprised, and rather disappointed.⁴

Professor Kenny buys into neither theism nor atheism. He remains agnostically distant. He concluded the Brompton lectures at Columbia University on *Faith and Reason* with the judgment that both the theist and the atheist to him "appear credulous; from their viewpoint, I appear as skeptical. Which of us is rational, I do not know."⁵

What is astonishing in this—perhaps more with Kenny than with Russell—is the singular absence of the specifically religious dimension of existence. Kenny writes as if there were no religious presence, let us say no "conscious involvement with God" within human history demanding reflective attention and possessing cognitive cogency. Fundamentally, God is expected to emerge through inference, as a hidden entailment of the contingent universe.

There seem in these texts (and in so many of their fellows) no awareness that the issue of the existence of God is a profoundly religious question, and that, precisely because it is religious, this question possesses its own specific evidence:

²Tertullian, *The Prescription against Heretics*, trans. Peter Holmes, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3 (Buffalo, 1887) 246.

³Anthony Kenny, *A Path From Rome: An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 99.

⁴Kenny, *Path from Rome*, 208-209.

⁵Kenny, *Path from Rome*, 210.

its own proper manifestations, for example, in the experience of holiness or in the mystery present as a dimension or orientation of life, or in that galaxy of fundamental religious exchange, whether personal or communal, represented in popular religiosity, or in that mysticism which Henri Bergson maintained "must furnish us with the means of approaching, as it were experimentally, the problem of the existence and nature of God."⁶ More astonishingly absent—within a Christian culture—are the two trinitarian modes of divine self-disclosure: the self-expression of God as a unit within human history and of the pneumatological transformation of human subjectivity in its awareness, affectivity, and experience. These do not figure at all. I said that it is astonishing to record this absence, but it is not extraordinary. We are coming upon a game whose rules were set at the dawn of modernity. And they were set—strange to say—in large part by Christian theologians.

This game and its rules provoked Wittgenstein to link Bertrand Russell with these Christian theologians whom he called "the parsons." Ray Monk cites this remark of Wittgenstein to his student, Maurice Drury, and then explains it:

"Russell and the parsons have between them done infinite harm, infinite harm." Why pair Russell and the parsons in one condemnation? Because both have encouraged the idea that a *philosophical justification* for religious beliefs is *necessary* for those beliefs to be given any credence. Both the atheist, who scorns religion because he has found no *evidence* for its tenets, and the believer, who attempts to *prove* the existence of God, have fallen victim to the 'other'—to the idol worship of the scientific style of thinking. Religious beliefs are not analogous to scientific theories, and should not be accepted or rejected *using the same evidential criteria*.⁷

It was such seventeenth century Catholic theologians as Leonard Lessius and Marin Mersenne who bracketed Christian religious experience as cognitively irrelevant to the issues raised by a putative atheism. For many theologians and philosophers at the dawn of modernity, philosophic reflection, in one form or another, was to ground the fundamental assertions of religion, for as Father Nicolas Malebranche would explain: "The certitude of faith comes from the authority of a God who speaks, and who cannot be a deceiver. If, therefore, you are not convinced *by reason* that there is a God, how will you be convinced that He has spoken? Can you know that He has spoken without knowing [first] that

⁶Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Breeton, with the assistance of W. Horsfall Carter (Garden City NY: Doubleday and Co., 1935) 240-41. Bergson adds: "Indeed, we fail to see how philosophy could approach the problem in any other way" (p. 241).

⁷As cited in Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein. The Duty of Genius* (New York: The Free Press, 1990) 410 (first and last emphasis added; remainder in the text). Monk is citing from Rush Rhees, ed., *Ludwig Wittgenstein. Personal Recollections* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981) 117.

He is?"⁸ Here Malebranche spoke for his Cartesian heritage, but Father Lessius had turned to a basically stoic natural theology, whose set of *topoi* or common-places were able to contain the new discoveries of exploration and comparative religion, of mechanics and astronomy. This natural theology gradually turned into the Newtonian natural philosophy that won the day for a mechanics that was both to become the universal scientific method and to ground the assertions for the existence of God. This universal mechanics merged fundamental theology with the physico-theologies of such scientist-theologians as William Derham, John Ray, and Bernard Nieuwentijt, founding their assertions of the divine existence through inference from the varieties of designs disclosed through the emergent new mechanics. Thus science was to ground religion—not unlike what is being tried again by Paul Davies today.⁹

And the first articulate, self-confessed, personally signed atheism emerged from the frustration of this project, when the Newtonian theological settlement collapsed, when physics or mechanics failed to provide the fundamental warrant for religious belief. For matter could be understood as dynamic, and its mindless progress over time could explain not only design in the universe but also malformations and personal tragedies. Atheism in the intellectual culture of the West emerged with Denis Diderot and Paul D'Holbach, and it came—to paint shamelessly with a very broad brush—out of a refusal or an inability of either philosophy or, more universally, mechanics, to do the foundational theological task.

But this refusal carried weight in theology only because so many theologians had previously bracketed whatever was recognizably religious as cognitively empty, and had insisted that natural philosophy or physics should provide what the great English theologian Samuel Clarke called the "first foundations of religion." I have told this story elsewhere and do not want to repeat it this morning.¹⁰ The list of those Catholic theologians who embraced this religious *epoché* is indeed massive, as the recent monumental study of Alan Kors has established.¹¹ Rather this morning, let me dwell upon what was bracketed as irrelevant to the question of the existence of God: Christian religious experience. It was this *epoché* that allowed an unprecedented atheism to emerge in the West, an atheism that eventually became the fastest growing religious movement of the

⁸Nicolas Malebranche, *Conversations chrétiennes*, as cited in Alan Charles Kors, *The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief, Atheism in France 1650-1729*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 126 (italics added). Kors' work provides a rich compilation of the Catholic theologians and philosophers of the time who not only argued the existence of God as a fundamentally philosophic issue, but insisted that this was a necessary foundation for religion.

⁹Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983).

¹⁰Michael J. Buckley, *At The Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987; paper edition, 1990).

¹¹See n. 8 above.

past two hundred years.

2. The Concept of Experience

The concept "experience" is a notoriously ambiguous one in the history of Western thought. Whitehead has written that "the word 'experience' is one of the most deceitful in philosophy"; Hans-Georg Gadamer has commented that "the concept of experience seems to me one of the most obscure we have"; and George Schner has recently urged a very careful set of precisions on its meanings and use.¹² There are few concepts in contemporary religious discourse that seem to me more abused. Appeals to religious experience often have an emotional intensity that is in direct correlation to their vagueness and imprecision, leaving one with the unhappy alternatives of being swept away with the fervor of enthusiasms without commensurate serious thought, or insisting upon criticisms and careful reflection that can ring among such exalted emotions as appealingly as the attempt to peddle farm machinery in an opium den.

This situation might seem to justify the strategies of so many theologians at the dawn of modernity, but I think not. There is no question that the word is often equivocal, but this morning I should like to confront this equivocation in the hope of isolating one meaning I think is particularly promising. Allow me to make three soundings in a history of ideas that ranges over two thousand five hundred years. Let me distinguish the use of this term as it is found in Aristotle, Kant and John Dewey.

In Aristotle, "experience" indicates a pattern of memories which allows someone to know something about the future. Some animals, he maintained, have only perception—present sensations; higher forms of animal life can retain these perceptions over time and hence remember past events—and these have memory. Still others have connected these past events into a pattern: they remember that such a sound was associated with such a pain or that such a liquid was associated with such a cure or, that such a personality was associated with such an action. Coleridge wrote his histories with this understanding of experience and Agatha Christie's Miss Marple uses it to solve her crimes. Experience here is an acquired skill. It enables one to gauge particular symptoms as indicative of future happenings. It is a recognition of likeness among particulars, and as such it is the necessary preparation for theoretical and practical knowledge.¹³

¹²Alfred North Whitehead, *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect* (New York: Capricorn Books, reprinted 1959) 16. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald C. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 346ff. See also Owen C. Thomas, "Theology and Experience," *Harvard Theological Review* 78:1-2 (1985) 179, and Georg P. Schner, "The Appeal to Experience," *Theological Studies* 53 (1992) 40-59.

¹³Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.1 (980b25-981b9); *Posterior Analytics* II.19 (100a3-9);

In Kant, experience is not such an acquired skill; it is the empirical dimension of all theoretical knowledge. For knowledge to occur, the onrush of the manifold of sensation must become synthesized through the forms of intuition and the categories of understanding. This anchoring of thought in sensation is knowledge. Knowledge must always have its empirical dimension, that is, it must contain a synthesis of thought with sensible intuition. All knowledge, then, in some sense is empirical knowledge, and "empirical knowledge is experience." There can be no theoretical knowledge, except of objects of possible experience, for the synthesis of concepts with the intuited sensible manifold constitutes theoretical knowledge.¹⁴

In the United States in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "experience" took on a more comprehensive character. In John Dewey and William James, experience is not an acquired skill preparatory to theoretical or practical knowledge nor does it indicate the empirical character of all theoretical knowledge. Rather everything that a human being knows or does is not only in some sense derived from experience, but *is* experience itself—either as content or as process.

John Dewey agrees with William James that "experience" is a double-barrelled word, that is, it indicates both the content and the process by which the content is acquired. Experience "includes *what* men do and suffer, *what* they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also *how* men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, and imagine—in short the processes of *experiencing*." And it is double-barrelled, maintains Dewey, because "it recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed

Prior Analytics I.30 (46a17-21); *Nicomachean Ethics* I.1 (1094b28-1095a13); VI.11 (1143b6-14). For this analysis and this subsequent treatment of the range of "experience" in Western thought, I am indebted to Richard P. McKeon, "Experience and Metaphysics," *Proceedings of the XIth International Congress of Philosophy*, vol. 4 (Amsterdam: North-Holland Pub. Co., 1953) 83-89, especially pages 84-86.

¹⁴Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1963) 173-74, n. 27 ("Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding" [B]). Without experience one may *think* an object, but not *know* it. Without experience given through sensible intuition, concepts are empty; without concepts given through thought, experience is blind. This is underlined by the famous maxim of Kant: "Without sensibility, no object would be given to us; without understanding, no object would be thought. Thoughts without concepts are empty; intuition without concepts are blind. It is therefore just as necessary to make our concepts sensible, that is, to add the object to them in intuition, as to make our intuitions intellegible, that is to bring them under concepts. These two powers or capacities cannot exchange their functions. The understanding can intuit nothing, the senses can think nothing. Only through their union can knowledge arise." ("Introduction. Idea of a Transcendental Logic," [B 75]; Smith, 93 [punctuation slightly altered]). Knowledge looked upon as the making of concepts sensible is experience.

totality."¹⁵ Dewey asserts that this, his "empirical method," possesses this superiority over other philosophical methods: it alone takes the integrated unity of experience as its starting point.¹⁶

Dewey's comprehensive understanding of experience has a second advantage over that of Kant and the British empiricists, namely, it is not simply a passive undergoing. It is an interaction, founded on an organic exchange between the experiencing organism and its environment. This is a fundamentally different understanding of experience and makes possible a very different location of religious experience as an object of reflection. Let me cite Dewey at paragraph length:

Experience becomes an affair primarily of doing. The organism does not stand about, Micawberlike, waiting for something to turn up. It does not wait passive and inert for something to impress itself upon it from without. The organism acts in accordance with its own structure, simple or complex, upon its surroundings. As a consequence the changes produced in the environment react upon the organism and its activities. The living creature undergoes, suffers, the consequences of its own behavior. This close connection between doing and suffering or undergoing forms what we call experience.¹⁷

I believe that Dewey's formulation of experience—both in its insistence upon the aboriginal unity of experience before division and upon a vital interaction as constitutive of that unity—offers a heuristic device of some importance. The concrete experience of coming to belief in the reality of God could perhaps be better explored through this understanding of experience.

Perhaps the failure to appreciate the interaction that there is in experience has permitted the bracketing of those very events that in the actual history of belief have proved most cogent. If one can credit personal testimonies, it is in this interaction that God—i.e., in any of the mediated or disguised manners in which the abyss of God opens before the human person as absolute or commanding or attracting the totality of her longing and commitment—it is *de facto* in this interaction that the average Christian assents or comes to assert the reality of God. Yet it is precisely this exchange or experience which for hundreds of years has been so often bracketed as without cognitive cogency. Let me examine this exchange or this experience first in its categorical dimension and then in its transcendental dimension.

3. Christian Religious Experience: The Categorical Dimension

Have there not been within ordinary Christian histories those events that were counted as an interaction with God, moments or dimensions of life in which the truth or reality of God evoked an unsuspected depth from within a person or

¹⁵John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (La Salle IL: Open Court, 1971) 10-11.

¹⁶Ibid., 12-14.

¹⁷John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, enlarged ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966) 86.

a community or moved in upon human beings in interchange or encounter that made the divine reality undeniable—moments of disclosure in which the absolute mystery of God revealed itself within the very ordinary events of human life? I don't want to argue this point in the abstract. Experience is concrete; let me try to be very concrete. Let me give two examples from reflective thinkers of our own century: both of them women of extraordinary calibre; both of them Jewish.

Edith Stein had gradually moved from positive atheism to a greater sympathy with Christianity. She was a woman whose entire and rigorous academic formation lay with Husserl's phenomenological method, the descriptive analysis of the phenomena of consciousness, that of which the subject is aware within lived experience as she moves to grasp the essence of that which is given in experience. Edith Stein's coming to God issued almost entirely with her ability to read personal and intersubjective experience. To take only the final act of that history: In the summer of 1921, on a visit to the philosopher Hedwig Conrad-Martius, she chanced to be left to herself one evening. She picked up the *Autobiography* of Teresa of Avila and read it through the night. As dawn was breaking, she closed the book, saying to herself: "This is the truth."¹⁸ This is not the chance reading of a pious tale by a religious enthusiast. It is the disclosure of the divine within a human history to one who was able to interpret it as such. I will come back to this in a moment.

A second example, not to prove my point but to illustrate it, could be taken from the first volume of the autobiographical writings of Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together*. She recalls the influence of Léon Bloy upon Jacques and herself in their coming to belief: "Months were to pass, and we might have been permanently halted by these insurmountable [intellectual] difficulties if Léon Bloy had sought to use with us an apologetic of demonstration. On what bases? Our reason was equipped to destroy, not to construct, and our confidence in reason, as well as in historical criticism, was very much shaken. But he did not even think of such a thing. He placed before us the *fact of sanctity*. Simply and because he loved them, because their experience was near his own—so much so that he could not read them without weeping—he brought us to know the saints and the mystics."¹⁹ Previously the Maritains had studied Plotinus and Pascal, had attended the lectures of Bergson and engaged with Peguy in conversation. Now Léon Bloy brought this history to its completion. He introduced this young couple not to argument and inference, but to the lives and the writings, i.e. to the experience and the holiness of the saints. So Raïssa Maritain

¹⁸Freda Mary Oben, "Edith Stein the Woman," *Edith Stein Symposium*, ed. John Sullivan (Washington: ICS Publications, 1987) 12-14. For the description of her involvement with the phenomenological method, see Mary Catherine Baseheart, "Edith Stein's Philosophy of Person," *ibid.*, 34-42; see also Sr. Teresia a Matre Dei, *Edith Stein: Auf der Suche nach Gott* (Ratisbon: Butzon & Bercker Kevelaer, 1963) 58-59.

¹⁹Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together*, trans. Julie Kernan (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943) 150 (italics added).

could place the story of their baptism in the chapter entitled, "The Call of the Saints."

If I were allowed only to cite but not detail the analogous experience of another extraordinarily gifted woman, also Jewish, I would call to mind the fourth letter of Simone Weil to Henri Perrin: "The greatest blessing you have brought me is of another order. In gaining my friendship by your charity (which I have never met anything to equal), you have provided me with a source of the most compelling and pure inspiration that is to be found among human things. For *nothing among human things* has such power to keep our gaze fixed ever more intensely upon God, than friendship for the friends of God."²⁰

I recall these examples simply to illustrate a single point and to raise a single question: The highest form of the categorical disclosure of God is in the lives of holiness. God emerges in the interaction and struggles in which human beings act and are drawn, in which they move towards God in accord with their longings and the structures of their consciousness and then undergo a response that they may not even at that time realize as divine. One thinks as still another illustration in our century of the profound effect worked upon Ludwig Wittgenstein by three books: Tolstoy's *Gospel in Brief*, of Ludwig Anzengruber's *Die Kreuzelscheiber*, and of William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*.²¹

If what these histories point to is true, is it not extraordinary that so much Catholic formal theology for centuries, its divorce between spirituality and fundamental or dogmatic theology, has bracketed this actual witness as of no cogency—aside from polemic allusions to the holiness of the Church? Is it not a lacuna in the standard theology, even of our day, that theology neither has nor has striven to forge the intellectual devices to probe in these concrete experiences the warrant they present for the reality of God and make them available for so universal a discipline? One of the few exceptions to this general judgment would be John of the Cross. His explicit methodology embodies religious experience within the expressive art-object—in this case, his poetry—in an interrelated mutual causality between expression and experience. From there, he moves to a pluralistic hermeneutics of the art object by means of the prior resources of sacred Scripture, the dogmatic teaching of the Church, and the experience of the reader. Again the influence flows both ways. Finally all four of these moments serve the communication of what has been disclosed in this circular inquiry. His methodology unites both the expressive-experiential model with the cultural-linguistic model in a dynamic circular relationship.²² I do not have the time to

²⁰Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, intro. Leslie Fiedler (New York: Harper and Row, 1951) 74 (italics added).

²¹See Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, 115-16, also 51.

²²See John of the Cross, "The Spiritual Canticle," prologue, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington DC: Institute for Carmelite Studies, 1991) 469-71. See also "The Living Flame of Love," prologue, *ibid.*, 638-39.

do more than to suggest the rich possibilities for our own time of so great a theologian and to remark that he remains very much an exception.

4. *Christian Religious Experience: The Transcendental*

There is still another aspect of this matter that we must explore. Dewey maintains that the origins of experience lie with the initial movement of the subject: "the organism acts in accordance with its own structure, simple or complex, upon its surroundings." This raises a further and perhaps even more pertinent consideration about the constitution of the subject, according to which it acts. This allows me to move to the transcendental dimension of experience. If the categorical presence of the sacred is a revelation of the reality of God, to whom is such a disclosure possible? In other words, what is the condition of transcendental or of human subjectivity, that allows one to recognize the divine in the encounter with the holy, i.e., "to have eyes to see"? Here the Thomistic inquiry into the formal object of faith seems to me to be of immense suggestive importance.²³ But to continue to try to avoid abstractions let me return to the histories from which I previously drew: What is the focus of the subjectivity of Edith Stein and Raïssa Maritain and Simone Weil? What constitutes the prior concentration of their subjectivity that allowed for what I am calling "disclosure" and its commensurate "recognition?" I suggest that it was the absolute commitment to the truth—however this truth would emerge in life. This profound consecration lay at the heart of reverence and inquiry, and these in their turn made such disclosure possible.

The absoluteness of this commitment explains Edith Stein's engagement with phenomenology, from her initial eagerness for Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen* and its promised return to things themselves to her translation of Aquinas' *De veritate*. Raïssa Maritain is quite explicit about the commitment that ran like a river through these years of anguish and preparation: "Despite all that might have turned us from it, we persisted in *seeking the truth—what truth?*—in continuing to bear within ourselves the hope of the possibility of a full adherence to a fullness of being."²⁴ Or Simone Weil: "It seemed to me certain, and I still think so today, that one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of *pure regard for the truth*. Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms."²⁵

Why is it that this commitment to truth, as a primary and absolute directive within human life, becomes the transcendental condition for the possibility of recognizing the revelatory character of the holy? Because, I believe, it is itself a surrender to the absolute; in biblical terms, to its unconditioned lordship; to a

²³See *Summa theologiae* II-II. 1. 1.

²⁴R. Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together*, 80.

²⁵Weil, *Waiting For God*, 69 (italics added).

summons to obedience and a love that takes priority over any conflicting claim. The experience of the absolute claim of truth is the experience of the claim of God. And the surrender to this claim—long before it has reached adequate categorical embodiment—is de facto a surrender to God, the only absolute. Were it otherwise, then one would experience a claim that would be stronger than that of God, a claim upon oneself that would take obvious precedence over any positive precept or assertion or revelation. For the first thing to be noted about this claim is that it is absolute: One accepts or follows the claim of truth simply because it is true. It is to be acknowledged and obeyed simply because of what it is—irrespective of the cost or of other considerations. It carries with it the sense of unconditional lordship.

Secondly, one finds this claim mediated in everything that one confronts, in every demand for acknowledgement and agreement which one encounters. The claim is pervasive, omnipresent. Please notice, then, that in this experience one accepts a claim that is pervasive in all things and is absolute above all things in its summons.

If one probes the transcendental dimensions of this experience of the claim of truth, one will see many of the attributes that are divine.

There is present, then, within the experience of this claim, an intentional experience of God that enables a person to recognize by a kind of connaturality the presence of God in the disclosures of the holy—however these appear.

Perhaps this position that I am advancing will enable us to understand something more of Ludwig Wittgenstein. He insisted that one cannot treat the existence of God as if its determination did not bear profoundly upon the character of the religious subject, as if it were parallel to issues in thermodynamics or non-euclidian geometry. In contrast, Wittgenstein gave his emphasis to the radical need for a change in the human subject asking this question, rather than to the intuition of, or inference to, the divine existence. As Ray Monk writes: "Wittgenstein did not wish to see God or to find reasons for His existence. He thought that if he could overcome *himself*—if a day came when his whole nature 'bowed down in human resignation in the dust'—then God would, as it were, come to him; he would then be saved."²⁶ The issue of the divine existence can only be resolved if there is a profound integrity in those who ask the question. To live by the light that one has, is not the only condition for addressing this question; but it is an utterly indispensable condition.

This interior acceptance of an orientation to a reality that is absolute—whether that be truth or love or justice—can be mediated by many categorical realities, all of which bespeak a radical concentration of life. One finds it mediated, for example, in a self-sacrificing commitment to just social structures for the exploited and the marginalized, a commitment that is nonnegotiable and continued even in a context in which these efforts are

²⁶Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, 410.

repudiated. One finds it mediated in a commitment to the integrity of artistic production, when that focus embodies an utter reverence and even total submission before the beautiful and the true. One finds it in an interpersonal self-transcendence into the love of another human being when the love which summons can even claim the sacrifice of one's own life. One experiences the haunting presence of God wherever a human being encounters the absolute—pervasive in its presence in all things and utterly uncompromising in its demands for surrender or obedience or love or acceptance.

This is to encounter God in unsurpassable closeness. God is "close" not by geography or physical nearness. The closeness of persons is a qualitative likeness, a configuration by which friends are able to know connaturally how one another thinks or feels or loves. Personal closeness is an affinity which makes communication possible and to which it ministers.²⁷ Christian theology has for two thousand years insisted that this "closeness of God," this radical change in human transcendentality, is worked through the Spirit of God. The mission of the Spirit is this change within human affectivity and awareness, a divine likeness that allows us to recognize the presence of God when its expression is categorical and historical. The Spirit of Christ configures a human being to Christ so that one recognizes in oneself or in one's situation or in others what—like Christ—images and expresses God.

This categorical expression of God is not only in the lives of the holy. It pervades history as it pervades that human subjectivity that confronts history and is the condition for its possibility. It is in the sacraments of the Church and in the concrete structures of social justice for which the Christian must struggle; it is in the official event that is liturgy and also in the popular religiosity in which so much symbol and affective weight is carried in a density that defies propositional adequacy—as Orlando Espín has so eloquently written. And for those who know how to see, like the tall nun in the rigging of Hopkins' "The Wreck of the Deutschland," the categorical disclosure of Christ—paradoxically perhaps—can also be in what passes for ruin, destruction and, death. Hopkins saluted this woman with rare praise:

Ah! There was a heart right!
There was single eye!
Read the unshapeable shock night
And knew the who and the why;
Wording it how but by him that present and past
Heaven and earth and word of, worded by?²⁸

For the categorical, in all of the forms by which it speaks out God, discloses the

²⁷For personal "closeness to" or "distance from," understood as likeness or unlikeness either in the order of nature or grace, see *Summa theologiae* I,8,1 ad 3; I,115,1 ad 4.

²⁸Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Wreck of the Deutschland," stanza 29, in *A Hopkins Reader*, ed. John Pick (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1966) 43.

One who above all is the Expression of God—the One through whom and for whom it is made, the One in whom all things hold together: Christ, the image of the unseen God.²⁹ As a human being is conformed subjectively to the reality of God through acceptance of the divinizing Spirit—however anonymously this acceptance may take place—so one connaturally recognizes the expressions of this God which words and interprets divinized transcendental experience and gives it full contour and definitive meaning.

For religious experience, if it is to be human experience, must have both the transcendental and the categorical dimension. Here Rahner is of enormous value and a complement to Dewey. The categorical is known only through the transcendental; the transcendental is known only through the categorical. But in themselves, they constitute that complexity of interchange between the organism and the environment or between the human person and her context that Dewey called experience. Understood in this way, the self-disclosure of God is always trinitarian. For all the manifestations of holiness within the externalities of history in some way participate in or approach that supreme holiness or union with God that is the hypostatic union; and the movements of holiness within the interiority of history and its human subjects in some way participate in or approach the transformative outpouring of the Spirit that is Christ's greatest gift.

The testimony of concrete experience, so trinitarianly understood, seems to me to be precisely what had been bracketed so comprehensively in the rise of a putative atheism in the West, in a strategy of religious *epoché* that was dialectically to generate what it was constructed to destroy. This bracketing of religious experience or of the religious dimensions of experience, this divorce between spirituality and formal theology, or between life and thought, set a style for the consideration of this issue which has lasted up until our own time. I think that, in their different ways, both Bertrand Russell and Anthony Kenny show themselves heirs to this tradition, one that prescind from anything innately religious, let alone explicitly or implicitly trinitarian, in order to justify or attack religion's principal assertion—the existence of God—by a line of inference.³⁰

What, then, can we learn from this consideration of one thread of the complex history of religious disbelief? That speculation or metaphysics or even natural philosophy becomes false when it deals with the reality of God—or that it is secretly atheistic as Feuerbach contended? Of course not. That has not been true of the great metaphysicians from Plato and Aristotle to Peirce and Whitehead. At its best, the natural theology that emerges from metaphysics indicates the human spirit's essential openness to God as the final truth of all

²⁹Cf. Col 1:15-17.

³⁰When Russell does give consideration to the person of Jesus, it is not to make sense of his conviction about the reality of God. Jesus is considered an ethical teacher, more adequate than most, less adequate than Socrates or Buddha. (See Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, 20-24.)

things. There are many aspects of postmodernity, of course, that are coordinate with what I am urging: the reverence for the Absolute of transcendence, the suspicion both of the liability of formulae and rituals to idolatry and of the identification of the divine with concrete institutions, the inclination to the mystical and apophatic and the openness of all creation before religious intuition, etc. But if this is prolonged into a rejection of inference, critical reasoning, institutions, science and philosophy in favor of sentiment, emotions, autonomous "emotional communities" and mystified vagueness, it would become as destructive as its contrary. Institutions, inference, philosophy and speculation are also component or demands of authentic religion, indeed, of authentic religious experience.³¹ Philosophy or metaphysics does not betray the genius of religion. Religion can only betray itself.

What can we learn from this? Perhaps above all that we must reflect upon the data of religion itself in order to justify the assertions of religion. By "religion" here, I am referring to all of the manifold that constitutes religion as, for example, outlined in the great treatise of Baron von Hügel: the intuitional, emotional and volitional; the speculative and rational; the institutional, historical and traditional.³² My paper has emphasized one set of these components because I think it has been historically neglected in scientific theology, but none of them can be finally bracketed without grave harm done to the genius of religion in general and to Christianity in particular. But if one ignores this religious manifold and turns to other disciplines to give basic substance to its claims that God exists, one is implicitly admitting that religion—or that reflection upon religion for its evidence that we have been calling theology—possesses an inner cognitive emptiness.

For if there is nothing of cognitive cogency in the experience of the sacred, whether immediately personal or numinously present to consciousness; nothing in the witness of the saints, lives of holiness reaching their highest instantiation in Jesus of Nazareth; nothing in the experiences of being drawn to God by an encompassing longing that is so much more mysterious as its object is not given in the categorical but is always beyond; nothing in the limit-experience of finitude—death or a joy that points beyond itself; nothing in the sense of mystery or infinite intelligibility towards which the mind moves in all inquiry and exploration; nothing in the absolute claims made upon a human being by the summons of truth or goodness or beauty; nothing in the experiences of authentic solitude or worship and sacrament or the usages of popular religiosity; nothing

³¹For this index of postmodernity, see José María Mardones, "Le fe cristiana ante la modernidad, la postmodernidad y la cultura neo-conservadora," *Pluralismo socio-cultural y fe cristiana*, ed. Facultades de Teología de Vitoria y Deusto (Bilbao-Vitoria, 1990) 36-41.

³²See Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studies in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends*, 2 vols. (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1961).

in an encounter with the Gospels in their reading and in the realization within human practice; nothing in the long tradition of the Church or in the interchanges in charity that constitute authentic Christian community and dedication; nothing in the life of prayer or contemplation or the experiences of mystics such as Teresa or John of the Cross; nothing in the witness of a really Christian marriage which is permeated by a sense of the Gospel and by the religious richness of the Church—if all of this and much more is to be bracketed as of little or no evidential value, then it seems to me idle to look to another discipline or scholarly inquiry to establish inferentially that there is a “friend behind the phenomena.”

Further, it is to argue that inference cannot simply substitute for experience. One will not long believe in a personal God with whom there is no personal communication, no interaction; and the most compelling witness to a personal God must itself be personal. In Christian terms that means a communication through the Spirit that makes the witness of the Son to the reality of the Father credible and compelling. To attempt something else as foundation or as substitute, as so many Catholic theologians have done and are doing in the assertion of the divine existence, is to move into a process of internal contradictions of which the ultimate resolution must be atheism.

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