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Ronald W. Hepburn's Agnosticism

Mary Warnock

In what follows, I shall concentrate on one of Ronald W. Hepburn's major works on the philosophy of Christian religion, *Christianity and Paradox*,[1] first published in the United Kingdom in 1958, two years before the death of J. L. Austin, and when the impact of Ludwig Wittgenstein's later work was at its height. Hepburn's aim in this book was to explore the effect of linguistic philosophy on theology, or rather on the perceived intelligibility of discourse concerning God in the Christian religion. The date of his book is significant, and explains the somewhat limited range of his concept of theology; for the hugely influential book, Rudolf Bultmann's *Jesus Christ and Mythology* was not published in English translation until 1963 (though Hepburn may well have been aware of Bultmann's work before this date, for the publication in England of his *Kerygma and Mythos* was as early as 1948). But at any rate, the idea of 'demythologising' the gospels had not become the integral aspect of theology that it later became. Indeed, Bultmann himself first used the term, 'to demythologise'. I remember attending a series of classes entitled *Myth*, given by the theologian, Maurice Wiles, in the 1970s, in which he was moving towards his view that God played no active part in the world, after his first act of creation; and that the miracles recorded in the gospels were all to be treated as myth or legend, though there was a good deal of reluctance among the mainly clerical members of the class to abandoning the Empty Tomb.

In any case, for much of his book Hepburn is chiefly concerned with the meaning, if any, to be attached to the word 'God' itself, in the light of the insights about meaning, and the uses of language for purposes other than making statements that characterised the analyses of linguistic philosophy. On this issue, he comes out of his discussion, he says, as a regretful agnostic. But he insists that 'agnostic' be taken seriously: he does not know whether or not there is a God, or what God would be if He existed; and he is ready to change his mind. Towards the end of the book, he seems prepared to accept the

1 Ronald W. Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox: Critical Studies in Twentieth-Century Theology* (1958; New York, 1968 2nd edn).

teaching of Jesus of Nazareth as an intelligible account of, or at least a pointer in the direction of the nature of God, and as our nearest approach to encountering God. For he rejected as strictly meaningless existentialist accounts, such as Martin Buber's, of direct encounters with God, in an 'I–Thou' relationship, for Buber the only way there was to know God.[2]

Other things have changed since 1958. For instance, the number of regular church-goers has markedly declined. And this has, in itself, led to some attempts to make Christianity more 'accessible' such as translating the Latin Mass. The most obviously misguided of these was perpetrated by the Anglican Church itself in the rewriting of the services of the *Book of Common Prayer* in the 1980s, which, though popular with some church-goers (and deeply unpopular with others), seems to have done little to bring in new believers. Partly as a result of this decline in numbers, but for other reasons as well, the 1960s and '70s saw a growing attempt at more radically rethinking Christian doctrine than one that any purely philosophical fashion could bring about. A perhaps precipitating factor here was a book entitled *Honest to God*, which was published in 1963 by John Robinson.[3] This book caused great scandal among traditional church-goers, and was very widely read. At the time, Robinson was Bishop of Woolwich, and though he was told by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, that he should consider his position, he nevertheless remained bishop until his retirement. He argued that, while the image of God had generally been brought down from that of an old man in the sky, it still needed to be brought nearer, within ourselves, or perhaps even dispensed with altogether, if the Christian religion were to survive. Later, from the 1970s until the beginning of the twenty-first century the Cambridge philosopher and College Chaplain Don Cupitt wrote a flurry of short, popular books, notably, *Taking Leave of God* of 1980 and *After God: the Future of Religion* of 1997. There is certainly no hint of such a demand for radically rethinking the basic doctrines of Christianity in Hepburn's work of 1958. Instead, there is a call for caution, so that we do not fall into speaking nonsense when we speak of God. How are we to distinguish what is muddle and can be resolved by clear thinking, from what is deep mystery, and must remain, as acceptable paradox? This is the problem he sets out to solve.

In his book, Hepburn does not directly refer to Wittgenstein's three lectures on religion, delivered in Cambridge in 1938. But this is not surprising. They fall chronologically between his early and his late work; and they

2 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh, 1937).

3 John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London, 1963).

exist only in the form of notes taken by Yorick Smythies who attended as a student. The only thing that we can be fairly certain of his having said is that religious people and non-religious people do not contradict each other. But is this a look ahead, as the Oxford theologian, and later Bishop of Durham, Ian Ramsay, supposed, to the different Language Games and different forms of life of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*? Ramsay, who was obsessed by Wittgenstein, hoped that here was an opening for the religious and the secular to co-exist peacefully, side by side, as different forms of life, which could not properly understand one another, just as, according to the *Investigations*, if a lion could speak, we would not understand him.[4] Hepburn did not take this line; and Wittgenstein's Cambridge lectures were, as far as we know, long before the gradual putting together of the *Philosophical Investigations*, even of the preliminary *Blue Book* and *Brown Book*, which were passed from hand to hand in Cambridge and Oxford during the 1950s.

There is one thing, however, that strikes one today about Hepburn's 1958 theological writing: it is curiously unhistorical. By this I do not mean that he is not interested in the historical Jesus of Nazareth. As I have already said, he thought that through what we can know of him we can get the best approach that we can have to an existential encounter with God. It is rather that he seems to read the gospel accounts of Jesus's life almost as if they were ordinary biographies. He was not apparently struck by the vast difference between the gospel-writers and ourselves, the huge gulf that lies between our way of thought and theirs. The theologian, Dennis Nineham – who died aged 94 in 2016 (and who had had the same philosophy tutor in Oxford, Donald MacKinnon, as was Hepburn's in Aberdeen) – put the matter thus, forty-one years ago:

> the characteristic religious difficulty today is a metaphysical difficulty, at any rate in this sense: where men seem to need help above all is at the level of the *imagination*; they need some way of envisaging realities such as God, creation and providence imaginatively in a way which does no violence to the rest of what they know to be true. They need to be able to mesh in their religious symbols with the rest of their sensibility in the sort of way supra-naturalist and messianic imagery meshed in with the sensibility of first-century people.[5]

4 Ian Thomas Ramsay, *Religious Language: An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases* (London, 1957).

5 D[ennis] E[ric] Nineham, *Explorations in Theology 1* (London, 1977), 4. In one of his

Part of Nineham's 'metaphysical difficulty' is that the nineteenth century brought about a revolution in historiography, almost as great as the revolution in biology. In order to understand history, we now believe that we need not only to be carried along by a good story. We demand more. As R. G. Collingwood put it, in his *Idea of History* of 1942, we must strive to 'think the thoughts' of the historical persons we study. We must never suppose that what was taken for granted by them is taken for granted by us; nor that what we assume is what they assumed. Thus between us and the authors of the Gospels stands a host of presuppositions about God's interventions in the history of the world, the expected future of mankind, the signs and wonders that were to be expected, into which we must think ourselves back if we are to understand the spirit in which they, variously, wrote. We must try to think like first-century Jews. We must think ourselves into what prophesies were being fulfilled, what promises kept, and for whom. This is why I complain that Hepburn's treatment of the Gospels is unhistorical. It treats them as familiar, not deeply alien. (It is, admittedly, quite hard, for those brought up to the kind of parallel universe of a Christian religious education, such as my own and Hepburn's, to acquire an adequate sense of their strangeness).

For example, Gospel-readers have to make a decision as to what they are to think of miracles. Indeed, for educated people, this is hardly a decision any more: miracles do not occur. Far more than post-Darwinian biological science, it is the non-occurrence of miracles that makes it impossible for modern readers to take the gospels as literal truth. (After all, Darwin did more to upset people's ideas of the Old Testament than the New). David Hume's argument against the occurrence of miracles remains standing: you need to weigh the reliability of the witness against the improbability of the miracle's having occurred; and there is never a witness so reliable as to come off best. (Hume's *Essay on Miracles* was to have been published as part of his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* of 1748, but was held back, as too damaging to his reputation, though it leaked out, and prevented his appointment in any academic post, and was not in fact published until after his death). Hume records that he first used this argument in conversation while walking with a Jesuit priest, with whom he was lodging in France, where he had gone to write his *Treatise of Human Nature*. The priest was telling him the story of a recent local miracle;

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obituaries, written by John Drury, it was recorded that at breakfast one day with the then Master of Trinity College, Rab Butler, Nineham was asked by Rab's wife, Mollie, 'And now, Professor Nineham, do you believe in the resurrection?', to which he replied: 'Of course not. Would you please pass the mustard?'

he was appalled by Hume's argument, and pointed out that, if it were valid, it would apply as much to the gospel-writers as to local witnesses. Upon which Hume brought the conversation to an end, and went indoors to his room, to write his *Essay on Miracles*. We, still more than Hume, are brought up and educated to respect the primacy of science. If something occurs that seems inexplicable, we assume that it has not been properly described, but that given time and patience it can be brought into line with natural laws. It is a dilemma for religion to have to pretend that such a broadly scientific attitude to events in the world can be put on one side at will; and yet this is what seems to be demanded of us, in reading the gospels.

We can be sure, however, in our reading of the New Testament, that Jesus and his disciples were all Jews; and that the disciples went to Jerusalem some six weeks after the Crucifixion. There, following the commission of Jesus, they started to establish a new religion which they referred to as the Way. It was first named 'Christianity' in Antioch before the end of the century (though it is not clear exactly when). By this stage, at any rate the disciples will have called themselves Christians, and the gospel was being preached to Jews and Gentiles alike, though the Jews were increasingly rejecting it. So, by the end of the first century AD, Christianity was a new religion, and it spread rapidly until the accession of the emperor Constantine (312 AD), who, after a miraculous vision, made it the official religion of the Roman Empire. But, because Jesus and his disciples had been Jews, and it was as a Jew that Jesus had been crucified and had claimed to have been resurrected from the dead, an indefinite amount of the Jewish faith came over into the new religion, including the belief that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Son of God. The God who had been the God of the Chosen People, the Jews, but also the Creator of Heaven and Earth, and the only true God, was still the only true God, and the Creator, but gentiles and Jews alike were now his children, and could be redeemed from sin by belief in Christ. In the *Acts of the Apostles* there is evidence of some initial disagreement about whether gentiles who became Christians had to abide by Jewish law – did they have to undergo circumcision? Did they have to be strict with regard to what food they might eat and what feasts they must observe? But gradually Christianity prevailed over Judaism in its own sphere, and the two sets of rites and rituals became separate. Christians were left, however, if not with the Jewish Law, still with the God of Abraham, the Creator of the world, a person, with a now newly declared interest in the redemption of his people, a people now potentially embracing as many as could be reached by the gospels.

This, then, is the God whom Hepburn, in his newly sharp linguistic mood, was seeking, and whom he tentatively failed to find in 1958. And he manifestly was not alone. There are now innumerable lapsed Christians, even agnostics or atheists, who nevertheless call themselves Christians (as well as a large number of people who have never encountered Christianity, or any other religion, at all). In his new book, Robert Reiss, a former Canon of Westminster, intends to offer comfort to people who loved the Anglican Church, but who were unable to believe in the literal truth of the gospels, or the creeds they recited in Church.[6] It is an account, to me most illuminating, of the writing of the different gospels, the order in which they came, and the specific purposes for which they were probably composed. And it accomplishes a comprehensive task of demythologising. There was no miracle left, not the incarnation, the virgin birth nor the resurrection, still less the lesser miracles such as turning water into wine, or walking on the sea, in which the faithful any longer had to believe. Having disposed of all the miracles, however, Reiss still professes a belief in God.

It is less than clear, to me at least, what this belief amounts to, and how well it might stand up against Hepburn's linguistic scepticism of 1958. Reiss follows the theologian, Paul Tillich, in asserting that human existence is necessarily 'grounded on' the existence of God; but recognizing that this is not in itself an especially perspicuous statement, he also adduces certain considerations which, he thinks, may lead us in the direction of a transcendent Deity, even if one of which or whom we can say little.

One such consideration is what Reiss regards as the otherwise inexplicable fact that human beings can understand one another when they speak. Now this is a very strange argument, and I may be guilty of misunderstanding it. I mention it, however, because it is certainly one that would have been rejected by Hepburn. Until this point, Reiss has seemed to regard human beings, like other animals, as unified creatures, the mental and the physical conjoined in the brain which is an enormously complex physiological organ, but a physiological organ nonetheless, offering no possibility of dualism, or a soul detached from a body. But in discussing human consciousness, or mutual understanding, as a pointer to God, he seems to revert to a total Cartesian dualism, the human individual being divided between the thinking and the spatial aspects, the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*, completely different substances one from the other. Human communication was indeed a huge problem for René Descartes and

6 Robert Reiss, *Sceptical Christianity* (London, 2016).

the empirical philosophers who followed him, John Locke and David Hume among others. For according to them, when we perceive something we receive a mental entity in our mind, and it is to this entity, idea or impression, that our words 'directly' apply. And my impression is necessarily different from yours as it is in my mind and not yours, just as my pain is not felt by you. So how can we ever refer to anything that is common to us both? But the very revolution in philosophy which Hepburn witnessed, starting with the German phenomenologists, Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl, and culminating in the later work of Wittgenstein, meant that human communication was no longer a mystery: we communicate because we are language-users, and language essentially refers to the common world we share. We do not, as Descartes, Locke and Hume supposed, learn the meaning of the word 'red' from the observation of a private red patch, referred to variously by philosophers as an 'idea', an 'impression', or a 'sense-datum', which only I can see, while you alone can see a different patch for yourself. If this were really so, it would indeed be questionable how my red relates to your red, and it might require a miracle for us ever to communicate with each other. But this is to mistake the nature of language. In fact, words are learned first and foremost by being related to the outside world (and only actually tentatively and with some difficulty to inner experience). If we each indeed had a private language it might take a miracle-performing God to account for our ability to understand one another. But given the essentially public nature of language, no miracle is needed to explain our ability. Once human beings evolved to adopt an upright stance, a long throat and a palate subtle enough for the articulation of words, then, though God might have set up the world, as some theologians would have it, in order that this might happen, no further intervention by God need be supposed. This was, after all, the great discovery of German phenomenology, that human consciousness is 'intentional', that is to say directed towards something other than itself; it is always, and at all times, consciousness 'of' something in the world.

In 1939, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, then close colleagues, went to Germany to visit Husserl about whose phenomenology they were beginning to hear. When he returned, Sartre wrote a short article in the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise*, which he edited with Merleau-Ponty. He was plainly in a state of high excitement. He had discovered a philosophy that was in revolt against what he called the 'digestive' view of perception, the Cartesian account in which he and Merleau-Ponty had been educated, according to which a subject

was sucked into the consciousness of the beholder, to become a mental entity, an idea or impression:

> Husserl persistently affirmed that you cannot dissolve things in consciousness. You see this tree, to be sure. But you see it just where it is: at the side of the road, in the midst of the dust, alone and writhing in the heat, eight miles from the Mediterranean coast. It could not enter your consciousness…[7]

Material things do not change their nature and become mental things in being perceived. 'We are […] delivered from the "internal life" […] since everything is finally outside, everything, even ourselves. Outside, in the world, among others, […] it is on the road, in the town, in the midst of the crowd, a thing among things, a man among men.'[8] There is no third thing, no mental entity inside us which is what we 'directly' see. And there is thus no mystery here, to lead us to God.

Wittgenstein, though not prone to admit to having read the works of other philosophers, had read Husserl and understood the idea of intentionality. The things we do with language, the way language works, had become as much part of his philosophy as it was of Austin's, by the beginning of the 1950s. He understood completely that we do not each have a private language, that indeed there can be no such thing as a private language, where each of us looks into a little box of our own, with something, or indeed perhaps nothing, in it, which we cannot share. We are not referring inwards when we talk, but outwards, just as Sartre had realised. And Ronald Hepburn would certainly not have been impressed by Reiss's pathway towards God, via the need for a miraculous explanation of the existence of inter-intelligible human language. He understood linguistic philosophy far too well.

Nor, I suspect, would Reiss's other pointers, the human pursuit of goodness, or truth, or the human sense of transcendent beauty, fare any better; for it is obvious that there is a human capacity to aspire towards such ideals, and they will serve as pointers to a transcendent God only to those who are already believers. Are we really to say that those who follow such ideals could not do so if there were no God? Let alone if the God of Christianity did not exist? This is surely a non-historical absurdity. Once again, those who are inclined

7 Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl's Phenomenology', trans. Joseph P. Fell, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 1/2 (1970), 4–5, 4.

8 Ibid., 5.

on other grounds to assert the existence of God will call him in aid to explain these and other ideals, which are shared by many human beings. But others will ascribe them to the development in human beings of an imaginative power to conceive of such values: an increase of the aspects of life about which human beings are inquisitive, a separation and abstraction of the concept of morality from that of instinctive behaviour, and an appreciation of the fact that some things are to be valued for their own sake. All this is quite distinct from the idea of the God of Abraham. Hepburn quotes from St Augustine's *De Trinitate*: 'God was "good without quality, great without quantity, a creator though he lack[ed] nothing, ruling but from no position, eternal yet not in time".[9] His question is simply whether such paradoxes make any sense. And he concludes that they probably do not.

It has to be said, of course, that there are believers, including, doubtless, many of the clergy, for whom there is something deeply satisfactory about their inability to explain these contradictions. They do not want to be able to understand what they are saying. It is enough for them that they feel a personal relation with this God, who goes about with them as someone to whom they can confess when they do wrong and express gratitude when they feel thankful for their lives or the beauties of the seasons. Their belief in God is something they carry round with them rather as some pre-school children are accompanied by a companion: it is difficult to say whether this person is believed in in the same way that, say, the child's parents and siblings are believed in; but the companion is a presence, can sometimes be blamed when things go wrong, and definitely has to be taken into account by others, as well as the child herself. I remember having to drive home past a particular house in order to drop my youngest daughter's companion, Squeeky, because he was staying the night there. And, of course, people who believe in God in this way are reinforced in their wordless and, on the whole, comfortable companionship by the regularities of the church year, the rituals and language of church services and the morality that is central to Christianity. But it was this half-belief that compelled Hepburn into regretful agnosticism in 1958.

It is time, then, to see what is left of Christianity if the miraculous is removed. If we discount the somewhat mysterious belief in a God who is the centre of Hepburn's paradoxes, and to whom Reiss still rather desperately clings – somehow at the heart of things, somehow a person (though no longer necessary for the creation of the world; for, convinced as he is of the existence

9 Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox*, 16.

of numerous universes other than our own, Reiss holds that the conditions for the existence of life could have arisen by chance) –, if we discount all this, there is the acknowledged fact that Jesus of Nazareth was the inspiration of what became a new religion in the first century AD. This religion was known to St Luke, if he was the author of the *Acts of the Apostles*, as the Way, and it had separated itself from the Judaism of its founder by the end of the century. So we must ask from what this inspiration sprang if not from the miracles that were performed in its name? The answer must lie in the revolutionary morality preached by a charismatic Jewish teacher, highly critical of the state of the Jewish religious community of his own time, and believed by his disciples to be the Messiah, promised in the Jewish prophetic tradition. One must not forget that St Paul's letters were the texts written most closely in time after the death of Jesus, and it is these letters, and those of Peter and John, that probably reveal most about the birth of the new religion and its breaking away from Judaism. Some have thought St Paul and Platonism to have been the main components of Christianity. And yet, patchy and internally contradictory as the gospel stories are, and doubtless written with rather different audiences in mind, there is no reason to believe that they were deliberately misleading about the revolutionary nature of the moral teaching of Jesus. This is shown in some of the reported sayings such as the beatitudes, and the parables such as the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. These seem themselves enough to be the foundation of a new religion. It seems to me, therefore, that it was from such moral teaching that the new religion drew its inspiration; and the morality of Jesus, a morality of the heart, was set in explicit opposition to the kind of law-governed morality of the Pharisees, which had become empty and formalistic. It was this new morality that the stories of the miracles were designed to reinforce. So it is one more paradox of Christianity that it is these very miracles, the Virgin Birth, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, that now serve to call the whole of Christianity into doubt. Theologians have been far readier to acknowledge this than members of the practising clergy, who very seldom raise questions about the truth or otherwise of items of doctrine with their congregations, though they may once have learned about them in theological college.

In the passage from Nineham that I have already quoted, he remarks that modern people need help to be able to make sense of the idea of God, an idea that was perfectly familiar to first century Jews. And it is generally assumed that the idea of religion is dependent on the idea of God or gods. Indeed, the opening words of my book of 2010 read 'The idea of God (or of gods) is

essential to religion, and without it religion would not exist.'[10] Yet now I begin to think I was wrong. (And indeed, when I wrote these words, I was forgetting Buddhism.) We must remind ourselves yet again that Jesus was a Jew, and the Jewish faith was indeed faith in God, both as creator of the world, and as the giver of the law to his chosen people, the people of Israel. As we have seen, there was discussion among the disciples and with St Paul of the extent to which gentiles who adopted the Way were bound by the Jewish Law, and this could not have been settled all at once, or all in one manner. Obviously, since Jesus was the Messiah, and the fulfilment of the prophecies, there could not be complete discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New, but perhaps the God of Israel could not be transferred between the Jewish and the Christian faiths without major modification. Perhaps we should consider whether God is the centre of the Christian faith as he undoubtedly was of the Jewish. It is not, after all, a minor change, to switch from being a God with a Chosen People – always at hand to help them when they suffer oppression or to lead them out of exile – to being a God indifferently for all the people in the whole world. What does this even mean? Perhaps the new Christianity really needs a more abstract idea at its centre, less imbued with history and with particular personality. Perhaps Christians are barking up the wrong tree when they start their creed by asserting that they believe in God.

And there is an obvious candidate for the *sine qua non*, the central tenet of the Christian faith: the idea of love. This is, of course, not a new idea. It is the idea that caused such scandal in 1963 when expressed by the Bishop of Woolwich in his *Honest to God*. Later, in the 1980s and 90s, Cupitt's books spreading from Cambridge explored the same ideas. And, at the very birth of Christianity, it was the idea expressed in the first century AD, in the first Epistle of John: 'Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is Love' (1 John 4:7–8). The Epistle-writer emphasises that this is not a new commandment, but the commandment that the disciples had been given from the beginning, and therefore that which they were commissioned by Jesus to teach to the whole world. If God can be said to be Love, then perhaps Love can stand in for God.

I believe, therefore, that it is perfectly possible to profess Christianity, while admitting to agnosticism or even atheism, as long as the value of loving one's neighbour is paramount, bad though many Christians may be at carrying out

10 Mary Warnock, *Dishonest to God: On Keeping Religion Out of Politics* (London, 2010), 1.

the commandment. There has surely never been a period of history when the evils of hatred are more clearly to be seen; and the virtues of forgiveness, generosity and a sense of community may seem to take on a positively sacred nature that would justify their place at the heart of religion. For religions are, after all, necessarily, a creation of the human imagination; no other animals conceive of them. So gods are created in our own image, or in the image of our own best aspirations. It is not, therefore, as we are often told, that morality must derive from Christianity or not exist at all. It is rather that the values of Christianity derive ultimately from morality, which long pre-dated it; but they derive specifically from the morality of love, as preached by Jesus. To believe this, we do not need to believe in God. But we may call ourselves Christians, none the less.

Finally, the lasting value of Ronald W. Hepburn's work seems to me to lie in his never-failing conviction that it is the imagination which alone can explain the uniquely human sense of the wonderful and the transcendental, whether experienced in the context of religion, or of our engagement with the natural world and our 'aesthetic appreciation of nature'. That is an insight that it is valuable still further to explore.

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