

## B. Critique of religious experience

In view of the considerations reviewed so far we are looking first for an understanding of human religiosity which will explain both its persistent fascination and its moral ambiguity. As so many contemporary commentators have pointed out, religion may have been driven from its traditional thrones by intellectual attacks and by emotional repudiation, but it continues to reassert itself, undoubtedly witnessing to deep needs in human selfhood. Consequently the Church at all levels needs to be more effective in unmasking the appeal of religious experience as it manifests itself in contemporary spirituality, and in showing how the world's individualism distorts what God is offering to the world in Christ. While that is the starting point for this chapter, its further purpose is to examine the weakest point of the European tradition in philosophy and theology, concerning human consciousness and selfhood, because it is there that the underlying confusion lies, giving further excuse for the prevailing habits of spirituality both in religion and in supposedly secular life.

### **Religion as private**

Nicholas Lash drew attention, first in *Theology on Dover Beach* (1979), then in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (1986), and more extensively in *Easter in Ordinary* (1988), to a 'general consensus' that religious experience is 'by its very nature, 'private', 'inner', 'subjective',<sup>6</sup> referring there to words of Brian Hebblethwaite. He went on that such a 'notion of religious experience... is parasitic upon a more general account of human experience...' of which he gives an instance in Richard Swinburne's definition of 'experience'.<sup>7</sup>

Behind the definition of experience as 'conscious mental going on' [Swinburne's phrase] there lurks the myth, at least as old as Descartes, that the *real* 'me', the essential person, lives somewhere inside my head. From within this private citadel, in which alone are certainty and security to be sought, I attempt (not without nervousness) to make contact, through sense or argument, with such other similarly sheltered egos as may surround and greet and threaten me.

This myth is of 'metaphysical dualism according to which all facts, events and things fall ultimately into one of two classes: the material and the spiritual, the physical and the mental, the bound and the free'. It appeals to people generally because on this basis religion can be kept under private control.

What keeps religion going, especially in our day, is the attraction of and the quest for, religious experience ... often construed as an oasis of delight, wonder or reassurance, a warm, safe place in which the complexity and incompleteness of argument, on the one hand, and the untidy and uncontrollable turbulence and terror of fact and flesh, relationships and politics, on the other, are kept at bay.

But, Lash concludes, “all such dualisms profoundly distort and misrepresent our human, and hence our Christian experience.... [They] express not simply a mistaken philosophy, but a pathological deformation, a personal and cultural disease. That is why they are so difficult both to diagnose and to heal”.<sup>8</sup>

### **Experience and the individual**

In *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* and then much more fully in *Easter in Ordinary*,<sup>9</sup> Lash took the ideas of William James, the author of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*,<sup>10</sup> as the outstanding example in the English speaking world of how things were going, and going wrong, in psychological thinking about religion. For James had defined religious experience as ‘the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine’ (*The Varieties* p.50). In contrast to that definition, we come now to the centre of this book’s concern to find a better statement of Christian orthodoxy concerning human nature and the human awareness of God. Although modernity has moved, both philosophically and theologically, in a systematically sceptical direction, there did arise through the humanism of the age a very proper attention to the ‘existential’ sense of what it is to be human. This experiential emphasis, the positive in modernity, has been providential, and is in marked contrast to the generally negative outcome of the Enlightenment as far as faith is concerned. On this basis I consider what the *imago dei* doctrine means and concentrate particularly on the origin of individual selfhood, outlining a proposal for an orthodox Christian understanding of the relation between God and the world in terms of duality and spirit.

### **Being open to recognise God’s presence**

To show why a philosophical theologian like Nicholas Lash has given such thorough attention to the subject of ‘religious experience’ I take his lecture in Canterbury Cathedral in September 1993, marking the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Anselm’s enthronement as Archbishop. The

whole lecture should be consulted,<sup>11</sup> but the essential points for my purpose are as follows.

The best known phrase in Anselm's writings: ... [is] "I believe so that I may understand". If, when considering this phrase, you find yourself drawn into a discussion in which all sides take for granted that either 'faith' or 'reason', either received tradition or our individual attempts to make some sense of things, must gain the upper hand, then Anselm will stay a stranger to your world. If, on the other hand, you find yourself muttering, without pain or effort, complacent bromides about 'of course we need both "faith" and "reason"', then not only Anselm's writings, but those of all great Christian thinkers, will remain closed books gathering dust in the shuttered attic of your sleeping mind. (p.151)

Confronted as we are by the massive unbelief of our contemporaries, we must not diminish the significance of that unbelief by reducing it

to a mere matter of finding no good uses for the small word 'God', whereas Anselm, who took serious things seriously, was interested in the unbelief that issued from the heart, not that which merely skimmed across the surface of the mind....

And under the sub-heading 'Experience and Expertise' Lash refers to words from Anselm's *Letter on the Incarnation*: 'One who does not believe, will not experience; and whoever does not experience, will not understand'.

[W]here the knowledge of God is concerned, it is discipleship which furnishes the necessary context of experience. I say 'discipleship', rather than 'believing', because we will not hear what Anselm is saying if we indulge our pernicious modern habit of *contracting* the sense of words like 'faith', 'hope' and 'love' until they refer to individual, private, psychic states or attitudes, rather than to shared and public patterns of conviction and behaviour. For Anselm, 'believing' is living the life of a disciple: a life open to God's command, nourished (as he puts it) by the Scriptures in the way of wisdom. (pp.154-155)

### **Questing from the shared heart**

By using the word discipleship, we are reminded that, not just as believers but simply as people, our life is corporate, and therefore

both for the Church's wellbeing and for humanity's survival the character of personal reality should be made clear. Since society and its faith communities belong together especially at the level of personhood, there is an obligation on all to understand the heritage of community living which is upheld by shared belief in the value and potential of persons. As world citizens we need to be alert to the danger of seeing the act of believing 'through spectacles designed by the Enlightenment', rather than in being "bound together in a common project" that belongs to our humanity (p.157).

The problems start when 'faith' and 'reason', heart and head, belief and understanding are taken to be antithetical, mutually exclusive ... In such a climate 'credo ut intelligam' rings out like a battle cry of obscurantism and irrationality. First take the leap of faith and then you will understand; first close your eyes and then, at last, you will see! Even quite sensible and educated Christians may be affected by this nonsense. (p.159)

My task now is to take the matter further with the help of James Mackey in *The Critique of Theological Reason*.<sup>12</sup> This complex study traces the roots of postmodernist positions in philosophy, with particular reference to human subjectivity, and then goes on to discuss research in developmental psychology in relation to this theme. The proposal from which he develops his argument is:

that the most significant feature of postmodernism is not the apparently rampant relativism it is thought to entail, but the loss of the subject (to which some would add, the loss to view also of the rest of reality). (p.5)

In his long second chapter he refers to Heidegger, who 'encountered in his early years' the prevailing philosophy as one in which the

still dominant subject is purely of the nature of mind, consciousness or spirit...as yet without any content from the material, empirical world. It is worldless, or other [than] worldly ... the transcendental subject that can only later, by some process or other, come to be or be seen to be related to this material world ... (p.54)

Mackey was pointing out that if the self transcends the body in the way our Creator has been held, in the western tradition, to transcend creatures, *our own existence can only be a matter of conjecture*, any knowledge of other persons that we seem to have can at best be a matter

of inference. In contrast the Christian makes no such assumptions. Believing in resurrection as well as spirit, we can be confident that human consciousness belongs intimately to our embodied existence, and that its relative transcendence of the body's materiality needs to be defined differently from the way the transcendence of the Creator has been conceived.

Mackey explains how two philosophical streams of thought, the phenomenologist and the materialist, have formed the postmodern climate in which we live. His analysis of the phenomenologist thinkers Husserl, Sartre and Heidegger shows that a satisfactory account of reality is threatened in two separate directions. On the one hand it is difficult to establish the subject's 'relationship with the rest of reality; and in particular the relationship of knower to known'. On the other the loss is threatened of 'the real embodied subjects we ... seem to ourselves to be'.

Heidegger's determination to rid us of a transcendent subject in the crude sense of transcendence ... tends to leave us rather too embodied in the world, with little or no transcendence of any kind.

Yet 'a 'Cartesian' dualism continues to be influential throughout Heidegger's philosophy' (pp.78-79).

### **Some illumination in Sartre**

What comes out particularly clearly in Sartre's kind of existentialism is an interpretation of human experience that has become more and more explicit among believers and unbelievers alike – the emotional sense that the human subject is alone and ultimately empty as if hanging over an abyss.

The positive achievement of Sartre's opening aim begins with his distinctive analysis of the *Cogito*. Instead of defining the *Cogito* as a thinking substance, replete with ideas and *volontes* ... Sartre seeks to define something altogether more fundamental and ordinary, which he calls the 'pre-reflective *cogito*'. This is a consciousness which is a being; and being a consciousness, it is conscious of being conscious. Yet we must not then describe it as being conscious of itself, for that would be to suggest that of its own nature and essence it has a kind of content to be conscious of. ... As Sartre puts it in *Being and Nothingness* p.349 ... it is of itself contentless, to the point where it can

be described quite accurately as the ‘absolute nothing which I am’. (p. 63)

It is that sense of personal emptiness to which I am pointing, for although Mackey rightly concludes his thorough examination of Sartre’s thinking about the self by saying that ‘his philosophy continues to fail’ (p.75), it seems to me that Sartre was right in his statements about subjectivity if considered in isolation, that it is consciousness of being conscious, yet *without content* in itself. We know, however, that we are not obliged to identify the self in that disjunctive way at all, for in being a certain individual, with a certain personality and a great bank of memories, we know ourselves as embodied people in relation to others and in the continuity of life in communities. How then is it that so many people in real life share the feelings of isolation that are the basis of Sartre’s philosophical complaint? How, against the background of such feelings, are we to account for our existence as persons, being *in a real sense substantial*?

### **Personhood is raw material for resurrection**

I shall argue that the apparent problem here in discerning the reality of the individual’s personal being requires a distinction between individual subjectivity and personhood, although it will be different from Sartre’s distinction between For-itself and In-itself. What we have to identify is the nature of our *dependence with other persons on the Creator’s personal being*. The distinction between subject and person is needed because the substantiality of self which we tend to identify closely with our subjectivity belongs rather to the order of ‘intersubjectivity’ (for which see section G below), since all created spirit has its non-physical existence in relation to God the Triune Spirit. This is the case for everyone whether obedient to God or not, whether believing or unbelieving, because all personhood involves the capacity to relate to others in the complementary way that we see paradigmatically in God’s Trinity.

Sartre, who did not perceive that we live in dependence on God, could not solve the problem that his thinking had propounded. He saw the reality of the In-itself on which personal continuity depends, but could not conceive any prospect of being assured that this was himself embodied in community. As Mackey represents his position:

*I am* and can *be* (self-) conscious only in the process of being conscious of something other than myself. The In-itself affords me the very possibility of being, in both the

ontological and ethical mode.... I depend upon it and act to try to make myself into an In-itself ... at times trying to pretend I have already succeeded ... (p.64)

We can all feel like Sartre cut off from our continuing reality, but in Christ we are able to see that this spiritual reality (In-itself), which I call our personhood, does remain through God's Spirit since our life as persons is sustained in God's Trinity who gives us our potential for healing and resurrection. This is why the NT affirms that all rise, either for salvation or for condemnation (John 5:29). Consequently Sartre's gloomy conclusion helps us to be realistic in recognising the need for this distinction between subject and person, and in understanding the belief in resurrection.

The individual's subjectivity does not encompass the wholeness of the person. Rather subjectivity is the place of access into personhood which is the dimension of each person's engagement with others and with the whole of spiritual or personal reality. The subject-self, as I shall call it, is in the first instance fundamentally physical; it mediates the encounter between persons and provides the individual with that identifying location from which he or she can both engage in the world of things and also participate in the interpersonal life of 'spirit'. The intersubjective life is one in which we absorb far more than we contribute. The input from beyond ourselves we absorb willingly or unwillingly, and with it we interact in active or passive response. Since we have only a little freedom to censor what we absorb, we often fail to appreciate how much we can be victims of the culture(s) and intersubjective climate in which we live. Consequently we have to stress that human life, which we tend to see in terms of separate individuals, is in fact deeply corporate and also dependent on God. We need a wider definition of personhood, and a perception of dependence on God's Spirit that has been part of the ancient wisdom of the biblical tradition (cf Job 12:10). When I agree with Sartre that human subjectivity itself is without content, I do not mean that the subject's mind is to be considered empty, as Locke does, a *tabula rasa*, for that would be to give the mind an essential aloofness and a self-contained constitution which I believe is to be expressly denied. Rather the subjectivity is empty in not being any kind of container. In my view the necessity of the subject-self concept lies in showing that the individual's consciousness exists in a participatory mode for feeling, for thought, for communication and in making decisions. The subject-self can stand out from the person's previous train of behaviour, and so is able to act with

freedom from moment to moment. For that reason it can side with God or against him. This freedom, to change one's mind, and will, becomes the basis on which personhood can be healed and nurtured through repeated choices under the influence of the Spirit.

### **Weakness in personalist philosophies**

Mackey's next section is intended "to observe what happened to...the (loss of the) subject, in the predominately personalist philosophies which have emerged in the course of [the twentieth] century; philosophies which... were welcomed with a mixture of relief and gratitude, and as much by Christian theologians as by moralists". (p.80) John Macmurray, for instance, was not able to take the critical step of realising that the human baby is a person, who knows and is purposeful even while she is largely helpless physically and has so much to learn. Because he has no concept of personhood that is much more than a knowledgeable subject, his thought remains individualistic and over intellectual.

It is the parent who, for quite a long time in the case of humans, supplies the intentionality, the rationality; it is she who knows and understands and intends the successful outcome of the infant's 'random' movements and trial-and-error behaviour in general. The human neonate, one might say, is rational during these earliest years, but only potentially so, only by proxy.

At first Macmurray's account appears to be 'a totally intelligible and convincing explanation', says Mackey, but

for all his talk about... being in relation with other persons from the outset... the child for all that time is... no more than a complex of very elementary feelings.... [T]he look, which for Sartre is itself the very paradigm of the conscious, knowing encounter with another person, falls for Macmurray amongst these random movements.... In consequence the newborn is only... 'potentially a person'.... (p.84)

Mackey's discussion of Macmurray's work leads on to the central question of this chapter: when and how does the human organism become a personal self? The answer has long eluded all enquiries, mainly because of assumptions that have prevented the search being directed to the right place. In showing that that was true in this instance Mackey has to conclude about Macmurray's work that he



makes it impossible to understand how human neonates come to be rational-intentional agents.... So much that he said about the nature of persons in relation is so obviously heading in the right direction. But it would be fair to say ... that in the unstable philosophy of the time, his work shows the pendulum still swinging towards the extreme of the solipsistic mind.... (pp.85-86)

### **Transcendence with immanence**

Going beyond the philosophical dilemmas of the twentieth century to find a 'better outcome', Mackey wrote:

the most promising approach ... would then begin with consciousness incarnate, subjectivity thoroughly ... embodied, in bodies and, through these, in the body of the material world. We can surely do this on the basis of our own immediate human experience.... (p.114)

He makes clear how we are to use the terms 'transcendence' and 'immanence' and be faithful to the nature of orthodox Christianity. All too often in the Church's history Christians have failed to use those terms properly.

A far more sophisticated account of immanence ... could correspondingly emerge ... Hence one would say of the mutual transcendence of subject and worldly reality that subject transcends worldly reality from within that reality, and that worldly reality transcends subject from within subject.... But this 'within' must not be taken in its spatial connotation, as is usual with the ghost-in-the-machine metaphor, but rather in the connotation of a kind of co-inherence which appears to be *sui generis* ... It follows that transcendence and immanence, in their properly sophisticated senses, turn out to be correlative terms rather than contraries; each calling for the other, rather than replacing each other, as happens when transcendence is taken in the crude sense of separation.... [Accordingly] subject and worldly reality could be described as correlative poles of the one inclusive being, rather than entirely separate regions of being. (p.117)