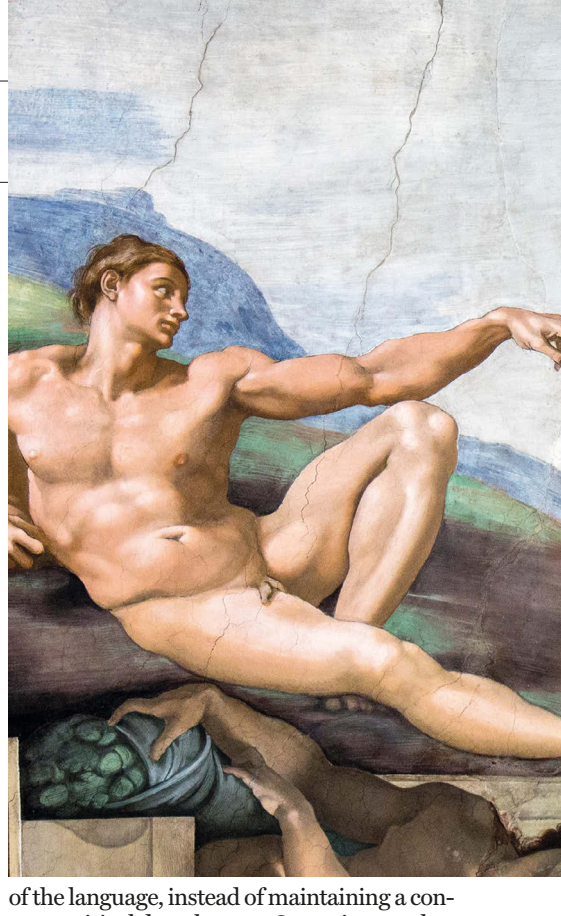
Reasons of the heart



Why believe in God? Making sense of religious faith requires richer resources than can be supplied by the 'analytic' approach / **By JOHN COTTINGHAM**

HOW RELEVANT is philosophy to religious belief? Catholic formation for the priesthood includes the study of philosophy, and most Catholics probably feel it is important that their faith should not be blind, or irrational, but based at least partly on reason and evidence. As Pope Benedict declared, and Pope Francis subsequently underlined in his apostolic letter on the thought of Blaise Pascal, *Sublimitas et Miseria Hominis*, "The Catholic tradition from the beginning has rejected what is called fideism, which is the desire to believe against reason."

Nevertheless, philosophical attempts to provide decisive demonstrations of God's existence have not, to say the least, met with unalloyed success. If religious claims could be established by philosophers with the same rigour as that with which geometers prove their theorems, there would presumably be few atheists or agnostics left. Nor does God's existence seem the kind of thing that could be corroborated by empirical science. The "God hypothesis", as Richard Dawkins has scathingly called it, does not seem susceptible of the kind of experimental confirmation that we expect of our scientific theories.

So how *can* we show there are philosophically respectable reasons for belief in God? Such reasons do, to be sure, need to be based on evidence, but the evidence, I suggest, has to be of a rather special kind. It cannot be what the American philosopher Paul Moser has called "spectator evidence" – that is, the kind of evidence that can be gathered and evaluated by a detached and impartial observer. To demand "spectator evidence" would be to think of God as an item in the universe that might be empirically verified in the same way as any scientific hypothesis. But the evidence relevant to believing in a God who is worthy of worship, and seeks our free and unconstrained love and allegiance, would, it seems, have to be very different. It would have to be evidence of an altogether more personal and more spiritually transformative kind.

Instead of an approach to God that tries to model itself on neutral, quasi-scientific criteria, philosophers of religion may need to take seriously what Pascal, in the seventeenth century, called "reasons of the heart". Instead of remaining cold, impartial observers, requiring to be presented with data that can be laid out for dispassionate scrutiny, we may need to give up our status as detached and lordly scrutineers, and be prepared instead to give ground, to be open, to yield to the possibility that we might be transformed.

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SOME MAY WORRY that letting one's guard down in this way is not philosophically respectable, because it risks allowing us to be swept along towards religious belief in a way that we should regard as irresponsible in any other area of enquiry. But in fact there are many areas other than religion where a certain openness and receptivity is both necessary and perfectly appropriate. In literary studies, for example, as the philosopher Martha Nussbaum has argued, if we are to discern the properties of a great poem or novel, we have to allow ourselves to be receptive and "porous", knowing when to yield to the power of the language, instead of maintaining a constant critical detachment. Or to give another example, in cultivating a personal relationship, if we always remain at a distance, clinically scrutinising the attributes of the person we seek to know, we may only succeed in blocking the opportunity for a closer kind of acquaintance that allows their deeper qualities to shine through.

Those familiar with the way contemporary "analytic" philosophy is taught and practised in the anglophone world will be aware that it is for the most part a very "left brain" subject, operating on a fairly rarefied intellectual plane, and often deploying a plethora of daunting specialised jargon. Such work can provide training in careful conceptual analysis and precise logical reasoning, skills whose value is unquestionable. But I have come to think that such methods should not be the whole story when it comes to the philosophical study of religion. For the "analytic" philosophical approach can seem very austere and abstract, and not to have much to do with the way religion actually operates in the life of the believer. It is rather as if the philosophy of music were to confine itself to the abstract theories of musicologists, without any attention being paid to the transforming power of music in the lives of those who experience it or perform it.

If we think about the issues that arise in the lives of religious believers – the enigmas of human suffering, sin, evil, repentance, conversion and redemption, the meaning of our existence, our place in the cosmos and our ultimate destiny – it should rapidly become clear that the very nature of the subject matter is often going to require the use of richer resources than can be supplied by abstract intellectual analysis alone. To attempt to understand the relevant phenomena in all

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Michelangelo's Creation of Adam on the Sistine Chapel ceiling in the Vatican

their emotional and psychological complexity, we are going to need to bring them to life, as it were, not lay them out as specimens on the dissecting table. And to do this, we are going to need the kinds of resource that will make vivid to us the way in which these challenging puzzles are addressed and wrestled with in the lives of the human beings concerned.

So we need what I call a more "humane" philosophical perspective. While in no way discarding the technical tools of the professional philosopher such as abstract argumentation and analysis, this perspective is also ready to draw on the full range of resources available to the human mind, including those that depend on literary, artistic, poetic, imaginative, aesthetic and emotional modes of awareness. In somewhat similar vein to Pascal's insistence that it is the heart that leads one to awareness of God, Ludwig Wittgenstein once wrote that "life can educate you to a belief in God"; and by "life" he explicitly included "sufferings of various sorts". The implication here is that conversion never, or only very rarely, occurs through intellectual debate alone, but rather comes about as a result of an emotional transformation, a radical shift of perspective, that allows the world to be seen differently.

Giving due weight to the role of the heart and the emotions need not at all mean that coming to believe in God is an irrational business. There is alternative interpretation, namely that an emotional shift can act as a *catalyst for the perception of new evidence*: as a result of being emotionally moved, one may become open to perceiving aspects of reality that were previously hidden from view. This, or something similar, was perhaps what happened to the unnamed disciples on the road to Emmaus, who were not merely intellectually convinced by the exposition of the Scriptures provided by the stranger, but who "felt their hearts burn within them as he talked with them along the way".

NONE OF THIS means that adopting a religious outlook need be a matter of uncritical acceptance. Philosophy has always prided itself on the testing and evaluation of our beliefs – as Socrates famously put it, "the unexamined life is not worth living". Reason is the jewel in philosophy's crown, the "quality control department" (in the scholar and scientist Iain McGilchrist's phrase) without which our thinking would be chaotic and undisciplined, and ever liable to lead us into confusions and wrong inferences. So it should remain a vital part of the philosophy of religion to be able to stand back from a given religious outlook, or framework of interpretation, and assess how far it coheres with other parts of our belief system – for example, how far it fits with what science tells us about the workings and evolution of the cosmos, the history of the earth and of our species, and how far it accords with fundamental moral convictions about how we should live and how we should treat each other and the environment.

These wider questions are part of the broader task of philosophy, which should always, in my view, aspire to be not just an analytic but a *synthetic* or *synoptic* discipline, striving to bring the different parts of our world view together and to see how far they fit together, or clash. But the resulting outlook should never become too abstractified, or too detached from its subject matter: it always needs to be sensitive to all the wondrously rich and manifold aspects of our human experience. So in thinking about religious belief, there is every reason to move towards a more holistic and capacious model of philosophical enquiry – one that encourages that imaginative insight or "amplitude of mind" that William Wordsworth in "The Prelude" called "reason in its most exalted mood". For the role of philosophical reason is surely most to be respected when it is allowed the greatest scope, allowed to range over the full spectrum of human experience, and to play its full part in the creativity and responsiveness of the human spirit. It will then not be cut off in isolation from the imaginative powers and rich emotional responses that bring our thinking alive, but will be able to draw on all these resources, so as to engage in a form of philosophising that is conducted by, and addressed to, the whole human being.

John Cottingham is professor emeritus of philosophy at Reading University. His latest book is The Humane Perspective: Philosophical Reflections on Human Nature, the Search for Meaning, and the Role of Religion (Oxford University Press, £70 (Tablet price £63).