

Theism and Spirituality*

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1. What is spirituality?

Despite the comparative decline of religion in contemporary Western culture, the notion of spirituality has proved unexpectedly durable. A T-shirt reportedly seen on some campuses bears the legend “I’m not religious but I’m spiritual”; the slogan seems intended to convey that the wearer, while not adhering to any religion or subscribing to any traditional religious doctrine, nevertheless has some of the attitudes often associated with a religious outlook – for example a disdain for purely material possessions, or a sense that there is more to life than worldly success or the pursuit of financial gain.

One might conclude that the concept of spirituality is nowadays used to mark a contrast with the “worldly” or “material” domains. And that contrast is certainly a very long-established element in the meaning of the epithet “spiritual”, as a glance at *Webster’s* or the *Oxford English Dictionary* will confirm. But it cannot be *sufficient* to define the term, since we would not normally classify pure mathematics as a “spiritual” pursuit, even though it deals with an abstract immaterial realm. Moreover, a contrast with “material” does not even seem *necessary* in order to describe something as spiritual: someone who spends his weekends walking in the mountains or the forest – hardly immaterial activities – might say his hobby has a “spiritual” dimension, if it gives him a sense of inner peace or harmony.

What seems important here is not the degree of corporeal involvement, or its absence, but rather that the activities in question take us beyond our ordinary routine existence and afford a glimpse into something more profound. Hence a deep appreciation of the wonders of nature or the transforming qualities of great art may be described as bringing a spiritual element into our lives. The “depth” that is in question here is not easy to specify precisely, but it seems to have something to do with our human aspiration to “transcend ourselves” – to seek for something beyond the gratifications and dissatisfactions of everyday living. The poet William Wordsworth is famous for his explorations of this theme, often in connection with those powerful intimations of meaning and value which many people have when contemplating the beauties of nature. He speaks in *The Prelude* (Wordsworth 1972 [1805]: 478) of those “spots of time” when some vivid experience of the natural world takes us beyond the depressing routines of normal life, and provides a “renovating virtue” whereby our minds are “nourished and invisible repaired.”

The label “spiritual” in ordinary usage may well be applied to the kind of complex response to the beauties of nature found in Wordsworth’s poetry. And the label may be equally apt for the music lover to use when describing those “sacred moments” when we are overwhelmed by a great work of music, and it seems that “the human world is suddenly irradiated from a point beyond it.” (Scruton 2010). But the use of terms like “spiritual” and “sacred” in such contexts raises the question of what relationship there is, if any, between the phenomenon of spiritual experience and the truth of traditional theism. The examples just cited suggest that one does not have to believe in God in

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order to enter the domain of spirituality; but that leaves open the question of whether such experiences are actually intimations of the divine, albeit those having the experiences may not construe them in that way. (Compare the case of morality, where the metaphysical question of whether God is the source of goodness or of rightness is not settled by asking whether those who pursue the good or the right actually regard them as depending on God.) As far as the ordinary meaning of the term “spiritual” goes, however, its usage does not seem to presuppose any theistic assumptions. It makes good sense, for example, to speak of “Buddhist spirituality”, when referring to typical elements of Buddhist religious practice such as fasting and meditation, even though Buddhism does not involve the idea of a personal God. In modern times, we have also seen the rise of so-called “secular spirituality”, advocated, for example, by practitioners of certain types of yoga, who do not subscribe to any theistic worldview, and might be reluctant to call their outlook “religious”, even though it may fill something of the role of a religion in their lives. In sum, the general category of spirituality, as the term is used today, appears to be broader than that of religion, and is certainly broader than that of theism.

2. Spiritual praxis

Though the contemporary notion of spirituality ranges over many different kinds of phenomena, there is some common ground. One is struck by the convergence in the forms of spiritual *practice* commonly found in the great world religions, and even in some types of secular spirituality, notwithstanding radical differences in the respective beliefs, doctrines and outlooks. For example, Buddhists, Christians, and practitioners of secular spiritual techniques may all from time to time seek periods of silence, stillness and meditation. This suggests that even if our primary interest is in religious and theistic forms of spirituality we may find helpful to approach the phenomenon of spirituality in the first instance by looking at praxis rather than theory – that is to say, by looking at some of the practices religious people engage in, rather than by analyzing the content of their theological commitments. So, as a working hypothesis for investigating religious spirituality, let us include under the term “spirituality” all the practical components of religious observance that are left when one brackets off the doctrinal elements – in short, pretty much all the structured practices religious adherents engage in, *qua* religious adherents, when they are not actually asserting credal statements, or involved in theological analysis of the teachings of their faith. Ignatius of Loyola, in the sixteenth century, spoke of “spiritual exercises”, which is a convenient label for the various religious practices most religious adherents engage in from time to time, and which are undertaken in a more systematic and formal way in the kind of seven-day retreat that Ignatius had in mind (Ignatius 1996 [1525]). This general category includes prayer, fasting, meditation, *lectio divina* (the attentive reading of Scripture), participating in communal worship, group activities such as singing psalms, individual self-examination and confession, and moments of prayer or reflective silence at key moments of the day (for example before eating, or before retiring).

The first point to be made about such activities is that they are not exclusively intellectual. They may well have an intellectual component, but they are not characteristically directed towards the analysis of propositions or the evaluation of doctrines. Spiritual exercises are typically *polyvalent* – they operate on many different levels – emotional, physical, aesthetic, moral, pre-rational, subliminal, introspective and collaborative, to name but a few categories in a very heterogeneous list. The singing of psalms, to take one key example that is at the centre of the divine office in Benedictine

spirituality and many subsequent monastic traditions, comprises the recitation of words learned by heart over a long period of weekly and monthly and yearly repetition. It entails a *formalized structure* of praxis – regulated patterns of observance assigned to set hours throughout each day. There is a *physical* component – prescribed movements of sitting and standing, in which the whole community participates, collectively as well as individually. It involves *music*, not just as an optional extra, but essentially and integrally: there is a plainsong chant, again carefully regulated, with an antiphonal structure and other laid-down forms – for example the crucial two beats of silence at the colon or pause in the middle of each verse.

It is largely pointless to ask if the experience of a monk attending the divine office is an intellectual one, or an emotional one, or a religious one or a moral one, or an aesthetic or musical one, since *all* these elements are involved, and not just involved as separate elements, but interfused in a total act of devotion (and the same point clearly applies to many other liturgical traditions). The music, we may note in passing, is a part of this kind of spiritual praxis that can be thought of as a kind of icon or image of the whole; for the singing or chanting integrates all the aspects of the person – physical activity (of lungs, vocal chords, mouth, shoulders, diaphragm and bodily posture), emotional expression and response, sensory appreciation, intellectual grasp, and, in the examples found in the finest music, more complex kinds of moral elevation and self-transcendence.

In the singing of psalms, as far as the cognitive or intellectual aspect goes there is of course a definite semantic content to the sentences that are chanted; but these sentences are typically not, or not very often, assertions about the truth of certain religious doctrines; they are cries of remorse, desperate pleas for help, shouts of praise, songs of thanksgiving, expressions of hope and trust, and so on. And their point is that they should work holistically, gradually transforming and perfecting the lives of those who participate; not just changing their intellectual outlook, but irradiating the very quality of their lived experience.

This very brief sketch of the features of a typical spiritual exercise may be thought to give support to the idea of the *primacy of praxis* (cf. Cottingham 2005) when it comes to understanding spirituality. This notion, however, must be employed with care. It may be that one can to some extent understand spirituality while bracketing off the doctrinal content, but it is important to note that bracketing off is not the same as deleting. It is dubious to claim (as did some of the non-cognitivist philosophers of religion of the latter twentieth century) that religious observance is entirely non-doxastic – that it does not involve any beliefs or truth-directed assertions about the nature of reality. Prominent among those who took this kind of line was Don Cupitt, who argued for a nonrealist account of religious spirituality, in which the God who is addressed in spiritual practices such as prayer has no independent reality but is simply “the mythical embodiment of all one is concerned with in the spiritual life.” (Cupitt 1981: 167). One problem with this approach is that it is very hard to deny that certain truth-claims are *presupposed* in the kinds of spiritual activity just mentioned; at the very least (to take an obvious point), the prayer and praise and thanksgiving expressed in a typical psalm presuppose the existence of a God, who is being thanked and praised and prayed to. That said, we need not suppose that the praxis in question requires or depends for its authenticity on our being able to unpack the precise meaning of these presupposed truth-claims, let alone on our being in a position to provide evidence which supports the claims. As centuries of theological debate have shown, the very idea of God as conceived in the three great Abrahamic faiths, a creative power that transcends the natural world,

is sufficiently outside the realm of ordinary human discourse as to generate a host of philosophical issues about the precise meaning of assertions about the deity, not to mention the question of their epistemic warrant. But this does not negate the validity of the praxis.

Why not? One clue to the answer may perhaps be seen in the part-for-whole analogy referred to above, the case of music. Music would remain a valid human activity even if there were no musicologists, or even if (as is perhaps indeed the case) there is no clear metaphysical account available of what music is “about”. One could go further: even if that which is expressed in a sublime work of music is utterly ineffable – that is, even if no cognitive or intellectual analysis were available which could pretend to capture what is expressed – this would not shake our confidence that music of this kind is among the most valuable and important enterprises that humans can undertake. The validity of the praxis survives the inadequacy of a theoretical account of it. It might even be claimed, drawing on the “apophatic” tradition that has informed much Western spirituality (see section 3, below), that the very ineffability of what is expressed may be an indicator of its transcendent value. This line, to be sure, is not without its problems. The dubious phenomenon of “new age spirituality” (including everything from massage oils to magic gemstones and healing crystals) provides ample evidence that mystery and ineffability can be used as a cloak for questionable activities for which their (sometimes fraudulent) practitioners cannot offer any articulate justification. And this might suggest that any approach to spirituality that accords primacy to praxis over theory risks making the domain of spirituality immune from critical evaluation. But here one may invoke the maxim “by their fruits ye shall know them.” The evaluation of spiritual praxis is not a logical free-for-all, shrouded in the obfuscating mists of ineffability; it can be assessed, at least in part, by reference to the moral and psychological difference it makes in the lives of the practitioners. We shall return to this theme in section 4, below.

3. Spirituality and the apophatic tradition

If one looks at the shelves marked ‘spirituality’ in libraries or bookshops, one will often find the writings of Christian mystics, such the *Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous middle English work of the mid fourteenth century, the *Revelations of Divine Love* written later in the century by the English anchoress Mother Julian of Norwich, or the works of the sixteenth-century Spanish Carmelites, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. These may broadly be classified as works in the “apophatic” tradition, strongly influenced by ideas of the fifth-century mystic known as Denys the Areopagite (or “Pseudo-Dionysius”), who declared that God is to be sought “beyond knowing and light, in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.” (Denys 1987 [500]: 997). The term “apophatic” signifies, as Denys Turner has aptly put it, “the breakdown of speech, which in the face of the unknowability of God falls infinitely short of the mark.” (Turner 1995: 19).

That God is unknowable, or cannot be fully comprehended by the human mind is a fairly standard theological idea, found in St Augustine (1857-66 [397-428]: Vol. 38, p. 360), and in St Thomas Aquinas, whose *via negativa*, or “negative way” was based on the idea that since “we do know what kind of being God is”, we have to proceed by establishing what he is not. (Aquinas 1911 [1266-73]: Pt I, qu.12, art.13). But what we find in the mystical writers mentioned above is not so much a theological thesis as the record of a personal struggle towards God though a slow and often painful process, as Denys the Areopagite put it, of purgation, illumination and finally union. This kind of spirituality invites us once more to focus on praxis rather than theory, and it is no

accident that in the medieval mystical writers it is partly inspired by the methods of the ancient “desert fathers” who, at the beginning of monasticism, aimed to seek God through a rigorous regime of solitude, fasting, silence and prayer.

In a certain way, then, we may say that spirituality of this type sets itself against theology, or at least against an over-intellectualizing approach to the quest for God. This idea is taken up explicitly in what has come to be known as the “Platonist spirituality” of a group of Cambridge thinkers of the seventeenth century, of whom one of the most notable was Ralph Cudworth:

Ink and paper can never make us Christian, can never make new nature, a living principle in us, can never form Christ or any true notions of spiritual things in our hearts. The Gospel, that new law which Christ delivered to the world, is not merely a letter without us, but a quickening spirit within us. Cold theorems and maxims, dry and jejune disputes, lean syllogistical reasonings could never yet of themselves beget the least glimpse of true heavenly light, the least sap of saving knowledge in any heart. (Cudworth 2004 [1647]: 60)

In spite of this, however, the Cambridge Platonists were not ‘mystics’, in the sense that they repudiated all explicit knowledge and understanding in favor of immersing themselves in the “cloud of unknowing”. On the contrary, in taking their inspiration from that fusion of Platonism and Christianity that had always been a significant strand in Christian thought, they celebrated reason as a divine gift, bestowed on human beings for the purpose of bringing them closer to God. As Nathaniel Culverwell declared, reason is a “calm and friendly light”, which “does never commend itself more than in agreeing and complying with faith.” (Culverwell 2004 [1657]: 137-8). The theme broached here, of the reconciliation of faith and reason, is of course a perennial one in religious thought, and it serves to remind us that, for all the emphasis on emotion and on praxis that we find in the writings broadly classifiable under the heading of “spirituality”, there is nothing in such emphasis that precludes a search for God or ultimate reality that aims to integrate all our human faculties. To mistrust an exclusive reliance on reason and intellect is by no means the same as repudiating these faculties altogether.

4. The psycho-ethical dynamics of spiritual praxis

The need, stressed by the Cambridge Platonists, not just for abstract knowledge but for salvation accords with the point made at the end of section 2 about the moral effects and purposes of spiritual praxis; and this in turn seems to reinforce the case for saying that the difference made to the moral quality of a life lies at the very core of authentic religious spirituality. The Ignatian concept of “exercises” is significant here, calling to mind as it does, the training programs devised by athletic or sports coaches. As Ignatius puts it, “just as walking and running are exercises for the body, so *spiritual exercises* is the name given to every way of preparing and disposing one’s soul to rid itself of disordered attachments.” (Ignatius 1996 [1525]: 283). The physical training analogy, with its suggestion of the rigorous discipline and effort needed to become an athlete, is highly significant. For the moral growth which is aimed at as one of the principal goals of spiritual discipline is not simply a steady and gradual maturing of ethical virtue and practical wisdom (as envisaged in more secular or down-to-earth moral systems such as Aristotle’s ethics (Aristotle 1976 [325 BC])), but a radical re-orientation of the self, or, to use the notion found in the Christian gospels, nothing less than a “rebirth” (John 3:3).

Not all spirituality, however, is authentic. In a recent study, Mark Johnston has described the phenomenon of what he calls “spiritual materialism”: this involves retaining our ordinary selfish desires (for security, comfort, success, etc.) and trying to get them satisfied by manipulating supposed supernatural forces. The debased form of religion known as idolatry is similar – placating the gods to get what we want. Authentic spirituality, by contrast, has it as its task (according to Johnston) to address the “large-scale structural defects in human life” – suffering, infirmity, and the vulnerability of ourselves and our loved ones to time and chance and, ultimately, death. The religious or redeemed life, Johnston argues, is one where we are morally purified in such a way as to be reconciled to these large-scale defects. (Johnston 2009: 14ff.).

How might this work? A purely academic or intellectual approach might suppose that it must work on a doctrinal level: the religious believer is one who subscribes to certain doctrines like the after-life, which reconcile him to the fear of death; or she subscribes to the idea that the right kind of prayer will produce divine interventions, to cure illnesses or avert dangers and difficulties. Now clearly many religious adherents do indeed believe in life after death, or in miracles. But there is always a danger that the wrong kind of focus on such beliefs will be the catalyst for the growth of superstitious, idolatrous, manipulative and inauthentic forms of religious observance. And it may well be that authentic spirituality puts far less emphasis on miraculous divine intervention or next-world eschatology than is often assumed by those contemporary critics of religion who construe it as a series of primitive unscientific attempts to explain or control the world by invoking supernatural forces (compare Dawkins (2006)). Instead, authentic spirituality aims at nothing less than the moral transformation of a life.

It may be helpful here to take a schematic example of a life structured by the actual disciplines of spiritual praxis. Although the contrasts about to be drawn are necessarily somewhat crude and simplistic, they may nevertheless convey something of the moral and psychological dynamic of such a life, in contrast to what may be called the “secular life”. On waking up in the morning, the secularist simply gets out of bed, washes and dresses, and starts the day’s business. The spiritual practitioner, by contrast, though of course also doing these things, sets aside an assigned time near the start of each day to collect the thoughts. This will be a time of silence and meditation. It will be a time to reflect with gratitude on the gift of life and the blessing of another day. It will be a time to recall the mistakes of the previous day, and summon the strength to improve. It will be a time of focused contemplation on the tasks to be done this day, and of awareness of the need for grace in performing and accomplishing those tasks. It will be a time of recalling the needs of others, both of loved ones and in the wider world. Such a program of spiritual praxis need not be a matter of prolonged and elaborate devotions, but may simply be a comparatively short time of *focused and morally oriented reflection*. Of course there is no logical impossibility in the secularist finding such a time for focused reflection each morning, but it seems likely, as a matter of empirical fact, that the chances of finding such a systematic pattern of praxis in the life of the secularist will be very small. Add to this that the praxis just described will, in the historical traditions we have been referring to (Benedictine, Ignatian etc.), not just be a free-floating individual decision that could peter out at any time, but will take the shape of a formalized structure, where the reflections and silences are interspersed with prescribed readings of scripture and recitation of psalms and so on. In short, there will be a *vehicle* for the spiritual practitioner’s daily activity – one that has been developed and refined through long centuries of tradition and continued practice, and which is designed and structured with the aim of nurturing the integration of the self, and furthering the slow and hard

process of coming to greater self-awareness and moral maturity. What is more, the same kinds of difference we have been outlining between a secular and a religious pattern of living will be exemplified throughout the course of each day, for example in the habit of saying grace before meals, or in meditative reflection before retiring last thing at night. The relevant structures will also be available in moments of special stress and difficulty such as arise in the major crises of every life and even, to some smaller extent, on a quotidian basis. And they will be reinforced at a communal level, by weekly rhythms of Sunday or Sabbath observance, and by the organized patterns of collective worship that mark the regular seasons of the liturgical year, not to mention the more momentous turning points of an individual's life in the community, such as those involving birth and marriage and death.

The purpose in outlining these more or less familiar patterns of spiritual praxis is not to offer an apologia for the religious life, still less to criticize the secular way of living that tries to make do without such structures (a decision that over the long term might well call for great courage and determination). The point rather is to bring out how the structures of spirituality are integrally bound up with certain psychological and moral goals, not perhaps too dissimilar from what the Stoics had in mind by a "good flow of life" (Zeno 1987 [300 BC]: 394). By their rhythmical and repeated character they are productive of internal focus and attentive self-awareness; they foster psychic integration and tranquility of mind; they are geared to the achieving of a progressive and deepening moral sensibility. No doubt the picture presented above is a somewhat idealized one, representing an optimal pattern rather than a statistically typical portrait of any given actual religious adherent (who of course may often diverge radically from the ideal). But it should serve to bring out the strength of the connection between authentic spirituality and moral growth, as well as the way in which spirituality functions as a "vehicle" for the religious life, so that any understanding of that life cannot work solely at the level of an intellectual analysis of theological doctrines, but needs to take account of the patterns of moral and spiritual praxis that energize it and give it shape.

5. The prospects for spirituality in a post-religious world

The contrasts just made between the secular and the religious life naturally raise the question of whether there might not be an authentic form of spirituality within the framework of a typically modern, wholly naturalistic worldview. A number of recent writers have argued for this possibility, notably the French moral philosopher André Comte-Sponville, in his *L'esprit de l'athéisme*, translated as *The Book of Atheist Spirituality*. Comte-Sponville completely rejects traditional theism, and firmly subscribes to the view, as he puts it, that the natural world is the "totality of reality" and that the supernatural "does not exist". Rejecting the idea of divine creator, he is drawn instead to an immanentist view: "everything is immanent to the All" – the capital letter, he adds, is due to "convention rather than deference". (Comte-Sponville 2008: 137). So there is no God here, only the whole of Nature; but nevertheless there emerges throughout the book a strong wish to preserve "the sacred" – the existence of "a value that seems absolute, that imposes itself unconditionally and can be violated only on pain of sacrilege or dishonor." The long tradition of spirituality, Comte-Sponville acknowledges, is a primary vehicle for preserving this vital sense of the sacred and the moral imperatives that go with it. And so he describes himself as "faithful" to that tradition. Fidelity, in his sense, is "what remains when faith has been lost". And "renouncing a God who has met his ... demise ... does not compel us to renounce the

moral, cultural and spiritual values that have been formulated in his name.” (2008: 18 & 21).

It is obviously correct that becoming an atheist does not entail abandoning morality. But Comte-Sponville’s idea of preserving “fidelity” to a spiritual tradition in the absence of faith nonetheless raises serious problems. As argued in section 4 above, the religious structures of spirituality provide a vehicle for the articulation and reinforcement of certain important moral values and sensibilities; yet for the vehicle actually to operate in an individual’s life there evidently has to be *participation*. And this returns us to the central question of the connection between spirituality and theistic belief, which has been in the background of our entire discussion. If the truth of theism is *presupposed* (see section 2, above) in the traditional Jewish and Christian and Islamic forms of spiritual praxis, then it is by no means clear how an atheist could participate in the relevant forms of devotion with integrity. “Fidelity” to a tradition implies more than merely acknowledging its existence, or regarding it as a rather impressive legacy, in the way a tourist might admire the splendid ruins of an ancient Greek temple.

A further problem for Comte-Sponville’s idea of “fidelity” to a spiritual tradition is that he evidently wishes to retain moral and evaluative concepts, drawn from that tradition, to which as a naturalist he is arguably no longer entitled – in this case, notions like “absolute”, “sacred”, “unconditionally imposes itself”, and the like. This raises a complex issue in moral philosophy that is beyond the bounds of the present article, namely whether a purely naturalistic ethics can support the traditional idea of the unconditional normativity of moral values – the idea that they exert a compelling demand on us, whether we like it or not. In fact for Comte-Sponville himself the “absolutization of ethics”, as he terms it, turns out in the end to be “illusory”: the idea of absolute external demands on our conduct is a “projection on to Nature” of “what exists only within ourselves.” (2008:178). But it seems unlikely that such projectivism will be able to underpin the genuine normativity or authority of moral values, or to embody fidelity to the spiritual tradition which has shaped so many elements of the Western cultural landscape. For the spiritual praxis that has enriched so much of our collective history, the practices of prayer, meditation, *lectio divina*, and the whole structure of private and public worship, has been, in the Western tradition, inextricably linked to the Judeo-Christian idea of our *creatureliness* – the notion that we humans cannot create values all on our own, and that our very existence depends on a creative power, source of all goodness, truth and beauty.

Admittedly (as was noted in section one) there are alternative forms of spirituality which are not committed to the theistic idea of loving and wholly good creator. Buddhist spiritual praxis, for example, is based on the concept of *anatta*– the idea that the self is an illusion and that there is nothing beyond a constant flow of impermanent conditions that arise and pass away. So the spiritual exercises in Buddhism are designed to release the mind from craving and attachment, and enable it to dissolve into a blissful state in which there is a kind of oceanic merging into the impersonal flux that is all there is. Such a spirituality belongs to a worldview that diverges radically from the Judeo-Christian conception, with its morality of unconditional requirements that calls us to orient our lives towards the Good – albeit it does nevertheless support a strong ethical tradition which makes the virtue of compassion central to living a good human life. This example suggests that the notion of a non-theistic spirituality is certainly not incoherent in itself; what does seem problematic is Comte-Sponville’s idea of remaining “faithful” to the specifically Western structures of spirituality once the theistic metaphysical framework which supported that tradition has been dismantled and discarded as

rubbish. Perhaps alternative structures might be devised, thus dispensing with the need for fidelity to a tradition; but as has emerged at many points in our discussion, spirituality characteristically involves a systematic and organized template of practices and routines; and it will not be easy to invent such a template from scratch. Nor, on the other hand, will it be easy to graft a new, wholly naturalistic spirituality onto the rootstock of the Western theistic tradition, with its associated morality of unconditional demands.

6. Spirituality and conversion

We noted in section 4 that a principal goal of spiritual praxis has always been taken to be the moral transformation of the agent. Many of the great writers in the tradition of Western spirituality make the point, explicitly or implicitly, that such transformation is not merely an intellectual matter, but characteristically involves a radical shift of emotional perspective. It seems part of the very nature of the religious life that it characteristically springs from practical and emotional involvement rather than from intellectual analysis alone.

The seventeenth-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal provides a striking illustration of this point. Pascal's famous *nuit de feu* or 'night of fire' on 23rd November 1654 – the intense religious experience that led to a radical change in his life – generated in him what he describes as feelings of "heartfelt certainty, peace and joy". But the God who is the source of these feelings is "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", not the God of "philosophers and scholars". (Pascal 1962 [1670]: 913). Faith, for Pascal, must arise in the context of a living tradition of practical religious observance, rather than from debate and analysis in the seminar room. This is perhaps part of what he meant by his famous dictum *Le coeur a ses raisons que la Raison ne connaît point* ("the heart has its reasons, which Reason does not know at all" (1962 [1670]: 423)).

The conversion experience Pascal describes was sudden and intense, and there are other cases (perhaps most famously that of St Paul on the road to Damascus, as described in Acts, Chapter 9), which appear to have been even more dramatic and shattering. But Pascal also canvasses the possibility of a much more gradual process, where the change comes about slowly (though once again not through intellectual reflection alone). What Pascal envisages is a change resulting from willed self-immersion in spiritual praxis, despite an initial position of neutrality or even skepticism:

You want to cure yourself of unbelief, and you ask for remedies: learn from those who were hampered like you and who now wager all they possess. These are people who know the road you would like to follow; they are cured of the malady for which you seek a cure; so follow them and begin as they did – by acting as if they believed, by taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. In the natural course of events this in itself will make you believe, this will train you. (1962 [1670]: 418).

The idea here seems to be that deliberate involvement in spiritual practices (going to church, taking holy water and so on) will gradually train the initiate into a pattern of belief. The actual verb employed by Pascal for this "training" process is *abêtir*, normally used of the taming of an animal. So the techniques of spirituality might seem to be envisaged as a kind of conditioning process, one that will bypass the intellect and *make* us receptive to religion, just as a horse is made receptive to bit and bridle by a process of habituation.

To interpret Pascal along the lines just suggested is to construe the practices of spirituality as operating in a very mechanical way. No doubt there are some respects in which spiritual praxis does indeed involve habituation, though that is of course true of the moral life generally (cf. Aristotle 1976 [325 BC]: Bk II). But to suppose this is the whole story seems inconsistent with the idea of God as offering salvation as a “free gift” (Romans 6: 23) that humans can accept or reject. A more plausible and religiously sensitive interpretation of Pascal is offered by Ward Jones, who construes him as advising the doubter voluntarily to place herself in position where the freely given grace of God has the opportunity to operate. The resulting process need not be supposed to be entirely mechanical or to bypass our fully human faculties of perception and reason. Rather, as a result of making oneself receptive (for example by going to Church, participating in the liturgy and so on) the subject gradually places herself in a position where evidence for the truths of the faith becomes available – the very evidence that might before have been ignored, or simply unnoticed. (Jones 1998).

If this is right, Pascal envisages religious belief not as a requirement to be met *before* starting to participate in spiritual praxis, but rather as the *destination* towards which the praxis may lead us. The suggestion is that the individual, after an initial decision to embark on the road, prior to evidence, may gradually be opened to experience that will subsequently, if all goes well, confirm the appropriateness of the initial choice. If this should seem to be a very tortuous and complicated process, it is worth noting that many of the crucial changes in our lives do in fact follow just such a pattern. In the choice of a spouse, or a career, or a decision such as whether to start a family, it is seldom if ever possible to make a rational decision “up front”, from a cold, detached and scientific perspective – from the perspective of an observer demanding what Paul Moser has called “spectator evidence” (Moser 2008). Rather, there has to be an initial decision to embark on a set of practical commitments whose credentials, at that stage, cannot be fully established. Only later, if one is prepared to make oneself open and vulnerable in the kind of way a detached spectator never is, will one be in a position to receive the free gift of evidence that (if all goes well) may confirm the validity of the initial choice.

To sum up the role of spirituality in conversion on this “Pascalian” analysis, the idea is that it offers a set of practices which we may embark on, even from a position of partial doubt, in order to make ourselves open to the possibility of change. In a somewhat similar way to what happens in the moral life generally, we develop understanding not principally by the intellectual analysis of theories, but through disciplined patterns of habituation, which progressively foster our powers of moral and spiritual discernment. This, if the theistic worldview is indeed true, will be one way in which conversion can indeed come about; and there will be a later stage, if all goes well, when praxis and theory will become interfused, and our daily patterns of behavior become incorporated into an ever fuller and more explicit grasp of the significance divine grace in our lives.

7. Conclusion: theism, spirituality and philosophy

To close this survey of the relationship between theism and spirituality, it is perhaps appropriate to draw some philosophical lessons. One such is that a major element in the Christian legacy that has so profoundly shaped modern Western culture is a tradition of spirituality that takes us into a different dimension from the theoretical debates and intellectual disputes which form the staple diet of academics in general, and philosophers in particular. It encourages us instead to reflect on how religious

allegiance is never simply the adopting of a set of hypotheses or doctrines, but always involves accepting a practical call to change one's life. What the disciplines of spirituality offer in this context is a method, an organized structure of praxis which can serve as the vehicle for progress away from disordered and wasteful living towards greater knowledge and love of the good.

This acknowledgement of a lived, practical dimension to the religious life need not be thought of as falling outside the province of philosophy; on the contrary, if the dimension in question is indeed an integral part of what it is to have religious allegiance, its recognition must form part of any sound philosophy of religion. To acknowledge this does not at all mean a move "away from reason"; as the Cambridge Platonists argued, it may be perfectly possible to pursue the goals of truth and rationality while at the same time deepening one's understanding of the moral and practical demands of religious faith. But abstract argumentation cannot be the whole story. Just as it would be absurd for a philosopher of music to confine himself to the abstract theories of musicologists, without any attention to the transforming power of music in the lives of those who experience it, whether as performers or listeners, so an exclusive concentration on "theism" (if by that is meant theories about the existence and nature of God) cannot possibly constitute the whole of the philosophy of religion. And if that is right, it seems to follow that there is a certain impoverishment in the philosophy of religion as currently practiced in many university departments. However that may be, a philosophical examination of the nature and role of spirituality in human life may serve to remind us of the complexity and richness of our human nature, and so recall us to what has always been one of philosophy's principal tasks, striving towards a better understanding of ourselves and our place in the scheme of things.

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