

# Awareness of God

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The belief that God is present to the human mind (or soul) and can be found there is part of the Christian tradition. Many Christian philosophers seem to regard this as the concern only of specially devout persons and of no interest for philosophical purposes. The evidence for it, they think, is too slender to be taken seriously by academic philosophers without particular interest in religion, who tend to regard anything in the nature of religious experience as suspect. So philosophical discussions about religion are usually concerned with rational arguments for and against theism, usually of a technical kind.

In this article, I want to suggest that there is another attitude of mind which has become more widely shared as the century has advanced, especially in France. The last section of the article, summing up the situation in England, has been added by way of appendix. I have concentrated on developments in Roman Catholicism because I think them to have special significance.

## 1. The Augustinian Claim

This claim, which I accept, will be set out, in the first instance, by the quotations from a work by Henri (now Cardinal) de Lubac:

Every human act, whether it is an act of knowledge or an act of the will, rests secretly upon God, by attributing meaning and solidity to the real upon which it is exercised. For God is the Absolute; and nothing can be thought without positing the Absolute in relating it to that Absolute; nothing can be willed without tending toward the Absolute, nor valued unless weighed in terms of the Absolute.[1]

There is no proof of these assertions in the sense of a logical argument enforcing acceptance of them on pain of logical contradiction. All that can be done, in the face of objections and incomprehensions, is to talk, like Plato, around the topic, in the hope that light may break through. Augustine finds what has been called a "quasi-immediate" [2] knowledge of God in the recognition of him as the truth by which the mind is illuminated. He finds that there is something above and beyond his own mind to which he has to submit, which is there waiting for him.

I shall try to put this insight into a form suited to our present situation. We heard a good deal not long ago about a problem of identity experienced in particular by the young (older people had either pushed it under the carpet or come to terms with it somehow). Sometimes this resulted in a sense of unreality: we had been thrown, as Sartre put it, into a meaningless world, and what was called our "existence" seemed to be vanishing away. How can life be given a meaning unless there is some sort of plan for it? To say that

something is *true*, then, would be to say not just that we have discovered it, but that it belongs to a world which has a purpose. The world has been put there by God, the source of reality; that proves to be what makes it "real," and that is what makes us "real."

If this is right, then it's not enough to claim that there is such a thing as a "foundational belief" in God. Such a belief cannot stand up to the objection that we might be at the mercy of a system of illusions organized by some presumably omni-competent evil power. It might not seem reasonable to take that particular objection very seriously, but the impression can remain that we are unable to cope intellectually with the situation in which we find ourselves placed; is the whole enterprise of trying to make sense of things the one great mistake? Only an awareness of God is both self-guaranteeing (only for the subject of it, but his claim must be thought about by others) and at the same time the guarantee of such certainty about anything else as we may prove to possess.

In human knowledge there is a unity of subject and object such that the possibility of error in affirming it is wholly excluded. The particular deliverances of our senses may "deceive" us; that is, to speak properly, we may at any time interpret what they present to us in a way which is perfectly reasonable (based as it is, on the lessons of experience up-to-date) but happens by some extraordinary combination of circumstances to be inappropriate. Even so, what is affirmed, as intuitively known, is the presence to our bodies, themselves intuitively known through our sensations, of a foreign body. For instance, if one falls down the stairs, the impact on one's body of other bodies cannot be in doubt because they are directly apprehended *as other*. But how do I know that I have not gone mad and become incapable of valid judgements? The answer, as before, is that the making of a valid judgement is guaranteed as such by the reality which I encounter, guaranteed itself as a reality by the source of reality, not necessarily recognized as such. It is not, as critics of such a view suppose, that there is a claim to a mere *feeling* of certainty, something purely subjective; it is the object with which there is that *union* of knowledge that provides certainty.

It is the recognition of the other as other that is basic for our knowledge. In the case of external objects it is only their activity upon us that we know; that is, we know them *in* their activity and only so; we find the cause *in* its effects. In the case of God, there is a union of a very different import; it arises as the first step towards a personal relationship to which everything else is heading. Far from its being the case that we can never be certain of God, without that certainty we can never be certain of anything. But, as Pascal said, God is always known and seldom recognized.

The following passage from de Lubac may now be useful:

The idea of the one God springs up spontaneously at the heart of consciousness, whether as a result of the exigencies of reason or of some supernatural illumination, and imposes itself upon the mind, of itself, of its own necessity. In fact, the clearest instance shows God revealing himself, and in doing so dissipating the idols or compelling the man to whom he reveals himself to tear from his heart: 'You have beaten upon the weakness of my sight, shining upon me with power, and I shook with love and dread.'<sup>[3]</sup>

Reasoning processes, de Lubac is saying, may prepare the way for an awareness of God, but they cannot produce it of themselves. The illumination of faith, he goes on to say, builds on the original awareness and gives it still greater force. And at this point the agnostic interlocutor may play what he considers to be his trump card: if there were a God, the world would not be the terrible place which, to so sad an extent, in fact it is. Something needs to be proposed about that in passing. It is that the "free will defense" of God in regard to the world's woes is perfectly sound: if love is God's meaning, it is unthinkable that his plan for us should be without a hazard; we must choose or reject him personally, willingly, freely; it is sin that is responsible for the world's woes, human or (in the case of physical evil) angelic. Obviously this raises a great number of further questions, but this much might be enough to avoid a breaking off of the conversation. To touch on this topic seems particularly necessary because theologians not otherwise fixed in Thomist positions continue to treat God's dealings with us as presenting at least apparent contradictions which we cannot hope to resolve. Even Karl Rahner, to whom I owe so much, insists on the complete "incomprehensibility" of God and refers to the "free will defense" as a "popular" and unsound enterprise.

At this point de Lubac's words are highly relevant:

The world is the real work of a beneficent God and has a real value. It is not just a stage on which man has to act and choose, nor is it simply an instrument for him to use; it is, so to speak, the stuff of the world to come, the matter of eternity. Man's task, therefore, is not so much to liberate himself from time as to liberate himself through time. His task is not to escape from the world, but to raise it up. Only, in order to understand time and the world, it is necessary to look beyond it; for it is its relation to eternity which gives the world its consistency and makes time a real becoming. And it is the hope of radical and final transformation which saves our terrestrial efforts from futility. . . .[4]

Finally, there is this as a sort of summing up:

If, when night comes, I think back to certain privileged moments when the truth of my affirmation was revealed to me in an experience, I am not living on a deceptive memory, on the recollection of a pleasing experience, but recollecting a value perceived; it is not the recollection of the fulfillment of a value which I love in principle within me, but the recollection of a newly discovered existence which integrates, orders and judges all human values.[5]

## 2. Dermot Lane's The Experience of God

The index of this little book ,[6] written by an Irish theologian, does not contain the name of any British one; the reason for this is that books by British theologians, relevant to Lane's purpose, are not easy to find. The introduction shows that the approach is the same as Cardinal de Lubac's: "The mystery of God is not some theorem to be proved; it is rather an experience to be lived. . . . The proofs for the existence of God are really an elucidation and elaboration of the experience of God." [7] So far as I know, this is the first book in English to sum up for the general reader the achievements of the last twenty-five years in bringing back experience, understood as an affair of the intellect, not just of feeling, to its proper place in traditional theology. There is much, then, of great value in the book; but I use it partly in order to disagree with it on certain issues. It could have been pointed out with advantage that experience in this sense is taken so much for granted by early Christian writers, starting with the New Testament, that it is seldom formally expressed. When Irenaeus, to take one example, speaks of our having an original knowledge of our Creator, a *sensibilitas Dei* (which one might translate "a taste of God"), he is not saying anything in the least extraordinary. Lane's introduction concludes admirably: "Theology is faith seeking understanding that is critically grounded in the experience of the revelation of God."

In this first chapter, Lane tells us that experience in general involves "some form of encounter between the subject and the reality" and that "there is always a reciprocal flow. . . which creates a new relationship, participation, awareness and understanding in the life of the individual." [8] The basic element here is awareness; without it, there can be no conscious relationship, nothing to react to or understand. "Participation" means a sharing, and that must be understood in terms of union when we are talking about God; in the ordinary way it refers to having something *in common*, and that, I must urge, is untrue of our relationship with God. The Absolute cannot be reduced to our level. Lane goes on to quote<sup>9</sup> from Professor J. E. Smith's account of religious experience, in his important and valuable book *Experience and God*, as being "at one and the same time an experience of something else," adding, that this "serves as the medium disclosing that dimension in life which is called religious." [10] In this book Smith discusses the general question about the meaning of life and speaks of the need to find an object of supreme worth; this constitutes "the religious dimension." "For an answer", he goes on, "it is necessary to surmise the possibility of revelation understood as disclosure from the transcendent side and encounter from the side of man." [11] I wish Lane had quoted that too.

Experience of God together with experience of the finite has been called a "mediated" knowledge of him by a number of writers, including myself, but I have come to the conclusion that this language can be misleading. It is suitable when the experience of God is based on an experience of, for instance, moral value, when its absoluteness comes to be recognized as God's and this seems to be discerned *through* it;

thus it can be called a direct but mediate knowledge. But the experience of something incidental which leads indirectly to an experience of God seems properly described as an "occasion" for it. In any case, all experience or encounter, *in itself*, is immediate in the sense that there is an actual contact. To this I shall return.

Lane, however, now rejects the suggestion that some kind of direct or immediate contact with the sacred is possible in religious experience.[12] The first reason given for this is that "the notion of experience, especially at the level of depth-experience, is a little more intricate than one of mere direct vision," because in it the subject moves "beyond the visible frontiers of the empirical world into a new invisible world, mediated by meaning and depth." Here Lane seems to be thinking about religious language and ordinary psychology. But from my point of view the heart of the matter is a non-conceptual experience of God which can be evoked on occasion by language and can itself evoke language (it can suggest analogies) but is beyond the power of language to express. In other words, there must be, on this view, a "touch" of God which is the mainspring, as it were, of the whole business.

Lane's second reason is, he says, "more serious". It is that from the side of the human person it is extremely unlikely that the individual could sustain direct contact with God in this life: "We must first of all receive the grace of 'light of glory' in order to enter into the beatific vision of God. . . . all human experiences of God are indirect, being mediated through our experience of creation and the revelation of God in Jesus." [13] I accept that they are mediated, in the sense I mentioned above, but that does not seem to me a good reason for calling them "indirect." Indirect knowledge, I would say, is the result of an inference; we know *that* something is there, but we do not at all know *it*. Lane's objection might seem to be based on the supposition that any direct knowledge of God would be unrestricted and unlimited apart from the beatific vision, whereas even in that vision there is always a further depth to plumb. There can be no doubt that our knowledge of God while we are in our present bodies is limited in comparison with the "face-to-face" knowledge of the blessed, but this does not mean that there is no sort of real vision of God available for us on this earth.[14]

Happily, however, Lane goes some way into reverse a little later: "We need to go beyond the alternatives of 'mediate' and 'immediate' experiences of God. Instead, we would want to suggest that God is co-present and co-known through the different experiences and knowledge of the human person. God is co-present to us from the outset in all our experiences." [15] He goes on to speak of "the God of Augustine who is more intimate to the soul than the soul is to itself." This is the God of many others besides Augustine, but the theme is not enlarged upon in Lane's book. He does, however, add here most usefully: "If we did not know God implicitly in all our experience, we would not even begin to raise the question of God. . . . One of the primary tasks of theology today is to unpack our human experience of this omnipresent God." [16] In this connection he refers to the famous statement of St. Thomas Aquinas that "God is known implicitly in everything that is known." [17] It is surprising because it does not fit in with Aquinas's general principle that man has no direct knowledge of God. De Lubac quotes it in favor of his case. It is perhaps one of those uncharacteristic remarks in which Aquinas the "essentialist" gives way to Aquinas the "existentialist." Father Copleston asks bewilderedly: "Does it mean simply that though one does not know one is capable of knowing?" [18]

Something more may be added usefully, perhaps, at this juncture on the notion of awareness as "union." It is not a novelty-Thomism speaks of an "intentional union," but seems not to see its importance. It found the action of knowing as a "becoming" in Aristotle, but does not find this pattern of identity without confusion central to epistemology. When we listen with enjoyment to music, it means something to say "we are the music". We are taken out of ourselves and "become" what we were not before. We give ourselves up completely to something and thereby increase our own stature. This can be an intellectual activity of great intensity in which we apprehend the notes in their relationship to one another and to grasp them as forming an intelligible pattern; it is a matter of sustained attention. This is a figure of the transaction which has to take place, in the end, between ourselves and God. It is indeed a beginning of that transaction even if it is accepted only as a mysterious gift of great value. If the mind is in a healthy state, its awareness of God grows as its activity intensifies. Philosophers in the Anglophone world commonly find this sort of talk meaningless and exasperating, because for them experience is bound up so closely with our bodily

functions that to speak of a mind which has a life of its own to live seems meaningless. Christian philosophers may be expected to believe that man (philosophically and theologically speaking) appeared on earth at a particular time with fresh powers of supreme importance.

### 3. Awareness and Christian Faith

It belongs to the philosophy of religion to consider the possibility of a divine revelation and, in particular, whether Christian faith has any relationship with a putative awareness of God. Here again it will be useful to take Father Lane's *The Experience of God* as a basis for discussion. The following passage gets us off to a good start:

If doctrine is not related to human experience it will inevitably become marginal in the lives of believers. Further, doctrine must be able to evoke religious experience in a way that opens up the individual to the ever present gracious mystery of God. A sign of sound doctrine is its ability to communicate some aspect of the inexhaustible reality of God. A close interplay should obtain between theological doctrine and religious experience.[19]

Lane describes what he calls "the most popular theory" about revelation as follows: "A kind of divine verbal communication took place between God and the world in the history of the chosen people and the life of Jesus. The agents of this divine communication were the prophets and the apostles who were regarded as the messengers of God." [20] It may well seem amazing that such a view should have been so widely held for so long. Lane here rejects "the suggestion that the revelation of God could be reduced to a series of propositions" and the implication that "God has stopped revealing himself to mankind . . . leaving the human race bereft." This is not to deny that there are propositions the basic truth of which (but not their culturally dependent forms of language) must be accepted by the faithful. The point is that this is not the whole truth of the matter: "God cannot be confined to or captured by a simple set of propositions . . . Such a view of revelation seems to contradict the important doctrine of the gracious omnipresence of God to the world and the indwelling of his Spirit among his people." The suggestion would seem to be that there is a non-conceptual element involved in revelation. But it is not directly stated.

Lane now turns to the theory of "revelation in history" and pertinently remarks that "a neutral or detached historian would not find the events of Israel's history more revelatory of God than the events of any other nation's history," adding that faith is not just a matter of discovering and arguing from historical facts but one of "grace and offer." A third theory, which "may be loosely designated as the subjectivist or existentialist" one, is summed up as follows: "The Word of God in Scripture calls us to a faith-decision. Revelation is not digging up doctrinal information about God from the past. Instead it is about a personal existential decision here and now." [21] Lane adds cautiously in a note: "Traces of this kind of thinking can be found in the works of R. Bultmann." He objects, soundly, that Bultmann's theory "creates something of a divorce between present faith and past history" and that it "neglects the role of tradition as the bearer and the Christian community as the interpreter of God's revelation to mankind." He concludes: "Each theory contains an important aspect of God's revelation. A balanced and complete account will include all of them." [22] This he will now attempt to provide.

The essential elements of his account are as follows:

There can be no divine revelation without the response of faith which receives it, and there can be no faith without the grace of God's revelation which draws forth faith in us. . . . revelation, if it is to be genuine, involves a process of conversion for the recipient. Contact with God changes the individual. . . . Revelation is only available in terms of the faith understanding of biblical and ecclesial witness.[23]

The last of these unexceptionable sentences should not be taken to exclude the sort of (not uncommon) conversion which has as its factual basis only the most slender acquaintance with the Bible and the teaching of the Church. The discovery of God in Christ and in his Church can be made in many different ways. Lane continues:

The revelation of God to us is always addressed to human self-consciousness and as such draws human self-consciousness out of its lonely estrangement into a new liberating communion with God. . . . It is only in and through the revelation of God that we become truly conscious of ourselves, our origin and our destiny.[24]

It seems that here Lane is speaking of revelation in general, not of the Christian revelation in particular which makes possible a union with the Father in the Holy Spirit through the victory over death of Jesus Christ. Are we to say that general revelation happened as soon as human beings appeared on this earth? It seems so, although we may reasonably suppose that there was at the beginning only a vague realization that so momentous a summons was being issued. We may also suppose that primitive man, in his state of innocence, was capable of very rapid development. Lane has not spoken of an "awareness" here, but his reference to "a new liberating communion with God" must imply it. He speaks to an "invitation from God which is mediated to us through our experience of the other who is the image of God in the world." [25] But there is nothing here about the image of God which each of us is and in which each of us can discover him. Lane follows Aquinas in playing down the directness of our self-knowledge. And it is by way of this, I want to suggest, that full conviction is gained. People who attribute it to the effectiveness of rational arguments, which they subsequently find ineffective, will sometimes discover that their conviction is still there underneath.

In regard to Christian faith, Aquinas does appeal to "inner" evidence, but it is of an unsatisfactory kind. Lane quotes him with approval: "There exists in the heart (*in affection*) an inner instinct which impels and moves us to believe. . . . It enables the individual to recognize and respond to the exterior grace of God's revelation in Christ." [26] Notoriously, Aquinas also gives the will a part to play in the production of the act of faith which seems to suggest wishful thinking. And he tells us that we must accept God's authority for His revelation although we have been given no convincing reason for believing in Him and cannot get intellectually "in touch" with Him. The result was that the certainty of faith became for traditional theologians the most difficult of all problems, the *crux theologium*. Theology had become rationalistic and detached from spirituality to the great impoverishment of both.

Apart from this residual Thomism, Lane is on what I would call the right side, for instance:

If the reality of the living relationship between God and his people is seen as something that can be summed up in a body of truths, then the emphasis of the Church will be simply one of safeguarding the deposit of faith. This will lead inevitably to an excessive concern with the defense of a verbal orthodoxy at the expense of a living active faith among the people of God. . . . If on the other hand the loving relationship between God and mankind in revelation is seen as something that goes beyond a body of truths . . . , then the concern of the Church will be to express that relationship in a language and practice that is in touch with people's present, personal, historical experience of God.[27]

#### **4. A Breakthrough: Dominique Dubarle**

What I have referred to as Father Lane's "residual Thomism" is a matter of the greatest importance in itself, although it appears only incidentally in *The Experience of God*. For it cannot satisfactorily account for that total commitment which faith, according to the Christian tradition, requires. It was not until 1963 that I was able to find a plain statement of what was needed in an authoritative work by a leading Catholic theologian. Henri Bouillard in his *Logique de la Foi* wrote as follows: "God reveals himself to each of us at the heart of the act of faith which he specifies. Our awareness of this revelation has the character of a direct and personal grasp, an inner experience, a supernatural perception analogous to mystical contemplation." [28] It is, in fact, the traditional view that mysticism is simply the development of faith; one would expect, then, to find an intuitive element in faith itself. Such statements as Bouillard's are still hard to find, at least in the Anglophone world (Father O' Collins' *Fundamental Theology*, excellent in so many ways, misses out this crucial point). And it was not until a few years ago that I found in the work of Dominique Dubarle what seemed to me a decisive breakthrough from Thomism to Aristotelianism on the whole philosophical-theological front on this fundamental issue of an awareness of God.

Dubarle is a much revered Dominican at the Paris *Institute Catholique. Le Modernisme*. [29] a collection of essays presented by him, ends with his ninety-page study, *Modernisme et Experience Religieuse*, in which he discusses the failure of the Roman authorities to understand what was going on in people's minds in the early years of the century. First I shall quote a few passages from the short final section of the article [30] in which he sums up his position. After referring to the statement in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel that the divine Word was life and that the life which was in him was the light of men, he continues: "With Saint Augustine I think-not indeed without my Christian faith's contributing to the thought's emergence-that it is this which gives us the basic truth about man's knowing powers." This, he says (I now paraphrase), is the ultimate truth about the light of the mind in all its dimensions and functions, natural and supernatural. But this truth is not always grasped in the same way at all levels. On the highest level of God-given wisdom it is grasped directly without need of interpretation; in everyday knowledge, science, discursive reasoning and so on, it is grasped through what man has taken from the world and organized, making it part of his mental life. The use of concepts and categories is indeed important and valuable, but this comes second in importance to the Light itself, without which these functions of the mind would not exist. Here I may add that Professor Ronald Nash in his book *The Light of the Mind* has shown conclusively, in my opinion, that this light is, for Augustine, God himself, not just something that he effects (which is the Thomist view of it).

Dubarle goes on to say that he finds the same teaching about human intelligence in what St. Paul said to the Athenians on the Acropolis about God's presence to them. It is a presence of the spiritual or noetic order, "immensely indefinite and confused," yet "it is in the life of the Word that the psycho-mental life of the human being is immersed." It is "a sovereign generality" which becomes "specialized and naturalized" as the light of the active intellect turns toward the sensible world in the form of reason and understanding, while still retaining its special active quality for use when opportunity arises. And then, "by a differentiating awareness, by a discrimination, this free and ever-active original register can achieve self-identification (the Word *was* the light that enlightens every man): ordinary experience takes on the cast of the ungraspable, the sacred. . . ." Dubarle sees in St. Paul's words to the Athenians about man's seeking God "gropingly" the fact that in primitive religion there must be "*contact* with divine truth," although God is still ungraspable and anonymous. Without this contact, "no searching for God would be found among men, nor any other specifically intelligent activity."

Catholic theologians are then asked to consider "whether, in this matter of man's religious life, there would not be an advantage in starting out simply from these Johannine and Pauline texts, taken in all seriousness, instead of beginning with more complicated and technical theories of knowledge such as Aristotelian or some modern one. . . ." The Thomist - Aristotelian theory has in fact been largely abandoned in theological schools with the result that these fundamental questions are often discussed, if at all, in terms of post-Christian philosophies. The following passage from an earlier part of the article will now be clear:

Why, then, whether it is a question of a 'natural' knowledge of God, or of faith, or of prophecy, or of that knowledge of the 'perfect' spoken of by St. Thomas, or, in fine, of the glorious vision of the blessed, why should there not be . . . with whatever differences and special characteristics, a simple cognitive contact with the very reality of God, making God known, really known himself, but always in a particular way and more or less profoundly.[31]

This passage seems to me to remove at a blow many unnecessary difficulties which have haunted theology for so long. It will be remembered that Father Lane objected to any talk about direct contact with God except in the beatific vision. Another passage is reminiscent of Lane, but the point of view is different:

. . . if the language of faith is to be more than simply talk, covering an ignorance pure and simple of the first Truth-the truth which faith, reflecting upon its own thinking, declares to be its object-then it is necessary, since the first Truth is simple, that faith's declaration proceed from a previous contact, itself simple, with this Truth. And this is the vital point: without this intrinsic source, the cognitive experience of that which faith principally expresses, the verbal determination of faith would rest on nothing, and faith itself would be reduced to a verbose ignorance.[32]

Lane was saying that the formulas of faith must keep in touch with the actual experience of the faithful. Dubarle is saying that, if Christians are not yet in touch with the inexpressible God, they are in fact only on the way to becoming Christians. The importance of this for Christian education will be obvious. Until "the sense of God" has been evoked, there can be no *religious* interest in what is being taught. One can always hope to evoke it. But the first duty is on the parents. If what has been said here is right, it follows that they should make clear, when opportunity arises, that religion is a matter of discovering God for oneself, something to look forward to when you are a little older, something that begins to appear in loving and being loved, in wanting to know the truth about things, in looking carefully at them, *appreciating* them.

## 5. Blondelianism

Philosophers in the Anglophone world take remarkable little notice of what their counterparts in France are thinking. There are historical reasons for this, such as the special relationships formed during the nineteenth century with German universities, but there is also a deep-seated difference of attitude to philosophy, at least as regards a concern with the life of the spirit and the pursuit of values, which persists to a considerable extent in France, not always from a Christian point of view but with one profoundly influenced by Christianity, whereas "the Anglo-American empirical tradition" is characteristically post-Christian. Philosophical Augustinianism continues to flourish in France and has come to be called, more precisely, Blondelianism. Books and articles continue to pour out about it.

Maurice Blondel was de Lubac's philosophical prophet; he has at least as much right as anyone else to be called the philosopher of the Second Vatican Council, which did so much to bring back a spiritual empiricism into Catholic thinking. His most famous book *L'Action* (1893) has appeared at last in English.[33] Here I can give only the merest indication of its contents. It is an account of man's various attempts to fulfill himself, and at this point I hope I may repeat a passage written some years ago:

These attempts follow one another with the inevitability which the 'logic of action' discloses to us, but there is always some fresh obstacle appearing, and there is always a gap between the will which wills particular finite objects (*la volonté voulue*), and the 'underlying' will (as we may call *la volonté volulante*) which always remains dissatisfied . . . The need for the absolute which emerges from all of this, combined with the impossibility of attaining to it by any products of human willing, leads to desperate efforts to force the issue . . . So the result of this 'dialectic' of human action is a requirement that is both necessary and impracticable . . .

'It is this conflict,' wrote Blondel, 'that explains why there must be present in a man's consciousness a new affirmation, and indeed it is the reality of this necessary presence that makes us conscious of the conflict.' That is to say, it is through this world's values but through their irremediable insufficiency that God is made known to us in practice.[34]

Blondel, therefore, is not a voluntarist or an activist. Man's great action, his self-surrender to God, is based on his awareness of him. This theme has been taken up by innumerable French writers of whom Gabriel Marcel is probably the best known. Marcel was one of those who had been willing to be called Existentialists (Heidegger was another, and so was I) until the word came to stand, in the popular view, for the philosophy of Sartre and for irrationalism in general. Marcel does not often mention Blondel and was once asked whether he had been much influenced by him; he replied: "That goes without saying." Blondel recognized himself as standing in a tradition of thought which goes back by way of Pascal, Bonaventure, and the pre-scholastics not only to Augustine but also to the Greek Fathers.

Writers in this tradition remind us of the New Testament theme that the eye of the mind must be kept clear if we are to fix it on God. And that, contemporary philosophers are likely to say, is fair enough in the pulpit but quite unsuitable in philosophical discourse. This separation of philosophy from spirituality is just as arbitrary as its separation from theology; they are all bound up together for Blondel, and in France he has largely succeeded in discrediting their separation, at least among Catholics. Yet he was at the same time most insistent that philosophy is an autonomous science. It is autonomous up to the point at which the summons of God is heard. When the summons has been accepted the philosopher becomes a theologian,

and he now knows the answers to questions by which the philosopher is baffled. When he steps back into the philosophical arena, he keeps the rules of the game, but he may know more about the truth of the matter than the philosopher. Such a claim is naturally infuriating to unbelievers, and the theologian will not put it into words on such occasions. But sometimes it has to be pointed out that the discovery or recognition of God cannot happen if one's attention is divided and that, if one is at the mercy of uncontrolled passions, one's attention is very likely to be divided. If desire for the true, the good and the beautiful is not fostered, but neglected, the result will be a growing inability to see what is there to be seen.

Even this is not the end of the matter. The acceptance of God is only the beginning of a journey, the spiritual writers insist, in which, if we do not go onwards, we go backwards. Fresh demands will be made upon us as we move from stage to stage. Fresh powers are an offer, but our existing powers will be lessened if we deliberately refuse to be taken onwards. Theology has turned into prayer, and there can be no advance in prayer unless we live in obedience not only to the first commandment but also to the second.

## 6. Philosophy of Religion in Britain

With the names of the late Austin Farrer, H. D. Lewis, E. L. Mascall, and H.P. Owen mine is sometimes associated, and it is true that we all reject syllogistic inference as providing a valid way of proving God. Also I am greatly indebted in different ways to all four of them. But it will soon become clear that I cannot claim the agreement of them all with the emphasis which I place on the "inner," and particularly the moral, evidence. Farrer has written somewhere of the "self" as the quarry from which all our metaphysical notions are hewn, and Owen has written: "The moral argument . . . is superior to the other arguments in one important way. The datum on which it is based (moral obligation) is in itself-in its very essence or nature-a mode of the Creator's action on his creatures . . . Its aim is not to show that we cannot explain the existence of the world unless we postulate the existence of God, but to show that we already encounter God within ourselves." [35] Lewis writes that God is "closer to all things than distinct finite things are to one another, and also remote beyond all conception," adding: "This we see, not as inference, but in one insight or leap of thought." [36] On the other hand, he also writes that "ethics like everything else is dependent on God, but this is a dependence whose exact nature we cannot understand and it is not peculiar to ethics. . . ." [37] He thinks that to allege an anonymous presence of God in the experience of moral obligation could result in reducing religion to ethics, and we have agreed to differ about this. Mascall, too, is unhappy about it, and here it will be convenient to quote from what I have already written about his Gifford Lectures, published as *The Openness of Being-Natural Theology Today*:

. . . Mascall regards all appeals to the moral evidence for God as exposed to hazards which he wishes to avoid and therefore confines himself to insisting upon the discovery of 'radical contingency uncontaminated by other factors which intrude themselves when I reflect upon my own self' (p. 15). . . . there is a certain difference between the accounts which we give of the fundamental human experience. That, for me, is the knowledge of self and knowledge of the world outside indissolubly united from the start. Mascall holds that knowledge of the world outside, normally at least, comes first. [38] . . . He writes: 'Now I do not wish to quarrel with the stress which, for their own purposes, both Farrer and Owen place upon the human self as the datum for theistic argumentation. . . .' adding, however, at once: 'I prefer to start from beings that we know more objectively and at the same time less intimately than we know ourselves' on the ground that there is then 'no danger of confusion with those psychological states of insecurity and anxiety to which existentialists attribute direct ontological status' (pp. 108-110). [39]

It will be clear, I hope, that my account of the matter has nothing to do with "psychological states of insecurity and anxiety." Awareness of moral obligation has its emotional tone like any other awareness, except perhaps that there is, when it is acted upon, the special satisfaction of realizing the truth about one's own condition. It is this awareness, I think, that saves many people from giving up hope of making sense of things. When Mascall insists that the world has to be explained, laying so much stress on rational processes that his thesis about an apprehension of God might seem to have faded from the picture, such people might feel that explaining the world is something that they are not at all called upon to do. Things act on one another in the world, things happen, they might say, but we can no longer think of the world itself as

happening. For such people, talk about a creator of the world is useless until they can discover him acting upon themselves.

Father Brian Davies, O. P., also regards the contingency of the world, the argument that it must have a creator, as solid ground for belief in God. In *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*,<sup>[40]</sup> which is expected to hold the field for some time as a book for students, he writes as follows: "If it is true that the mere existence of things requires a cause, but if that cause requires a cause and that cause another and so on *ad infinitum*, then nothing will exist at all."<sup>[41]</sup> It may be unreasonable not to accept this, but we have to bear in mind that there are many people who can be led to adopt a more sensible attitude only by being persuaded that there is direct, "inner," evidence of God. Even if this argument for a creator is accepted, there is the difficulty that the cause of all existents cannot be himself an existent. Davies sees this, not as a difficulty, but as the way to show God's transcendence. But it is a difficulty for the sort of person who cannot, so he will say, attach any meaning to talk about someone who does not exist but is the source of existence. And the only way of helping him to see it is to stop arguing and try to widen his horizon on Blondelian lines. Then we may come to see that it is no contradiction to say that God can be known but not named. Causal arguments may prove something but not the God of religion.

In his chapter "Experience and God" Davies considers claims to an awareness of God, and discusses certain objections to them which, he says, "are not decisive when taken individually." He goes on: "But this is not to say that it is never reasonable to believe in God on the basis of experience of God."<sup>[42]</sup> His argument then proceeds as follows:

If there is a God, one might say, it is likely that he would communicate himself to people directly. But the claim that it is reasonable to believe in God on the basis of experience is heavily dependent on the notion of coming across something in the world. . . . the trouble with this suggestion is that God is usually said to be very different from any particular thing which we might come across in our day-to-day lives. . . . According to some of those who appeal to it, our experience of other people can be compared to experience of God because it involves an awareness of what is non-empirical; they have a non-empirical or non-material side to them. . . . In fact, however, the analogy is very weak indeed. One reason is that any human being is a particular thing. . . . We do not just learn of a person's mental life or non-empirical nature independently of their bodily presence and behavior. In the same way . . . we cannot learn of God's existence independently of his bodily behavior. The trouble, is, though, that God is not supposed to have a body.<sup>[43]</sup>

I have tried to include here everything essential to Davies's case. At this stage in the present article, I need only ask the reader to find my answers when needed, in earlier parts of it.

Davies, in his chapter "Morality and Religion," says some kind things about writings of mine on this topic. I must emphasize that I find his discussions of other topics in this book very rewarding. Speaking of my references to the absoluteness of moral obligations, he says: "This is not a watertight argument, but it does raise a problem for someone who believes in an objective and imperious moral law. If, furthermore, one already has reason for believing in God independently of moral considerations, one might well argue that there is some additional reason for thinking of the moral law with reference to God. . . . If one has reason to believe in God, one would thereby have available some model providing a context for talk about a non-human law-giver."<sup>[44]</sup> I have only to remark that I do not base an "argument" on the absoluteness of moral obligation, by which I refer to that phenomenon, still (I hope) generally recognized in our society, known as "having a conscience"; most people think it definitely wrong "to go against one's conscience." Those who do not, it seems to me, need to be introduced to the idea of life as a project which demands thinking about and to that of the presence to their minds of a beneficent power at one and the same time, with emphasis more on one side of the coin than on the other as the particular circumstances suggest. The strategy consists in trying to show that the two considerations are really only one.

The proposal that moral experience might be regarded as a religious matter in view of an already existing belief in God is one which fits in with what is probably the most influential opinion in Britain about

experience of God—that it has no evidential value simply in itself, but can be recognized by religious persons as what people with their beliefs might be expected to have: it comes naturally to them to think that God communicates with us in that way. Dr. Peter Donovan in his *Interpreting Religious Experience*,<sup>[45]</sup> after much emphasis on the unreliability of claims to have experience of God, subscribes to Professor Basil Mitchell's statement: "The correctness of any particular interpretation cannot be guaranteed by the experience itself, but relies on a conceptual framework which draws support also from other, independent, evidence."<sup>[46]</sup> Mitchell's account of the way in which belief in God can arise is brilliantly done, but it does not leave room for the unrestricted commitment which Christian faith, according to traditional theology, must carry with it. Reasoning processes which, as Mitchell agrees, can issue in nothing more than a strong probability (and are in any case beyond the powers of most people), combined with experiences which have no independent evidential value, cannot justify a firm adherence to Christianity. Acceptance of Kant's view that there we can have no valid intellectual *experience* makes it hard to see how religion came into existence originally or how belief-systems survive at all. There are, however, signs that a change in the attitude of British academics may be on the way; Professor John Bowker, for instance, in *The Religious Imagination and the Sense of God*<sup>[47]</sup> argues that the massive witness to a direct apprehension of God cannot be dismissed on *a priori* grounds.

Father F. C. Copleston's *Religion and Philosophy* appeared in 1974. He is concerned to show in it that one "can see in metaphysics a movement of the spirit toward God."<sup>[48]</sup> He mentions in a footnote "a recognition of an absolute (moral) claim" and comments: "It is arguable that a recognition of this kind is a response to a self-disclosure of the divine reality under the aspect of the Good. . . . I do not think it absurd to envisage the case of someone calling himself an atheist, who, for human purposes, would have to be classified as such and yet could not count as an atheist in God's eyes."<sup>[49]</sup> This is most encouraging. In this final paragraph he sums up his position as follows: "The immanent movement of reason towards the absolute manifests the finality of the spirit." For man is "the being who transcends the world as involved in it, and in this sense metaphysics proves to rest on a profound impulse. But in itself metaphysics is precisely a way to the Absolute through the activity of rational reflection, the objectivity of which is not destroyed by the impulse which gives rise to the reflection." It seems to me that, if one becomes conscious of an "impulse," the rational course is to look for its cause, and I see no reason why anyone should doubt its "objectivity" (it is obviously not a bodily but a mental condition). More importantly, what Copleston means by "rational reflection" is not only concentrating on the matter in hand, rejecting this or that putative explanation until only one reveals itself (which is all that he should be meaning by it here) but something which would count as a philosophical argument. I think it a prejudice to suppose that philosophy is nothing but a matter of arguments. Copleston proposes for his purpose a rational process which (he insists) is not an inference.

The argument, which he presents only tentatively, runs as follows in baldest outline. "Reason unifies the world" is the first stage. There is no logical contradiction when X is one finite thing and Y is another in affirming X and denying Y, so that "we may think it metaphysically possible for X to exist in a state of complete isolation." This is the second stage. The third is "the discovery that, in fact, the completely isolated finite thing is unintelligible." Copleston explains: "That is to say, reason cannot remain in the idea of such an individual; it has to relate it to something else as ground of its existence. To understand the finite existent involves this relating. . . ." Thus there has to be a "movement of transcendence" consisting in the recognition of a Creator.<sup>[50]</sup> This process of thought may indeed *help* somebody to realize that one cannot dispense with a Creator. But there will be, I think, other people who would very much like to achieve this "movement of transcendence" but find it impossible. Actual contact with the Creator will *assure* them that he is there. And only proper attention to their own specifically human characteristics will provide them with this contact.

Philosophical work in Britain is as much concerned as ever with Wittgenstein. Opinions differ sharply about how he is to be interpreted, and I shall not venture to adjudicate between them. From my point of view, the effects of Wittgenstein, which, for all that I can tell, he might have deplored, have been often disastrous. In a recent book by Don Cupitt, Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, there is the following passage:

. . . there is nothing left for faith to be except a free, voluntary and creative decision simply to choose a certain shape and direction for one's life. . . . There is no longer anything out there for faith to correspond to, so the only test of faith is how it works out in life. . . . The objects of faith, such as God, are seen as guiding spiritual ideals that we live by, and not as beings. . . . The world is made not of beings but of meanings, and religious meanings are purely practical. . . . It is only since Wittgenstein that we have dared to say explicitly that the whole of the objective, quasi-factual side of religious belief must now be rejected as superstition.[51]

Cupitt goes on to say, in effect, still appealing to Wittgenstein that we are locked up in the structures of language or other sign-systems which we have invented and that the idea of there being anything beyond them is simply unthinkable.

The most influential Christian philosophers in this country are Wittgensteinians who reject, for philosophical purposes, any talk about a spiritual principle in man. I am not the only person to disagree with them, but those who share my point of view have not, as yet, written books about it.

It may seem surprising that I have not discussed at all the positions of Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan who, with the exception of Hans Kung, were, I suppose, the best known philosopher-theologians of our time; the reason is that, although they have done so much to shift opinions into more promising directions, neither has made a straightforward appeal to the "inner" evidence. For Rahner, as Father Donceel has put it, we apprehend God only "out of the corner of the eye." [52] Lonergan in his *Second Collection* moves to a position described as "existentialist" in which he says, excellently, much about loving God, but little (and that not very clear) about awareness of him.

#### NOTES

[1] *Sur les chemins de Dieu* (Paris: Aubier, 1955), p. 45; in the English translation, which I have used, *The Discovery of God*, trans. Alexander Dru (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1960), p. 40.

[2] The appropriateness of such a description will be discussed in sections 2 and 4.

[3] De Lubac, *Discovery*, pp. 35-36; p. 40 in the original, quoting Augustine *Confessions* VII. X. 16. The vigor of the Latin cannot be reproduced in translation.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 182; in the original, p. 223.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 151; in the original, p. 180.

[6] Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1981.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[10] (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 52.

[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 66.

[12] Lane, *Experience*, p. 14.

[13]Ibid., pp. 14-15.

[14]Anyone who doubts the propriety of this statement might read the final chapter of Louis Bouyer's *Introduction to Spirituality*. The awareness of God being a unique case, the Fathers sometimes call it a "seeing" and sometimes repudiate the description. To call it a "seeing" is only to "point" to it and in the only intelligible way.

[15]Lane, *Experience*, p. 15.

[16]Ibid., p. 17.

[17]*De Veritate* 22. 2, ad 1.

[18]Aquinas (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1955), p. 256.

[19]Lane, *Experience*, p. 21.

[20]Ibid., p. 30.

[21]Ibid., p. 31.

[22]Ibid., p. 32.

[23]Ibid., p. 33.

[24]Ibid., p. 34.

[25]Ibid., p. 39.

[26]Ibid., p. 64, quoting Aquinas *In Johannem*, c. 6, lect. 5.

[27]Ibid., p. 49.

[28]"Specifies" translates *determine* it means that the revelation occupies the mind (like music).

[29]Paris: F. Beauchesne, 1980.

[30]Ibid., pp. 263-270.

[31]Ibid., p. 252.

[32]Ibid., p. 248.

[33]Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press. It will be found, I fear, very difficult to read. Bouillard's book, *Blondel and Christianity* in the English version, is the best introduction to his work. A necessarily bold account of it is to be found in F.C. Copleston's great *History of Philosophy*, vol. 9: Maine de Biran to Sartre (New York: Newman Bek, 1974), pp. 223-237.

[34]*The Absolute and the Atonement* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971), pp. 78-79, quoting *L'Action*, pp. 334-5.

[35]*The Downside Review* (July 1977), p. 196. On the previous page he points out that the Bible bases this knowledge wholly on a direct, though mediated, apprehension of God's personal presence.

[36]*Philosophy of Religion* (London: English Universities Press, 1965), p. 146.

[37]*Ibid.*, p. 262. Karl Rahner's acceptance of the moral evidence for God has helped to make it something of a commonplace in Catholic fundamental theology.

[38]*Mysticism and Theology* (London: G. Chapman, 1975), p. 121. Many themes in the present article will be found in fuller form in this book.

[39]*Ibid.*, p. 123.

[40]New York: *Oxford University Press*, 1982.

[41]*Ibid.*, p. 46.

[42]*Ibid.*, p. 70.

[43]*Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

[44]*Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

[45]In the series *Issues in Religious Studies* (London: Sheldon Press, 1979).

[46]*Ibid.*, p. 89, quoting Mitchell, p. 112. Donovan refers to Lewis, Owen, and myself as writers whose views he is controverting.

[47]Oxford: Clarendon, 1978.

[48](Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1974), p. 45.

[49]*Ibid.*, pp. 179-180.

[50]*Ibid.*, pp. 158-159.

[51]*Only Human* (London: 1985), p. 202.

[52]The implication seems to be that we are never "in touch" with Him in the sense which I have been trying to indicate.