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Religion, science and limiting questions

There is a fashionable argument stemming from some philosophers deeply influenced by Wittgenstein which contends that science and religion cannot come into conflict though indeed many people confusedly think they conflict. There can be no conflict, for these activities with their attendant modes of discourse are *sui generis* each with its own distinctive rationale and criteria of intelligibility. They do not compete at the same task, do not give alternative and sometimes clashing accounts of the same reality, and they cannot be appraised by the same criteria.

I have argued elsewhere that this important and in many ways compelling and culturally understandable stance is profoundly mistaken.[1] However, Robert C. Coburn in an incisive and now fortunately reprinted essay articulates a rationale for such a Wittgensteinian account of religion which escapes the criticisms which I and others have brought against such Wittgensteinian accounts.[2] Furthermore, and more importantly, it is a significant and neglected account in its own right. I want here critically to examine it. If my arguments are even near to their mark, they will establish that this attractive account by Coburn will not enable us to make sense of crucial strands of religious discourse or show that there can be no conflict between science and religion.

It is Coburn's contention that there is a distinctive but neglected feature of religious discourse which would, if duly noted, serve to characterize the *sui generis* nature of the discourse, help to break perplexity about religion, and show that religious discourse is in order as it is. To see that this is so is to see that religious discourse has its own distinctive kind of order—an order that traditional accounts, both skeptical and non-skeptical, have failed to account for, though traditional non-skeptical accounts tend in effect to defer to this use in an unwitting and reified manner.

I shall argue that Coburn's account catches at best only a necessary condition for religious discourse. I shall further contend that Coburn gives us an analysis which is in effect a reductive analysis that leaves out of account certain distinctive features of religious discourse and that it is just these features which Coburn neglects which generate distrust about the coherence of first-order God-talk.

In trying to explicate one central use of religious discourse, Coburn calls to our attention a distinctive type of question which religious utter-

1 Kai Nielsen, 'Wittgensteinian Fideism,' *Philosophy* 42 (1967), 191-202; 'Language and the Concept of God,' *Question* 2 (1969), 34-52; *Contemporary Critiques of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1971), ch. 5, and *Scepticism* (London: Macmillan, 1972), ch. 2.

2 Robert C. Coburn, 'A Neglected Use of Theological Language,' *Mind* 72 (1963); reprinted in Dallas M. High, *New Essays in Religious Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 215-35. My citations are from *Mind*.

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ances 'normally function to answer.'[3] Following Toulmin, he calls this type of question a *limiting question*. To be a limiting question, utterances or inscriptions must have the grammatical structure of questions, but they can ask neither straightforward theoretical questions, e.g., 'What are the laws of thermodynamics?,' nor practical questions, e.g., 'Should I vote for Buckley?' Limiting questions are never literal questions. Instead they express 'some "inner" passion or action,' e.g., 'Why did she have to die of cancer just now when finally they had got together after all those years?,' uttered when one knows perfectly well why she died of cancer.

Consider some responses to, 'What is the ultimate significance of life?' or 'What is the explanation of the fact that there is a world at all?' There are contexts in which these questions are asked where there is no straightforward answer or where no literal answer is possible, but where the person who engages in such linguistic performances is not conceptually confused about the meanings of the terms involved.[4] Such utterances arise out of despair or anger or grief—out of 'turmoil of soul'—or what occasions them may be the engaging in a 'spiritual activity' such as 'marvelling or worshipping or blaspheming.' Here we catch religious discourse in one of its typical employments; and here religious limiting questions find their natural home.

These questions, Coburn contends, fall into three main types arising in response to three types of problems: 'moral problems, problems of morale, and problems concerning the ultimate significance or "meaning" of things.'[5] By 'moral problems' Coburn has in mind typical philosophical normative ethical problems; by 'problems of morale' he means those problems 'which arise out of our inability to reconcile ourselves to the various ills that flesh is heir to—sickness, failure, missed opportunities, and the final, ineluctable frustration of death—death of friends and family and ultimately of our own death.'[6] The last category of limiting question is the kind of question raised by questioners such as Tolstoy's Pierre who are trying to find an intelligible pattern in experience which gives life a coherence or enduring worth.

More generally, religious limiting questions belong to that 'class of limiting questions the asking of which constitutes behaviour which is part of the (or a) criterion of having a problem of one or more of the above three kinds.'[7] The discourse used in response to such questions is, according to Coburn, religious discourse. To understand that religious discourse is employed in response to such questions is to understand its use in the

3 Ibid., 371.

4 I do not mean to suggest that there are contexts in which these questions are literal questions for which there is 'cosmological information.' About that I have at least as strong reservations as does Coburn. But I do think that believers for the most part think that this is what they will receive and I think that if their expectations cannot be met then Judaism and Christianity cannot have the import and the sense they purport to have. I have tried to give an alternative analysis of what is involved here in my "On Speaking of God," *Theoria* 28/2 (1962), 110-37, and 'Religious Perplexity and Faith,' *Crane Review* 8 (1965), 1-17.

5 Coburn, 'Neglected Use,' 373.

6 Ibid., 374.

7 Ibid.

stream-of-life. Religious statements provide logically complete answers to religious limiting questions.

This notion of a logically complete answer may require some explanation. 'I enjoy Mozart' is a logically complete answer to 'Why are you listening to that record?,' and 'Why do you listen to the music you enjoy?' is an inappropriate question in this context. Similarly in a religious context, 'Why did they all have to die on their birthdays?' is completely answered by 'The ways of the Almighty and All-Wise God are righteous, though beyond our understanding.' To say 'So what? Why does this "explain" or make acceptable their deaths?' indicates that either one does not understand or that one does not *accept* certain key religious statements, for *within the religious form of life* there is no room for such a question.

'Why does anything exist?,' 'Why is the world the way it is?,' 'Why is it my duty to keep promises?,' and 'Why is life so hard and cruel?' are religious limiting questions. They are, as Kierkegaard would say, from the emotions; they involve our deepest and most intimate concerns. It is crucial to note here that religious utterances have a key role to play in providing logically complete answers to such emotionally harassing limiting questions. Such religious utterances, as Wittgenstein in effect pointed out as well, are directive of our behaviour.

Noting and taking to heart these elements in our discourse helps make plain some things that would otherwise be paradoxical: why it is that to know God is either to love him, fear him or hate him; why it is impossible to believe in God without responding to him in some affective way; why it is impossible to have faith in God without having a worshipful attitude toward him and without responding to him in contrition and thankful praise. That religious statements are answers to limiting questions also accounts for the fact that the believer is continually threatened with loss of faith, e.g., 'Oh Lord, I believe, help Thou my unbelief.' Beliefs from the emotions will have that quality and they will give rise to limiting questions. In short, to recognize that religious statements are answers to limiting questions is to recognize why it is they could—logically could—not fail to be inextricably linked with the passions. In this way religious questions differ from purely cosmological questions.

An understanding that religious questions are limiting questions also explains why in the theological tradition there has been 'the persistent tendency to understand God as an essentially mysterious entity, as a being of such a nature that all our words, not simply in fact, but necessarily fail adequately to describe or characterize Him, except, of course, insofar as they are used to say what He is not.'[8] To reason in the way these theologians have is, Coburn claims, to commit a kind of *descriptivist fallacy*. That is to say, these theologians are making an error (not strictly speaking a 'fallacy') comparable to Moore's talking of non-natural qualities.

The commission of this fallacy by theologians obscures the fact that religious claims, as answers to limiting questions, are attitude-expressing. If we try to treat religious discourse as being descriptive in the same way our talk of persons is descriptive, we will fail to catch the distinctive

8 Ibid., 381.

attitude-expressing and evoking function of religious discourse. The confused theological claim that 'God' refers to an essentially mysterious, non-temporal, non-spatial, transcendent entity or force arose out of a failure to take proper note of this non-descriptive function of discourse coupled with a dim but confused recognition that some added element is integral to religious talk. It is this recognition that religious talk has some distinctive element not retained by ordinary empirical statements 'about how things are' that makes the theologian who fails to grasp the non-descriptive function of his discourse reify his religious conceptions and try to say what is in reality incoherent, namely, that language can refer totally beyond all possible experience—that it can refer 'out of the world' altogether.[9] However, these are but the reified shadows cast by a failure to recognize that religious statements are answers to limiting questions.

Coburn's analysis makes an important point about the non-descriptive, non-cognitive functions of religious discourse, but his account will hardly do as an adequate explication of religious or theological discourse. It does not, I shall argue, catch the distinguishing traits, if any, of religious discourse and it does not even show that such discourse is *sui generis*. Coburn indeed calls attention to a genuine element in religious discourse to which attention should be called, but stressing this element as exclusively as he does obscures the fact of something equally essential, namely, the crucial putatively assertional content in certain key religious utterances. Moreover, his characterization of 'religion' is much too broad.

It is perfectly correct to point out that for those who are committed to this form of life and who are reasoning in its confines certain limiting questions cannot be asked within that mode of life. But an acknowledgment of the existence and role of this neglected feature of religious discourse will not put to rest puzzles about the *mysterium tremendum* or the 'ineffability' of God. Jews and Christians conceive of God as transcendent to the world. His reality is thus perforce of a very distinctive sort: God is indeed *not* conceived as an entity alongside of other entities; he is infinite yet particular and utterly unique; he is transcendent, yet he is everywhere. It is this very strange metaphysical characterization of God built into our very first-order God-talk which 'explains' the fact that certain theological statements provide logically complete answers to religious limiting questions. It is this fact about what 'God' supposedly refers to, and not the fact that theological statements provide logically complete answers to religious limiting questions, that provides us with an understanding of why God is taken to be 'an essentially mysterious entity.' There is and can be no adequate, purely empirical characterization of God because of this very metaphysical and very puzzling conception of God. It is this which makes both God and God-talk *sui generis*. The mysteriousness of God, the essential elusiveness of God-talk, is not accounted for at all by Coburn. He only shows, if his argument is correct, that there is a mistake in the theologians' account of why God is taken to be mysterious. His account by contrast would show that God is not mysterious. But a God so conceived would not be the God of Judaism, Christianity or Islam.

9 I have criticized such accounts in my 'On Fixing the Reference Range of "God,"' *Religious Studies* 2/1 (1966), 13-36.

'God' is indeed irreplaceable by non-theological or non-religious descriptions. Talk of God is very unlike talk of stones, Jones, or photons. To account for the differences between 'God' and 'John' or 'Fido' and to bring out the most characteristic uses of religious utterances, it is not sufficient simply to move away from a purely descriptivist understanding of the uses of theological sentences to a claim that religious utterances are also attitude-expressing, attitude-moulding, and action-guiding. 'God' has come to have these non-descriptivist functions because 'God' supposedly denotes a transcendent supremely wise and powerful being or reality. Moreover, if believers gave up this belief *about* what they mean, 'God' would in time cease to have that use. Yet it is exactly such talk about the denotation of 'God' that remains so utterly perplexing. Such discourse most certainly does not seem to be in order just as it is. And the very non-descriptive features of 'God' are dependent for their continued force on its *alleged* descriptive force. But where 'God' is used non-anthropomorphically it is most difficult, if not impossible, to say what descriptive force it does have. The suspicion arises and persists that it may not have any. It may only be *putatively* descriptive—an allegedly descriptive or designative word which actually fails to describe or designate.

Coburn's analysis of 'religion,' 'being religious,' and of 'religious limiting questions' suffers surprisingly enough a defect not unlike Tillich's. Certainly, problems posed by conflicting moral outlooks, problems concerning attitudes toward death or failure, and problems about finding an intelligible pattern in experience which will enable us to see our lives as a whole and as something possessing enduring worth are typically connected with religious answers and religious questions. But the connection is a contingent one and not a necessary one. Marx, Freud, Santayana, Dewey, and Sartre wrestled with such problems and did not give religious answers. 'A religious *Weltanschauung*' is not a pleonasm and 'an a-religious or anti-religious moral outlook or attitude toward death' is, perhaps, mistaken, but it is not a contradiction. Indeed 'being religious' connotes 'having a certain commitment,' 'a certain inwardness,' 'taking the deep things of life seriously,' but these latter terms do not connote 'being religious.' Coburn tells us that we understand 'being religious' by reference 'to such things as the disposition to live agapistically, to exhibit hope in times of tragedy, to take the deep things of life seriously, to engage in worshipful practices of a formal and/or an informal sort, and periodically to entertain or have in mind various of the pictures, sayings, parables, doctrines, etc., of some religious tradition.'[10] But Comte and Santayana neatly fulfilled all these criteria while remaining atheists. To be religious it is not enough to entertain or have in mind certain religious doctrines, we must in addition believe they are *true*. And a Russell or a Dewey or a Feuerbach can, as well as a religious man, be disposed to 'live agapistically and exhibit hope in times of tragedy.' We must not, if we have respect for clarity, convert them into religious believers by stipulative redefinition.[11] Such attitudes, actions

10 Coburn, 'Neglected Use,' 381.

11 Sidney Hook neatly exposes some of the verbal legerdemain in such conversion by stipulative redefinition in his essays 'Modern Knowledge and the Concept of God' and

or commitments are not *sufficient* to mark off the sphere of the religious and thus are not sufficient to mark off a religious limiting question. There is religious *doctrine* as well, and it is here where the language-game we play with religion begins to get puzzling and perhaps incoherent.

Coburn wishes to mark off a religious use of language by way of an analysis of religious limiting questions which will free our understanding of at least some parts of religion from these doctrinal perplexities. But like the repressed they return to plague him, for he is not able to specify adequately what counts as 'a *religious* limiting question.' Thus without taking into account religious doctrines and cosmological claims Coburn cannot get started on his analysis and without them he cannot finish it either, for he cannot explain in a sufficiently complex way why non-theological or non-religious descriptions never adequately characterize God. Wittgenstein also recognized this non-descriptive function of religious discourse, but he never thought it could account for everything that religious utterances purportedly express.[12]

Religions, as systems of salvation, do (as Coburn stresses) bring into play focal attitudes. There is no understanding of religion without understanding that. But these systems of salvation also have doctrinal schemes. Scandal to the intellect or not, they all—even Therevada Buddhism—have certain concepts which are transcendental, i.e., concepts whose non-normative aspects are not completely explicable in naturalistic terms. Coburn, as other of his essays make apparent, is highly skeptical about the coherence of such religious or theological discourse.[13] The use of religious discourse he attempts to explicate in 'A Neglected Use of Theological Language' tries to avoid such pitfalls, but we cannot adequately characterize theological or religious discourse without reference to such puzzling considerations and thus implicitly raising the very non-Wittgensteinian question: Is such first-order God-talk itself in conceptual disarray?

It is not, however, simply the question of conceptual disarray which is important here, but, if my argument is for the most part well taken, Coburn's account will not demarcate religious talk in such a way that it can be seen to be non-conflicting with scientific discourse. If Coburn's account were correct, then the domains of science and the domains of religion or at least a very central part of religion would be quite distinct, but, as we have seen, there are irreducible putatively cosmological elements of religious discourse, essential to such religions as Judaism and Christianity, for which Coburn's analysis cannot account. Since these cosmological propositions make claims which at least appear to be claims which could come into

'The Quest for "Being"' in his *The Quest for Being* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1960).

12 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. by Cyril Barrett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966). I have critically examined Wittgenstein's view on religion in my 'The Challenge of Wittgenstein,' in *SR* 3 (1973), 29-46.

13 Robert C. Coburn, 'The Hiddenness of God and Some Barmecidal God Surrogates,' *The Journal of Philosophy* 57 (1960), 689-712, and 'Professor Malcolm and God,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 41 (1963), 143-62.

conflict with scientific claims, Coburn's analysis does not establish the autonomy of religion or show that science and religion cannot come into conflict.