Introduction

MARTIN WARNER

I

Religion, Reason and Reality

'Religion' is standardly defined either as 'a particular system of faith and worship' or as 'recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship' (OED 1971: II 2481). The focus, that is, may be on religion either as a practice or as a framework of ideas and beliefs, but the two elements are interdependent; faith and worship are unintelligible without some idea of that to which they are directed, and religion's characteristic conceptions are such that certain practices and responses are seen as appropriate—even mandatory. Indeed, it has often been argued that 'religion' derives from *religare* ('to bind'), witnessing through its very etymology to the characteristic religious sense of binding obligation, a duty of 'obedience, reverence and worship', as well as of social bonding. The contemporary notion of religion as a matter of free human choice is of comparatively recent development, strongly influenced by secular pressures; more characteristic of classic religious consciousness is the implicit demand mediated through both Old and New Testaments: 'I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts', 'You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you' (Haggai ii 23; John xv 16).

The form of religion that has most significantly shaped Western culture is that of Christian theism. The reference in the dictionary definition to 'some higher unseen power' is a partial reflection of the characteristic religious denial that all our experience can be wholly understood in terms derived from the physical, temporally structured, universe, and the corresponding affirmation that there is that which transcends the literal application of such categories—to be spoken of only, if at all, by means of images, symbols, narratives, parables, metaphors, models and analogies; to use traditional language, a religion takes the dimension of mystery seriously. A theism is that type of religion which claims that all its images, models, analogies and so on of this transcendent mystery are ultimately reconcilable *both* with each other (God is one) *and* with every feature of human (and non-human) existence (God is Creator). It is for this reason that theisms which, like

1

Introduction

Christianity, include among its dominant images those like that of a loving father find the 'problem of evil' so intractable. A virtually universal characteristic of theism is the practice of worship, directed to this transcendence understood as a unity—referred to in English by the word 'God'. Christian theism is distinguished from other forms by its dominant images and narratives, which are focused in the biblical records.

From Classical times, of course, it has recurrently been objected that any such 'higher unseen power' lacks reality, and one and a half centuries ago Ludwig Feuerbach more specifically argued that the idea of God is a projection of human beings' own ideals for themselves—that far from man being made in God's image, God is made in man's (Feuerbach 1957). The standard *riposte* is that human experience points beyond itself, and that inability to recognize this represents a form of imaginative, intellectual and perhaps moral blindness; God has 'left not himself without witness', though many fall into the category of 'the blind people that have eyes' (Acts xiv 17, Isaiah xliii 8).

The religious scepticism of the Enlightenment which Feuerbach inherited was part of a wider sceptical movement of thought whose problems are notorious. It may be possible to limit evidentially significant experience to a clearly delimited set of 'hard data' commensurate with the categories of contemporary physical science, but this not only removes God (and any objective morality) from view but also other people; the sceptical puzzle of how we can properly ascribe mental functioning and inwardness to others simply on the basis of our own experience has unnervingly close structural similarities with religious scepticism (see Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* 1967). Further, the Enlightenment attempt to displace God while retaining meaning and value in human life now seems distinctly problematic; developments over the last quarter-century have only served to reinforce the interest of the proposal by David Jenkins (now Bishop of Durham) that we should reverse the Feuerbachian analysis: 'The reduction of theology to anthropology was a prelude for reducing anthropology to absurdity. If we have grounds for re-understanding anthropology as theology, we may yet have hope that we can be rescued from the Absurd' (Jenkins 1967: 79). How an individual responds to these claims and counter-claims tends, not unreasonably, to be significantly affected by how far one finds oneself impelled to take seriously intellectual demands and/or aspects of one's own experience that cannot be seriously responded to or expressed in non-religious terms without what seems to be distortion.

To 'find oneself impelled' is a very different matter from making a criterionless choice; coming to terms with one's own experience in this way is more like 'the kind of unmethodical, accumulative procedure by which a mass of sensitive responses are precipitated into a philosophical

2

belief, . . . a notion embodied in Pascal's *esprit de finesse* or Newman's illative sense' (Quinton 1985: 20–1; for a detailed exploration and analysis of such *finesse* see Warner 1989a). Anthony Quinton's juxtaposition of philosophical belief and Cardinal Newman suggests that what we have here may fall under the categories both of 'reason' and of 'faith', and so indeed it proves. Renford Bambrough's opening paper in this volume is concerned to show that there is no sharp opposition between reason and faith for faith is itself a mode of reason. There are of course traditions which seek to separate them sharply, and the term 'fideism' was coined in the nineteenth century for a form (later, any form) of irrationalism that sets (and upholds) religious faith *against* reason. But such positions are very difficult to render coherent, gaining what measure of currency they have through neglect of the analogies between religious and other forms of belief and by positing an implausibly constricted notion of rationality.

Here, as elsewhere, tidy-looking dichotomies can lead to severe oversimplifications of the complexities of our knowledge, beliefs and understanding. To break their hold on us it is helpful to compare a wide range of particular cases, and this Bambrough sets out to do. To take just one of his examples, faith in one's doctor can be well-grounded and reasonable or the reverse; it would be very odd to retain that faith when shown it was unreasonable by setting faith against reason—the contrast between reason and faith that is plausible here is in fact between two forms of rationality, between one's reasonable confidence in the doctor's judgment and the reasons available to oneself, apart from that judgment, for following the course of action the doctor recommends. As Bambrough points out, this is a 'typical case of trust or confidence being allowed to outweigh what you come to regard as superficial and dangerous grounds', but such a contrast presupposes the falsity in this instance of any analogue of fideism, and helps to broaden our conception of what counts as 'rational' and of how reason may constrain us. Assembly of example after example supports the case for 'counting faith and hope and trust and confidence as rational faculties'.

Further, as Roger Trigg insists in his response to Bambrough's paper, my continuing faith in my doctor as a source of future guidance is not well placed if he or she has died suddenly this morning; not only must the object of my faith be reliable and worthy of trust, but 'whatever I have faith in must exist for my faith to be justified. . . . Faith can persist as long as it is believed that its object is real, but it logically cannot survive an acceptance of its unreality'. In generalizing the case in this way Trigg is criticizing the application to the concept of belief of the influential doctrine of anti-realism which, at least in the forms here considered, has considerable internal difficulties.

3

Introduction

In general terms, realism is the doctrine that that which we encounter exists quite independently of us—although not necessarily in the form that we conceive of it—and that reality (whether physical, temporal, mathematical, mental, moral, religious or whatever) is therefore independent of our conceptions of it. In the words of its most sophisticated critic, Michael Dummett: 'Realism is a definite doctrine. Its denial, by contrast may take any one of numerous possible forms, each of which is a variety of anti-realism concerning the given subject matter: the colourless term "anti-realism" is apt as a signal that it denotes not a specific philosophical doctrine but the rejection of a doctrine' (Dummett 1991: 4). Dummett is concerned to undercut the framework of the traditional debates by recasting them in terms of meaning theory; he makes no claim to have resolved any of them, merely to have provided a 'prolegomenon', but warns that 'there is little likelihood of a uniform solution to all of them' (15). He certainly has no tendency to see the difficulties he has identified in the logical and meaning-theoretical presuppositions of classical realism as undermining traditional belief in God (Dummett 1991: 348–351; see also Dummett 1978: xxxix).

In less cautious hands, however, matters are very different. For Richard Rorty, for example, anti-realism should replace realism globally through a fairly straightforward inversion; we should reject the notion that human experience points beyond itself, drop 'the very idea that the world or self has an intrinsic nature' independent of our concepts and languages and, with it, 'the idea of languages as representations'—mediating an independent reality to us; such notions represent 'a remnant of the idea that the world is a divine creation' whose nature is given by that which is transcendent of us, and should be abandoned (Rorty 1989: 21). With these notions, as Trigg points out, go the traditional ones of truth and rationality as well—which places the status of Rorty's claims and apparent arguments, as he is well aware, in a somewhat paradoxical light. One is reminded of Dummett's toying with the Berkeleyan argument 'that anti-realism is ultimately incoherent but that realism is tenable only on a theistic basis', a thesis he reluctantly set aside on the ground that he (and by implication we) do not 'know nearly enough about the question of realism' (Dummett 1978: xxxix). For Rorty the paradoxes, or apparent paradoxes, are a function of the ways our languages and assumptions have been distorted by our picture of 'the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations—some accurate, some not' which it is the business of reason and method to correct and improve; for 'it is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions' (Rorty 1980: 12).

4

This last claim can be illustrated in his own case by the way he is apparently held captive by another picture, that of rational argument requiring 'common commensurating ground' (1980: 364). In theory he is critical of the notion that there is 'no middle ground between matters of taste and matters capable of being settled by a previously statable algorithm' (1980: 336–8), but in urging his case he trades on just such a tidy-looking dichotomy: 'There is no way, as far as I can see, in which to *argue* the issue. . . . There is no "normal" philosophical discourse which provides common commensurating ground. . . . If there is no such common ground, all we can do is to show how the other side looks from our own point of view', and on this basis the only criteria of acceptability are 'agreement' and 'convenience' (1980: 364–5; 1982: xl–xliv). Recognition that 'algorithmic' reason is inadequate to the task of correcting and improving our representations of the world plays a significant role in his rejection of the picture of the 'great mirror', whose development he attributes to the Enlightenment but whose roots are far older; once again, an inadequate conception of reason has had irrationalist consequences. (For fuller discussion see Warner 1989a, esp. 28–30 & 359–364; also 1989b.)

Despite the problems of his position, and his explicitly atheistic stance, Don Cupitt invokes Rorty in support of his own brand of religiously tinged global anti-realism, which is the main target of Roger Trigg's paper. Cupitt proposes a radical revision of the traditional conception of God, and with it of religious belief: for Rorty, as we have seen, we need to abandon 'the very idea that the world or self has an intrinsic nature', they are language-dependent; analogously, Cupitt claims that 'language creates reality', and therefore 'like us, God is made only of words. . . . We can no longer distinguish clearly between the sense in which God creates, the sense in which language does, and the sense in which we do' (Cupitt 1990: ix–x). There is a clear break here with the traditional religious belief that we are created and sustained by God rather than the reverse, and that consequently God's choice is prior to that of his creatures and human creativity dependent on the Creator. This form of anti-realism also subverts the presuppositions both of Feuerbach's analysis and of the Bishop of Durham's counter-proposal; neither the reduction of theology to anthropology nor the re-understanding of anthropology as theology have the consequences anticipated if world and self, God and we, are on the same ontological level; indeed, given the paradoxes inherent in the positions of both Rorty and Cupitt, the prospect held out by David Jenkins of 'rescue from the Absurd' would appear to be a mirage.

Roger Trigg is concerned to show that these paradoxes undermine the possibility of both reason and faith, and point to an underlying incoherence. Beliefs, like emotions and other elements of our mental

Introduction

lives, have targets; they are directed towards items which we may misunderstand or which, indeed, may not exist—but when there is such misapprehension recognition of the error standardly modifies the belief or emotion; where it does not do so we have irrationality and neurosis. Except in the special case where a belief is self-directed, there is a clear distinction between the person believing and the item believed, between subject and object. As Bambrough points out in his criticism of William James' 'Will to Believe', while in certain cases the psychological fact that someone believes something will happen may causally influence the course of events in such a way as to render that belief true, this goes no way towards showing that 'faith in a fact' can help create a fact in any more radical sense; my belief in my doctor cannot in any other sense justify that confidence. Trigg argues that global anti-realism of the Rorty/Cupitt brand is irreconcilable with the distinction between subject and object, and hence the recognition that reality is independent of our conceptions of it, that appears to form an essential presupposition of our mental lives when we are not consciously fantasizing. In proposing that we credit their claim that the presuppositions of belief be rejected Rorty and Cupitt undermine their own rhetoric (for on their own terms it can hardly purport to be rational argument): 'There is a distinction between the person with faith and the object of faith. My faith in God must involve trust in someone beyond myself.' And more generally, far from it being the case that language creates reality, 'Language is the tool of our thinking and not its prison'.

II

Logic and Language

A number of responses are no doubt possible to this challenge. One would be to begin to draw distinctions between the ways in which reality is and in which it is not independent of our conceptions of it. Another would be to drop blanket arguments for what I have characterized as 'global anti-realism', and in sober Dummettian style accept that 'there is little likelihood of a uniform solution'—realist or anti-realist—to the full range of metaphysical problems with respect to which these categories have been invoked. But in neither case is there any guarantee that some variant of the radical claims of which Rorty and Cupitt seek to persuade us will emerge from the analysis, either as a general conclusion or more specifically in the case of religion. In the present context a more promising line of approach is opened up by considering the notion of constraining limits which the picture of language as a prison evokes.

6

Part of the appeal, both of religious fideism and of Cupitt's rein-
terpretation of the concept of God in terms of the creative powers of
language, derives from the traditional insistence that the mystery at the
heart of religion transcends all our categories. This mystery is charac-
teristically spoken of not as one item amongst others but as that in
which all things, ourselves included, subsist—'in him we live, and
move, and have our being' (Acts xvii 28)—and on which all depends;
the religious attitude, therefore, tends to go together with a sense of
radical contingency, of the need to take seriously the question 'why is
there anything rather than nothing?', the rejection of any answer in
terms of that about which a similar question could be pressed, and
hence a conception of God as that which does not fit into any of our
explanatory chains which explain how things are—as radically tran-
scendent, the 'that than which no greater can be conceived' of St
Anselm's *Proslogion*.

Those who believe that their experience has given them some
immediate (if radically limited) knowledge of God are commonly
termed 'mystics', and the types of claim and language made by those
whose credit has stood the test of time testifies to the radically
anomalous character of that about which they write. Similarly, the term
'mystical' ('*das Mystische*'), is used in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* to point
in the same direction: 'It is not *how* things are in the world that is
mystical, but *that* it exists.' (1961: para. 6.44), and here too the
linguistic problem is insisted on: 'There are, indeed, things that cannot
be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. [*Dies zeigt sich*.]
They are what is mystical.' (para. 6.522). We are told in the Preface that
language has a limit, 'and what lies on the other side of the limit will
simply be nonsense' (1961: 3); nevertheless, notoriously, the penulti-
mate paragraph of the *Tractatus* declares that its own propositions 'are
nonsensical' and yet can be used—when 'transcended'—to 'see the
world aright' (para. 6.54); it would appear that in its own terms the
work exemplifies *das Mystische*.

Whether or not the image of language as a prison is generally helpful,
the recurrent sense that it has limits which constrain us but which the
religious impulse seeks to transcend is frequently present in the phen-
omenon of mysticism. Here we find particularly strong resistance to
any attempt to reduce the religious mystery to ordinary human catego-
ries, like having faith in one's doctor, and yet the wish to use these
categories—for they are the only ones we have—to speak of it. This
tension is addressed in the discussion between Herbert McCabe and
Cyril Barrett on the logic of mysticism. As Barrett points out, it is a
mistake to think of mystics as 'a special breed of religious believers' for,
at least on the Wittgensteinian analysis, 'anyone who has a religious
experience is a mystic' and similarly, while any philosophy of religion

Introduction

'must be firmly based on a logic of religious language' it should also
recognize 'that religious language is itself mystical, that is, an attempt to
express the inexpressible'. This helps to explain why religious dis-
course generally is notoriously elusive, with the consequent appeal of
fideism, irrationalism or simple agnosticism and its apparent openness
to the charge of unintelligibility; nevertheless, the issues are par-
ticularly sharply focussed in the writings of those whom Barrett terms
'professional mystics'.

The very concept of 'mystical experience', in the narrower sense of
the contemplation written of by the Church's 'mystical doctors',
appears to bear on the issues both of realism and of the elusiveness of
religious language. St John of the Cross, for example, writes of the
'secrecy' and 'indescribability' of mystical contemplation in such a way
as to suggest its transcendence of at least the main part of our con-
ceptual apparatus: 'For, as that inward wisdom is so simple, so general
and so spiritual that it has not entered into the understanding enwrap-
ped or cloaked in any form or image subject to sense, it follows that
sense or imagination (as it has not entered through them nor has taken
their form or colour) cannot account for it or imagine it, so as to say
anything concerning it'; in some cases the soul may be 'clearly aware
that it is experiencing and partaking of that rare and delectable
wisdom', but not in all; further, apparent expressions of that experi-
ence are for St John no guarantee of its reality. (1978: 'Dark Night of
the Soul', 429–30). The discerning spiritual director needs to rely on a
complex and overlapping range of indicators: some will relate to the
possible contemplative's spiritual history and current disposition, such
as general aridity and inability to meditate not brought about by
obvious causes; others to apparent effects of the experience, such as
detachment, self-denial, humility and, more generally, great tran-
quillity and virtue; a third set are perhaps best understood as general
standing conditions, well summarized by Benjamin Gibbs (1976: 538)
'It is absurd to ascribe mystical contemplation to someone who has not
willingly embraced a life of suffering for Christ's sake'.

To say that someone fulfils all these criteria is not to say that he or she
is a true contemplative, but there does nevertheless appear to be a
conceptual connection between the ascription of the contemplative
state and recognition of the fulfilment of these conditions, such that it is
necessarily true that the meeting of these criteria affords evidence that
an individual is 'experiencing and partaking of that rare and delectable
wisdom'. There is a clear analogy here with the notion of a 'criterion'
employed by Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* in its discus-
sion of our ascription of certain mental states and processes, when 'An
"inner process" stands in need of outward criteria' (1953: I para. 580;
see Kenny 1967: II 258–61); given the close structural similarity noted

8

above between scepticism about other minds and scepticism about God, it is perhaps hardly surprising to find St John's pattern of thought matching so closely one which Wittgenstein was later to identify as that which was required to meet the sceptical challenge (1953: I paras 354–5).

There remain, however, problems about the God-ward reference integral to St John's analysis, concerning such claims as that in the case of contemplation 'the Holy Spirit infuses it and orders it in the soul . . . without either its knowledge or its understanding' (1978: 'Dark Night of the Soul', 428). The ascription of contemplation could be shown to be false—in technical language it is 'defeasible'—for the evidence affords only a presumption, and even if the presumption is not rebutted it may nevertheless be false, for in the last analysis it is God alone who 'knows the secrets of the heart' (Psalm xliv 21). For St John, in infusing the gift of contemplation God is 'imprinting' his footprints upon the soul, and '"Thy footsteps shall not be known"' (431–2; quoting Psalm lxxvii 19). The reality of a person's state, it would appear, may in this instance be different from what either that person or anyone else believes to be the case on the best evidence available, a claim which is easier to fit into a realist than an anti-realist frame of reference, but in either case it raises problems of intelligibility: as Wittgenstein puts it in his discussion of mental functioning and the law of excluded middle: '"God sees—but we don't know." But what does that mean?' (1953: I para. 352) Here we encounter once again the elusive character of religious language.

Barrett's claim that religious language generally 'is itself mystical' follows from the general account of mysticism provided by Herbert McCabe in the paper to which he is responding. McCabe focuses on the account of theology provided in the work of St Thomas Aquinas, one of the classic benchmarks of orthodoxy for the Catholic Church, arguing for a convergence between St Thomas' conception of the divine and that of the mystical to be found in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.

For St Thomas the key notion for exploring talk about God is that which he refers to as '*esse*', 'to exist' (the infinitive of the verb 'to be'). We grasp the notion of existence not as we do ordinary concepts, discovering through experience which items do and which do not fall under the concept, but through learning to say what is the case; 'we do not have a concept of existence as we have a concept of greenness or prevarication or polar bears'. Standardly, whatever exists does so as some kind of thing—as a polar bear for example—and falls under a specific range of concepts, which preclude it from falling under another set; if a polar bear then neither naturally green nor a dodo. Enquiry about the existence of an item or class of items (for example, dodos) operates by asking whether there is anything which falls under a certain

Introduction

concept and hence not under others; 'given the natural world we understand the natures of things by contrast with what they are not'.[1] However when we are considering the existence of the world itself, not when we are considering why it should exist in this way or that but its existence as such, this analysis is impossible. If we press the question 'why is there anything rather than nothing?' it is at once apparent that no answer could be satisfactory couched in terms which enable the same question to be asked of that which the answer posits, in terms which pick out one more item as instantiating a given concept—for why should that item itself exist? Whatever is posited, it clearly cannot be understood as having existence in the ordinary way; in McCabe's formulation: 'the Uncreated exists without *having* existence.'

It is the existence of the world as opposed to the possibility that there might not have been any world at all, the 'gratuitousness of things, that St Thomas calls their *esse*. . . . In thinking of the *esse* of things we are trying to think of them not just in relation to their natural causes but in their relation to a creator'; the grammatical difficulty of the expression (the 'to be-ness' of things) echoes the difficulty of the thought. Wittgenstein it will be remembered, wrote 'It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists.' (1961: para. 6.44), and McCabe suggests that 'he is engaged with the same question as St Thomas is when he speaks of *esse*. As St Thomas distinguishes between the creative act of God (which we do not understand) and natural causality (which we do), between creation and trans-formation, Wittgenstein distinguishes the mystical from "what can be said".' But at this point, of course, the two diverge. For St Thomas, it is 'the *esse* of things that leads us to speak of God—which, for Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, cannot be done', for the relations between concept and object, and between predication and quantification, adumbrated above govern 'what can be said', and beyond that we are left with that which makes itself manifest in our use of language but cannot be described in it—a domain which, as Peter Geach points out in his paper, extends to all language, not just religious discourse. For Wittgenstein, we approach the mystical simply by recognizing the limits of what can be said.

But, McCabe points out, St Thomas does not give up so easily. If both he and Wittgenstein are addressing the same question, then the mystical is not a particular specialized area of theological interest but

---

[1] The legitimacy of McCabe's appeal to the notion that things have 'natures' is supported by both Durrant and Geach, who are agreed that we cannot 'take it for granted that this medieval stuff has long since been shown worthless by the labours of John Locke'. Geach's fullest defence of this aspect of the Thomist account may be found in Anscombe and Geach 1961: 'Aquinas', sect. 2.

10