Getting the Right Travel Papers: A postscript to *The Spiritual Dimension*

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Abstract
This reply offers a detailed refutation of some of the objections raised in Christopher Coope's extended discussion of *The Spiritual Dimension*. It explains the 'non-partisan' strategy of the book, which Coope systematically misunderstands, and exposes some serious problems with Coope's own preference for a harshly exclusivist form of Christianity. Several issues connected with religious belief are then discussed, including emotional involvement versus detachment in the assessment of religious claims; layers of meaning in religious language; human autonomy and divine authority; the problem of evil; apophatic theology and transcendence; divine action in the world; and the doctrine of the afterlife.

I am grateful to Christopher Miles Coope for taking the trouble to produce his extended comments on *The Spiritual Dimension*. The book had very favourable reviews, and on top of that it has attracted, of all the books I have written, the warmest email response not just from philosophers but from a wide variety of other readers who have been kind enough to say they found it helpful. So it is a valuable corrective to any resulting complacency for me to learn that there are readers whom I have not merely not managed to convince, but whom my approach has positively irritated. That aside, Coope's discussion does, along the way, manage to raise several matters which are of interest and importance.

I say 'along the way' because, for one who appears to pride himself on his commitment to truth and logical argument, Coope's critique is remarkable diffuse and emotive. In *Ratio*, the journal of analytic philosophy which I edit, we limit book reviews to 2000 words, and recommend a maximum of 6000 for self-standing articles; the rationale for this is that authors who indulge themselves much beyond these limits are likely to fall short of the concision at which good analytic argument should aim. Coope thunders on for a staggering 14,000 words; yet in all that time he does not manage to provide any systematic discussion of a single one of the arguments in the *Spiritual Dimension* (which contains, amongst others, chapters on the relation between religion and ethics, religion and science, psychoanalysis and religion, Enlightenment critiques of religion, the nature of religious

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language, and the epistemic credentials of religious belief). Instead, he paints a general, impressionistic picture, *alluding* to arguments rather than analysing them, and, for the most part, expressing his outrage or distaste rather than actually engaging with the reasoning involved.

What is going on, I hazard, is that my book has become in Coope's eyes an icon onto which he can project all the animus he feels towards a certain 'cut-down' species of Christianity which is 'on offer up and down the land', a 'Christianity domesticated or bowdlerised to suit the average amiable modern reader.' In short, while presenting itself as a philosopher's critique, his discussion actually belongs in the genre of 'grumpy old man' journalism: it is a diatribe against the kind of trendy, half-baked, well-intentioned but essentially bland 'make it up as you go along' style of religion often associated with a certain species of rather decent and polite, but doctrinally vacillating, modern cleric who does not actually believe anything very much any more. I have no particular wish to defend this kind of 'cut-down' Christianity – though I am tolerably certain that many of its proponents are far closer to following the Christian message than those who presume to criticize them (in an earlier age it would have been 'burn them') for doctrinal impurity. But as far as my own position in the book is concerned, Coope has simply mistaken his target. He has committed the elementary fallacy of assuming that because I have remained silent about some Christian doctrine, I am therefore repudiating it, or not committed to it. Both in his assessment of my methods and of my intended destination, Coope reminds me of nothing so much as a manic John Cleese type airport official, picking up a passport and furiously tearing it up and stamping on it. 'Your passport is *not valid*!' he roars at the astonished traveller, 'and in any case the country you are trying to visit is *not worth going to*!' Embarrassingly, it turns out that the passport in question belongs to someone else, and the destination in question is one the traveller had no wish to reach in the first place.

My general strategy in writing about religion has not substantially altered since I published *On the Meaning of Life*, two years before the book under discussion. In the preface to the earlier book, I expressed an anxiety about the risk of alienating, on the one side, believers who might be offended by any answer that that does not explicitly start from the religious doctrines they take to be central, and, on the other side, atheists who might be irked that religious ideas should be allowed to intrude at all into the human struggle to find meaning in our lives. What I proposed, in an attempt to circumvent this twin risk, was an explicitly non-partisan strategy, which would

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try to show how spiritual and religious questions, instead of being hijacked by dogmatists, whether of a theistic or atheistic stripe, could be approached within a framework that 'connects with values and commitments that we all share.'[1]

Coope is annoyed by this irenic approach, because he wants more attention to be paid to the controversial aspects of religious belief – what he calls the 'craggy bits'. If doing this will generate 'division and antagonism', then so much the better; for division and antagonism turn out to be 'just what Christianity envisages'. If he is here trying draw me into a polemical debate about specific tenets of Christian doctrine, I fear I shall disappoint him. This is not because (as he imagines) I subscribe to a bland, watered-down version of Christianity, but rather because doctrinal polemicism strikes me as among the most depressing and futile of human enterprises – and when conducted by philosophers under the guise of 'rational argument' it nearly always turns out to be stunningly lacking in self-awareness.[2]

It is certainly true, as Coope points out, that I couched my arguments not in terms of specific doctrines, but using classifications of very broad scope such as 'the religious impulse' and 'the religious quest'. Yet since (as Coope rightly observes) the history of humankind, has thrown up many religions full of 'absurdities and abominations', is it not vital to specify *which* religion one is talking about? I actually raised this precise point myself, in a section of Chapter 8 called 'Which Path?' (p. 153ff).[3] But the reasons for my using general labels, rather than running the colours of a specific faith up the mast, were partly a matter of tactics: the book is aimed at a wide philosophical audience, and I was keen to avoid what may be called the 'switch-off' effect. I well remember talking to a philosophical colleague about an book by Stephen Clark, which, in the course of an interesting discussion about Aristotle or Plotinus, happened to use the phrase 'the Lord Christ'. The colleague in question remarked, with a kind of superior 'we know better' smirk, 'At that point I simply stopped reading!' This kind of prejudice is surprisingly common among philosophers, whether theists or atheists, who claim to be judicious and rational evaluators of arguments; and (as already observed) I was aiming to establish some common ground

[1] John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. ix.

[2] For a classic example, see the splenetic debate between Elizabeth Anscombe, R. M. Hare and others, in *The Listener*, February to April 1957.

[3] Page references are to J. Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

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for discussion, rather than attracting only those who were already *parti pris*. There is, in any case, a long philosophical tradition, going back to Aquinas, of writing about religion in such a way as to avoid reference to revealed truths, in order to be accessible, as Descartes put it 'even among the Turks'.[4] The interface between philosophy and theology is notoriously fraught with problems, but I make no apology for trying to steer clear of theological controversy. That said, I certainly did not attempt to conceal my allegiances. Careful readers of the book will, by the end, be in no serious doubt about the authorial commitment to a Christian (as opposed to, for example, a Buddhist) framework (pp. 162–3); and indeed some reviewers, and many correspondents, were able correctly to identify a specific, if discreetly signalled, denominational allegiance (unlike the one Coope projects on to me, this is, to say the least, not one known for its doctrinal laxity).

On a related point, Coope objects to what he takes to be my 'ecumenity', and takes me to task for inserting, in the course of a joke which happened to mention the Mormons, a cautious footnote where I pointed out that no disrespect was intended to any particular religious sect or denomination. But Coope has completely missed the point here. The anecdote concerned a group of recently departed souls waiting anxiously in a large hotel anteroom, until an angel marches up to the podium with a golden envelope and says 'Thank you for your patience folks, I know you're all waiting to know who is going to heaven. And the right answer was ... The Mormons!' Coope presumably thinks the point of the joke is: 'Ha, ha, how absurd that it should be the *Mormons* who are to be saved!' But, as I made abundantly clear in the footnote, that kind of disrespectful sneering is not at all the point of the anecdote. One could just as well substitute Catholics, or Calvinists, or any other group. The point is that there are members of many religious sects who apparently quite genuinely believe that they are going to be saved *just in virtue of belonging to a particular doctrinal faction*. This kind of smug exclusivism ('our club has the key to salvation') is an all-too-human impulse, but

[4] 'I have written my philosophy in such a way as to make it acceptable anywhere, even among the Turks, so as to avoid giving the slightest offence to anyone.' *Conversation with Burman* [1648], AT V 159: CSMK 342. 'AT' = C. Adam & P. Tannery (eds), *Œuvres de Descartes* (12 vols, revised edn, Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964–76); 'CSMK' = J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch and A. Kenny, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. III, The Correspondence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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I make no apology whatever for firmly repudiating it. It is, moreover, utterly at variance with the teachings and actions of Christ, who reached out to the rejected Samaritan woman, who commended the faith of the Centurion (a gentile member of the occupying army whom orthodox Jews would have avoided even speaking to), and who told the pious believers, confident in their assured membership of the right sect, 'Not everyone who says to me 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the kingdom of heaven.' Coope here insists that Christianity is *meant* to be exclusivist, and quotes with relish a saying from Mark, 'He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.' But this little excursus into scriptural exegesis turns out to be an embarrassing flop, for the verse Coope cites is in fact from the notorious addendum tacked on to the end of the last chapter of Mark (Ch. 16, vv 9–20), which is not found in the earliest manuscripts, and is universally acknowledged by biblical scholars to be a spurious addition, reflecting the proselytising agenda of the embattled early church.[5]

Of more interest than Coope's ill-fated scriptural foray is the question of *why* anyone should be so keen to embrace, or at least insist on the non-detachability of, the 'craggy bits' of Christianity. One can see how a militant atheist might rub such passages in, as indeed Richard Dawkins does, saying in effect, 'look you Christians: *this* is the vicious and intolerant religion you are, whether you like it or not, committed to!' But why should someone who is strongly drawn to the Christian faith want to keep the spotlight on the hard, jealous, punitive, partialistic God portrayed in some parts of the Bible? I can think of two explanations. (Please note: these are not at all meant to be diagnoses of Coope's own particular stance, since I know nothing of the rationale for it, but are offered simply for general interest, since the phenomenon in question is rather widespread.) Firstly, from a psychoanalytic perspective, many who are or have at one time been believers are often, perhaps at a partly buried level, very *angry* with God, either because of terrible things that have happened to them or their loved ones, or because of hurt they have suffered at the hands of authority figures in their churches. And as a result they

[5] Even if this passage, or other similar ones, should turn out to be genuine, they would still not need to be interpreted in exclusivist terms as saying that doctrinal allegiance is necessary (let alone sufficient) for salvation. A great deal would depend on exactly what 'he that believeth' (*ho pisteusas*) means. The apocalyptic warnings in Matthew 25: 31–46 make clear Christ's repudiation of those who claim to be his followers but do not feed the hungry or visit the sick.

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tend subconsciously to project that anger back onto God, and insist that the God to whom they would *have* to be committed should they return to the church, or to whom anyone else *must perforce* be committed if they are to join that church, is, precisely, this harsh and angry God. A second possible reason for insisting on the craggy bits is that many fundamentalist believers are reluctant to accept that religious sensibility can, like moral sensibility, evolve and develop over time. So if God was once conceived of as given to favouritism, then that *must* be the correct picture, for all time. But the course of the Hebrew Bible, to take one example, clearly shows a striking evolution, from God's being conceived of in quasi-idolatrous terms – as one who bestows his favour in response to grovelling sacrifices – to one who says instead 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice' (Hosea 6:6). And Jesus explicitly repeats this passage, telling the Pharisees who criticised his consorting with outsiders and sinners, 'Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, not sacrifice!' (Matthew 6:6).

To return to Coope, his relish for the God who shows favouritism, and his grinding insistence that God must not be conceived of in trendy modern terms as wholly benevolent, or having an interest in fairness and equality, seems to me doubly misconceived. All the elements of this allegedly flabby and degenerate piece of modernism are in fact right there in the earliest annals of Christianity. As far as equality goes, Simon Peter, one of Jesus of Nazareth's closest associates, yet initially an exclusivist who was reluctant to widen the message to the gentiles, came to a striking realization of 'how true it is that God does not show favouritism, but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right' (Acts 10: 34–5). Second, as far as benevolence goes, while what Coope says about grace, and the forgiveness that 'cannot be taken for granted', is absolutely right, he is surely off-target when he represents my invoking of the attribute of divine benevolence as an anodyne retreat from the true and grimmer picture. The love of God is right at the centre of Christianity, again, from the very earliest records. Anyone who doubts this should consult the impressive encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), and the wealth of rich scriptural references given there.

Now for some brief self-defence on points of detail. It may be tiresome when authors subjected to hostile criticism whine that their arguments have been misstated, but there are many places where Coope has distorted my meaning so flagrantly that it cannot be allowed to pass. Five quick examples: (a) Coope quotes a sentence 'all scepticism or lingering restraint is to be cast aside' to try to

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show that I am advocating uncritical yielding to heightened emotional states. But the sentence in question is lifted from a section where, so far from advocating emotional abandonment, I was explicitly discussing the *dangers* of uncritical emotional modes of response (pp. 9ff). (b) He claims I shift the whole question of religious truth from the question 'Is it believable' to 'Does the whole thing appeal to me?' This is a travesty. The paragraph in which I argued that a doctrinal summary 'often tells us surprisingly little about how far a religious worldview informs someone's outlook' was a paragraph in which I explicitly *repudiated* non-cognitivism (p. 80); I argued that it can be distorting to focus *exclusively* on propositional content, but that is quite different. (c) In a sneering footnote that describes me as 'a compulsive spiritualiser', Coope interprets my discussion of the petition in the Lord's Prayer to 'give us our daily bread' as reducing it to the wish that 'we shall all become more compassionate and healing'. This is a complete distortion. The section of the book he refers to was about the *multiple* layers of the prayer, and in explicating the first of these layers I *explicitly* referred to ordinary human hunger for food (p. 94, esp. fn. 30). (d) Coope assimilates my views about human autonomy to the radical feminist view of Daphne Hampson (which I criticised) that divine authority is an 'offensively male' concept; and he portrays me as championing, against religious humility, Iris Murdoch's ideal of the 'free independent, lonely, powerful' agent. If my mere mentioning of these women had not riled him, he might have stayed calm enough to read my actual conclusion in this section, which denounces self-creationist models of autonomy and speaks of the prayer 'thy will be done' as encapsulating a submission to 'objective moral realities to which, like it or not, our lives must conform if they are to flourish' (p. 42). (e) On the problem of evil, to which I devoted a long discussion, Coope simply caricatures my position by saying that I think God 'lacks the freedom to stop making things', and later (in connection with why God does not prevent plagues) 'he would if he could but he can't'. Admittedly he notes, without elaborating, that I provide 'other defences', but by then the damage is done: the reader has been encouraged to suppose that there is nothing worth serious attention here. In fact my argument involved (among other complex elements) the Leibnizian notion of metaphysical imperfection, and the theological idea (developed in the sixteenth century by Luria) that creation necessarily involves withdrawal or loss of power. I am sure my argument has flaws, and I should greatly welcome exploring them, but sniping at a safe distance helps no one. (The impression that Coope is flailing around without being prepared to get down to work here

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is reinforced by the fact that later on he flings in at random the completely opposite complaint that my approach to God's omnipotence is too 'conventional', contrasting it unfavourably with Geach's strategy of cutting God's power 'down to size'.)

There are many other topics which Coope alludes to, which have given me food for thought, and which I should like to explore in more detail, but I am mindful of the limit of 5000 words I have set for myself, and I do not want to weary the reader. Here is just a brief checklist. (1) Notwithstanding Coope's worries, I do not want to retract anything I said about the 'detached stance' which I argue is appropriate for science but problematic in many other areas of human inquiry; but since I have recently written elsewhere about this, and about the idea of 'accessibility conditions', I will say no more here.[6] (2) On the question of whether, given my view about a certain degree of involvement being necessary for properly understanding and evaluating a way of life, we could ever reject anything in advance, without giving it a try, Coope objects that according to my view one could not assess anything without participating in it: 'only apostasy is possible'. My answer here is that Coope is right to insist that some degree of prior filtering must be possible and desirable; but that in the really momentous choices of life (marriage, parenthood, career, and, possibly, philosophical and psycho-therapeutic inquiry) we just have to bite the bullet and accept that there is no alternative but to launch out without prior guarantees. This is part of the human condition; and it is no surprise that it should apply to religious faith too. (3) With regard to my attitude to psychoanalysis, I should simply refer Coope to my earlier book, *Philosophy and the Good Life*; the Jungian framework there defended makes it quite clear that my approach is not one of cheery 'exorcism' of the frightening forces of the unconscious mind, but rather a complex integrative project which is concerned with the healing of the self.[7] (This connects with my views on the flaws and weaknesses of human nature, a proper reading of which, in both the earlier book and the present one, in no way whatever supports the Coope interpretation that I aim to bowdlerise or eliminate the doctrine of original sin.) (4) Concerning the apophatic tradition in theology, and what Coupe calls the 'somewhat familiar' (actually Augustinian and Thomistic)

[6] 'What Difference Does It Make? The Nature and Significance of Theistic Belief.' *Ratio* XIX (4) December 2006, pp. 401–420, repr. in J. Cottingham (ed.), *The Meaning of Theism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

[7] J. Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ch. 4.

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idea of the incomprehensibility of God, I accept that this strand in my argument of the book was the most problematic (though I would not accept Coope's implied criticism of one of my sources, Denys Turner's *The Darkness of God*,[8] which strikes me as an extremely sensitive and illuminating work). The transcendence (or what it has become fashionable to call the 'otherness') of God, seems to me to give at least a strong *prima facie* reason for supposing that our human grasp of him must be of a 'minimalist' kind (to use a term employed by Brian Davies in his discussion of Aquinas' five ways).[9] Or as St Augustine put it, '*si comprehendis, non est Deus*' ('if you comprehend him, he is not God').[10] Of course, if this is not to rob theistic belief of any real content, there must be some way of making a transition to the human world; this was something I did not explore in my book, except to say (pp. 164–5) that it suggested the need for an excursus into incarnational theology – something perhaps to be undertaken in a future, less strictly philosophical, work.

Finally, I come to two of Coope's most interesting points, concerning divine action in the world, and the after-life. On the former topic, I did not say very much in the book, though I certainly did not mean to propose the notion of a causally impotent God, which Coope attributes to me. I must admit, however, to being attracted to the Dominican (or *a* Dominican) conception according to which it is idolatrous to think of God as a manipulable power that we can invoke as a magical short cut to produce the results we want; at the heart of Judaeo-Christian theism is the metaphysical idea that God makes the difference between existing and not existing, not the simplistic and anthropomorphic idea of a cosmic manipulator.[11] *Pace* Coope's reading of *The Spiritual Dimension*, however, I did in fact, drawing on Dorothy Sayers' brilliant *The Mind of The Maker*, countenance the idea of a certain kind of causal 'leakage' between the transcendent

[8] A brief extract from which Coope alludes to as an example of the 'thickets of barely intelligible quotation' which he claims to have found in the book. Unless he has been stumped by the lucid sentences I cited from Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Wittgenstein, Nussbaum, Williams, Plantinga and many other mainstream philosophers, he may perhaps be objecting to the fact that I occasionally quoted from more poetic sources, such as Julian of Norwich, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Gerard Manley Hopkins and C. Day Lewis. I am more than happy to leave the reader to decide whether such material should be outlawed from all philosophical writing.

[9] B. Davies, *Aquinas* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 46.

[10] Augustine, *Sermones*, 52.

[11] See Herbert McCabe, *Faith Within Reason* (London: Continuum, 2006), and my review of this work in *The Tablet*, 7 April 2007.

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creator and his creation (p. 138); and certainly the idea of the Incarnation implies, as I noted, at least one such intervention. These are (to say the least) complex issues which require further study. As Coope acutely notes, there are important implications here for the notion of petitionary prayer, which I did not tackle in the book, but which I hope to address in the future.[12] Lastly, with respect to the after life, I should be truly sorry if I thought anything I said had disturbed or offended anyone's faith. But I honestly think Coope has misread me here. I am not proposing 'moral transformation' as a naturalistic *alternative* to traditional salvation; but I think a careful reading of the Gospels clearly shows that it is inextricably *involved* in such salvation. Coope quotes from a more recent essay of mine where I remarked that saying 'Congratulations' to someone dying of a painful disease was a 'ghastly parody of the proper Christian response to illness and death.' That is not at all the denial of the after life that Coope takes it to be. As I pointed out in the paper in question,[13] on hearing of the death of Lazarus, Christ emphatically did not say 'wonderful news!', but on the contrary, he is said to have 'wept' (John 11:35). So far from thinking that within the Christian worldview suffering is illusory or 'anomalous' (to use Alistair McGrath's epithet),[14] Christianity puts suffering, and its potential transformative power, at the very centre of human life. This is not, at all, a denial of the Resurrection; but, as the mystery of the *Triduum* shows, that event is inseparable from the Crucifixion. And one does not say 'Congratulations' to one who is still on the cross.

In responding to a very polemical piece, it is hard not to allow some sharpness of tone to creep into the reply. But I have responsibilities to other readers as well as Coope, and have therefore thought it important to be firm in setting some of the record straight. But I hope he will accept that I am indeed very appreciative of the time and effort he has

[12] There are no easy answers, but the right kind of theological and philosophical framework for a solution seems to me likely to be contained in the following: 'It is time to reaffirm the importance of prayer in the face of ... growing secularism ... Clearly, the Christian who prays does not claim to be able to change God's plans or correct what he has foreseen. Rather, he seeks an encounter with the Father of Jesus Christ, asking God to be present with the consolation of the Sprit to him and his work.' Benedict XVI, *Deus est Caritas*, §37.

[13] 'What Difference Does it Make?'

[14] A. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, *Volume III: Theory* (London: T & T Clark, 2003), p. 208; thoughtfully discussed in Andrew Moore, 'Not Explanation but Salvation', *Modern Theology* 22:1 (2006), pp. 65–83.

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put into his essay, which I know has been a very long time in the making. These are matters of life and death, which we both, in very different styles, are concerned to address in ways that are true to our convictions. So despite the philosophical masks we wear, some degree of passion is perhaps not only unavoidable, but even desirable. I am all too conscious that the journey on which I have embarked is an uncertain one, with no guarantees of success; but some of the points Christopher Coope has raised have alerted me to pitfalls and obstacles in the terrain that remains to be traversed. I wish him, in closing, a fruitful outcome to his own journey.[15]

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