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Booknotes

In *How to Believe* (Bloomsbury, 2015) John Cottingham attempts to get beyond or behind the seemingly endless and inconclusive wrangling over the rationality (or not) of religious belief, taken as a set of propositions isolated from practice. Having already written about *why* we might believe religiously (*Why Believe?*, Continuum, 2009) Cottingham now explores just what believing means in practice and how one might come to engage in that practice, or, having engaged, continue on that road. It would, though, be wrong to take Cottingham's subtle and sensitive reflections as a twenty-first century revival of what was once known as Wittgensteinian fideism.

For Cottingham the what that one believes is important. He has little time for those, whether officially religious or secular, who would be content with a generalised and unspecific sense of awe or wonder. The wonder or awe 'at what?' would be all-important for Cottingham. He is also critical of the late John Hick's attempt to reduce all religious beliefs to a common core, gesturing symbolically at something ineffable. That, says, Cottingham would undermine the *wholeheartedness* one requires in actually practicing religion, the focused commitment to a specific set of doctrines and liturgical practices (and he has some sharp things to say about some contemporary church bigwigs in this context).

How to believe: Cottingham sees this partly in terms of the adoption of a world-view, in the sense that a commitment to scientific naturalism would be a basic and unprovable world-view, something that is not irrational or inconsistent with what reason tells us, but which goes beyond what is straightforwardly provable or refutable. Having said that, as Cottingham suggests, there are (or may be) aspects of our lives, moral, intellectual and aesthetic which do appear to require a transcendent basis or reference.

But a religious world-view is not just a view. It is something requiring commitment and personal transformation, personal transformation demanded by a personal God, to whom we respond, and who responds to us. Cottingham's exemplars here are Pascal and Bach, not the Pascal of the wager, but the Pascal of the practice of religious duties through which we begin to live in the mysteries of faith, the Bach of the church cantatas, particularly perhaps BMV 131, *Aus der Tiefe, rufe ich, Herr, zu dir*: 'my soul waits for the Lord from one morning watch to the next'. For Cottingham the rational

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understanding which may be to the fore in naturalistic science and analytic philosophy needs balancing with the imaginative understanding pointed to in the works of Bach and the thought of Pascal (*sens, raison et coeur*). And he laments the way the atmosphere of religious practice, expression and belief once current in the Western world has largely disappeared from our culture.

There is in Cottingham's all too short book an on-going dialogue with the poetry of Rilke. Like many of us he is clearly fascinated by the Rilkean sense that in our human perception and experience, and even in our individual lives and experiences, something unique in the universe is disclosed, something revealed that could be revealed in no other way. But does that mean that *my* life and experience is set apart from that of the other members of the religious community Cottingham thinks is necessary to articulate and sustain a life of faith? More fundamentally even, does this sense of my or our experience being a unique mode of revelation mean what is revealed in our experience is simply a projection of human wants and fears, a Humean gilding and staining of the world, and not locking into something already there, already real? Rilke himself seems, crucially, ambiguous at just this point. Cottingham does face up to these crucial questions, indeed puts them better than we have done here. But the book is short, and we would have liked much more on them.

And, having invoked Pascal, Cottingham might also have said more about the transformation required by serious religion. To put the question in terms the Jansenistic Pascal would have understood, how can we be saved or indeed do anything ultimately worthwhile without grace? We do not need to be Calvinists to be at times oppressed with the feeling that all human work is beset by failure and imperfection, even or perhaps especially when we attempt to perfect it, and to protect it against imperfection.

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