New Blackfriars

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Comment: *Religion Without Organized Religion*

Religion, they keep saying, is in decline. The sooner it goes the better, since it's deeply corrupting intellectually, as philosophers such as Daniel Dennett, A.C. Grayling and Sam Harris insist, proponents of the New Atheism, along with the zoologist Richard Dawkins, much better known. His books are best sellers.

The religion in decline in question is, of course, church-going in Western Europe — not Islam, which is thriving, let alone non-Western Christianity, or the other religious traditions that flourish all over the face of the earth, sometimes with practices that horrify the religious-minded among us as well as people with no religious commitments. Religion has existed for as long as there have been human beings and shows no sign of disappearing any time soon. Moreover, for those familiar with the Bible, there is nothing new about people who are themselves religious denouncing corruption in religion — most religions go in for self-criticism and reform.

However, not all philosophers who (as one might say) lack the gift of Christian faith are so negative as the New Atheists. In their private lives, some philosophers who have left Christianity behind are religious enough to choose some form of Buddhism. Others, continuing a tradition that dates back at least to Matthew Arnold, are out deliberately to save what matters in religion, naturally and intrinsically, as they would think, apart altogether from its institutionalization in any historical religion, and specifically in Christianity. Whether their books will sell in such quantities is another question.

In his *Margins of Religion* (Indiana University Press 2009) John Llewelyn, formerly Reader in Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, highlights the difference between 'organized religion' and 'religiousness', arguing for 'the possibility of a relative naturalness and unsophisticatedness for the religious, however codified and institutionalized as a religion it may in due course become' (p. 302). Adapting Durkheim's phrase, he contends that 'the elementary forms of religion' are to be found in 'gut-reactions that are not necessarily *Gott*-reactions'. Such reactions are provoked by 'birth, and copulation, and death', as T.S. Eliot's Sweeney says, 'at once the most bodily and at the same time most spiritual events we undergo or witness' (p. 4). Whenever we are faced with 'the boundaries of life and

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death', in other words, we are on 'the margins of religion' (p. 412). Moreover, intimations of the sacred are frequently located in the natural world, in the highest mountains or in rivers like the Ganges, as well as in music and works of art, none of which is recognized uniquely, or always more perceptively, by church-going people. Then, so Llewelyn suggests, philosophical argument about religion, perhaps because of Christian concern with doctrinal orthodoxy, lays such emphasis on propositional beliefs as the yardstick that the fact that the realities of religion are grounded ultimately in how mortals deal with events like birth, death and sex can easily be overlooked.

In what turns out to be his last book, *Religion without God* (Harvard forthcoming), the eminent legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin argues that the divide between people of religion and people without religion is too crude: 'millions of people who count themselves atheists have convictions and experiences very like and just as profound as those that believers count as religious'. Dworkin, who died on 14 February 2013 aged 81, occupied chairs in the philosophy of law on both sides of the Atlantic. Motivated here as elsewhere in his work, partly at least, by a desire to find a measure of common ground in order to reduce the ferocity of the 'culture wars' in the United States, Dworkin recalls that Einstein, though of course not a Christian, accepted that 'some transcendental and objective value permeates the universe, value that is neither a natural phenomenon nor a subjective reaction to natural phenomena'. People like Dworkin do not believe in a 'personal' God, or in Christianity. They nevertheless feel, so he insists, an inescapable responsibility to live with due respect for others; they suffer sometimes inconsolable regret at a life they think, in retrospect, wasted. He does not say so but we Christians need not rush in to claim such attitudes as residually Christian. It's a religious attitude, Dworkin contends, to accept the full, independent reality of value.

Some Christians would see no common ground with such proponents of religion without organized religion. While allowing that theists ordinarily feel obligations to worship Dworkin seems to have no equivalent. Llewelyn, on the other hand, may leave that possibility open. Readers of Thomas Aquinas will recall that for him 'offering sacrifice belongs generically to natural law, but the particular way of doing so is determined by human or divine institution' (*Summa Theologiae* 2a 2ae 85, 1 ad 2) — which is surely not very far from a distinction between religion and organized religion that we might at least discuss.

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