

Engagement, immersion and enactment: the role of spiritual practice in religious belief¹

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1. Intellect in search of faith: the cases of Nagel and of Putnam

How is spiritual praxis related to religious belief? Most of those working in philosophy of religion in academia today are believers – already committed to a religious worldview. For such people, religious praxis is, so to speak, *already in place*, before the philosophizing. Following in a long tradition going back to St Anselm, they might see their philosophical inquiries under the rubric of *fides quaerens intellectum*: starting from an initial position of faith they look to philosophy to provide some kind of intellectual support for it.

But what about those approaching things from the other end, as it were – those who are not believers, not involved in religious practice, but who start from the standpoint of neutral philosophical inquiry? (Whether any philosophical inquiry can in fact be wholly neutral is an interesting question, but I shall leave that on one side.) The group of philosophical inquirers into religion who are non-believers divides, I suggest, into at least three subgroups. First there those whose inquiries have convinced them that the religious outlook is untenable. This group regards religious faith as a mistake, and has no desire to adopt it. A second group comprises those whose inquiries seem to them to leave it open whether there is a case for accepting a religious worldview, and who put the matter aside, adopting an agnostic stance. Third, and perhaps most interesting, there are those who share with agnostics the sense that the religious worldview is not proven from an intellectual point of view, but who are not content with that, and would like to have faith – they regard the lack of faith in their lives as to some degree regrettable. If we want a label for this group, we could think of them as falling under the heading not of *fides quaerens intellectum*, but of *intellectus quaerens fidem*: instead of pre-existing faith seeking intellectual backing, they exemplify the unconvinced intellect that regards faith as something desirable.

Why should someone who is intellectually unconvinced harbour a desire for faith? In the seventeenth century Pascal suggested one motivation – the desire to live on in eternal bliss after death, coupled with the belief that faith is a prerequisite for this (Pascal, 1670, no. 418). Perhaps there may be some who are motivated in this way by after-life considerations, but I suspect a more widespread, and more philosophically interesting, reason for the intellectually unconvinced to hanker after faith has to do with the universal human desire for *meaning*. Thomas Nagel, in an important recent essay, argues that a central component in the religious temperament is what he calls a ‘yearning for cosmic reconciliation’ or ‘completion’ – the desire to ‘achieve a kind of understanding that would connect ... every human being to the whole of reality – intelligibly and, if possible, satisfyingly’ (Nagel, 2010, 3-4).

Religious belief, Nagel suggests, is one way of satisfying this human desire for meaning, and for ‘completion’. For the person of faith, there is an ‘all-encompassing mind or spiritual principle in addition to the minds of individual humans beings and other creatures’, a mind that is ‘the foundation of the existence of the universe, of the natural order, of value and of our existence, nature and purpose’ (2010, 5). The reason that Nagel’s characterization interests me here is that he

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is describing a position that *he himself is unable to take*. And hence, while acknowledging that he feels the pull of the religious temperament, the desire to be connected to a source of meaning and value, he is obliged to cast around to see if there is something *other* than religious faith that will give him what he wants.

Nagel admits to sharing the religious temperament to the extent of being dissatisfied with what he calls ‘resolute secularism’, the view that there is nothing missing, nothing left out, from a description of the world in purely scientific terms. And he goes on to speculate that there may be some ‘non-accidental fit between us and the world order’. Perhaps Darwinism is not the whole story, and there is some natural, impersonal, but irreducibly teleological process at work in the universe, so that we are ‘part of the lengthy process of the universe gradually waking up’ (a similar suggestion has recently been made by Tim Mulgan (Mulgan, 2016; see also Nagel, 2013)). However, Nagel ends up doubting that cosmic teleology, without a God, would do the job in helping us make sense of our lives. ‘Does it really make any difference’, he asks, ‘whether we are the products of natural teleology or of pure chance?’ (Nagel, 2010, 16-17). He ends with the pessimistic conclusion that since the desire for cosmic reconciliation will not go away, the only response left to us may after all be one of existentialist despair.

This is the classic human situation of someone who yearns for cosmic reconciliation or completion but who in Pascal’s words ‘cannot see the road ahead’. Yet of course Pascal famously suggested a remedy in such cases: if theoretical speculation and argument are inconclusive, turn to praxis. If you can’t believe, start going to Church: ‘this will train you, this will make you believe’ (1670, no. 418). It is probably fruitless to speculate on why this is not even an option for Nagel. He might well be repelled by the suggestion of praxis as opening the door to faith, since he is elsewhere on record as declaring that he is not only an atheist but that he hopes theism is not true, since he ‘doesn’t want the universe to be like that’ (Nagel, 1997, 130). Yet in a certain way one could say that Nagel *does*, on his own admission, have an interest in becoming a believer – he admits to having the temperament that is at the root of the religious impulse, the desire for completion, and comes close to conceding that the alternative, non-theistic vehicles for satisfying that temperament do not really work.

It is interesting to compare the case of Nagel with that of an equally eminent American philosopher, Hilary Putnam, who describes how he embarked on the path of religious praxis at the age of fifty. When one of his sons unexpectedly announced that he wanted to have a bar mitzvah, Putnam explains that he made the decision to start attending weekly services at a local Jewish congregation and to continue doing so for a period of one year. This decision seems to have involved something of an experimental approach to religious praxis – try it and see what happens. And what emerges from Putnam’s account is just how important engaging in the relevant practices turned out to be, in his eventual transition to becoming a regular adherent to the Jewish faith. In another telling anecdote from the same period (the middle nineteen-seventies) Putnam recalls that at that time so-called ‘transcendental meditation’ was all the rage, and the advocates of this new cult were suggesting to him that he should give it a try, setting aside twenty minutes a day for the purpose. Putnam describes how he thought to himself :

well, in *twenty minutes* I can *daven* (say the traditional Jewish prayers). Why do I need to try something that comes from another religion? So I started to *daven* every morning (or afternoon, if I didn’t have time in the morning)... I appreciate that what “davening” does to or in one’s soul must be very different from what Transcendental Meditation does; be that as it may, I found it to be a transformative activity, and it quickly became an indispensable part of my “religious activities” (Putnam, 2008, 3).

To draw any specific inferences from the cases of Nagel and Putnam would of course require far more detail about the personal lives and circumstances of both philosophers than is available to us. But they do give us examples of two outstandingly gifted analytic philosophers, both clearly highly competent in evaluating and assessing the philosophical arguments for and

against theism, both evidently possessed of the religious temperament in the broad sense of being sympathetic to the search for cosmic solutions to the human predicament, and both, until middle age, holding aloof from any theistic allegiance. And what appears to tip the scales, in the one case and not the other, is not further philosophical reflection, but the transformative effect of actually engaging in spiritual praxis. In the rest of this paper I want to look at how this kind of transformative process might work, and in so doing indicate what I take to be some important lessons for the philosophical understanding of the relation between religious belief and spiritual practice.

2. *The primacy of praxis*

One possible lesson may perhaps already be suggested by the discussion so far, namely that the adoption or rejection of a theistic worldview may not be as dependent on purely intellectual assessments and arguments as is often implicitly supposed by philosophers of religion. This connects with a certain disquiet I have expressed elsewhere about the way philosophy of religion is standardly practised in much of the anglophone world – a disquiet that seems to be shared by a small but growing number of writers in recent years. The problem connects with what Eleonore Stump (2010, 24-5) has called the ‘cognitive hemianopia’ of many philosophers – the way their philosophical thinking about religion involves only ‘left brain’ skills (to use a problematic term, but a useful shorthand),² meaning that their thinking has become curiously detached from the involved imaginative and emotional modes of awareness that are manifest in religious texts and religious life generally.

In my own work, I have also emphasised the widespread failure to recognize what I call the ‘primacy of praxis’ in religion (2005, 5ff; 2014, 153). When we leave the seminar room and look at religious forms of life as they actually operate, we are likely to be struck by the pivotal importance of spiritual practices and disciplines, as opposed to intellectual debate, for developing and deepening religious understanding. One does not have to be a card-carrying Wittgensteinian to recognize the seminal importance of his thesis that understanding the meaning of a given utterance requires us to understand the human practices and forms of life within which it operates. So rather than assuming, as much philosophy of religion has tended to do, that we can analyse and dissect the ‘cognitive content’ of religious claims, and evaluate their truth in isolation from the religious practices that give them life and meaning, may it not be worth starting at the other end, as it were, and look at what religious people *do*, in their liturgy, in their religious practices and rituals and activities, before we presume to extract the supposed doxastic ingredients and pronounce on their tenability or otherwise?

Any advocate of the primacy of praxis must face the obvious initial objection the praxis can hardly be prior to the beliefs in any philosophically important sense, since one cannot engage in any given form of religious praxis without already having the relevant religious beliefs in the first place. Straightforwardly understood, however, what this objection says is simply false; for clearly one can, for example, attend a church service, stand up, sit down, kneel, sing the hymns, recite the prayers, all without subscribing to belief in God. But surely, replies the critic, the words used in the liturgy *assert* the existence of God, so cannot be recited by a non-believer, except in an empty, parroting way that means nothing, and so is not genuine participation in the praxis? Again, the assumption here is false, or at least misleading. If we take the singing of Psalms as an example, the sentences recited are typically not, or not very often, claims about the truth of certain religious doctrines, or even assertions of the existence of God; they are cries of remorse, desperate pleas for help, shouts of praise, songs of thanksgiving, expressions of hope and trust, and so on (Cottingham 2014, 153). But don’t the utterances implicitly *presuppose* that God exists? That cannot be denied, at least in a large number of cases. But here it’s important to remember that the God of mainstream

² For more on the respective role of the brain’s hemispheres, see the controversial but to my mind brilliantly persuasive account in McGilchrist 2009, and, for some of the implications for religious belief, his monumental later work McGilchrist 2021, vol. 2.

theism, in all three Abrahamic faiths, is standardly regarded as incomprehensible to the human mind, the mysterious ultimate source of all being and goodness, or (to quote Nagel's phrase cited earlier) 'the foundation of the existence of the universe, of the natural order, of value and of our own existence, nature and purpose.'

To engage in forms of worship that presuppose the existence of such a source or foundation actually allows participants a great deal of *cognitive latitude* in how they formulate their conception of God before they incur a charge of insincerity or mere parroting when they use a given form of words as part of their liturgical praxis. In order for them to engage authentically in theistic liturgy and spiritual praxis, so far from their idea of God having to conform to the standards of precision and exactitude beloved of philosophers and scientists, insisting that God be subjected to exact classification and definition may actually stand in the way of proper religious reverence – a point stressed by many theologians from Augustine of Hippo (*Sermons*, 52, vi, 16 and 117, iii, 5) right down to Jean-Luc Marion (1999, 34). The ineffable God who dwells in 'light inaccessible', as Paul's letter to Timothy has it (1 Timothy 6:16), or to whom our language can refer only 'lightly and poetically', in Michael Leunig's phrase (2008, 237, quoted in Williams 2014, 34), is thus utterly unlike a precisely defined object in the world. God is nothing like the undetectably small china teapot orbiting in space between Earth and Mars, to use the comparison once introduced by Bertrand Russell (1952) and gleefully revived by Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* (2016, 75). Hallowed rituals and practices presupposing the existence of the cosmic teapot could scarcely be engaged in without immediately incurring charges of mindless irrationality or insincerity; but the same is, to say the very least, not obviously true of practices that presuppose an ultimate source of being and value, a source that transcends the physical world yet which is also immanent, manifest in everything that exists.

3. *How spiritual praxis works*

The discussion so far suggests a number of conclusions about the relationship between spiritual praxis and theistic belief. First, as is illustrated in the case of Hilary Putnam, praxis can be *chronologically* prior to belief – that is, it can be engaged in by someone who is not yet a convinced believer. Second, it can to a considerable extent be *logically* independent of belief: a great deal of the language used in liturgical practice does not consist of explicit assertions of doctrinal or theological claims. Here one might well apply to liturgy a comment made by Rowan Williams about Dante's *Divina Comedia*: it is 'not a versification of doctrinal propositions but an attempt to allow the being of ... God to become transparent and actively transformative in the words recited and read or heard' (Williams 2017, commenting on Montemaggi 2016). And third, even when the language is phrased in such a way as to presuppose the reality of God, what is presupposed is not an existing thing in the world ('God is no thing', as Rupert Shortt (2016) has recently underlined), but more like a foundational or grounding presence that is the source of being and goodness.

This latter notion, however, suffers from a certain vagueness, and this raises the worry that in the effort to vindicate the priority of spiritual praxis over belief we have risked blurring or eroding the doxastic component of religious allegiance to vanishing point. To show that this worry is misplaced, I want to look in more detail at the way in which spiritual praxis actually works, and in particular how – not immediately, but as they progressively immerse themselves in the programme of ritual and repetition that is the vital core of spirituality – it enables the participants to enter and begin to inhabit a framework of interpretation, a new way of looking at the world.

The first step in seeing how this works is to focus on the *multi-layered* character of spiritual practices – the way they engage our awareness and our attention at many levels. These include for example the physical and behavioural level (where bodily movements and ritual performances are involved), and the sensory and aesthetic level (consider for instance the visual, olfactory and auditory features found in traditional Orthodox and Catholic spirituality, including the sight of sacred vessels and rich vestments, the smell of incense, the music sung by cantor and choir). We are here a world away from the flat, single-layered domain of literal factual assertion, and are caught up in a dynamic structure of mutually resonating meanings and modes of communication

that appeal not just to the intellect, or even to the intellect plus the emotions, but to the whole person, and which have the power to change our perception in a host of ways, many operating below the threshold of explicit awareness.

Perhaps because these resonances are often so elusive and fragile, compared to the solid domain of explicit propositional content, many analytic philosophers implicitly downplay the importance of these aspects of human awareness, or even ignore them entirely. Yet without appreciating their importance one cannot begin to understand whole swathes of human life and experience – those involving poetry, literature, art, and music, for example, not to mention personal relationships, love, friendship, and much else besides. In all these domains, human beings continue, to be sure, to exercise their cognitive powers – what they do goes far beyond mere reflex, or animal response, and involves a rich grasp of the relevant properties and relations in all their complexity and interrelatedness. But the kind of awareness involved cannot be achieved by the detached analytic intellect – we know, for example that those suffering from certain kinds of autism can be among the most intellectually gifted of people, but be strangely incapacitated when it comes to the empathetic perception needed for detecting someone’s feelings and forming a close relationship. To allow scope for the richer and deeper kinds of awareness just mentioned, a kind of empathetic openness and engagement is required, and it is precisely this kind of openness that spiritual practices have the power to trigger and to foster.

For one cannot just *will* oneself to be open to a given segment of reality. The right kind of sensitivity needs to be in place, and this will often require, apart from innate capacities and endowments, careful cultivation and training. And often this training will begin not with intellectual investigation, scrutiny of evidence, or learning of facts, but with performances and activities, initially perhaps done by rote, or by imitation. If for instance we consider the early stages of moral development, a young child cannot just be ordered to feel sorry for his little brother or sister whom he has pushed over. Typically, he will be encouraged to go up and say ‘I’m sorry’, and perhaps put his arm round the distressed sibling, subconsciously imitating gestures of comfort he has seen his parents perform. In due course of time, these words and actions become ‘reinforced’, as the behavioural psychologists say; and in their train, certain feelings and beliefs, if all goes well, start to form. The child starts to become responsive to the moral realities of family life and interpersonal contact. And the act of putting one’s arm round someone to comfort them starts to take on a rich symbolic significance that weaves itself into the growing child’s outlook and starts, again if all goes well, to shape its awareness and colour its perception.

But the importance of practical performances and routines extends far beyond these simple examples of childhood training and extends into every aspect of adult life. One of the problems of the secularized milieu in which increasing numbers of people now live is that it does not provide anything in the way of symbolic and resonant repertoires and rituals designed to nurture and reinforce our moral and spiritual sensibilities. Apart from the threat of external enforcement in extreme cases, our moral growth, our responsiveness to the good, is often left hostage to the haphazard interplay of chance, the vagaries of group conformity, or the random chatter of social media. It would be rash in the extreme for academics to suppose they are rational enough to be themselves immune from this unwholesome daily diet. But spiritual praxis, as traditionally conceived, is supposed to provide a *counter-diet* to that on offer from the secular world. The dietary metaphor is particularly apt here in the light of what William Wainwright has called the ‘ingestion’ of sacred texts – a process of complete absorption, into the psyche of the participants, of the scriptural readings that form an integral part of most liturgies. As Paul Griffiths has pointed out, in the history of Christianity (and many other religions) before the invention of printing, repeated reciting, chanting, memorizing and reflecting on the scriptures had the effect of making the text enter ‘into the fabric of [one’s] intellectual and emotional life in a way that makes deep claims upon that life’ (1999, 45-7; quoted in Wainwright 201, 50).

The moral dimension, the sense of one’s life being subject to *claims* or *demands*, is of course a recurring element in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures, and crucial to their role in liturgy and worship; and it also underlies and informs many other aspects of spiritual praxis. Secularists may

say that the demands of goodness and justice are operative anyway, as it were, and can be adequately validated without any recourse to religious categories. But even if such secular validations of morality work (a subject for another paper), it is doubtful if they could energize our moral imagination in the right way. For as humans we need, in order to flourish, not just to act rightly, not just to exercise our ‘practical reason’ or ‘rational choice’, but to have acquired and thoroughly absorbed a conception of goodness that guides and irradiates our lives. Moreover, as we saw even in the simple case of childhood training, the process of interior absorption is inseparable from the acts of outward expression that cement and reinforce what is being learned. As Robert Adams has argued, in order to live well, human beings need to have outward ways of *expressing their allegiance to the good*:

Something of ethical importance can be done in worship that we cannot accomplish except symbolically ... Getting ourselves dressed in the morning, [going]to work, and then home again to dinner, we try on the way and in between to do some good, to love people and be kind to them, to enjoy and perhaps to create some beauty. But none of this is very perfect, even when we succeed; and all of it is very fragmentary... Symbolically, we can do better. Symbolically I can be for the Good as such, and not just for the bits and pieces of it that I can concretely promote... I can be for the good by articulating or accepting some conception of a comprehensive and perfect or transcendent Good and expressing my loyalty to it symbolically ... The symbolism provides something for which there is no adequate substitute. Theists find this value of symbolism supremely in worship (Adams 1999, 227).

This theme has been taken up in an interesting recent study by Terence Cuneo, entitled *Ritualized Faith*. Cuneo here reveals that he himself followed an unusual religious trajectory: he was baptized a Roman Catholic, but his family switched to the local Evangelical Free Church when he was very young, and though initially enthralled by this brand of Protestantism he later became disillusioned. As a student he became interested in returning to Catholicism, but it ‘just didn’t take’, and a series of events led to his deciding to become Orthodox. One such event was being invited by a friend to attend an Orthodox Pascal liturgy where he ‘sensed, for the first time ever, a fit between the actions being performed in an Easter service and the significance of that which was being celebrated’ (Cuneo, 2016, 207, 210). The stress on actions here is highly significant. The seven petitionary litanies in the early fifth-century Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, for example, provide a way of ‘develop[ing] and enact[ing] an ethic of outwardness ... understood to include not only ... opening ourselves up to the needs of others but also standing in solidarity with them’. Or in the Eucharist, the celebrant’s blessings over the gifts are a way of ‘affirming their goodness’: they ‘affirm and treat the natural world, as symbolized in the bread and wine, as being a means of communion, a point of contact with God’ (Cuneo 2016, 33, 48).

Much more is involved here than understanding liturgy as having moral significance through its symbolic power. The Easter liturgies that are so important in Catholic and Orthodox worship, the foot-washing on Holy Thursday, the dramatized passion narrative on Good Friday, and so on, are, for those who participate in them, highly emotional and involved enactments or re-enactments of pivotal events described in Scripture, where the participants are not just pretending or playing a role, but engaging with it at a deep imaginative level: they fundamentally alter their relation to the episode being re-enacted by imaginatively *inhabiting* it in such a way as to appropriate it (Cuneo, 2016, 84, 87). One of the key dispositions here is *receptivity*, and one is reminded here of Martha Nussbaum’s seminal account, in *Love’s Knowledge*, of how our powers of moral discernment and understanding can be developed by engaging with a literary text with the right kind of attentive openness. But the additional dimension that liturgy supplies, in contrast to literary engagement with of a novel or poem, is that the participants are called upon by the liturgical script to *commit* themselves to certain moral and religious ideals, including, as Cuneo puts it, ‘being like, or aspiring to be like, the characters presented in the ... script’ (2016, 104).

4. What about the beliefs?

So spiritual praxis involves a number of significant elements. In the first place, it works on us not just intellectually, but emotionally and physically, in a multi-layered holistic way that *engages* the whole person. Secondly, it allows us to *absorb* certain ideas at a deep level that colours our outlook on the world and opens our eyes to aspects of reality that may before have been occluded. Thirdly, it allows us to *express* certain fundamental moral attitudes in powerful symbolic form that plays a vital role in sustaining and supporting them. For I'd venture to suggest here that without a living tradition of spirituality in which we can immerse ourselves, and which will sustain us in reaching up towards the good, we will be left gasping in the cold outer space of theological speculation, or struggling across the arid plain of secular ethical calculation. And fourthly and finally, through imaginative identification and receptivity, it allows us, instead of assessing and scrutinizing a worldview from a distance, to *immerse* ourselves in it, to inhabit it, so that it becomes a fundamental part of who we are.

If we put together all these related elements of spiritual praxis, *engagement*, *absorption*, *expression*, and *immersion*, how does this bear on the thesis of the primacy of praxis discussed earlier – the idea that spiritual praxis can be chronologically and logically prior to explicit religious belief? Certainly, as we saw earlier, it's clear that you do not have to start from a position of belief in order to embark on the praxis: any serious study of religious communities and forms of life is likely to show that achieving secure faith is often a long and arduous journey, where spiritual disciplines and observances like prayer, meditation, fasting, worship and so on are the means on the way to the desired, but not yet achieved, destination of secure faith (compare Cuneo on 'watchfulness' in the Orthodox tradition, 2016, 214).

Nevertheless, the various features of spirituality we have been examining all seem to make sense only on the assumption that there is a genuine divine reality that is the object of our spiritual quest. Here the position of Terence Cuneo is interesting, since despite his patently wholehearted commitment to the liturgy and worship of the orthodox tradition, he admits, with disarming honesty, that 'on most days' he finds himself 'not believing many of Christianity's core claims' He goes on to say that he finds 'beauty, forgiveness, redemption, and meaning' in the Christian vision of the world, acknowledges that this vision is inextricably bound up with a theistic framework, and 'hopes with all [his] being that what the tradition says is true' (2016, 214).

Some hardline believers may be very suspicious of the idea of commitment to the praxis without doxastic commitment to the doctrines, but I think this corresponds to how very many sincere religious practitioners think and feel about their outlook. But I want to move the discussion towards a close by asking whether there may not be scope for a stronger position than this – one that does not merely emphasise the dynamic and potentially beneficial effects of theistic spiritual praxis in human psychological and moral development, and which does not merely rest content with the pious hope that the underlying theistic framework may be true, but which construes the praxis as actually *constitutive* of making contact with the divine reality in question.

This stronger position is suggested by some of the things Cuneo himself says. He claims at one point, for example, that 'knowing how to engage in religious ritual is, when all goes well, *a way in which we know God*'; and he also suggests that 'engaging in the liturgical activities ... is not primarily a *means* to forming beliefs about God, but ... knowing God ... *consists* in engaging in them'. This strong constitutive claim in turn hinges on the idea that the liturgical practices handed down in the tradition 'provide the materials for ... *knowing how to engage God*'. And elsewhere Cuneo compares the kind of knowing he has in mind with having a *rapport* with someone (2016, 148, 162-3, emphasis supplied). An objector may reply that there is a logical gap between engaging in the practices on the one hand, and, on the other hand, engaging with God, or 'engaging God'. The latter notions, like having a *rapport* with someone, or making contact with someone, are what Gilbert Ryle (1954) called 'success verbs' – they automatically carry the sense of a relation *accomplished*, which in turn implies the actual existence of the persons involved. So all sorts of assumptions are presupposed here – for example that there are good reasons for thinking that the

prescribed rituals are indeed an effective way of making contact with the divine, and that there is indeed something or someone to be made contact with.

So can the advocate of spiritual praxis with integrity take this stronger position, and boldly assert that such praxis simply is our human way (or a human way) of making contact with the divine? Not, I think, if this is taken to mean there can be some logically guaranteed or magical route from liturgical praxis to contact with God. But what I think we *can* say is that, although it is not within our human capacity to build a guaranteed bridge from our phenomenal world to the divine reality beyond it, there can come a point where the epistemic worry ('how can I know my spiritual praxis is really directed towards a real divine object?') simply ceases to have any purchase.

By way of analogy (though it obviously a partial and imperfect one – I shall return to this in a moment), consider a more straightforward case where praxis plays a constitutive role. Alice prefers Bertrand's company to that of others, she enjoys talking and eating with him, she comforts him when he is depressed, she visits him in hospital when he is ill, she weeps when he is sad, she rejoices at his successes, she defends him when attacked, she calls him daily when they are separated, her face lights up when she sees him. If this list goes on long enough, it becomes clear that the performances listed are not merely the *accompaniments* of Alice's loving Bertrand; they are the very embodiment and enactment of love; and vice versa, in the case of Bertrand and his love for Alice. There is theoretically a question as to whether it is not conceivable that there is no love, that it is all an act, that one of the parties is a robot or a zombie; but without getting into the sillier recesses of academic scepticism, there comes a point when there is no serious doubt that Alice and Bertrand's behaviour, and their disposition to continue behaving in a similar manner no matter what, actually constitutes their loving each other. The performances constitute their loving engagement with each other.

I have described this example in a somewhat idealistic or rose-tinted way, and in a real human relationship, such loving commitments are learned over time, tested through crises and joys and sorrows, and only if all goes well do they become inseparable from the outlook and character of the parties involved. And this is equally true in the case of spiritual praxis. There may be setbacks and disappointments, but if all goes well repeated patterns of spiritual praxis should in the long run tend to foster the kind of focused receptivity which leads to new perceptions and commitments. And these new perceptions may in turn prompt further engagement, which, as it becomes absorbed in to a repeated pattern of behaviour, in turn opens the door to deeper perception and deeper commitment.

If the traditional religious praxis prescribed in the Christian rite of the Eucharist functions as it should, it involves the participants in a regular structured process where, amongst other things, they open their hearts on each occasion to reflecting on their failures and weaknesses and asking for help to overcome them; where they listen attentively and receptively to morally uplifting readings which are progressively absorbed into their day-to-day reactions and ways of perceiving the world; where they participate in sacred rituals which embody and enact their receptivity to the gifts of life, the power of goodness, and the hope of redemption; where they associate themselves with all their fellow communicants who are in similar need of grace to themselves; where they reach out to them in physical gestures of goodwill and peace; where they receive a blessing and go out of the building resolved to construe all of life as a blessing.

Of course it is not always like that: spirituality can go stale, praxis can become routine, engagement can turn sour. But when all goes well, when the life of the individual is progressively renewed and uplifted by immersive, committed, absorbed engagement in transformative spiritual praxis at its best, then to continue to ask 'are you sure of the validity of what you are doing?' ceases to have any purchase. From the epistemic point of view, the transformations undergone by the subject have triggered new modes of awareness, in turn triggering new receptivity and openness, so that it becomes no more possible for the subject to doubt the authenticity of the reality that they have encountered than it is possible for Alice or Bertrand to doubt the authenticity and the reality of the love flowing between them in the scenario just described.

But of course there is a crucial difference in the divine case, namely that one of the parties to the relationship is behind the veil, as it were, never directly seen. So however deep the perceptual transformations undergone through spiritual practice, however epistemically confident the spiritual practitioner feels that they have encountered a divine reality, there still remains the ontological question of whether there is really a two-way encounter as opposed to an unrequited commitment, or a commitment directed to the void. So we come back to our original question: can we plausibly say that spiritual praxis of the kind described *constitutes* an encounter with the divine?

Emmanuel Levinas, who famously argued for the primacy of morality over metaphysics, would presumably say no: for him there can be no access to God, no encounter with God, except through ethical action. Theological claims about the infinite transcendent God dissolve into the absolute demands placed on me by the vulnerable face of the other:

The face signifies in the fact of *summoning me* - in its nudity or its destitution, in everything that is precarious in questioning, in all the hazards of mortality... The Infinite in its absolute difference withholds itself from presence in me... It is in calling me to other men that transcendence concerns me ... The idea of the Infinite is to be found in my responsibility for the Other (Levinas 1983, 113).

Levinas's position is in tune with much contemporary theological thinking that rejects traditional 'onto-theology'. And it may seem, on the most radical interpretation, that this approach replaces religion with morality, inviting us to bring the transcendent down to the human ethical domain; and that that traditional 'divine worship' thus loses its point, giving way to the imperatives of ethical action. But if the arguments of this paper have been on the right lines, this is a false antithesis. In the first place, the forms of spiritual praxis just mentioned – self-examination, cultivation of receptivity, acceptance of vulnerability, sharing of the consecrated gifts, reaching out to fellow-worshippers – are from start to finish *ethically focussed*, geared towards allegiance to the good, and compassion to others. In the second place, in the Jewish theistic tradition that colours so much of Levinas's underlying outlook, the very idea of sacred and inviolable ethical commandments or requirements depends on God. In the Hebrew Bible, recapitulated in the teachings of Christ, the second commandment, to love one's neighbour, ranks alongside, but does not replace, the first commandment, to love God. And much spiritual praxis, in actions and words, enacts and expresses just that love.

Yet for a Levinasian, presumably, that love is a one way street, since the Infinite, in its 'absolute difference', 'withholds itself from presence ...' But I will conclude with a final comment that takes issue with this, but which I think is broadly consistent with the spirit of Levinas. Sacramental worship may be thought of as a process whereby the finite creature *enacts* the search for the infinite perfection which it cannot fully grasp. In the Mass or the Eucharist, those who participate *orient themselves*, though liturgical practice and ritual, *towards that for which they long*. Thus the drama of the Mass begins with a *journey*: in the opening antiphon, the priest intones *Introibo ad altare Dei*, 'I will go up to the altar of God' – note the future tense – which is a quotation from Psalm 43 [42], a song of longing to be 'brought up to the holy mountain of God', and this is embodied in ritual as the celebrant processes up the altar steps. What is expressed in all this, and in many other related spiritual practices and rituals, is the longing of the finite creature for communion with the infinite – that which cannot be comprehended, cannot be grasped, but whose presence neither Levinas nor anyone else is in a position to declare is always withheld. For what cannot be comprehended can nevertheless be glimpsed, through the transformations worked by spiritual praxis. It is glimpsed as holy – holy (as Levinas might put it) in its difference, as the unreachable object of our longing, but also holy in the awe it calls forth as the sacred source of normativity – precisely that inescapable summons that Levinas identifies us as experiencing in our encounters with our fellow creatures.

I conclude that so far from being a redundant extra tacked on to the requirements of the ethical life, spiritual practice is the life blood not just of religious faith, but ultimately, of morality

itself. By enacting our human longing for the good, and expressing our responsiveness to it, spiritual praxis embodies and constitutes our engagement with the divine, and enables us to encounter, in so far as our finitude allows, the infinite perfection that passes all understanding.

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