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Ever since the Enlightenment it has been difficult to be religious with intellectual integrity. Belief in a transcendent and benevolent being is inconsistent with rational reflection upon the state of the world, the evils that occur in it, and the laws of nature which describe its workings. The Enlightenment has taught us that knowledge is of the world of appearances. What lies behind that world in the realm of metaphysics – whether it be the ‘thing in itself’ or God – is forever beyond our powers of cognition. For an honest post-Enlightenment thinker, atheism would seem to be the default position.

And yet religion remains an important phenomenon. Not only do many people in the West – people who are brought up in a post-Enlightenment culture – profess religious beliefs, but many major geo-political events can only be understood as the result of religiously based commitments and conflicts. Post-Enlightenment thinkers have cut themselves off from any sympathetic understanding of these phenomena. Such thinkers might avow an attitude of respect and tolerance for the religious convictions of others but they cannot but regard them as irrational or even infantile. It would seem then that Enlightenment thought is incapable of the degree of rapport with those who have religious convictions which would be needed in such various contexts as interpersonal counselling or the pursuit of world peace.

Accordingly, any book that promises to discuss religion from a philosophical perspective with a view to demonstrating its importance in human life and its intellectual credibility would have to be of interest. John Cottingham comes to this task with an admirable record of publication on the thought of Rene Descartes, on psychoanalysis and the pursuit of happiness, and on the meaning of life. Moreover he approaches his task with an appropriate recognition that the traditional agenda of the philosophy of religion is not appropriate to such a task. Proving the existence of God or using methods of rational persuasion to coerce doctrinal beliefs is no way to proceed if a sympathetic understanding of religion is being sought. Rather, these beliefs are implied and justified by the practices, rituals and moral commitments in which the believer is immersed. Cottingham promises to use the notion of spirituality in order to understand religion, the assumption being that human beings have a need for meaningfulness in their lives which leads them away from the humdrum concerns of everyday life and into a set of practices which bespeak a spiritual realm marked by beauty, goodness and the peace that arises from ultimate concerns.

It is a pity, then, that Cottingham argues that such a spiritual quest can only be fulfilled by a set of doctrinal and metaphysical commitments that draw heavily from
the Christian tradition. Despite his disclaimers, this book is a work of apologetics. It tries to show that the metaphysical and moral doctrines of Christianity are rational despite the Enlightenment attacks upon them. It seems that we cannot attain our spiritual quest unless we believe that there is a transcendent God and that his nature is as described in Christian revelation. We cannot attain peace unless be believe that our suffering is redeemed by the incarnation. We cannot become truly moral unless we see such a stance as a fulfilment of God’s design for us. Rather than seeking to describe or espouse a non-metaphysical set of beliefs or attitudes which might constitute a viable form of spirituality for non-believers, Cottingham leaves his readers with the impression that the Christian religion is, if not the only, then certainly the most important form through which our spiritual quest might be fulfilled.

Cottingham deals with many of the traditional themes of the philosophy of religion, such as the problem of evil, God as a source of morality, and the nature of religious language. He defends religion against the psychoanalytic critique that it is an infantile attachment to a heavenly father figure. He discusses the plurality of religions and defends the validity of the Christian tradition. But the chapter that might be of greatest interest to philosophical practitioners is the one that discusses how we might cope with the vulnerability that marks our human condition. Cottingham calls for a spiritual 

askesis: a becoming childlike and receptive to the spiritual reality which enlivens our moral commitments and fulfils our quest for meaning. The pity is that he does not see that the resources for such a transformation lie in our human existence and in our relationships with others in our communities rather than in a transcendent realm belief in which so often separates us from such immanent sources of value and meaning.

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