14. 'We already know what is good and just...'¹ : Idolatry and the scalpel of suspicion

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Suspicion of religion and of religious believers is inherent in western atheism and it is not hard to find this reflected in philosophical thought. However, the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'² has been marginal in mainstream philosophy of religion which has concentrated on epistemological issues, inspired by what Merold Westphal has called 'evidential atheism'.³ This critique of religious faith focuses on the alleged epistemological shortfalls in religious beliefs, pointing to its incoherence, unintelligibility and inadequate evidence.

While the theme of suspicion is muted in mainstream philosophy of religion, it is explicit and open in the work of Nietzsche, Freud and Marx but also in a less known work of David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*.⁴ Nietzsche was well aware of the epistemological objections to Christianity but he came to the realisation that his own atheism was evoked by something deeper than epistemological objections. His 'genealogical' investigation was inspired by suspicion about believers themselves and the extent to which such individuals are motivated by self-interest in their professions of faith. The focus is therefore on the integrity of believers and on the *very possibility of truthfulness in believing*. This is, of course a confronting critique for religious believers. How then can this 'atheism from suspicion'⁵ open the way for dialogue between believers and their philosopher critics?

Dialogue and mutuality of engagement have not been notable characteristics in mainstream philosophy of religion. In fact philosophy has invariably set the agenda in both the content and approach taken in this enquiry. As Charles Taliaferro writes, philosophy of religion has often been characterised by 'aggressive critique on the one side and defence or accommodation on the other'.⁶ How then can a more equitable exchange be created for religion to speak on its own terms?

Suspicion of believers is reflected in the statement quoted in the title: 'We already know what is good and just'. The full paragraph is found in Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in which he describes a class of people, categorised as 'Pharisees' as follows: 'As those who say and feel in their hearts: "We already know what is good and just, we possess it also; woe to those who seek

thereafter!"" These are closed-minded people that today we would call fundamentalists.⁷

The passage is part of Nietzsche's concentrated critique of Christianity which becomes progressively more vituperative in the course of his writing, but the condition he calls 'pharisaism' is a form of corrupt interiority which he extends beyond Christians to Jews and in fact, to all 'the good'. In other words, 'pharisaism' is intended as a general characterisation of the slave morality which Nietzsche both profiles so insightfully and attacks so violently. He seems quite unambiguous when he says, 'Pharisaism is not degeneration in a good man: a good part of it is rather the condition of all being good'.⁸

As noted above, Nietzsche's critique reflects the assumption within western philosophical thought that religious faith is a form of self deception which leads to epistemic closure. In other words, there is an underlying prejudice that all serious religious conviction has the seeds of fundamentalism. In his depiction of faith as self affirming illusion, Nietzsche represents Christians as psychologically diminished people who seek a packaged faith that they can control in order that they can live unchallenged with all that they believe and 'know'.

In this chapter, I will show (with particular reference to the Christian faith), that discomfiting as suspicion is to believers, it can engender dialogue in at least two ways: first, by the mutuality, or a 'logic of implication' which suspicion itself introduces; second, by the insights which suspicion elicits from religion which serves religion by contributing to its self understanding. In addition, suspicion also increases general understanding by sharpening the differences between the interlocutors.

Here the notion of idolatry maps out the 'rhetorical space',⁹ or the areas where engagement can be found. In other words, as far as Christianity is concerned, what philosophers like Nietzsche say about such interior corruption cannot be rejected outright since it resonates with what Christian faith itself characterises as idolatry. I use 'scalpel' as a metaphor for the incisive work which suspicion can do when religious believers confront suspicion and acknowledge the presence of idolatry in their beliefs and practices.

I will suggest that we can utilise this dynamic to open up dialogue with the serious religious sentiments with which suspicion resonates, not only in Christianity, but in any religious tradition which values a spirituality of inwardness. The paper will now fall into two parts. In the first part, I will outline the critique from suspicion in David Hume and in Nietzsche's profile of pharisaism. In the second part, I will consider Christian responses to critiques of this kind.

Nietzsche's critique

In his *Natural History of Religion*, Hume argues that religion originates from self-regarding human instincts, such as 'the anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery [and] the terror of death' and the 'unknown causes' of such deep emotion are objectified into the divine. Hume uses terms like 'superstition,' 'idolatry,' and 'polytheism' to describe the various ways in which religion is used to further those essentially self-regarding instincts.

While Hume showed a certain admiration for the lofty and noble ideals of religion, he advances his atheism with this challenging question: how could so much violence be done in its name.¹⁰ Centuries later that question is echoed in the postmodern protest that the big stories of faith have given us as much terror as we can take.¹¹

Hume's answer to his own question is challenging but illuminating to believers. He concluded that many religious people are able to live with the fundamental contradiction between the ideals of their faith and the violence which it produces because they have domesticated their religion into cosy ideas and 'comfortable views' which have lost all their challenge and edge. As he sees it, believers are so cocooned in their web of beliefs that they will use it to justify whatever they want. These people are in control of a religion that they use to advance their self interest.

With this in mind, Hume raises another question: how does this kind of domesticated religion fit in with religious worship? Does not worship of God require a letting go of self interest? Is not true worship a self-forgetful, non-calculating act? Hume therefore concludes that believers are simply psychologically incapable of worship and that what they call adoration and worship is nothing more than placation and flattery of the divine. An insurance policy against things going wrong.

In drawing the distinction between flattery and adoration, Hume anticipates Nietzsche who (as we shall see) represents religious piety as a form of restlessness borne of anxious self-preoccupation. Believing as he did that it was the philosopher's duty 'to squint maliciously out of every abyss of suspicion',¹² Nietzsche was convinced that his account would reduce faith to nothing more than the manifestation of psychological disease. His conclusion that Christianity is the most virulent form of the morality of *ressentiment* led Nietzsche to the broad conclusion that the Christian form of life is not only disingenuous and anaemic, but 'pharisaical' through and through.

Nietzsche's analysis of pity clearly illustrates the dynamics of Christian slave morality. For Nietzsche, what Christians consider to be virtues arise from weakness and low self esteem but they also show the 'cunning of impotence'¹³ since in caring for another, they enjoy the taste of superiority and of being in

the stronger emotional position. Pity is thus often 'obtrusive' and 'offends the sense of shame', hurting another's pride. Hence Nietzsche advises that 'unwillingness to help can be nobler than the virtue that rusheth to do so'.¹⁴ In Nietzsche's characterisation, however, pharisaical Christians use pity as a covert revenge. Armed with their good deeds and acts of kindness, they parade as 'embodied reproaches' to those around them.

Nietzsche's representation of pharisaical moralism illuminates the dynamics of idolatry to show how failure of character breeds epistemic closure. Three personality traits structure pharisaical morality: self-enclosure, self-loathing and self-deception.

Firstly, self-enclosure. The pharisees hate new challenges. Nietzsche describes them as 'the beginning of the end' because they are unoriginal and 'cannot create'. By resisting visionaries like Zarathustra and Christ they 'sacrifice unto themselves the future...the whole human future'.¹⁵ Since their spirit is 'imprisoned in their good conscience',¹⁶ the pharisees are 'not *free* to understand' (my italics) new ideas. As Nietzsche judges, the Pharisees 'already know what is good and just'.

Secondly, Nietzsche insightfully suggests that pharisaical traits reflect a deep self-loathing. They speak of the person who is not content with himself, but who is always wishing that he were someone else: 'If only I were someone else...And yet—I am sick of myself!'¹⁷

Thirdly, the person who cannot bear himself also cannot bear to reveal who he is. But the dissembling of the pharisee works so well that duplicity passes over into self-deception, which flourishes within his lonely life. Nietzsche presents graphic descriptions of this squinting weak-willed individual who slinks about in dark places, continually brooding and machinating forms of underhand ascendancy. The weak are consequently weighed down and 'exhausted' by their project of self-preservation: by thoughts about the next move and the next masking act. Such inauthenticity works itself into an art form and issues in a restlessness which Nietzsche describes as 'roving about'. Accordingly, the heart of the pharisee is a 'swampy ground' where 'worms of vengefulness and rancour swarm', in which 'the air stinks of secrets and concealments', and 'the web of the most malicious of conspiracies is being spun constantly'.¹⁸

The picture of Christians gets worse. Indeed, there is no doubt of Nietzsche's thorough hatred of Christianity when he wrote in *The Antichrist*,

I call Christianity the one great curse, the one great intrinsic depravity, the one great instinct for revenge for which no expedient is sufficiently poisonous, secret, subterranean, *petty*—I call it the *one* immortal blemish of mankind...¹⁹

Christian response

Can Christianity respond to a critique of this kind, a critique which reduces it to suspicion and lies? We return to the points made earlier on how suspicion can engender dialogue.

We noted firstly that dialogue stems from the logic of suspicion itself, from what I have called a 'logic of implication'. This arises from the fact that suspicion is chiefly concerned with truth and with truthfulness in so far as it is driven by the desire to unmask what is false and inauthentic. If the author of suspicion seeks to expose the ways in which religion functions 'both to mask and to fulfil forms of self interest which cannot be acknowledged',²⁰ he or she must also accept their own vulnerability in this process. They must accept that the evasiveness of human consciousness extends to themselves. No one can claim self transparency and anyone is a potential target for unmasking.

This logic of suspicion unites and elicits insights which are both theological and philosophical. Christian biblical and theological thought does not hold back from pronouncing on the human capacity for self deception and the folly of any pretensions to self transparency. Foucault resonates with this awareness when he says 'it is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous'.²¹ And because of this there is always work to do in challenging pretensions to truth. This point of mutuality is rare in philosophy of religion but it is a good basis for dialogue, especially if it is framed by the sense of fragility of truthfulness which Foucault suggests.

The theologian, Karl Barth recognised the constructive role which suspicion plays against spiritual idolatry. He said that idols are 'No Gods' which trade the voice of truth for domesticated versions of it and arise from our desire to be comfortable and safe from the challenge of truth. The more domesticated and familiar, the less recognisable they are as idols. Barth therefore argued that Christians must listen to those prophetic voices from outside our comfortable spaces because they can reveal our idolatry and '[t]he cry of revolt against such a god is nearer the truth than is the sophistry with which men attempt to justify him'.²²

Secondly, suspicion can challenge religious believers to respond in a way which deepens their self understanding. As John Caputo writes, such penetrating critique can serve a prophetic purpose, by 'holding the feet of religion to the fire of faith'.²³ In that sense, suspicion reminds religion of itself and of its prophetic potential.

In what follows, I will consider some areas of Christian theological thought which can be deepened by Nietzsche's profile of the Pharisee. Here, Nietzsche shows how self loathing feeds self deception and self enclosure. Imprisoned in his good conscience, the Pharisee creates a world impervious to challenge. The relationship

between religious conviction and epistemic closure is indeed corroborated by what one finds in religious fundamentalism, but there are countervailing religious ideas on the issue. For example, the philosopher Kierkegaard was at pains to point out that faith is not epistemic certainty but an orientation of the self toward eternity, a passionate decision in the face of ultimate concern.²⁴

Perhaps one of the most pointed warnings against the danger of self enclosure is found in Coleridge's well known aphorism. He writes: 'He who begins by loving Christianity better than truth, will proceed by loving his own sect or church better than Christianity, and end in loving himself better than all'.²⁵ This spiritual dynamic of faith is worth analysing. In the important distinctions that Coleridge makes between love of truth and love of Christianity and its specific forms, faith is clearly distinguished from idolatry. Further, according to Coleridge, faithfulness to truth must override faithfulness to Christianity because faith must be sought but never really found in the pharisaical sense. No Christian could claim that they 'already know what is good and just'. Neither can they claim to 'possess' it. Further, it follows that faith is a process of learning and must be protected from idolatry by self reflexivity and by interior vigilance.

So much about the nature of faith, but what about the claim that all 'the good' are Pharisees and that all one's efforts in the spiritual life are corrupted by instrumentality? This broad claim touches all spiritual aspirations everywhere. If the self is never free from itself then there can be no authentic spirituality. All religious devotion is sham and as Hume noted, worship is humanly impossible.

Yet, religion is not caught out by Nietzsche's observation about the ubiquity of the self. Indeed, most religious traditions recognise that instrumentality towards the divine leads to servility of the spirit. As Thomas Merton writes,

If we remain in our ego, clenched upon ourselves, trying to draw down to ourselves gifts which we then incorporate in our own limited selfish life, then prayer does remain servile. Servility has its roots in self-serving. Servility, in a strange way, really consists in trying to make God serve our own needs...This fact of human nature is recognised and acknowledged at the beginning of prayer in order to rise above it.²⁶

In the light of the above, Westphal points out that Merton's profound spiritual insight can explain why across religious traditions, the spiritual life is protected from the corrupting effects of instrumental self interest by what he calls 'terminal' activities, such as prayer, worship and meditation. These spiritual practices are designed to resist instrumentality by celebrating what Westphal calls 'useless (i.e. non instrumental) self-transcendence'.²⁷ They recognise Nietzsche's insight from the beginning, that while the self is ubiquitous, there are ways and means

for devotees to reach that place of freedom where instrumentalism does not have the last word.

To argue categorically as Nietzsche does, that human beings are incapable of non-instrumentality is to be bound to the ultimacy of this logic and to a restricted view of human possibility. This is perhaps not surprising, given that instrumentality lies deep within the way we think and live. But it opens up the conversation on views of human nature and of the possibilities of the spiritual life. The Christian contribution to this discussion would refer to the theological notion of grace, to address Nietzsche's rich profile of the Pharisee who is forever weighed down by the exhausting project of inauthentic self representation. For as Jürgen Moltmann argues, grace pronounces 'the demonstrative value of [our] being'²⁸ to release us from the 'dreadful questions of existence'²⁹ that surround the instrumental approach to human worth.

However, suspicion can also divide the interlocutors. It can reveal the fact that they inhabit different worlds. For example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who read Nietzsche closely, bemoaned the prevalence of instrumental religion in the Christianity of his day. He identified it as the 'cheap grace'³⁰ which trades self-serving religion for the radical experience of self-surrendering discipleship. However, while agreeing with Nietzsche about the lure of self-affirming illusion in religion, Bonhoeffer maintains against Nietzsche that true freedom comes from self surrender to God. In answer to Nietzsche's analysis of the Christian life, Bonhoeffer puts forward the radical Christian understanding of power which challenges Nietzsche's understanding, not only of freedom, but also of weakness.³¹ Clearly sharpened by his engagement with Nietzsche's psychological insights into the slavish uses of weakness, Bonhoeffer articulates a notion of 'Christian weakness' which is understood in relation to the imitation and discipleship of Christ. This 'weakness' is cultivated by the challenge of a courageous and robust character that constantly resists idolatry by self-reflexive learning. Thus Bonhoeffer starkly opposes a comfortable view of God with the Christ of the cross. He addresses Nietzsche's contempt for Christian ideas of redemption and his rejection of 'that wretched of all trees' with this statement of Christian distinctiveness: he writes:

If it is I who say where God will be, I will always find there a [false] God who in some way corresponds to me, is agreeable to me, fits in with my nature. But if it is God who says where He will be...that place is the cross of Christ.³²

Conclusion

It is clear that suspicion can provide a creative spur to religious self understanding.³³ Like a scalpel, it cuts deep into the religious conscience but it can be a source of insight which feeds continuing dialogue. It is also clear that

suspicion can clearly show up profound differences between the parties but at least mutual understanding has been advanced. In this paper, I have tried to show that the notion of idolatry in both philosophy and theology provides a 'rhetorical space' for dialogue between faith and its interrogators and I have used the metaphor of the scalpel to indicate the cost of self reflexivity which is the price of fruitful dialogue.

ENDNOTES

¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich 1905, *Zarathustra*, Thomas Common (trans.), with an introduction by Elizabeth Forster-Nietzsche, New York, Macmillan, Third Part, LVI, # 26, p. 218. The full paragraph reads, 'As those who say and feel in their hearts: "We already know what is good and just, we possess it also; woe to those who seek thereafter!"'

² Paul Ricoeur describes this as the 'exegesis of the desires that lie hidden in...intentionality. See his (1970) *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, Denis Savage (trans.), New Haven, Yale University Press, pp. 457-58.

³ Westphal, Merold 1993, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism*, Grand Rapids, Mich., Eerdmans.

⁴ Hume, David 1956, *The Natural History of Religion*, H. E. Root, (ed.), London, Adam & Charles Black. I am indebted to Westphal for the discussion on Hume which follows.

⁵ The phrase comes from Westphal, 1993.

⁶ Taliaferro, Charles 1999, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford, Blackwell, p. 3.

⁷ Martin E. Marty characterises fundamentalists as those who look backwards and attempt to 'freeze' truth in some form. See his 1992, 'Fundamentalisms Compared,' *The 1989 Charles Strong Memorial Lectures*, Adelaide, Flinders University Press, p. 1. See also Lamb, Winifred Wing Han 1998, 'Facts That Stay Put: Protestant Fundamentalism, Epistemology and Orthodoxy,' *Sophia*, vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 88-110.

⁸ Nietzsche, Friedrich 1977, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, R. J. Hollingdale (trans.), London, Penguin, # 135, p. 82.

⁹ Lorraine Code uses the notion to explore the effect of inequality in discussions. See her 1995 *Rhetorical Spaces. Essays on Gendered Spaces*, New York, Routledge.

¹⁰ Hume, David 1956, *The Natural History of Religion*, H. E. Root, (ed.), London, Adam & Charles Black.

¹¹ Lyotard, Jean François 1981, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (trans.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, p. 81.

¹² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, # 34, p. 47.

¹³ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Kaufmann W. and Hollingdale R. J. (trans.) (New York, Vintage Books, 1967, I # 13, p. 40.

¹⁴ *Zarathustra*, Fourth Part, LXVII, pp. 265-7.

¹⁵ *Zarathustra* Third Part, LVI, # 26, pp. 218-9.

¹⁶ *Zarathustra*

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 122.

¹⁸ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

¹⁹ Nietzsche, 1990, *Twilight of the Idols/The Antichrist*, R. J. Hollingdale (trans.), London, Penguin, # 62, p. 199.

²⁰ Westphal, 1993, p. 14.

²¹ Foucault, Michel 1983, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,' Afterword to Hubert L. Dreyfus, Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 231.

²² Barth, Karl 1933, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Edwyn C. Hoskyns (trans.), New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 37-52. I am indebted to Westphal for his discussion on Barth in *Suspicion and Faith*, 1993, pp. 4-6.

²³ Caputo, John (ed.) 1997, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, New York, Fordham University Press, p. 159.

- ²⁴ Kierkegaard described faith as being acquired on a daily basis 'through the infinite personal passionate interest'. See Kierkegaard, 1944, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, David F. Swenson (trans.), Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, p. 53.
- ²⁵ Coleridge, Samuel Taylor 1825, *Aids to the Formation of a Manly Character*, London: Taylor and Hessey, p. 101.
- ²⁶ Merton, Thomas *Contemplation in a World of Action*, quoted in Merold Westphal, 1984, *God, Guilt and Death: An Existential Phenomenology of Religion*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, p. 142.
- ²⁷ The phrase is discussed in Westphal, 1984, *God, Guilt and Death: An Existential Phenomenology of Religion*, pp. 138-51.
- ²⁸ The phrase is F. J. J. Buytendijk's and quoted in Moltmann, J. *Theology and Joy*, London, SCM Press, 1971, p. 42.
- ²⁹ Moltmann, 1971, p. 43.
- ³⁰ Bonhoeffer, D. 1959, *The Cost of Discipleship*, London, SCM, p. 35.
- ³¹ There is a prejudice within modern atheism which equates Christianity with weak-willed conventionality and self-deceptive servility. Ludwig Feuerbach wrote, 'What distinguishes the Christian from other honourable people? At most a pious face and parted hair'. Feuerbach, L. 1980, 'Epigrams', *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*, Berkeley, University of California Press, p. 205.
- ³² Bonhoeffer, D. 1986, *Meditating on the Word*, Cambridge, Cowley Publications, p. 45.
- ³³ For an extended discussion see Lamb, Winifred Wing Han 2004, *Living Truth and Truthful Living: Christian Faith and the Scalpel of Suspicion*, Adelaide: ATF Press.