ON THE REALITY OF GOD

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In a recent article in *Religious Studies,* Kai Nielsen continues his examination of the approach to religious belief to which he has earlier given the enduring label of "Wittgensteinian fideism." His specific target is the account of what it means to believe in God offered by the Swansea philosopher Ilham Dilman in various writings, chief among them an article on John Wisdom's philosophy of religion. In Dilman's account, Nielsen finds some features of religious belief helpfully illuminated, especially regarding the connection between believing in God and orienting one's life toward God, a common theme among the Wittgensteinians. At the same time, he finds Dilman not untypically "evasive and in effect obscurantist about how we are to understand the concept of God and about *what* it is we are talking about in speaking of God."[1] Belief in God, on Dilman's account, seems to Nielsen not to differ from taking up a certain moral stance toward the world. How, Nielsen asks, does Dilman's version of Christian believing differ from that of the "Godless Christianity" of Braithwaite, Hare, and Van Buren? Although Dilman seeks to show the sense of God-talk, "he has not been able to articulate a sense of that talk that would distinguish the claims of the believer from those of the religious skeptic."[2]

The problem, as Nielsen sees it, is essentially that of reference. Traditionally, the crucial difference between believers and non-believers has been taken to be a disagreement as to what there is: reality either does, or does not, include "a God," and at least some God-talk either rightly or wrongly refers to that God. Dilman wants to excise such references from his account of what believers do and say, and yet, in Nielsen's judgment at least, he does not provide any other satisfactory way of distinguishing believers from non-believers, given the fact that non-believers may share the moral stance of believers, and even use their language, albeit in a deliberately non-referential way.

It is not my intention to come to the defense of "Wittgensteinian fideism," though it does seem to me that "Wittgensteinian pietism" might be a more apt label, given these philosophers' preoccupation with the religious life, especially its "inwardness" and emotional makeup. Nor do I aim to defend Dilman's position in particular against Nielsen's criticism; I believe that

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[1]Kai Neilsen, "Wisdom and Dilman and the Reality of God," *Religious Studies,* XVI (1980), p. 54. His "principal target" is Ilham Dilman, "Wisdom's Philosophy of Religion," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy,* V (1975), pp. 473-521. For Nielsen's understanding of "Wittgensteinian fideism," see his article by that title in *Philosophy,* XLII (1967), pp. 191-209. The term does not appear in the present article.

[2]Nielsen, "Wisdom and Dilman on the Reality of God," p. 60.

criticism to be warranted and successful on the whole. My purpose is rather to confront the question with which Nielsen's criticism leaves us. How should we distinguish the claims of the believer from those of the skeptic? What should be involved in the believer's affirmation of the reality of God which is not also involved in, say, the "Godless Christian's" recommendation or use of God-language in support of a way of life? "Should" is used in these questions to make it clear that the ensuing inquiry is not simply descriptive—or subtly prescriptive, as some of the Wittgensteinians' accounts of religious believing tend to be—but avowedly normative. This is conceived as a Christian theological response to the question. I say that, not to distinguish it sharply from other responses, but in order to identify the sort of belief (namely, proper Christian belief) which is under discussion here.

Now, it might be supposed that this issue only arises given a somewhat eccentric account, such as Dilman's, of what believing in God amounts to. The first order of business, then, is to show that this is not the case, and that, in fact, the question may be fairly provoked by some features of a more standard Christian theological account of God-talk. Nielsen is right in saying that Dilman has called attention to some aspects of our use of God-language which tend to be ignored; and it is some of these aspects, among others, that make the notion of reference problematic.

Dilman notes that believing in God has more to do with having a perspective on the world than with believing in the existence of something within or beyond the world. Believers and non-believers need not have different inventories of the world's contents, that is, they can find some basic level at which they are agreed as to what is before them. But they have different ways of relating those contents to each other and to themselves: one will make (or see) connections, have ways of construing things into patterns, which the other will ignore or deny, and vice versa. John Wisdom, in whose work this phenomenon of apprehending relations among things is a recurring theme, is correct in saying that the resultant difference both is and is not a difference "as to the facts," as to what is the case.[3]

Dilman also stresses, in a way that Wisdom does not, the fact that the difference has largely to do with the conceptual equipment of persons, and that coming to believe (or presumably to disbelieve) is often a matter of conceptual growth or change, and not a matter of finding new evidence.[4] Whether or not we see a person as loving has to do not only with what we are able to observe about that person but also with our understanding of what love involves; and the more we know about love, the less inclined we are to judge by superficial evidence *pro* or *con*. It is this relationship between one's perspective and one's conceptual preparation that lends sense to Wisdom's curious claim that a difference in judgment in such a case both is and is not a difference as to the

[3]John Wisdom, "Gods," *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), p. 154.

[4]Dilman, "Wisdom's Philosophy of Religion," pp. 474-6.

facts. The evidence may be there for all to see, and, at some stratum of discourse, to agree upon ("She gave him candy"); yet our different ways of "reading" the evidence may yield differing accounts of what is the case, at another level of discourse ("She was expressing her love." "No, she was bribing him."). These different readings display different abilities to make use of the evidence, i.e., differing ranges and configurations of concepts for understanding human behavior. And we may modify our reading, and come to a different judgment, as a result of some shift in conceptuality even when there has been no change in evidence. Thus, one who has long disbelieved in God may one day find belief a possibility, not by finding new data to support the rejected concept, but by discovering that the rejected concept was not an appropriate concept of God. This may lead both to an inquiry after a more adequate concept and to a reconsideration of the evidence, a tentative new reading of the world in the light of a new understanding of what might be meant by "God."

Of course, these are not separate enterprises. If our concepts enable our assessment of the evidence, the evidence also has an impact on our conceptuality. That is, it is through seeing and experiencing samples of love—samples of increasing variety, subtlety, and complexity, and some samples of counterfeit love as well—that we come to understand what love is, and that understanding changes somewhat with each new sample. Our first acquaintance with any such concept comes through examples of its employment, situations in which the relevant terms are used or to which they are somehow applied. We do not normally start out our lives with a definition of love. We may eventually be able to articulate suitable definitions or descriptions for particular purposes, but only after learning our way into the language and behavior of love in a lengthy process of conceptual formation. That this is no less true of the concept of God is another of Dilman's useful observations. "Thus if you wish to understand what God's existence amounts to, ask yourself what it means to believe in God, to worship Him, to thank Him, fear Him, love Him, etc."[5] There is an echo here of Wittgenstein's remark that "grammar tells what kind of object anything is."[6] It is by acquainting ourselves with the use of a concept, its "grammar," that we come to see what the concept represents, if indeed it does. "Do we have souls?" is a question which cannot be answered by looking within or around a human body, but only by identifying the contexts in which souls are spoken of, learning the use of the term, and then making a judgment as to whether sense is better served by an affirmative or negative answer. (Sense will be most likely served by an elucidation of the use of the term than by a monosyllabic reply. "There is a soul" amounts to a claim that this concept has a proper application. But simply to make that claim, without suggesting what that application is, is not

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 519.

[6] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* 3rd ed., ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and Rush Rhees, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan Company, 1958), 373 (p. 116).

much help.)

Similarly, the question "Is there a God?" is best approached by way of an examination of the grammar of "God," as Dilman indicates. In what contexts and to what purpose does one speak of God? What does "fearing God," "interceding with God," "praising God" amount to? What is an "act of God" or "the grace of God"? It is through an exploration of such usages in their interrelationships—an exploration which goes beyond verbal acquaintance to conceptual grasp—that one may come to identify God, to see "what it is we are talking about in speaking of God" (to use Nielsen's words).

Nielsen justifiably complains that no such sense of the identity of God emerges from the remarks Dilman makes concerning the proper understanding of God-language. Dilman's practice does not succeed in illustrating his principle that attention to the use of God-language will show us what God's existence amounts to—or if it does, it succeeds only in showing that God's existence doesn't amount to much, since, as Neilsen shows, the reference to God in each of Dilman's examples can be eliminated in translation without any apparent loss in the sense Dilman himself takes them to have. The problem, I believe, is in the practice and not in the principle. Specifically, it is in Dilman's arbitrary restriction of the sense of God-talk to what he considers the "religious" or "theological" sphere, the sphere of inwardness, and his dismissal of other possible dimensions of sense as "metaphysical" or "philosophical." This restriction severely hampers Dilman's ability to deal with the question of the reality of God, in either of the two dimensions of that question. That is, neither the identity nor the actuality of God can be discussed in the terms to which Dilman wants our talk about God to be limited, because those terms exclude some crucial features of "God" even while they permit other features to be highlighted.

Certainly there are metaphysical, philosophical, and even other religious uses of the term "God" which an adherent of a particular religous tradition has every reason to resist, or at least to distinguish sharply from the usage proper to that tradition. There are philosophers' gods which are not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But there is also a sense in which the concept of God native to biblical tradition is a metaphysical concept, after all. Certainly it does not have its origin or its primary *Sitz im Leben* in metaphysical reflection. Like other basic metaphysical concepts, it has its roots and its proper habitat in human experience. It is "metaphysical" only because it has strictly general implications. That is, if it is coherent at all, it is one of those "general ideas" which are, in Whitehead's words, "indispensably relevant to the analysis of everything that happens."[7] It does not take a metaphysician to discern this, nor to admit it. (And admitting it does not commit a person to that "metaphysical religiosity" which Nielsen rightly despises—the use of deep-sounding phrases which only tie the mind in knots when one attempts to

[7]Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1960), p. 82.

understand them.) The affirmation that God is creator of heaven and earth is sufficient, or any of various other biblical utterances stating or implying that God is related to everything there is. It is simply built into the grammar of "God" in this tradition that there is nothing and no event which cannot be described in terms of God's relationship to it—and, indeed, that those who worship God ought so to understand the world, since seeking and operating out of such an understanding is part of what it means to worship God.

Since it is a function of the concept of God thus to structure one's understanding of reality, the question of the reality of God is a strange question. Up to a point, it resembles the question of the reality of love. Imagine someone asking, not "Does she really love him?" but "Is there really such a thing as love?" A pursuit of that question would involve both an effort to clarify what counts as love and an effort to determine whether there are (or have been, or might be) any instances of it. "Love" is a concept which is supposedly applicable to some situations, but not to others, so the question of its identity and that of its actuality are separable in principle. One could fail to find a coherent concept of love, or one could find a coherent concept but fail to find any instances of it.

The question of the reality of God is similarly a question of the coherence and applicability of a concept, except that in this case the second follows from the first. If the concept of God is coherent, there can be no situation to which it does not pertain; coherence entails universal applicability. In this, the question of the reality of God is more like the question of the reality of the world than like that of the reality of love. "If the world isn't real, what is?" is a fair question. Claims that the world is not real usually amount to challenges to our concept of "world" or of "reality" or both. They are not occasioned by such experiences as walking through solid objects or watching furniture disappear, but by the conviction that something else is more properly entitled to the name of "reality." ("And you thought reality meant *this.* Wait till you see!")

"Reality includes a God" is an odd half-truth. (Wittgenstein is reported to have asked, plaintively, "Couldn't he *half* exist?") The other half is that God includes reality. "God" and "reality" are coextensive, though not identical, concepts. They are coextensive in that there is no reality "outside" or "beyond" God. Whatever there is is immanent in God, so that God is inclusive of all reality. They are not identical concepts, however, because each has uses which the other does not.

The assertion or denial of the reality of God is the assertion or denial of the propriety of a way of apprehending and relating to reality. The affirmation of the reality of God does not simply add one more item to the roster of what one takes to be real. Rather, it involves a distinctive way of understanding all that one takes to be real. To be sure, that affirmation also properly implies that God is "a reality." "God" is not simply an honorific term for the world; it has its own distinctive reference, and we can distinguish—though never separate—the world from God. The referentiality of "God" is unusual,

however, in that we may refer to God only by referring other things to God, that is, only in language which expressly relates God to other things; while at the same time any statement whatsoever about other things may be understood to permit at least an implicit reference to God. The second of these features is connected with the observation that God is related to everything there is. The first of them is also grounded in the grammar of our talk about God. We may not point to God, except by pointing to something in the world and speaking of God's involvement in it. We may not describe God except in terms of God's relationship to the world. Of course, much of our talk "about" God is not strictly about God at all, that is, it has no direct referentiality or cognitive value, but functions rather to foster a proper human orientation toward God ("The Lord is my shepherd"). But it is an indispensable element of Christian faith, at least, that there is One to whom human beings are relating themselves (or being related) when they use this orienting language. They are not merely assuming a posture, but a relationship. To this extent, at least, belief in God involves referentiality.

"*What* it is we are talking about in speaking of God," then, is not simply our dispositions, nor simply the world under a different name, but the One who is constitutive of the world as an intelligible whole, related to each of its components, yet distinct from the world thus constituted and determined. What finally distinguishes the position of the believer from that of the religious skeptic is that the believer acknowledges that One, and lives in conscious response to the reality of God—lives, not only *as if* God were real, but in the belief that God *is* real.

Whether that distinction is ultimately of much importance, when considered alongside some other significant distinctions among human beings—in the quality and integrity of their lives and of their relationships with others, say—is another question.