

CONVERSATIONS WITH GEORGE PATTISON

**SCOTTISH
UNIVERSITIES
PRESS**

God, philosophy
and the meaning of life

**GEORGE PATTISON
AND PHILIP TONNER**



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George Pattison and Philip Tonner



First published in 2026 by
Scottish Universities Press

SUP Publishing CIC
International House
38 Thistle Street
Edinburgh
EH2 1EN

<https://www.sup.ac.uk>

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George Pattison and Philip Tonner 2026. *Conversations with George Pattison: God, philosophy and the meaning of life*. Edinburgh: Scottish Universities Press. <https://doi.org/10.62637/sup.ucee1565>

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ISBN (Hardback): 978-1-917341-24-0
ISBN (Paperback): 978-1-917341-25-7
ISBN (PDF): 978-1-917341-27-1
ISBN (EPUB): 978-1-917341-26-4
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62637/sup.ucee1565>

All external links included were live at the time of publication.

An electronic edition can be downloaded free of charge at
<https://doi.org/10.62637/sup.ucee1565>
or scan the following QR code:



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Typeset by: Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Cover design: Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Front cover image: © Cover photo courtesy of George Pattison

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NOTES ON AUTHORS

George Pattison is a retired Anglican priest and scholar. After thirteen years as a parish priest, he taught in the universities of Cambridge, Aarhus, Oxford and Glasgow and has held visiting fellowships and posts at universities and research institutes in the USA, Denmark, Germany and France. He has published extensively on existential philosophy and theology and has recently taken up the editorship of the journal *Theology*. He now lives in North Devon.

Clare Carlisle is the author of eight books on philosophy and philosophers, including *Philosopher of the Heart: The Restless Life of Søren Kierkegaard*, *The Marriage Question: George Eliot's Double Life* and, most recently, *Transcendence for Beginners* (her Gifford Lectures on life writing and philosophy). She grew up in Manchester, studied philosophy and theology at Trinity College, Cambridge, and now lives in Hackney. She is Professor of Philosophy at King's College London.

Philip Tonner is the author of three books: *Heidegger, Metaphysics, and the Univocity of Being*, *Phenomenology Between Aesthetics and Idealism* and *Dwelling: Heidegger, Archaeology, Mortality*. He is co-author with Tim Ingold et al. of *Conversations with Tim Ingold: Anthropology, Education and Life*, also published by SUP. Philip grew up in Glasgow, studied philosophy at the universities of Glasgow and Warwick, and archaeology at Kellogg College, University of Oxford. A former teacher, he is now Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Glasgow.

PREFACE

First of all, I would like to emphasise how grateful I am to Philip Tonner for suggesting this set of conversations and for all the work he has subsequently put into it. From my point of view, it has been an extraordinary opportunity to try to pull together some of the often very divergent threads of my thinking about God over the last many years. I suppose that, from the outside, my successive focuses on Kierkegaard, art, Buddhism, philosophy of religion, Heidegger, Dostoevsky and the Russian tradition, and the practice of and reflection on preaching may seem a bit disjointed and, of course, it is right and proper that each of these has its own specific and non-exchangeable set of requirements and, in return, its own peculiar gifts to the developing life of the mind. That, I should immediately add, is one of the great benefits of the conversational approach – that it is flexible enough to loop round and between materials that may otherwise seem quite disparate, just as any everyday conversation might begin with the weather, move on to health, and then, perhaps, begin to engage some of the big issues in the participants' work or personal lives.

In recent years, not least under the influence of Bakhtin's polyphonic reading of Dostoevsky, I have come to see conversation as a, if not the, eminent model of what is going on in theology – a comment that I'd extend to humanistic study as a whole. Precisely because the materials that such study is engaging with are the words, written, recorded or spoken, of other human beings (at a greater or less historical distance from ourselves) there is a prima

facie proximity to the dominant way in which we learn words and use them: conversation – starting from the conversations that mothers have with their babies in the womb through to the last words of the dying. Nor do I think that this is essentially changed by the fact that many of the materials we deal with are non-verbal: architecture, painting, sculpture, music and dance. And if theology itself allows us to think of its ultimate engagement with God as leading us beyond words to silent prayer and wordless adoration, these too are prepared in words and interpreted in words.

If conversation is the overarching model for what we are doing, there is, of course, scope and sometimes need for that conversation to submit itself to certain kinds of regulation. Apart from the basic principles of logic that enable us to make sense of what we are saying to one another, there may be more particular rules that kick in as we tackle certain kinds of questions; similarly, although we will usually return to our native language for articulating what we believe most needs to be said on any given theological topic, we may have to learn other languages en route – classically Hebrew, Greek and Latin, but in today's multi-polar world one or more modern languages are also likely to be required (despite the prevalence of English as the new *lingua franca*). Any serious study is likely to demand many hours of solitude, whether at a library desk or on a lonely seashore, but even here this is for the most part aimed at deepening rather than abandoning the ongoing exchange and refinement of views that is the matter of our conversations. In any case, what we are reading in the library will, for the most part, be the record, the trace, of other conversations. In this respect I remain sufficiently persuaded by the Renaissance model of humanistic study not to draw too sharp a line between reading and conversation.

For these reasons (and apart from the fact that my own last book was a book of conversations), I am more than happy that Philip has chosen this approach to my thought. Although I am aware that, quantitatively, I am the main speaker in these conversations, readers should not overlook the questioner, since the questions determine the overall direction that the conversations take. In this sense – and this is potentially true of our everyday conversations about life's endless contingencies – our work on this book has not only been

an opportunity to try to focus on and bring into view the unifying threads of my own work but also an answer to Burns's prayer that we might learn to see ourselves as others see us.

I am especially pleased that this book is being published by the Scottish Universities Press, since although I am now living in England, my theological formation took place in Scotland, and the influence of the Scottish theological tradition remains active – even though in Scotland itself religion has now become a minority pursuit. Or so the opinion polls say – but it is likely that the civilisational shift we are experiencing at the moment will not, in the long term, be simply a linear process of secularisation but rather a multi-dimensional development in which the best and most thoughtful voices of the tradition will still be leading us towards what the poet Edward Young called 'sound important truths'.

George Pattison
North Devon
January 2026

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Philip is grateful to George Pattison for his willingness to be interviewed five times over the period of about a year. He is also very grateful to him for his contributions to the work of editing and revising the transcribed conversations for publication, and for his work compiling a bibliography of preferred editions to include in the final version of the text. Both George and Philip are grateful to Clare Carlisle for agreeing to write a response to the five conversations presented here.

George thanks Hilary for being there throughout. Philip thanks Lynsey, William and Philip for their support throughout.

The authors are grateful to the team at Scottish Universities Press, Dominique Walker, Gillian Daly and Paul Clarke, for the information and guidance they have kindly provided at regular intervals during the production of this book. The book itself has also benefited from the comments on the initial proposal by two anonymous reviewers, and subsequently by one anonymous reviewer on the initial draft of the book. The authors are grateful to the members of SUP's Editorial Board for supporting the proposal. Funding to cover the production charge of the book was generously provided by the University of Glasgow Library. The authors are grateful to Valerie McCutcheon for her support in this regard.

INTRODUCTION

Philip Tonner

Conversations with George Pattison: God, philosophy and the meaning of life presents a comprehensive and accessible introduction to the work of George Pattison, one of the leading voices in theology and philosophy writing in English today. This book, which is composed of a series of interview conversations (conducted via Zoom between the winter of 2024 and the spring of 2025), allows Pattison to reflect on and discuss his work as a whole as it has developed over the course of his intellectual life and academic career. The conversational format of the book, which, by posing questions, and prompting consideration of issues that a particular reader has seen in his work, has enabled Pattison to consider afresh the existential themes that have emerged in his lifelong work of exploring the overarching question of what it means to live a meaningful Christian life. This project has also provided him with the opportunity to develop some new reflections on some of his key influences, in particular Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821–1881). This conversational approach has allowed us to combine aspects of intellectual biography, autobiography, introduction and festschrift in a single, readable volume that explores how one prominent priest, theologian and philosopher has sought to live and to think.

Beginning in the early 1990s, Pattison emerged as one of the most important figures working at the intersection of theology and philosophy in the United Kingdom. After initially training to

become an Anglican Priest, as we will see in our first conversation, Pattison began his academic career at King's College, Cambridge in 1991; his first book, *Art, Modernity and Faith: Towards a Theology of Art*, appeared that year and was quickly followed up the following year with his second book, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious* (Pattison, 1992).¹ Both of these works are now in their second editions. In 2002 Pattison would take a post as Associate Professor (Lector) in Practical Theology at the University of Aarhus. This international move built upon the foundation of his growing reputation as a Kierkegaard scholar, and on a long-standing relationship with the University of Copenhagen which began in the late 1990s. In the fullness of time Pattison would take up various international roles throughout Western Europe, the United States and Russia.

Over the course of his career, Pattison has not only advanced thinking and research within the orbit of Kierkegaard studies, he has also made significant contributions to a wide range of debates in theology, philosophy, existential thought, art and aesthetics, technology, modernity and faith, mysticism, religious studies and the life of the Anglican Church. The conversations that follow in this volume will see Pattison respond to questions about his work as a whole, as well as on certain aspects of his work, and will allow him to reflect on these constituent discourses, and on areas of interest from the perspective of his present concerns. Having presented a major new Philosophy of Christian Life, he will be able to place his earlier works and concerns within the context of this new perspective, a perspective only available to someone who has attempted such a great project.

This book of conversations represents the first attempt to present an overview of Pattison's thought as a whole, and it does so mainly in his own words. The interview format has allowed Pattison the

1 The editors of *Kierkegaardian Essays: A Festschrift in Honour of George Pattison*, De Gruyter (which came out in 2022), Clare Carlisle (who also contributes to this present volume) and Steven Shakespeare, provide a neat biographical overview of Pattison's academic career as well as an indication of his importance for Kierkegaard Studies in their Preface to that volume.

opportunity to present his thinking in an eminently accessible way. New readers of his work will find interesting and engaging introductions to not only his own writings, but to key ideas and problems that have been called to attention in the broad spheres of philosophy and theology down through the ages. Existing readers will discover something of the man behind the work, as he negotiates sometimes quite intimate questions about his writings and about the experiences and thinking behind them. The questions presented to Pattison here are, of course, the questions that one of his readers developed as they read their way through his oeuvre. Other readers will have their own. Still, readers of these conversations will find a wealth of insights with which to engage, and to re-engage, as they tackle some of Pattison's original works, and the works of those who have inspired him.

Pattison's works present a series of highly original attempts to synthesise and develop ideas and concepts drawn from theology, philosophy, phenomenology and aesthetics, amongst other discourses, and even close readers of his will learn something new about his rich and wide-ranging thinking in the pages that follow. The process of producing these conversations allowed Pattison the opportunity to develop some of the themes in his writings in a new light. He could, for example, reflect on what is already an original perspective on the devout life, or prayer, or hope, or what it means to be human, or what it means to live in relation to God, and to do so in response to a direct question, something that is in fact a rare opportunity for academic writers. In these conversations we will cover Pattison's intellectual development, not only from his earliest publications in the 1990s, to his most recent collection of essays, *A Philosophy of Prayer: Nothingness, Language, and Hope* (2024), but also in childhood and in adolescence. We cover Pattison's ecclesiastic and academic careers, his early life and his intellectual formation as this took place throughout his life. The result is at once a highly readable introduction to the work of one of the most important philosopher-theologians active today while also being a highly personal introduction to the man himself – and for a thinker who stresses the importance of the personal in his works, and for whom philosophy is ultimately about what really matters to us (*to timiōtaton*;

Ancient Greek: *to* (the), *timiōtaton* (most honourable/precious/revered/valued)), this approach is entirely in keeping with the ethos of his writings.

Five interviews with Pattison follow this introductory chapter. There is then a response to these interviews by Professor Clare Carlisle, once a student of Pattison and now a philosopher in her own right, who is both an eminent Kierkegaard scholar and biographer, to which Pattison will himself respond.² Not only does Carlisle's response (entitled 'Kierkegaard's queerness') provide ample scope for Pattison's own response, picking up as it does questions about how we may or may not be called to a particular religion, in this case Christianity, and about how we should understand the relationship between complex conceptual terms, in this case 'authenticity' and 'queerness' (both of which 'indicate ways of not conforming to social conventions' (Carlisle this volume)), it also makes significant inroads toward a new appraisal of 'Kierkegaard' (the 'thinker and author') as queer. Carlisle's contribution to this volume has the virtue of relating some of our most recent and most pressing concerns in the academy and beyond (with gender, sexuality, heteronormativity and queerness) to nineteenth- and twentieth-century existential philosophy, all the while not losing sight of Pattison's remarkable ability to inhabit the roles of priest and philosopher, preacher and teacher, with integrity, intelligence and grace.

We also include an appendix at the end of the volume that publishes an earlier interview with Pattison, conducted by the same interviewer in 2016, just over ten years ago (at the time of writing this introduction). Each interview in this volume focuses on a particular theme in Pattison's work and at the end of each chapter there is a 'further reading' section containing references to key works by Pattison, as well as to selected texts by other scholars discussed in that chapter.

Our first conversation focuses on Pattison's life and career. Here we cover Pattison's childhood and school experiences at The Perse School in Cambridge (he was a direct grant recipient for a free place

2 Carlisle's biography of Kierkegaard appeared in 2019: Carlisle, C. (2019) *Philosopher of the Heart: The Restless Life of Søren Kierkegaard*, Penguin/FSG.

as a result of passing the 11-plus); his undergraduate studies in Edinburgh and his postgraduate research on Kierkegaard, supervised by Ann Loades, in Durham. One constant throughout Pattison's life has been what we might call a 'Scotland-England dialectic'. While born and raised in Cambridge, Pattison has always been conscious of his Scottish heritage on his mother's side and he has studied and lived in both countries. We will explore salient aspects of both his academic and religious careers (the latter beginning with a curacy in Newcastle-upon-Tyne). Pattison reflects on the influences that shaped his personal and intellectual development – it was while he was pursuing his A-levels that he started to read, amongst others, Kierkegaard – including during his varied political engagements as a student in the late 1960s (he found himself in Paris studying French in the run up to the 'events of May 1968') and in Christian CND in the early 1980s. We also explore how his interests and engagements with Christianity, existential philosophy and Buddhist spirituality have evolved over time. As well as being fascinating in its own right, this conversation also helps to situate the specific themes explored in subsequent chapters (such as the role of passion in the God-relationship, academic life, ministry and the place of the Church in society) in the wider context of Pattison's life and work.

Our second conversation sees Pattison exploring the key philosophical concepts of existence and nothingness while reflecting on the meaning that God can have for us now in our 'present age'. Taking a lesson from the work of Jean-Paul Sartre early in his formation (*The Flies* [1943] had been a set text for French A-level at the time Pattison took the course), Pattison would go on to respond to existential questions from a perspective informed by a Christian religious commitment. Theatre, film and literature have been formative for Pattison; fittingly, then, this conversation will include a reflection on the 'parable of the onion' told by Grushenka in *The Brothers Karamazov*. This conversation will explore existential philosophy, Buddhist philosophy and the human-God relationship in some detail. Pattison will suggest, via a discussion of Sartrean and Buddhist accounts of nothingness, that there is 'literally nothing between us', there is nothing preventing our step into a profoundly empathetic state. We explore how Sartre and Heidegger tried to

articulate philosophies that approached human beings as they actually are in the fullness of their lives – how they act, what they do – in order to get beyond general definitions of what ‘they’ are supposed to be like, as, say, a ‘rational animal’. Dasein, the term that Heidegger adopted to try to capture the human way of being in the world, we learn, might be glossed as ‘Here I am!?’³, where the exclamation mark and question mark point to the sheer and astonishing fact that we are here (or there!) at all. We, as mortal beings, find ourselves in a world not of our making, with a particular body, set of circumstances and personal history, and we must get on and live our lives. It is how we respond to our specific situation that defines us. Pattison explores these existentialist views of human being and pulls back from certain aspects of them (such as their ‘macho’ expression: see also Carlisle’s ‘response’) to develop his own more communal and perhaps ‘Christian-Stoic’ vision. Dostoevsky’s lesson of the onion – we can only come to salvation together – is crucial in this regard and whether one finds oneself Christian or atheist what is important is that both ‘should be outdoing each other in casting down the idols and doing away with all the gods who are not gods’.

Conversation three gives Pattison the chance to focus on and discuss three key influences on his thinking, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Dostoevsky. Kierkegaard is a constant source of inspiration for Pattison and this chapter will enable him to reflect on what it is about Kierkegaard’s thought that he finds so compelling. Kierkegaard was, as Pattison notes, a writer who lived a way of being Christian in the advent of modernity, a time characterised by rapid change and much ‘existential’ uncertainty. Having pursued his doctorate on Kierkegaard, and having written several books about him at different stages of his career, Pattison has most recently combined reflections on Kierkegaard with reflections on Heidegger, and has recently published a new discussion of the latter’s relationship with the former.³ Kierkegaard was, along with Augustine and Luther, philosophically essential for Heidegger’s project in the years that led up

3 Pattison, G. (2024) *Heidegger and Kierkegaard*, Cambridge University Press. This book is part of the *Elements in the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger* series.

to and included the production of his unfinished masterwork of 'fundamental ontology', *Being and Time* (1927). It is timely to reflect anew on this relationship in the years leading up to the centenary of Heidegger's magnum opus. Heidegger has been a crucial interlocutor for Pattison in several of his projects and this conversation will give him the opportunity to reflect on Heidegger's continued relevance to his thinking. From a discussion of the importance of Heidegger to Christian thinkers across the confessional divides, Pattison will explain the role of language in Heidegger, and the importance of a conception of philosophy as a practice of raising questions, rather than as a project of staking out positions.

In 2024 Pattison published a book of fictional conversations with Dostoevsky, a work that represents the flowering of his fascination with Russia, Russian culture and theology. Tolstoy, Chekhov, Shostakovich, Eisenstein, Tarkovsky (who features in Pattison's *Thinking about God in an Age of Technology* and *Crucifixions and Resurrections of the Image*) and Rublev have been constant companions to Pattison throughout his intellectual and spiritual development.

In *Conversations with Dostoevsky* Pattison (or Fyodor Mikhailovich) invites the reader to consider the following scenario:

One day I am out in St Petersburg. It's a Sunday, and people of all classes are also out taking a walk . . . Amongst them I see a young man. He's about thirty years old. He's done his best to dress up well, but his clothes are old and worn . . . He has a little boy with him, about two years old. He's been cross with the boy, but now he's picked him up and the child is clinging to his neck . . . while I've been talking, they've gone, father and son, absorbed into the crowd . . . I never see them again, but I can't stop thinking about them. Who are they? Where have they been? Why? The man's the kind of worker you see in a locksmith's or a printing office. Solid, reliable work – but not well paid. Where's the mother? I'm thinking that she's dead, probably not long since, maybe about two months ago, almost certainly of consumption. While daddy's at work, he pays some old woman even less than he earns to look after the little boy . . . but today is Sunday and they've been out on a visit, let's

say to the dead wife's sister, over in the Viborg district. The sister and her husband are probably a notch or two up the social ladder and they don't really have much in common with our young widower. They drink tea together, but don't say much. They say their goodbyes awkwardly and the father carries the boy home. It's a long walk from the Viborg side to Liteiny, especially if you have a lad of two to carry . . . No wonder the father's quick to snap, and tomorrow he has to get up early for work. (Pattison, 2024, pp. 15–17)

Now comes the question: 'what do you think?' Is the story 'true'? It exceeds the facts of what Fyodor Mikhailovich might have seen, the man and the boy, and instead presents something far more interesting, a story of human beings, of 'people who feel and cry and hope and love as we do'. The elements of the story might be entirely untrue (perhaps the mother is alive and well) but nevertheless it has the power to sensitise us to the world and to the human (the 'man in man', the universal in the particular) and to the fact that each is more in truth than the sum of listable facts about them. Entering into an artistic vision such as that disclosed here through story might allow us to 'see ourselves and our world as they truly are' (Pattison, 2024, p. 17). Importantly, this seeing is not simply a matter of mental representation (the critique of which by thinkers like Heidegger Pattison is well aware of), it is a matter of feeling, of becoming sensitised to a world inhabited by 'people as alive as you and me' (Pattison, 2024, p. 17). The storied conversation is a great vehicle for such an education of our attunement as it takes us on a journey – whether one in which Dostoevsky materialises just enough to hold a conversation, or whether in one where George Pattison recounts the story of how he conceived of a conversation in which Dostoevsky materialises and engages his interlocutor through dialogue – wherein we mix our expectations with that of the teller and end up travelling together toward a terminus (a truth?) not specified in advance.

Conversation four introduces what is a crowning achievement of Pattison's career, his Philosophy of Christian Life. This philosophy is outlined across three volumes: *A Phenomenology of the Devout*

Life (2018), *A Rhetorics of the Word* (2019) and *A Metaphysics of Love* (2021). Pattison describes his Philosophy of Christian Life as expounding 'a movement from desire, through word, to love' (Pattison, 2018, p. 2), and this conversation will explore the meaning of this philosophy in terms that might provide the rudiments of an answer to the question 'what is the meaning of life'? Pattison recently augmented this philosophy with a collection of essays entitled *A Philosophy of Prayer: Nothingness, Language, and Hope* (2024), and this conversation will invite him to expand on the relationship between his trilogy and this more recent volume.

Pattison's philosophy retrieves Heidegger's identification of human being as Dasein, as 'Here I am!?', as a starting-point for Christian reflection. This project represents, re-examines and synthesises key aspects of his almost fifty-year-long 'attempt to understand Christian life as an appropriate response to the astonishing fact of self-conscious existence' (Pattison, 2021, p. v), where that existence responds to a kind of calling, or gathering, which allows for transformative living together. The importance of theology and philosophy of religion for Pattison is the part that they can and do play in our attempts to transform our lifeways for the better.

Pattison's Philosophy of Christian Life approaches a central truth-claim of Christian belief, and it does so in three steps: part one begins with an analysis of the aspiration, basic to any form of Christianity, that one endeavours to live according to the will of God. The performance of this aspiration would furnish the religious with an answer to the question of what it *means* to be a practising Christian. Pattison finds an exemplary account of this in 'the devout life tradition', which is expressed in the teachings of François de Sales and the 'so-called French School of early modern Christian spirituality' (Pattison, 2018, p. 1). Specifically, Pattison's focus will be on what he describes as the 'intentionality of Christian life' (Pattison, 2018, p. 1) and he will, in the second part of his three-part work, engage the lessons of the devout life tradition through the prism of language, as that prism has been affected by the various linguistic turns in philosophy from the eighteenth century onwards. He will be guided by an interpretation of the devout life 'as a vocation or calling' (Pattison, 2018, p. 1) and he will focus on the desire that one may

have to orientate one's life toward God. Finally, in the third volume, Pattison will explore what this desiring orientation and articulation reveals about the character of reality itself.

The unifying thread of Pattison's Philosophy of Christian Life project is to understand 'what it means to want to live by the truth that God is love and that those who love live in God and God in them' (Pattison, 2018, p. 2). For Pattison, living the devout life is a form of practice 'in which the whole person, inclusive of affective, volitional, intellectual, and social commitments, is engaged and which is extended over what is envisaged as a lifetime of devotion' (Pattison, 2018, p. 52). Viewing the devout life as a practice of self-hood invites Pattison to conduct his enquiry in terms of 'the tradition of existential phenomenology' (Pattison, 2018, p. 55) and within that tradition it will be from Martin Heidegger that he will draw a model for the kind of existential phenomenology of religion that he intends to pursue.

Recent engagements with Heidegger and his account of human being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) have drawn attention to his characterisation of it in terms of dwelling (*Wohnen*), which is the 'basic feature of being in keeping with which the mortals exist' (Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* 7: 163, quoted in Dahlstrom, 2013, p. 63). The notion of dwelling is multifaceted. It has come to be used in disciplines like philosophy, anthropology, human geography and others to invoke 'the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work' (Garrard, 2012, p. 117).⁴ For Heidegger, 'I am, you are' is identical to 'I dwell, you dwell', and the philosophy of dwelling has offered an alternative starting point from which to re-think the world, the body, space and place, landscape, society, nature and the environment, ecological relations, hybridity, affect, performativity, representation and non-representation, creativity, heritage, history, and in Pattison's case, the devout life.⁵ The promise of Heidegger's philosophy is a

4 See also: Tonner, P. (2018) *Dwelling: Heidegger, Archaeology, Mortality*. Routledge.

5 I drew upon Jones's helpful article when compiling this list. See Jones, O. (2009) 'Dwelling', in Kitchin, R. and Thrift, N. (eds) *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, Volume 3, pp. 266–72. Oxford: Elsevier.

starting point from which to re-think and re-imagine the whole of life, including the 'character of the human God-relationship' as this is lived in a life called to devotion (Pattison, 2018, p. 66).

Drawing on the tradition of phenomenological philosophy, Pattison approaches the literature of devotion within the context of life as it is lived, in the spirit of confronting 'the matter at issue' (*Die Sachen selbst*), and for this reason he will ask, "what does God *mean* to those who are living a devout life?" It is crucial that we get clearer about what believing in God could mean for real individual human beings living in specific times and places. He says:

it is possible to imagine that if we really understood how such belief functions in the concreteness of human existence, then the question of whether God does or doesn't exist might prove to be the least interesting question to be asked. In any case, unless or until we have a good idea as to what it is we are talking about such questions are essentially empty. (Pattison, 2018, p. 6)

Pattison's emphasis on lived meaning and the personal is significant and pervasive in his works. The meaning that God has to real people is fundamental, and by focusing his reader's attention on this at the outset of his *Philosophy of Christian Life*, Pattison is reminding us of our impending existential choices while also seeking to 'expand our understanding of the range of possibilities through which we live out the meaning of being human' (Pattison, 2018, p. 62). To start his three-volume investigation of the *Philosophy of Christian Life* with a phenomenology of the devout life, as Pattison does, is to start with a subject identified with a complex form of life that is taken to be worthwhile, meaningful, and that calls upon the human capacity to learn and to live in relation to the meaningfulness of God in human life. This approach will provide Pattison with the means to get clearer about what believing in God means for human beings, from the perspective of an enquiry that takes account of the values inherent in worlds of human engagement, worlds that form the background to our actions and practices, our hopes and our fears, and that are the homeland of our thoughts.

In conversation five Pattison takes inspiration from Kierkegaard's saying 'Life is lived forwards but understood backwards', and in this chapter he will look back over his career to date and indicate the avenues of some of his future work. Christian spirituality for Pattison involves 'thinking about and discerning what is really worth remembering', and in the process of engaging with scripture and tradition we find that Christianity is not some 'fixed entity': it is through our situated efforts of questioning and conversing with each other and with the various 'pasts' that we encounter as we move forward that 'scripture-and-tradition become open to us'. We are part of that ongoing historical process and 'today's innovation is itself tomorrow's tradition'. It is the existential dimension of life that, as so often in these conversations, calls to Pattison in his counsel that we engage the whole person, investigate what will emerge as truth, and learn 'the meaning of hope through the memory of suffering'. This rich conversation ranges over teaching, learning, the modern university and the relative importance placed on research *vis-à-vis* scholarship, and more traditional forms of teaching and learning, amongst other topics. We hope that, as one of our anonymous readers remarked, the strength of our book will be its 'emphasis on the existential as still necessarily theological, and the theological as still necessarily existential'. We certainly agree with that reader that 'we would abandon both at great cost to our future human flourishing'.⁶ Given this, it is fitting to end our series of conversations with George Pattison, as we do, with his suggestion that we strive to be 'simultaneously realistic and hopeful', and his counsel that we attend to and remember what most calls us to thinking.

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CONVERSATION 1:

Life and career

Summary: This conversation prompts Pattison to reflect on his life and career, from his childhood in Cambridge in the 1950s to the present. He discusses some of his early intellectually formative experiences and relates these to his subsequent thinking and development. Of particular interest to readers will no doubt be Pattison's weaving of his own existential journey through some of the wider social and political, as well as theological and philosophical, developments of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Pattison has had a varied life, one that has seen him working as a labourer, a priest, an academic, and a nursing assistant in the Royal Edinburgh psychiatric hospital (it was during this time that he started reading Dostoevsky and found that his writings helped him to make sense of his experiences there). Rich in intellectual and cultural references, one thing that is evident is Pattison's ecumenical formation, a formation that saw him attending lectures in the 1970s by Jürgen Moltmann and Hans Küng, amongst others. One theme that emerges in this discussion as particularly important for Pattison is love, and it is from Aldous Huxley that Pattison took a crucial lesson, that 'attention in love to another human being is far more important than any amount of psychedelic fireworks'.

Philip Tonner

First of all, George, thank you for agreeing to this series of interviews on your work. I'm lucky to have had the opportunity to interview you before (see Appendix A). You've also received requests for interviews from other sources. Can I ask you for your thoughts about the interview process please? For example, how do you prepare for an interview?

George Pattison

Thank you, Philip, and I'm very grateful for challenging me to think about my work in this way. I see it as a great opportunity to examine some of the connections between my life and my work and also to try to see my work as a whole. As to your last question – probably not enough, but I'll try to do better. With good preparation, an interview can bring ideas to life in vivid and engaging ways but (as we hear all the time on the radio) an interviewee who hasn't done their homework ends up going all over the place!

CHILDHOOD AND SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

Philip Tonner

Please can you tell me where you were born and about your parents and grandparents.

George Pattison

I was born in 1950 in Cambridge, where my parents had moved after they left the army at the end of the war. Both of them were from business families based in Liverpool, in my mother's case going back several generations. They actually met at a lecture on *The Winter's*

Tale, which was part of the educational programme for soldiers in the army of occupation in Germany. When they were demobbed in the summer of 1946 they married and moved to Cambridge, where my father took up a place at St John's College to study history.

I only ever knew one grandparent, my maternal grandmother, a powerful presence in my childhood. Both my grandfathers and my paternal grandmother had died before I was born. My mother's father was a merchant marine captain and died as a result of the Bombay explosions of 1944 in which a ship carrying ammunition caught fire and exploded, killing over 800 people and making tens of thousands homeless. He had been a merchant marine skipper and although his boat was not the one that exploded, he was thrown from the bridge of his own ship and was injured, dying some months later back home in Scotland. It's through him that I've always been conscious of a strong connection to Scotland – his family had been fishing folk, crofters and boatbuilders at Dunnet Head for many generations. My mother had spent much time there as a child and was very mindful of her Scottish heritage. My father had been cut off by his father so I had no contact there – and, in any case, he too (my grandfather) died before or about the time I was born, as did my paternal grandmother.

Philip Tonner

What was the intellectual climate at home like during your formative years? Do you think your parents influenced your thinking?

George Pattison

This was the post-war era and what my parents had been through deeply influenced how they saw the world and their political and moral values. My mother had been an eager young Christian before the war and on one occasion attended a Student Christian study weekend at which Mervyn Stockwood (later known as 'the Red Dean' before becoming Bishop of Bristol) told the eager

young students that those who were true Christians would immediately go back and join their university socialist societies. She may have become a member of the Communist Party, though she was not always consistent as to whether she had been a member or not! In any event, during the Blitz, when Liverpool was particularly heavily bombed, she and other students acted as firewatchers from the tower of Liverpool Cathedral and, after one particularly heavy night of bombing when much of the area around Everton was destroyed, she lost her faith in a benign God, even though, like many of her generation, she continued to respect the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. For example, if a tramp came to the door, which happened in country areas back then, she would invite him in for tea and see him fed. As for parenting, she was influenced by A. S. Neill's *The Free Child* and though I can't say that this was a blueprint for my own upbringing it was an important factor.

My father had joined up the day after war broke out and was in campaigns in North Africa, Italy, France and Germany. He wrote two fictionalised memoirs based on these experiences, which were exceptionally explicit in recording the actual language used by soldiers in the field – in books and films of the time they rarely said anything more extreme than 'Blimey'. This may have been one of the reasons why they were never published. He became very active in student politics at Cambridge, becoming President of the Union Society in one of its more brilliant periods, debating with and against several future Cabinet ministers, including Geoffrey Howe and Norman St-John Stevas. The latter was a particular political foe of my father, not least in relation to my father's attempt to open full membership of the Union to women (which was rejected), although when I got to know Norman many years later he was extremely amiable – in fact, the last time we met he even kissed my hand (a first and last for any of Mrs Thatcher's Cabinet ministers)! Returning to my father, he left when I was eighteen months old and after several years of temporary jobs became a schoolteacher in East London, living in a wreck of a boat in the Walthamstow Marshes that he kitted out with a cabin and basic facilities. It was all rather Dickensian. In fact, there was something

rather Dickensian about my childhood as a whole, quirky and marginal. My father had bought a cottage in a village outside Cambridge with money he'd saved from his army pay but after he left the larger part of the cottage was let out to tenants and my mother and I lived in two small rooms where a small, cracked iron stove ('the Chattan Queen') served for heating and cooking. This lasted till I was about six and I vividly remember the feeling of the day when we took possession of the whole cottage. My mother also had to deal with the stigma that marital breakdown still carried in the 1950s.

Amongst the things my father left behind was a large number of Left Book Club and other political books. Mostly they related to topics that I didn't really understand as a child, but I was at one point persuaded by Quintin Hogg's *The Case for Conservatism*, but only briefly. Needless to say, this was a very different kind of conservatism from what we have post-Thatcher and post-Johnson today.

Philip Tonner

Where did you go to school and what subjects did you study in secondary school?

George Pattison

My first school was the local church primary school and it was there I learned the basic biblical stories. Even though I disconnected from the church in my teenage years, the stories remained – as I discovered when I began to study theology.

When I was eight, I went to the Perse preparatory day-school in Cambridge. At the 11-plus I got a free place to the upper school – what was then called a 'direct grant' school. About half of us had free places, the other half were fee-payers. Many of the fee-payers were children of Cambridge academics who hadn't done so well academically at the 11-plus but whose parents wanted them to have the full academic education. It's a measure of how things have

changed that, back then, we tended to look down on those who went to public schools as academically inferior. The Perse had been founded in 1615, giving its name to Free School Lane in Cambridge, but is, alas, now fully private. I was a fairly anarchic student and, together with a friend who later became professor of Arabic at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, came very close to being expelled. Positively, it was an intensely academic school and at least some of our teachers encouraged us to develop alternative perspectives on history, literature and politics. It also had a strong tradition of encouraging theatrical performance – Peter Hall, founder of the RSC, was one of its better-known alumni. Shakespeare was a constant presence that has remained. This probably connects to the dramatisation of Kierkegaard's *Repetition* that I wrote and produced in 2013 and that Clare Carlisle wrote about in her biography of Kierkegaard. I was early on oriented to the arts, which my father was convinced were of no use (he wanted me to pursue medicine), and I did English, History and French at A-level.

I started to read Plato, Augustine, Pascal and Kierkegaard for myself during my A-level years, and through French A-level discovered Sartre and Camus (*The Flies* was a set text). Around that time I also started getting interested in Buddhism and Indian religion and music – this was the '60s, after all! Knowing this, my parish priest, Brian Dupré, took me to my first theological lecture, which was on the subject of the unknown Christ of Hinduism. It was given by Raimundo Panikkar, a charismatic Jesuit priest who developed an intellectually robust but also highly personal fusion of Indian and Christian spirituality that I've always admired, albeit I've never subsequently engaged fully with his writings.

Many years later, I discovered that the first ever book in English on Kierkegaard, published in 1911, was by a country parson, the Revd Francis Fulford, who'd also attended the Perse. Even more curiously, Roger Poole, whose deconstructive reading of Kierkegaard was much discussed in the 1990s, was also an alumnus, though he left the year before I arrived. Maybe there's some Kierkegaardian twist in the school's intellectual DNA – but that's pure speculation.

Religious Education was not at all emphasised in the school and the RE teacher also had to teach music plus one other subject. It's

no wonder we had a new one nearly every year. However, in sixth form we had RE from the Chaplain of King's College – in the lower sixth it was David Isitt, in the upper sixth Michael Till, later Dean of Winchester. Both were hugely approachable and their classes were more like open discussions of whatever seemed relevant to a collection of bright and noisy seventeen-year-old boys. Together with the gentle, mildly mystical approach of my parish priest, they gave a totally different impression of religion from the authoritarian, repressive image that many of my contemporaries seemed to have and I'm grateful to them for that. Religion was never something I had to rebel against, on the contrary it was one sphere of life where I was taken seriously and affirmed for who I was without having to prove anything – although one result of this is that I've always underestimated the reality of other people's negative reactions to religious authority.

In my last year at school, I spent a couple of weeks in Paris on a language course. This was during the build-up to the 'events' of May 1968 and every night large numbers of police and CRS (riot police) were to be seen sitting in their vans, waiting. A less violent manifestation of the time was the 'free University of Cambridge' later that summer, and I remember several of us going along to some event that took place in King's College and that involved an American graduate student with very long hair talking interminably. Still, it seemed cool at the time.

Philip Tonner

How formative do you think your childhood and school experiences were for your subsequent career and intellectual projects?

George Pattison

I wouldn't say that I haven't developed since I was seventeen – I hope I have – but I'd already set myself the enormous task of trying to think together a leftist political orientation, Indo-Buddhist

spirituality, existential philosophy and the Christianity of the New Testament – not to mention engagement with cultural tradition and contemporary innovations (I was also ‘into’ Stockhausen, for example). I’m now clearer, though, that I’m not going to produce some sort of synthesis or amalgam out of all this, since each of the elements has its own dynamic and its own scope, but the point is the effort of trying to think coherently across these multiple dimensions: *Die Anstrengung des Denkens* (the German expression can be translated as ‘the effort of thinking’), as Hegel said – and in many ways there are many parallels with the intellectual challenges of Hegel’s own time.

UNDERGRADUATE AND POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

Philip Tonner

You studied at the University of Edinburgh taking an MA in 1972. Can you tell me what it was like when you were there?

George Pattison

I went up in 1968 and, basically, spent the first two-and-a-half years doing ‘60s stuff, which is why I ended up doing an ordinary rather than an honours degree – and I was probably lucky to get that. During Freshers Week I mooched about with a copy of Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* in my pocket and soon got quite involved with various political events on and off campus, starting with the large demonstration against the Vietnam War at the American Embassy in London, leafletting an Orange Parade with pamphlets urging Civil Rights for Catholics in Northern Ireland (I didn’t get roughed up, but one of the others did), and, later, the occupation of the university careers office, a protest that was initially directed against the university investments in South Africa. There were some eye-opening moments in all this, such as one very ordinary middle-aged woman

who asked what our Civil Rights pamphlets were about and when I explained, told me that I didn't understand that 'these people' were Catholics and plotting against the Queen. Growing up in the south of England, I'd imagined sectarianism was a joke, but I soon discovered otherwise.

At the same time, I continued reading about Buddhism – a lot of D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts – and twice went down to the Tibetan Monastery at Samye Ling. For the language requirement of an ordinary degree, I took Sanskrit and at one point was able to read the Bhagavad Gita in the original, though I've now forgotten it all. Michael Coulson, who taught us, was an early advocate of gay rights and I remember my mother being shocked when I got a letter from him with 'Support the fight for gay rights' written on the outside of the envelope.

In my third year, I was living on a farm in Fife with a group of other students, including Pete Irvine (who later established and directed the big Hogmanay Party in Edinburgh). Unfortunately, the police took an interest in our activities and the fall-out led to front-page headlines in the *Daily Record* ('Drugs down on the farm') as well as the *Evening News*. Later I discovered for myself the point that Aldous Huxley makes in the novel *Island*: that attention in love to another human being is far more important than any amount of psychedelic fireworks.

Philip Tonner

What about your studies?

George Pattison

I did do some work, mostly in history, philosophy and politics, and if I hadn't failed to get an essay in on time, even with an extension, I might have done honours politics. I think it was rather a good essay about the function of ideology in the Soviet Union but the topic was too large in proportion to my knowledge. Another essay I was

very pleased with was an analysis of the Paris events of May 1968 as illustrating the effectiveness of a cybernetic rather than a top-down model of societal relationships. I was also rather pleased with an essay on Plato that interpreted him as a mystical thinker, but my tutor, the late Sarah Waterlow, wasn't so impressed and gave it 28%.

Philip Tonner

The 1970s were clearly a time of great reflection on your part. Ultimately, these led you to your undertaking a BD. Can you tell me about your thinking at this time?

George Pattison

I hadn't had much to do with the church during my student years, though, as I mentioned before, it wasn't anything I'd ever felt the need to rebel against. The summer after I graduated, though, it suddenly came to me – not literally a 'call' but perhaps something very close – that I should seek ordination. Apart from the fact that I wasn't really qualified for anything, it seemed to offer a way of synthesising my rather diverse interests in spirituality, social involvement and, by then, a rediscovered intellectual engagement. My parish priest suggested I could make a start by attending church, which seemed a fair point.

I've never seen this move back to the Church as turning my back on what I'd lived through in the '60s but more like a way of preserving (Hegel might say 'sublating') those utopian elements of the '60s movements that resonated with the early Christian quest for a radically egalitarian, welcoming and non-violent society – Jesus called it 'the Kingdom of God'. Of course, I've learned that it's not that straightforward, but still . . .

It was two years from then until I began studying at the Scottish Episcopal College in Edinburgh. In between, I worked variously as a labourer, a secondary school teacher (you didn't need a PGCE in

England back then), and a nursing assistant at the Royal Edinburgh psychiatric hospital. I'd married halfway through my first degree and we now had a little daughter to care for. It was during this time that I started reading Dostoevsky, which resonated with a lot of what I was experiencing, not least in the psychiatric hospital.

I began reading as much theology as I could, saying the daily office (sometimes on the bus on the way to work), and even undertaking the preparations for devotion recommended by St Francis of Sales, which included imagining oneself on one's death bed and contemplating the pains of hell. When I say 'as much theology as I could', it was more or less indiscriminate and largely dependent on what was on the shelves of various local public libraries. It included Barth's *Commentary on Romans*, which hugely excited me, Augustine's *Confessions* and *City of God* (all of it), Spinoza's *Ethico-Religious Treatise*, von Hügel on mysticism, the novels of Charles Williams, and Dante (in Dorothy Sayers' translation). I also read some biblical commentaries and a lot about Judaism.

I was fortunate at that time to meet Bishop Neil Russell, who had been a curate at old St. Paul's Church in Edinburgh and later became Bishop of Zanzibar, from where he was expelled in the 1960s. When I met him, he was living in a very small religious community in Roslyn, south of Edinburgh, called the Community of the Transfiguration. Richard Holloway has called Neil 'a saintly ascetic' and described him as a 'man who lived like a desert father; a man who had given away everything he possessed; a man who lived on hand-outs and wore only second-hand clothes; . . . a man who spent two hours every morning in silent prayer; a man who was so manifestly holy he scarcely seemed to be of the earth at all.' It was Neil Russell, by the way, who got me reading Edwin Muir. There were only about four members of the community, which was financially supported by one member who was both a hereditary baronet and worked as a miner – I believe he was in fact secretary of the local branch of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). They were the only religious community I've come across who really took the vow of poverty seriously. They had a shared house but lived in little huts in the garden. For me, they were a powerful example of taking the existential challenge of Christianity seriously and having the courage to strip away a lot of

excessive ecclesial stuff. At the same time I was reading a lot of Thomas Merton. I think that also appealed to the sentiment that getting rid of stuff is sometimes just as important as 'doing' and adding stuff. I've never really liked ecclesiastical pomp and circumstance since then, which is a bit paradoxical, I know, because I found myself in places where there is much ecclesiastical pomp and circumstance, but I think it's very good to have a critical distance from that.

I can't remember all the reasons that led me to choose the Scottish Episcopal College for ordination training, but one was that it was one of the relatively few Anglican colleges at that time that was open to married ordinands – though married students in the year above me (all men, of course) had to live in college during the week and were only allowed out to stay with their wives at the weekend. There was definitely something rather monastic about it, albeit in a rather cosy way. At the same time, it was a requirement that all students should take the BD degree at New College, where I reconnected with my academic aspirations – in a big way.

At that time, systematic theology at New College had split into 'Dogmatics' and 'Divinity'. This split basically followed the divergence between the approaches of Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. The former insisted that human beings could do nothing to achieve knowledge of God and were entirely dependent on grace, as revealed in scripture. The principal figure in Dogmatics at New College was T. F. Torrance, who had been a student with Barth, but who also had an extensive interest in the dialogue between theology and science (something quite alien to Barth himself) and, at the same time, placed a strong emphasis on Patristics and Orthodox theology. In this perspective, the study of theology was itself a kind of religious practice. Lectures began with prayer, and I recall TF (as we called him) saying that those of an unregenerate mind cannot do theology. Torrance's intellectual energy and prodigious learning were very impressive, but by my second year I was clear that I was going a different way. Nevertheless, he did communicate to us the seriousness of what is at issue in the study of theology.

Veering away from 'Dogmatics' I turned to 'Divinity', where the principal figures were D. W. D. ('Bill') Shaw and Elisabeth Maclaren (later Templeton), the latter of whom started me reading Nikolai

Berdyaev, an abiding interest. Versus Barth, 'Divinity' followed Bultmann in arguing that scripture needed to be interpreted in relation to human beings' existential experiences and understanding, though I became more interested in Paul Tillich, partly because his approach was more philosophical than Bultmann's but also, I think, because Tillich had developed an interesting version of Christian socialism – he had been closely involved in the development of the Frankfurt School and was very close to both Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. He also had the distinction of being amongst the first academics to be dismissed when Hitler came to power, although it's a matter of debate whether his last book to be published in Germany before he went into exile – *The Socialist Decision* – was consigned to the flames in the Nazis' book-burning spree of 1933 or merely pulped. Tillich's religious socialism was the subject of my dissertation and although this never got published I was able to cannibalise some of it in my 2015 book *Paul Tillich's Systematic Theology*.

Many of the materials relating to Tillich's socialism were only available in German and, with a remote base in O-level German, my German was vastly improved by spending the summer semester of 1976 at the Tübingen Stift as part of a regular exchange programme between Edinburgh and Tübingen. Apart from improving my German, this was intellectually pivotal in my development. The Stift was where Hegel, Schelling and Hölderlin had studied and it had remained a powerful element in modern German intellectual history. I attended seminars on Kant (one on the Introduction to the *Critique of Judgment* and the other on the *Critique of Practical Reason*), as well as lectures by Jürgen Moltmann on the Christian doctrine of humanity and Hans Küng (in which he explored the idea of 'basic trust' as a psychological preliminary to belief in God). I also heard lectures on Kierkegaard, whose *Philosophical Fragments* was a set text in Divinity at Edinburgh. At Tübingen I met Ulrich Fentzloff, whose blog '*Tagebuch eines Landpfarrers*' ('Diary of a Country Priest') I regard as one of the more important theological documents of our time (I write about it in my book *A Rhetorics of the Word*).

I should also mention Fergus Kerr's lectures on 'The Later Heidegger and the Way to God', which were never published but were inspirational for my own later development.

Despite training in Scotland and despite academic success, I wanted to return to England to work as a parish priest, and served a curacy in a parish in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. It was a very old-fashioned kind of curacy and I'd often be set to work a street, going from door to door introducing myself as the curate and trying to engage interest for the Church – as well as taking, on average, a couple of funerals a week. It was a very working-class parish, with some streets merging into the underclass of the unemployed and, in some cases, unemployable. There was a lot of goodness there, and some holiness, and we did some good things (including a kind of rock Christmas carol event, which involved setting the words of the annunciation to 'Don't Cry for Me, Argentina') – but I didn't really have the social experience or skills or church vision to go further. I was also frustrated at the near-total lack of interest in critical theology amongst many clergy, which I found intellectually stifling. It was also very problematic for my family. A couple of my teachers at New College had written to me after I'd moved to Newcastle encouraging me to pursue further research and it became clear that this was something I had to do or, at least, attempt.

Philip Tonner

You went on to pursue a PhD at the University of Durham. Did you pursue this while still a Parish Priest? Can I ask, what led you to choose Durham?

George Pattison

My priority for the PhD was finding someone who would supervise it. In (I think) 1979, I'd attended the annual conference of the Modern Churchman's Union (as it was then, today it's 'Modern Church') on the theme 'Is a theological Common Market between England and Germany possible?' On the train back to the North-East I found myself sitting with Stephen Sykes, then Professor of Divinity at Durham, John Rogerson, an Old Testament scholar, and Ann Loades.

Ann was an extraordinary person, especially in the context of 1970s theology. She was very tall, glamorous, and would sit in conference lectures knitting – I’m told that on one occasion she threw a ball of wool at a speaker she disapproved of. She was also very tough and direct. For six years in the 1980s she co-presented a Channel 4 current affairs programme, *7 Days*, and would be awarded a CBE for services to theology, a rare honour. Not many people were interested in Kierkegaard at that time, but Ann responded positively to my ideas and by the time the train had got back to the North-East, we’d decided that she was the right person for the job! It also helped that she taught ballet, just at a time when we were looking for a class for our daughter, so she did that too!

I was awarded what at that time was called a ‘Major State Studentship’. This only covered basic living costs and I entered an arrangement with the Diocese of Durham which, through the council, provided accommodation in return for Sunday services and basic pastoral care and services (weddings, baptisms, funerals, confirmation classes, etc.).

Philip Tonner

Your thesis was entitled *Kierkegaard’s Theory and Critique of Art: Its Theological Significance*. You went on to develop this into a book, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious*. Kierkegaard has been one of your most significant influences. For now, can you reflect on your choice to pursue a doctorate on his work?

George Pattison

When I began to think seriously about doing a PhD, I was juggling three possibilities. One was Coleridge (I was writing a lot of poetry at that time), one was Berdyaev and one was Kierkegaard. These could seem all very different, but what they had in common was, I think, an intensely personalist view of human being, that is to say, that there is something in the human being (what Dostoevsky called

‘the man in man’) that is not reducible to sociological or even psychological laws, a core of freedom that is decisive – even in our relation to God. Remember that I’d been very excited by Sartrean existentialism at school, but Sartre’s idea of freedom was essentially negative, the manifestation of what he called an ‘upsurge of nothingness’ in the midst of being, whereas these personalist thinkers understood freedom as bringing us into relation with the world and with others. Why Kierkegaard? I think because I found him the most challenging, both in terms of the multi-layered nature of his writings and because of the intellectual difficulty of his thought. Although I’d read a selection from his journals while I was at school, I’d found *Philosophical Fragments* both extremely difficult and also extremely annoying – and Kierkegaard himself argues in that book that faith (as he understands it) is going to offend those (like me) who put their trust in human reason. But even though this annoyed me, it also intrigued and attracted me because of the brilliant way in which he said it. And I also sensed, which I’ve become more convinced of since, that Kierkegaard was not (like Barth) trying to deny the relevance of human experience in the God-relationship but trying to move us away from over-intellectualising that relationship. It was not the rational self but the passional self that would bring us to God, as he put it in a rhetorical question borrowed from the English poet Edward Young that Kierkegaard used as a motto for *Either/Or*: ‘Are passions, then, the pagans of the soul, reason alone baptiz’d?’

PRIESTHOOD

Philip Tonner

Following your BD you spent fourteen years as a Parish Priest in the Church of England. How do you now think of those years and of the various experiences you had during them?

George Pattison

As I mentioned before, I was a curate in what people used to call a 'tough' working-class parish in the West End of Newcastle. It was a very old-fashioned set-up and the vicar who trained me worked on the assumption that, except for Catholics and Methodists, everyone was basically Church of England and all they needed was a reminder to get them to church – and getting them to church was the main thing. He related the story of his own training vicar who'd go down a street of terraced houses, knocking on two doors at once and, when the housewives put their heads out of the window, would call out 'Sunday morning. Ten o'clock. Be there – dead or alive'. That was it. I'm sure the reality was more nuanced, but the story revealed the basic idea. In that spirit, I'd be assigned specific streets to work, going from door to door and taking it from there. This isn't something many of my contemporaries experienced and there was, obviously, a lot wrong with it, but a surprising number of people did ask me in and sometimes this led to further conversations. It was socially challenging to me, but, after a while, I learned that you just had to 'faire face', as Bernanos writes in his *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne*, which tells the story of another rather inept and gauche priest. The insurmountable problem with this approach was that even then, in the 1970s, there was no longer the basic sense of identification with the church that the whole operation presupposed. I'm sure that is even more the case today.

This basically false conceptualisation of the Church's place in society also contributes to the cluster of expectations around clergy families. I don't think my wife and I had any idea when I went into parish ministry as to how attitudes toward 'the vicar's wife' were essentially unchanged since the 1950s, nor the disruptiveness of the clergy lifestyle on family relations. Just one small example – I'd often get phone calls from parishioners in the middle of the family dinner and people would say 'I knew I'd catch you at home'. Put on the answerphone, you might say – but back then this wasn't well-regarded and would have occasioned further negative comment! I don't know if this has changed, but I hope so. This was even true to a certain extent at King's and, later, at Christ Church. There's a

strange dynamic here: clergy and their families are – or were – put on a pedestal but, by virtue of being identified with a set of beliefs and values that the majority of people no longer accept, were at the same time derided. Again, I think this has to do with the Church being perceived as claiming an authority over people's lives that their sense of individual freedom then requires them to reject. Some clergy themselves buy into that fantasy and even though most don't, it's a powerful archetype. It's one thing, though, for an ordained person to have to deal with this: it's different again for their families. It'd be nice to think we've moved on from that, but I suspect not.

A major element in my parish ministry was, inevitably, death or, to be more precise, dying and bereavement. When I was a curate, I was taking on average about two funerals a week, though it could be up to twelve. This was at a time when the vast majority of funerals used the prescribed church service, and it wasn't often that a family member would request to do a reading or say a separate word. The tone was more 'The day Thou gavest, Lord, has ended' than 'I did it my way' – and, theology apart, I still think that the older words express a deeper view of what human life is about. If possible, I'd visit the family, which was, I think, appreciated. On one occasion I remember visiting a widow, an old lady of about eighty, whom I'd never met before but as I came through the door she threw her arms around me and said 'I knew you'd come'. Another time, I overheard relatives talking after the funeral, and one said, 'He's a canny lad, the vicar. He came round to the house, yeh kna'.' These small things matter, and even if what you say isn't all that deep or memorable, just being there is important. However, even after three years I could still be faced with a congregation of a hundred or more and not a single face I knew. Only on one occasion did I take a service when no one at all turned up, which was very poignant.

Later, when I was in village communities, in County Durham and then in Suffolk, it would be very different, because I'd not only know the person concerned but also their relatives and friends (and after some years, many of them were my friends too); often I'd know about the death before the undertaker and would likely have visited the person when they were ill. In fact (we're now in the 1980s) in Suffolk I'd go into the hospital every week and ask at reception for

a list of patients from my parishes and get it – unthinkable today. As I wasn't one of those who, as people put it, tried to 'shove religion down their throats', they were mostly pleased to have a visitor and, often, visiting one person on a ward would end up as a communal discussion.

It wasn't all sickness and death, though. I've recently been going through boxes of old papers and discovered lots of material relating to work with children, including a Lent course from my Newcastle time entitled 'Johnny and the Daleks', which I wrote and for which the vicar's son constructed a Dalek, using egg cartons and silver foil round a wooden frame. The vicar sat inside, operating a cassette recorder with the Dalek's words (mostly 'Exterminate') that he'd press at appropriate moments, though one week it went completely haywire to general mirth and bewilderment.

And then there were the primary and middle school assemblies, sometimes aided by my playing folk-style choruses on the guitar. It sounds cringeworthy, but there was a lot of fun. In Newcastle I also took assemblies at a school for the blind in the parish, which was very humbling. One day they asked if they could come and 'see' (their word) my church, which, of course, we arranged. It was all rather chaotic with children going round the church and feeling the pillars, the lectern, the pews – everything. But a good kind of chaos.

Over the course of fourteen years, one faces virtually every kind of pastoral situation, from requests for exorcism to armed husbands out for revenge, but despite some pastoral instruction at college and in post-ordination training schemes, I was woefully unprepared and unprofessional. I suppose the idea was still that faith and prayer would be enough. At one level, that's true – except that in a complex and pluralistic society you have to develop a different kind of sensitivity in order to know when faith can be shown and when prayer can be made – and that sensitivity needs to be taught, you don't know it by instinct or learn it by osmosis. There are huge issues here that we probably can't even start on.

In my training parish the main weekly service was a parish communion with attendance of about 100–120. It was slightly Anglo-Catholic, but in a rather old-fashioned way. Later, in my village churches, it was often a question of 'when two or three are gathered

together' and in winter they'd be gathered together without much heating except for portable gas heaters. But, actually, the 'beauty of holiness' doesn't depend on large numbers. In fact, the sense that 'this is real' can be all the stronger when it is more intensely focused.

As in many rural areas, the financial situation of my parishes in Suffolk was hopeless. The parishes were asked to pay amounts into central church funds that we just weren't able to raise – not alongside what were often hugely expensive repairs to the buildings. People often talk about 'tough decisions' but the tough decisions just weren't being made. One thing that did start happening, though, was the encouragement of local or non-stipendiary ministry, which is broadly a good thing, except that the part-time training programmes are often just not sufficient to enable the kind of real in-depth knowledge of the Bible and Christian tradition that are necessary for preaching and teaching. Later, I discovered that in Denmark all clergy (at least until very recently) are required to have the equivalent of a master's degree in theology, with the result that although I heard several very boring sermons while I was there, I never heard any that were completely incompetent, which, I'm afraid, you can hear only too often in the Church of England.

'To preach' has become almost a term of abuse, but I passionately believe that there is something sacramental in the phenomenon of a person standing up and addressing others about what Tillich called our 'ultimate concerns' – though I'd also welcome it if there were more scope for this to become a two-way traffic. One of my first sermons, as a student, was at an evangelical church in Edinburgh where the custom was to have a post-service discussion of the sermon with the young adult group. One of the complaints I got was that my sermon was rather short (it was about twenty minutes, I think). It's also important that there's a proper context for preaching and, specifically, that there's usually an ongoing connection between preacher and congregation. The university chapel phenomenon, where a visiting preacher turns up every Sunday, can make for good theatre (though not very often, to be honest), but a simple word, spoken with understanding, and with the implication that the preacher is going to stick around to see if reality lives up to what

has been said, is ultimately more meaningful than any amount of rhetorical or intellectual fireworks.

Philip Tonner

You became Dean of Chapel at King's College, Cambridge in 1991. This post involved both pastoral and worship roles alongside teaching duties (see Appendix A). Can you tell me about your ten years in that role?

George Pattison

As you say, this involved both ecclesiastical and academic roles. Ecclesiastically, I had overall responsibility for the Chapel within the framework of College governance, although, as I soon discovered, everything in Cambridge and Oxford is about negotiation and the rest of the College, fellows and students, were very aware of being stakeholders in what happened there – mostly in a positive sense.

The formal worship of the Chapel is, I suppose, world famous and we had a steady stream of visitors to daily Evensong, as well, of course, as the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols at Christmas. This was a great thing to be part of and, as a 'live' event is more than just (!) the music, since the changing pattern and intensity of light in that vast space with its great fan-vaulted ceiling is very much part of the experience. A privilege of being Dean was that I was from time to time able to just sit in the Chapel outside hours, sometimes in the half-light or dark, and soak up its extraordinary silence, a silence that was heavy with the reverberations of all that had been said and sung there over five hundred years.

I was also very involved in the televised *Carols from King's*. As you may know, whereas the Nine Lessons and Carols followed a fixed pattern of readings, *Carols from King's* allowed scope for experimentation and, at various times, we used Tillich, Dostoevsky, Edwin Muir and many more non-canonical texts. Sometimes this elicited complaints, since people didn't always realise this was a separate

thing and believed we'd changed the time-hallowed formula of the Nine Lessons and Carols. Others were very appreciative. For many people, of course, the Christmas Eve service is endowed with a sempiternal quality, one of those things that provide a sort of comfort by being the same every year, a symbol of stability in a changing world. That's often what Christian worship more generally has become ('keeping things the same'), but the authentic spring of worship is lost if we forget that it's also about the future, 'hastening the Kingdom', as Franz Rosenzweig put it.

The pastoral aspect of the post was significantly underdefined. There was a chaplain who had responsibility for Christian pastoral care of the student body (alongside the non-religious tutorial team), while the Dean was assigned to the fellowship. An impossible task, really, but perhaps the best way to approach it was as a ministry of friendship.

Part of the appointment was to be Director of Studies for the King's students studying theology, which also led to further involvement in the Divinity School, both teaching and examining. My first books – *Art, Modernity and Faith* and *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious* – came out early on in the '90s and I suppose they set the agenda for my own work in that decade.

It was quite amazing to suddenly find that pursuing my academic interests was regarded as part of the job. Of course, there's a long tradition of parish clergy continuing their studies but that is more honoured in the breach than the observance and I always felt guilty about taking time off parish work to write. *Art, Modernity and Faith*, for example, was written on my days off.

I've always been responsive to visual art and, when I'd finished my thesis, I reacted against Kierkegaard's critical view of art by going to the opposite extreme. Of course, Kierkegaard is quite an accomplished literary artist himself, but he's also extremely wordy – whereas it seemed to me at that time that visual art opened a dimension of being human that was more-than-verbal. Quite coincidentally (some might say providentially), the art critic Peter Fuller had a second home in my Suffolk parish and we got to know each other quite well. In one of his more important books, *Theoria*, he argues that modern art has suffered as a result of the death of God and decline

of religion, since this has entailed the collapse of a shared symbolic order; at the same time, art has resources to offer what the subtitle called 'the consolation of lost illusions'. Although we came to the question from differing angles, we shared a perception that art and religion are undergoing a shared crisis in which each certainly has something to offer the other but neither has 'the answer'.

Peter was killed in a car crash in the spring of 1990, but through him I made many contacts amongst artists and writers about art. In early 1990, with Janet Martin Soskice, I set up a one-day art and theology seminar in Cambridge, a highlight of which was an impassioned exchange between Peter and Sister Wendy Beckett about Francis Bacon. Peter thought that Bacon's nihilism impacted the actual quality of his art, while Sister Wendy argued that the power of his art revealed a kind of faith beyond nihilism. Several years later, I took part with Wendy in a BBC2 programme about the portrayal of the Passion in the stained-glass windows of King's College Chapel under the title *Sister Wendy's Pains of Glass* (although it was really based on a programme I'd done for BBC radio the year before). Through the 1990s I took part in many 'art-and-religion' events, some under the aegis of ACE, the Art and Christianity Enquiry set up by Tom Devonshire-Jones, including events at the National Gallery, Tate and Tate Modern galleries. The texts of several of these ended up in the book *Crucifixions and Resurrections of the Image*.

At the same time, Kierkegaard re-emerged as a major focus of my writing and thinking, partly prompted by the setting up of the Kierkegaard Research Centre in Copenhagen and the stimulus of the big 1995 conference 'Kierkegaard Revisited' that inaugurated its work. Central to the work of the Centre was the production of a new edition of all of Kierkegaard's writings to the highest contemporary standards. Under the leadership of Niels-Jørgen Cappelørn, the Centre had a large team of philologists checking all the references and sources of everything Kierkegaard wrote and, at the same time, ran a series of research projects and seminars on his work and its reception. I benefited from two research semesters at the Centre, in 1997 and 2000. Already in 1997 my intention had been to work on Kierkegaard's upbuilding or edifying writings, but I got waylaid by what he wrote about Copenhagen itself, resulting

in *Poor Paris!*, a study of the role Copenhagen plays in Kierkegaard's writings and how the life of the city illustrated the tensions between modernity and tradition, secularity and faith that we find in his theoretical works. In 2000 I did get round to focusing more on the discourses. I'll stop there for now, as I know we're going to talk about Kierkegaard in a later interview. I'd just add that my association with the Centre (I'm still a member of its Advisory Board) has been one of the most consistent threads in my academic life, both in terms of the work I've been able to do there but also with regard to the opportunities to meet a series of outstanding scholars, both other visitors and Copenhagen-based colleagues. This (the '90s) was also a time when I began to work with a sequence of very able PhD students, many of whom are now themselves prominent scholars or active in a range of interesting and socially constructive ways outside academia.

One of the prompts to my interest in Kierkegaard's upbuilding writings had been Heidegger's footnote in *Being and Time* that these were more philosophically interesting than his straightforwardly philosophical works, and Heidegger was and is a major dialogue-partner (so to speak) in my reading of Kierkegaard, as well, of course, as in his own right. Twice in my life, first at the start of the 1990s and then in 2012, I've taken time out to read *Being and Time* from start to finish and each time this has had a profound effect on my work for the following decade. In Cambridge I also gave a lecture series on the relationship between Kierkegaard's upbuilding writings and *Being and Time*, and we can perhaps say more about that later.

It was at Cambridge also that I began working more systematically on Dostoevsky, whom I'd been reading since my 20s (as I've already mentioned). In the first instance, this was because of a paper called 'Background to Modern Theology' that had one week dedicated to *The Brothers Karamazov* and there was no one else around ready to teach it. However, it quickly snowballed, especially after I met Diane O. Thompson who'd attended a lecture I'd given on the representation of the dead Christ in Manet and in Dostoevsky's *Idiot* – a very interesting case of cultural synchronicity in that both painting and novel confronted viewers and readers with the sheer deadness of

Christ, unalloyed by any sentimentality or supernatural illumination. Diane took my Dostoevsky studies in hand and together we organised a conference with the Glasgow Centre for Literature and Theology that bore fruit in a volume we co-edited, *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*. This was also when I began learning Russian.

When I first arrived in King's I realised that it was somewhere you could invite anyone to come to speak and it struck me that it would be great to invite the Dalai Lama. In fact, one of his translators was a PhD student at King's at the time and he took the initiative and asked me if this would be possible. A few people were very sceptical about having a Buddhist leader speaking in the Chapel but I have to say that for several days afterwards the atmosphere in Chapel and College was noticeably more tranquil, which anyone who's ever been around this remarkable person will understand – this is the power of someone who, in complete humility, simply is who he is, without pretence or pomposity.

ACADEMIC LIFE

Philip Tonner

You became Lector in Practical Theology at the University of Aarhus in 2002. You were there for two years. Can you tell me about duties there?

George Pattison

Practical Theology in the Danish context is far more of a theoretical discipline than it is in the UK or USA. I took it to be about making students aware of the ways in which Christianity is communicated, so as well as courses on preaching, I did courses on visual art, film and spiritual direction. In the Danish system as it was then, students can only take Practical Theology in the latter part of their studies, meaning that it was in effect a Master's-level course. The students

were very well-prepared and engaged and did some really interesting dissertations. My book *A Short Course in Christian Doctrine* reflects some of my teaching there. *Thinking about God in an Age of Technology* was also essentially written in Aarhus, though it didn't directly connect to my teaching. Living on my own, five minutes' walk from the faculty, meant I didn't have much else to do but work – though most days, then as now, I'd aim to walk for at least an hour, usually down to the sea.

Philip Tonner

Prior to your academic appointment at Aarhus, had you applied for other jobs? What was the 'job market' for academics like at that time?

George Pattison

Back in the 1980s, when I was becoming aware of my limitations with regard to parish ministry, I did apply for many jobs and had several interviews, but (obviously) none of them came to anything. Kierkegaard, as I've mentioned, was out of fashion and art and theology was probably seen as a bit amateur. In fact, I'd given up the search until Don Cupitt rang me up and drew my attention to the King's post and encouraged me to apply. It was rather different with Aarhus. Although my overall experience at King's was very positive, a difficult personnel situation arose in the course of my last year and when I discovered that I didn't have the support of the leadership of the college, I realised that in all conscience I couldn't continue. Just at that time I was visiting Copenhagen and a friend told me about the Aarhus post. On my return home – I think it was a Friday – I contacted the Dean at Aarhus who said, yes, that's right and the deadline is noon on Monday. It was a very scrambled application, but I did it and it happened.

Philip Tonner

In 2004 you became Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford. This is a historic and senior Chair held in tandem with the post of canon at Christ Church Cathedral. How did you feel upon your appointment? Were you 'nervous'? Did you feel what we sometimes refer to today as 'imposter syndrome'?

George Pattison

I had imagined that Aarhus would be a much longer-term undertaking and I was even looking to buy a flat there when I learned about the Lady Margaret Professorship becoming open. I had imagined that my predecessor, John Webster, who was about the same age as myself, would most likely be staying there till retirement and there weren't that many other posts around the country that I could have been a plausible candidate for.

In classic Oxford language, the invitation to be interviewed didn't use the word 'interview' but talked about the appointing committee wanting 'to discuss' my application. It was also carefully choreographed so I didn't see any of the other candidates and I wasn't even sure if there were any. Nevertheless, it was one of those things that I felt 'right' about. But, yes, I was rather overcome when I got the letter – not only because of the nature of the post but also because it meant I'd be back with my wife and family, though Ryanair had done a very good job at keeping us connected between Aarhus and Cambridge: on one occasion I got home for just £1.

Oliver O'Donovan, then Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology, suggested that I chaired examinations in my first year at Oxford, which was certainly a challenge, but a very rewarding one and, as he'd guessed, helped me get to grips with the way the set-up worked. Then, in my second year, I became deputy chair of the faculty as a lead-in to chairing it the following year. So, basically, there wasn't time to feel like an impostor – and, as I've indicated, I'd grown up in an Oxbridge milieu, even if in a slightly offbeat way.

Philip Tonner

Tell me about your time at Oxford.

George Pattison

After about a week at Christ Church, I realised that it was no accident that *Alice in Wonderland* was written there. There's a very positive side to that – a lot in Oxford is still very quirky, unpredictable and a bit random. Strange and wonderful things happen and, as in *Alice*, it's easy to see both the charm and the ludicrousness of it. Unfortunately, the sequence of events that led to the dismissal of Martyn Percy as Dean of Christ Church (which happened after I left) highlighted the problematic aspect of Oxford's (or, at least, Christ Church's) irrational side and I doubt if the current rewriting of Christ Church's constitution will entirely dissolve all of that.

I appreciated once again being able to participate in liturgical life. As at King's, though, while I valued being able to worship in a richly layered ancient building to the accompaniment of what was often supremely beautiful music (despite the penchant of Anglican choral foundations for bathetic late-Victorian and Edwardian anthems), there is sometimes a kind of stiffness, some would say pomposity, about that particular liturgical tradition and one has to work hard to humanise it through the way one preaches, prays and generally conducts oneself.

As I've indicated, the first few years of my time at Oxford involved a lot of administration, some of which was tedious, but it could also be very rewarding. For example, we got to work with some of Britain's leading architects on proposals for a new Humanities building, though the crash of 2008 meant there wasn't the money to build it. We also managed to secure funding for a new Chair in the Study of the Abrahamic Religions through a process that offered unusual insights into the religious situation of the Middle East. Happily, the Chair has attracted a sequence of outstanding scholars, Guy Stroumsa, Anna Abulafia and now Frank Griffel.

The major part of my work was teaching, at both undergraduate and graduate levels. As at Cambridge, I worked with a series of

research students, many but by no means all of them working on Kierkegaard. I think that at one point I had twelve, which is far too many – especially as it wasn't then usual to have co-supervisors. Nevertheless, since 1991, this has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my work – in Cambridge, Denmark, Oxford, Glasgow and St Andrew's – and it's been a great privilege to follow the development of research students' projects, their deepening grasp of the field, and their original insights. Sometimes, of course, they've had periods when they very understandably fall into a slough of despond, but they've mostly come through. There may be a shift in culture going on here and practice varies from country to country, but I always regarded the students' projects as their own, and I was just there to nudge them when needed, whereas in Germany, for example (and increasingly in our own contemporary research culture), the students are there to contribute to the professor's own mega-project, as in lab-based research teams in science. One can see that this latter approach may bring results, but there's still something important about the personal element in an individual scholar pursuing their 'private passion', at least in the humanities.

Despite some scepticism, colleagues gracefully enabled me to introduce a new course on Dostoevsky at honours level in a paper widely known as 'Special Theologians', which usually included Augustine, Aquinas, Newman, Barth, etc., so Dostoevsky was a bit of an outlier. As this was an optional course, the students were mostly very motivated and we all got a lot out of it.

Philip Tonner

Can you tell me about your academic work during this period of your career?

George Pattison

Kierkegaard remained a major focus of my work, and I continued to have strong links to the Kierkegaard Research Centre in

Copenhagen, usually going over three to four times a year. I also ran a series of seminars on Heidegger funded by the university to which we invited a range of leading Heidegger scholars and Heidegger critics. Oxford has, of course, a reputation as a bulwark against 'continental philosophy'. At a reception in the week I arrived, one leading philosopher of religion came up to me and, without introducing himself and without even saying 'Hello', said 'Of course, some of us don't regard Kierkegaard as a philosopher'. However, at the time I left, Oxford probably had more academic staff actively working on Heidegger than anywhere else in the UK, a situation strengthened when Mark Wrathall was appointed in 2017.

My Kierkegaard and Heidegger interests blended in a series of seminars and teaching events involving Oxford and Copenhagen (led from the Copenhagen side by the late Arne Grøn) around the theme of passivity, approached in the perspective of phenomenology. I was also involved in the project 'The Ethics of Powerlessness', based in the philosophy department at Essex University, and there was some convergence between these. This strengthened my own 'phenomenological turn' which would later show up in my Bampton lectures on the *Phenomenology of the Devout Life* that was conceived while I was still in Oxford, though the lectures themselves weren't given till after my move to Glasgow.

It was while I was at Oxford that I also began working on a series of more 'systematic' books, notably *God and Being* and *Eternal God/ Saving Time*, in which I tried to make my engagement with Kierkegaard, Heidegger and the Russian tradition fruitful for fundamental questions in the philosophy of religion. The titles of those books perhaps indicate an abiding debt to Heidegger – 'being' and 'time' respectively!

Philip Tonner

In 2013 you moved to the University of Glasgow to take up the 1640 Professorship of Divinity. What prompted you to move?

George Pattison

Oxford had a strict retirement age of sixty-seven and as I got to within five years of that I thought it likely I'd want to go on for longer, so I started looking around. Because of my Scottish connections, I made a point of looking for somewhere in Scotland, and this was what came up.

Philip Tonner

Tell me about your time at Glasgow.

George Pattison

For a start it was wonderful being back in Scotland and, this time, discovering something of the West.

The milieu of being a small department nested within a larger school was, of course, something new and, as in many other places, we were increasingly dependent on younger staff on part-time or temporary contracts to deliver a lot of the teaching, which is a major issue across the sector. Because of the college system in Oxford one didn't always see colleagues in one's own subject very often and it was good to have a physical place where people were around and there were more opportunities for informal interaction. Though small, it was a warm and supportive department and, to be honest, because there was always a sense of being under threat people looked out for one another all the more.

In terms of teaching, it was especially good to be able to help redesign and deliver a second-year course on mysticism, alongside my colleague Charlie Orzech, a sinologist. Ironically, I'd put a lot of effort into redesigning a mysticism and spirituality course in Oxford but then had to pass the teaching of it on to others, so it was nice to see it through this time. It was a course that about half-a-dozen others contributed to and I enjoyed the feeling of being part of a team, and there was a guest lecture from one of the monks from

Samye Ling. We hosted a major conference of the Mystical Theology Network in 2017. I was also able to introduce a new honours course on existentialism and faith, which we opened to students in TRS, philosophy and modern languages and which I co-taught with Ramona Fotiade and Olivier Salazar-Ferrer.

Again, I worked with a number of very able research students at Glasgow, though with less focus on my own primary areas of research – but that too is good and, as I’ve said, I strongly believe that the main driver in a PhD has to be the student’s own interests, not the supervisor’s.

Tonner

Did your work change in Glasgow?

George Pattison

As I’ve mentioned, I conceived the idea for the lectures on *A Phenomenology of the Devout Life* back in Oxford, but the work for these was done while I was at Glasgow and, as it developed, it expanded to the idea for a three-volume *Philosophy of Christian Life*, which I proposed to Oxford University Press in 2017 and which then appeared between 2018 and 2021. The second volume, *A Rhetorics of the Word*, came out of the research year (2017–18) I spent at the Max Weber Centre in Erfurt (there seemed to be something appropriate about working on ‘the Word’ in the city where Luther had studied and taught), while the third, *A Metaphysics of Love*, was almost entirely written in Glasgow. Each of these volumes reflects long-term interests, but, to the extent that the work as a whole succeeds, it brings them into a coherent and unified development – you’ll find mysticism and spirituality, the ‘how’ of communication, the Russian connection, Dante, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and, of course, central themes of Christian theology: prayer, vocation, sin, incarnation and eschatology – as well as Glasgow’s own Francis Hutcheson, I should add.

Universities do – or did – like to talk about research-led teaching and during this time there was a very strong resonance between my teaching on mysticism and the Philosophy of Christian Life. At the same time, this also meshed with my long-term work on existentialism, and these came together in the book on *The Mystical Sources of Existentialist Thought* (2019), that I co-wrote with Kate Kirkpatrick, a former research student and now a leading interpreter of Simone de Beauvoir.

I spent a lot of time putting together a major grant application for a three-year project on phenomenology and religion, but despite two very positive reviews, the third reviewer was very hostile in ways that, to my mind, were not really fair. Although there is the opportunity to respond, the word-limit is very small and, given the way these processes work, just one negative report is likely to sink a project. Nevertheless, the work on the proposal, which involved a meeting of a good number of potential participants, was itself very creative and moved my own thinking on, feeding into the Christian life trilogy.

My work on Russian religious thought also went into a new gear in Glasgow. Initially this came out of another failed grant proposal, but when I revisited the proposal a year later I saw that it had actually generated a network of potential contributors for an *Oxford Handbook* (I'd edited two before, so knew what was required). A key to this kind of thing is getting the right co-editors and working with Caryl Emerson and Randall Poole was just amazing. This is not my primary area of research and it was a great learning curve. In the course of working on the volume we brought contributors together to share their proposals, which is a great thing for this sort of exercise rather than having people all working in their own separate foxholes. It makes for a better working atmosphere and ultimate outcome. Anyway, it's a great volume and we had a good Russia-based online follow-up panel on it – that was before the war, of course. Scholarly contacts are still possible, of course, either online or through conferences in places like Uzbekistan, but the possibilities are much diminished and Russian scholars who haven't bought in to the 'Russian World' ideology are ever more restrained.

RETIREMENT

Philip Tonner

Before your retirement you went down to 20% FTE as Professor of Theology and Modern European Thought at Glasgow. Did this give you time to formulate some of your more recent projects?

George Pattison

This ended up being quite a short period, really, and was when I was becoming fully absorbed in the Philosophy of Christian Life which has in turn generated a number of seminars and events, including a two-day colloquium at the University of Bern and a special feature in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie*, as well as maintaining a certain level of examining, seminars, etc., and ongoing editing, e.g. on the *Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, which eventually came out in 2020. At the end of that year, colleagues put together a one-day event on the Philosophy of Christian Life to mark my retirement, which also required a response on my part. You yourself contributed to that, as did David Jasper, Simon May and Clare Carlisle.

In general, the period from 2013 onwards has been very productive and several periods of accumulated and externally funded leave have enabled me to bring to fruition things that had been a long time in preparation.

Philip Tonner

You retired in 2020. What have you been doing since?

George Pattison

For many years, I'd planned to use retirement to pull together a number of articles and lectures about Dostoevsky into a book. There'd been a certain amount of planning in these, so that it wouldn't be too difficult to work them into a fairly coherent collection. In the summer of 2019, I gave a paper at the International Dostoevsky Society conference in Boston and, as always, was hugely impressed by the scholarship of participants. Most, of course, are Slavic Studies or Russian Studies specialists, which means that they are able to bring a much greater knowledge of Dostoevsky's literary, intellectual, historical world to bear in interpreting his works than I am ever going to be able to do. I've done a lot of that kind of historical textual study in relation to Kierkegaard and worked closely with those responsible for producing the new edition of his works, so I'm aware of what that kind of work involves and I suddenly realised I wasn't going to be able to produce work at that level – as I'd have liked – in relation to Dostoevsky. Thinking about it on the plane home, the words 'Dostoevsky smiled . . .' came into my mind and I realised that what I needed to do was to write the book as a series of 'conversations with Dostoevsky' – and that's what's happened. A not very successful academic is going through a mid-life crisis and has taken to sitting up late over a glass or two of whisky, and, one evening, when he's been reading Dostoevsky's short story 'A Gentle Spirit', Dostoevsky himself appears and they talk through a series of issues that help the narrator to begin moving toward a more positive approach to life – not quite a conversion story, but something in that direction.

There were many other things going on, of course, and this didn't happen overnight. I then took the further decision to work on this as a blog, in a small way following Dostoevsky's own practice of serial publication, usually keeping a few episodes (I think once it was down to only about one) ahead of publishing. This exercise itself gave me some insight into the very different psychology of writing that way, compared with the contemporary method of completing a whole manuscript that then goes through several editorial revisions before going for publication. The book, *Conversations with Dostoevsky*, is

substantially an edited version of these – much edited, I should add, and with the addition of a series of commentaries in which I take a more conventionally academic approach to the issues discussed in the conversations, something that annoyed one reviewer, who hugely enjoyed the novel before being appalled by the way I reverted to my professorial persona in the commentaries.

My work on Dostoevsky also led to my being invited to the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, initially (in January 2023) for a one-off lecture in a series ‘Russian Religious Philosophy in the Age of Putin’ and then for a month-long fellowship in October 2023. Together with my host, Clemena Antonova, a Bulgarian art historian who contributed a chapter on icons to the *Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, I developed a proposal for a collection of essays on *The Russian Idea in Question*, examining how key elements of the Russian religious and intellectual tradition have been ‘weaponised’ in the service of Putin’s neo-imperialist project, starting with the Orthodox Church itself. We’ll probably talk more about this in a later conversation, but there are, of course, huge issues to be addressed when a writer or tradition is used in this way and we have to ask both what it is in their work that facilitates such use while also resisting the claims of, in this case, Putin to be the authentic interpreter of the tradition. There is a line from Dostoevsky and the nineteenth-century tradition to what is happening today, but there are also lines that head in other directions, and whichever line we choose will also involve cutting off other interpretative possibilities.

Much of this is quite painful, as it’s being done in the context of a brutal war that has also closed down the opportunities for free and open debate with Russian colleagues, all of which heightens awareness that words have consequences, sometimes terrible consequences, in the real world – something that many of the hyper-theoretical debates in post-modern philosophy and theology often forgot. It’s not just that what looks good in theory doesn’t work in practice but that what looks good in theory works only too well – but horribly – in practice.

Of course, being retired means that there are many things I no longer need to do, starting with academic administration. I have though continued to sit on a couple of advisory boards (for the

Kierkegaard Research Centre in Copenhagen, The Max Weber Centre in Erfurt, and, until 2024, a very active Routledge Series on Mystical Theology), and write peer reviews of book and project proposals as well as articles, and a steady stream of endorsements. There've also been several seminars and conferences, often now online, and some examining. Five years in, and I'm starting to let some of this go, not least as I feel peer reviewing should be being done by those who are professionally engaged in institutionalised research.

I'm currently working on a short novel about the life of St Adrian of May, a ninth-century Celtic saint who was martyred by Viking raiders on the Isle of May – although historians are doubtful as to whether he ever really existed. The working title is *The Apocalypse of Adrian* and it explores the experience of a man who is living through the collapse of a Christian civilisation. There's also a love story. I don't know yet if it'll work, but finding out is part of the enjoyment of any writing project.

Most recently, I've taken up the editorship of the journal *Theology*, which is both stimulating and challenging. The current intention is to do this for just a couple of years before passing the editorship on to someone in the next generation.

Further Reading¹

Hogg, Q. (1947) *The Case for Conservatism*. Penguin.

Huxley, A. (1964) *Island*. Penguin.

Küng, H. (1980) *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today*. Translated by E. Quinn. Doubleday.

Marcuse, H. (1964) *One-Dimensional Man*. Sphere Books.

Moltmann, J. (1974) *Man: Christian Anthropology in the Conflicts of the Present*. Fortress.

Pannikar, R. (1964) *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*. Darton, Longman and Todd.

¹ We will include references to Pattison's works at the end of subsequent less biographical conversations.

Sartre, J.-P. (1946) *Two Plays. The Flies/In Camera*. Translated by S. Gilbert. Hamish Hamilton.

Suzuki, D. T. (1960) *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, London.

Tillich, P. (1977) *The Socialist Decision*. Translated by F. Sherman. Harper and Row.

CONVERSATION 2:

Existence, nothingness and God

Summary: This conversation discusses some key terms in the philosophical and theological traditions, concepts such as ‘existence’, ‘nothingness’ and ‘contingency’, as well as some of the key thinkers – like Jean-Paul Sartre, and also the Kyoto School of Buddhist philosophy – who have contributed to how these terms are understood. Pattison goes on to explain some of the limitations of overly individualistic philosophies and explains the importance of our ‘being together’ in our ‘common lot’. It is how we deal with our situation as mortal human beings living in communities that is paramount. The varying senses of the word ‘existential’ and ‘existentialism’ are discussed by Pattison in connection to recent accounts of ‘eco-existentialism’. Birth, death and the limits of our human situation are brought into sharp focus, as is the function of religious traditions in offering symbolic resources and practices to us to negotiate these rites of passage. The existential challenge remains, in the end, and it is how life is lived by us together that matters for Pattison. It is from that perspective that Pattison will go on to discuss the topics raised in this conversation, such as the importance of technology in our lives, the histories and literatures of Christianity and Buddhism in relation to existential questioning, as well as the current situation of the Church of England, in the remainder of this conversation.

EXISTENCE

Philip Tonner

‘Existence’, despite appearances, is a very complex term. It has a number of resonances in both philosophy and theology. What do you understand by the term existence?

George Pattison

I began my philosophical education as an A-level student reading Sartre, who famously said, ‘existence precedes essence’. Like much in Sartre, it’s a great sound bite, but it’s not immediately self-evident what it means. I take it to mean something like ‘if you want to understand human beings it’s no good just trying to define them in terms of some general attributes that we’re all supposed to have or to share, and to say, “that’s what a human being is”. You have to look at how we actually are in our existence.’ Or, to use another of Sartre’s very well-known phrases, ‘we are the sum of our actions’. So it’s not what the textbook says about us that counts, but what we actually do in our lives.

Heidegger made a very similar point when he opted for the term *Dasein*, signifying the human being as the being who ‘is there’, meaning ‘there’ in the full concreteness of our existence. This is further explicated by another key term from *Being and Time*: *thrownness*, meaning that we, as it were, wake up in the world and find ourselves being in a particular way, having a particular body in a particular set of circumstances, in this family and not that family, speaking one language and not another. That’s our concrete contingency. I’ve heard one Heidegger scholar gloss ‘Dasein’ as ‘Here I am!?’ – Here-I-am-exclamation-mark-question-mark. And that is our ‘situation’. It’s astonishing that we’re here, but what does it mean, what’s it about? How we actually respond to this is what really defines us, rather than some abstract thing like the Aristotelian-Thomist definition of the human being as ‘man is a rational animal’, which doesn’t really tell us anything about who we are.

So far, so good, but there are two aspects of Sartre's account (and to a lesser extent Heidegger's) that I'd want to pull back from: it's very individualistic and it's very action-focused.

Sartre – at least, the existentialist Sartre – has us defining existence in terms of individual action, like Orestes defying Zeus and taking his destiny into his own hands (in *The Flies*). What I see as more important is how we 'do it together'. Heidegger did talk about *Mitsein*, being-together, though debate still carries on as to just how much sociality there is in Heidegger's model of the human being. For myself, I don't think Heidegger's account is incompatible with a more dialogical view but *Being and Time* is very much about our being as a being-toward-death, and for Heidegger this is absolutely individuating. As Kierkegaard before him put it, you can only talk about death 'under four eyes', that is, face to face with death, you and death alone. Versus Heidegger, I prefer the formulation of the much-missed American philosopher of religion David Kangas, who talks about our being together toward death. What matters is not just how heroic or clear-sighted or honest I am in relation to my mortality, but how we are to help each other in this situation that we are all in. This is our common lot, and it's how we go toward it together, how we live it *together* that matters, not just how *I* live it.

With regard to Sartre's focus on action – 'You are the sum of your actions' – it's what you do that counts. Compare the words of the Afro-American lullaby, 'Hush, little baby, don't you cry! You know your mama was born to die.' How we react to such insights, how we deal with what we have to endure and what we have to suffer matters just as much as what we do: we are enduring and suffering, as well as acting, beings. Often people who don't have much scope for action in their lives, nevertheless make a huge contribution to our being human together by the way in which they endure what we have to endure, as we all must endure 'our going hence' as well as 'our coming hither'.

Philip Tonner

You contributed a chapter – 'Existentialism and Religion' – to the *Bloomsbury Companion to Existentialism* (2011). In that volume, the

editors note that they wish to counteract the fashionable idea that 'existentialism' is outmoded. Can I ask, what is your perspective on that charge against existentialism?

George Pattison

The charge is certainly out there. In 1982 the *Guardian* obituary for Sartre basically said that he had outlived his influence and no longer spoke to the younger generation. Also back in the 1980s, I wrote a book that never got published but I did get a reader's report that said how troubled he or she (I suspect he) was by my mention of such names as Sartre, Heidegger and Nietzsche, and said, 'This is all stuff from thirty years ago. It's not relevant to us now'. That's clearly not the case today and there's no doubt that in the last decade or so there's been a huge resurgence of interest both in the classical existentialist authors, in studying them in the context of the Academy and also in applying them to our present situation. And of course that's a very different situation from, say, the generation of the 1940s and '50s. They were living through a time of great crisis. We're living through a time of great crisis too, although it's a very different crisis. One indicator of this is that today we have the expression 'eco-existentialism'. What does this mean?

Take the expression 'existential threat', often used in relation to the challenges of climate change, but also to the darker challenges now facing the international order. We hear the expression a lot now, but it's essentially a different sense of the word 'existential', since it refers to threats to the physical survival of a particular institution, nation, or even humanity as a whole. By way of contrast, the 'existentialist' question arises when we see that such challenges throw the very meaning of what we're doing and who we are into question. Not just: how do we survive this, but who do we want to be in the face of this? For this reason I understand 'eco-existentialism' as raising the question of how we are to be in relation to the environmental crisis we're facing, recognising that the human beings' relation to their environment isn't just a given, as it is for most (though maybe not all) other animals, plants and beings that can

only be as they're programmed to be in certain given environments. By way of contrast, we are much more detached from our immediate environments and can take differing attitudes toward them. Some people say 'drill, baby, drill' but others are saying, 'No, let's look at new ways of being human. Let's be a bit more inventive and creative and imaginative here'. Either way, it is, as Kierkegaard might have put it, a fork in the road calling for a radical either/or.

Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei is an example of this eco-existentialist turn but a number of younger scholars are engaging with existentialism in a variety of ways, including Clare Carlisle, Noreen Khawaja, Kate Kirkpatrick, Bartholomew Ryan, Steven Shakespeare, Judith Wolfe, just to mention some with whom I've been fortunate to be connected. Although they're not all 'existentialist' in a narrow sense, they've all developed their thinking through engagement with one or more of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre and de Beauvoir.

Of course, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Dostoevsky remain main points of reference in my own thought, to a certain extent also Berdyaev. Regarding Berdyaev, he's not been read much for a generation or so but he was hugely present and influential in the 1940s and '50s in Britain. There haven't been any new editions of his works for years and years, but there are younger scholars now in Europe, Russia, America, as well, working on his thought. I was recently asked to contribute to a collection of essays about Berdyaev being edited by a young scholar in Mexico. This resurgence of existentialism is a phenomenon, and it offers both a resource for thinking through our own issues and to do our own kind of existentialism in our own day.

Philip Tonner

Although 'existential' concerns are nothing new in philosophy and religious thinking – you yourself note that some commentators would see the story of existentialism to be already unfolding in the Book of Job – the term 'existentialism' is a fairly new one, coined as it was by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel. Marcel, and that other Catholic existentialist thinker, Miguel de Unamuno, are

often overlooked in contemporary accounts of existentialism. Your *Anxious Angels* is an exception. And you go further. There you note that the 'distinctively Russian visions of Berdyaev and Shestov show that religious existentialism was never a narrowly Protestant (and still less a narrowly German) phenomenon. Roman Catholicism also produced several outstanding thinkers who could be described as existentialist, despite the hostility of the official hierarchy to the spirit of existentialism' (Pattison, 1999, p. 194). Nor were existential themes restricted to European thinkers. There were 'strong existentialist elements in the movement of Japanese Buddhist philosophy known as the Kyoto School' (Pattison, 2011, p. 117). Religious thinkers who explored existential themes – whether they be included in the category of 'religious existentialism' or not – seemed to have shared concerns that exceeded their religious traditions. Can you tell me about some of these concerns and about what that excess might tell us (if anything) about religious experience and religious traditions?

George Pattison

Let's go back a step. In the post-war era, when existentialism first became fashionable, a lot of people commented along the lines of 'Well, Kierkegaard is a classically individualistic Protestant thinker, whose mind and outlook is shaped by a particular kind of Lutheran spirituality', and that cast a long shadow. Sartre too was from a Protestant family and was a cousin of the great New Testament scholar and missionary doctor Albert Schweitzer, so one could argue for a Protestant connection, but I think that would be misleading and doesn't really explain anything anyway. As you mentioned, Unamuno was raising existential questions in a very different cultural context, likewise Dostoevsky. Existential thinking is not just the philosophical transcription of any one religious tradition, since the questions it addresses are fundamental human questions that aren't monopolised by any tradition.

David Swenson, who was one of Kierkegaard's first translators into English, entitled one of his translations of Kierkegaard's upbuilding

discourses *Crucial Situations in Life*, which isn't a phrase you'd find in Kierkegaard himself but it does quite a good job of identifying what's going on in these texts, namely, that Kierkegaard is writing about issues that come up in life, in existence, and that are not accounted for in any catechism. Karl Jaspers, one of the philosophical initiators of modern existential philosophy, talked in a similar vein about 'limit situations' in which we run up against the limits of our powers and understanding as especially revelatory of who we are. This anticipates Heidegger's account of 'running towards death', since death would seem to be the ultimate limit situation where we really are faced with the question 'What is it to be? What is it not to be?' But death isn't the only one. One could expand that to talk about our birth, as Heidegger's student Hannah Arendt did when she spoke of our natality. That is also a limit. It's beyond our control. It's our being thrown into the world in a certain way. The same goes for falling in love, which often explodes upon us in ways that have nothing to do with what we'd planned or expected, as numerous love songs, good and bad, have explored.

In the past, religious rites of passage would have provided ways of dealing with such situations but only a minority of people today actually turn to the Church or to another religious institution to provide symbolic help through these crucial situations in life. And even if one remains within the traditional religious structures as a practising Christian (or Hindu, or Muslim, etc.), our general feeling for what it is to be human today means that we don't simply take what's prescribed and internalise it in a direct way. It has to be negotiated at a personal level, so that while the church, or some other institution, offers a set of symbols or practices, it's how we live it that matters. The institutional symbols don't do away with the existential challenge and I think one can't ultimately get away from that. We no longer believe in or live through our rites of passage in the way that, let's say, an unlettered peasant in the eighteenth century, who entirely believed what the parson or the priest said, would have done. Actually, in real life, I often think that the unlettered peasant is a fiction of the romantic imagination, because I'm sure many of them had their own views as to what was really going on.

Philip Tonner

The challenge of the modern world isn't only at the level of ideas, though. It's also the case that the whole material and technical configuration has massively influenced how we understand ourselves and you were an early commentator in academic theology (in the early 2000s) to see that technology had become a 'field of ultimate and thus of religious concern' (Pattison, 2005, p. 4). Where do you think we are now with respect to theological and philosophical questioning relating to technology?

George Pattison

First of all, I should say that I'm part of the second, or even third wave of theological thinking about technology, and it's interesting that it was already a major theme for a number of significant thinkers in the interwar period. Paul Tillich, Berdyaev, the Catholic theologian Romano Guardini and, of course, Teilhard de Chardin are all significant theological figures who thought a lot about technology, prompted very much by the First World War, the first great technowar, which the Italian Futurist Marinetti greeted with enthusiasm as the 'metallisation' of the human body and the transformation of the human into a machine. But many other people, including each of those theological figures, thought this was a terrifying prospect, at least in that format (Teilhard had his own version of what we now call transhumanism). Of course, this was also time for the advent of radio, television and other mass communication systems that look very outdated now, but which generated the shock of the new at the time and were in some contexts associated with the rise of totalitarianism.

The particular configuration of the question concerning technology is always changing. In the '90s I gave a sixth-form assembly talking about Heidegger's critique of technology and in the discussion one of the girls said, 'but there wasn't any technology' when he was alive. And, for many people, we're in a situation now in which 'technology' equals IT. When I wrote that book in the early 2000s

(Pattison, 2005), that was already there, but IT technologies have expanded exponentially since then to the extent that, some thinkers would say, we can no longer talk about an 'online' and 'offline' life, that we're basically living our lives online all the time – 'onlife' as one commentator has put it.

I was at one point working on a follow-up book about trans-humanism, which, as in the remark I quoted from Marinetti, has been around for a while as an idea. But of course, with each new great leap forward in technology such transformations become more and more plausible. Whether it becomes more and more desirable is a whole other matter. One of the reasons why I stopped working on that was simply that I found so much of the transhumanist literature begged so many questions about what matters in human life that it was very difficult to get to grips with. In a way, I'm a bit ashamed to say that because this debate is setting the running in a lot of areas of our lives and we should be engaging with it. But it wasn't for me at that point.

There are many fronts here. There is, of course, the influence of social media, very much in the news at this time, with Facebook in America removing its fact-checking controls, as well as the gathering debate about AI. What are these media actually doing to our heads, to our lives, to the way we live? These are massive questions. And I do suppose that my reaction is not dissimilar to that of the medieval monastic movement: sometimes there are situations where you just have to step back. Yet here we are talking on Zoom, and we all know how useful and valuable these technologies can be as tools. But there's a tipping point and this is both an individual and a collective issue. At the individual level, for example, parents are having to work out how to regulate their children's use of mobile phones, or laptops, or whatever, and say, 'Come on, put that down; time to go for a walk in the woods. Time to go for a swim'. It's even more challenging collectively because obviously, we need these technologies but, as current debates about Facebook and X are showing, these are very problematic. More broadly, we've dug ourselves into an environmental hole through our technology, although paradoxically, it's only technology that can help us to get out – albeit probably different technologies, used differently.

In his critique of technology, Heidegger spoke of the power of technology to dazzle and allure, and we get fascinated and overawed

and drawn in by it and lose our deliberation and our conscious control, and that's what we need to regain, on the macro scale and on the individual levels.

NOTHINGNESS

Philip Tonner

Returning to existentialism, an early influence on you was Jean-Paul Sartre (see Appendix A). He is, of course, famous for having produced a book with 'nothingness' in the title (*Being and Nothingness*, 1943). What did you learn from Sartre?

George Pattison

A lot. As I've mentioned, I first encountered Sartre when doing A-level French with *The Flies* as one of our set texts. In this play, based on the Greek *Oresteia*, Orestes speaks of freedom crashing down on him like a lightning bolt, which spoke to my seventeen-year-old self on the brink of venturing out into the world, and taking my freedom into my own hands. I now see that as a much too heroic view that ignores the whole tragic dimension of Orestes' situation, where Heidegger's account of thrownness serves us better. Orestes is who he is because of this terrible situation he's been thrown into: his mother has murdered his father because he murdered their daughter because this was what the gods demanded in order to allow the Greek fleet to sail against Troy. Resolving such situations requires more than individual self-assertion.

Someone coined the phrase 'entangled freedom' but, at least in his plays, Sartre writes almost as if you can cut through all the tangles with a single act of decision. That, I think, is too simple and we are much more interrelated with one another than Sartre seems to allow. Furthermore, Sartre saw human relations as inevitably antagonistic. The other person is always someone who is trying to diminish or

obstruct or limit my freedom, whether they're consciously wanting to or not. On this picture my self-assertion as a free individual subject is always pushing back against some other person. There are then only two options, either sadistic or masochistic relationships. Essentially, it seems to me that, in reality, human relationships can be very different from that. Kate Kirkpatrick, in her book about Sartre, and even more in her thesis, argued that Sartre's view of the world is basically the Augustinian view of the fallen world, but without the possibility of redemption. That rings true. This view of human beings as mutually devouring was indeed how Augustine regarded the City of Man: the war of all against all. But of course, Augustine, and Christian theology in general as well as some secular philosophers would say, 'we all understand why you're saying that, and we all have to reckon with that, but that's not all there is to human life'.

I touched on this a while ago when saying how even if we're living our lives within religious institutions, we have to interpret them. We have to take responsibility for how we live them out. For example, the Christian tradition talks about imitating Christ. Well, obviously, we can't do that directly, because our cultural circumstances are so different from his. Some heroic individuals in the Middle Ages did try to do this to the point of doing things like going without food and water for forty days and nights or performing horrific things to their bodies. But that is being too literalistic and it isn't obvious what imitating Christ means in a society like ours and we have to work out for ourselves what this means.

Kierkegaard understood this when he spoke about the martyrdom that he suffered as a 'martyrdom of laughter', namely, being made fun of in a satirical magazine. Obviously, that's not the same as being stoned to death. But, as we know from social media, that kind of mockery, in words and images, can drive people to suicide. This is a serious thing. It's not the arena, there are no literal wild beasts, but it can be a horrific experience for those like Kierkegaard who go against the crowd. This, by the way, is another important feature of our contemporary social media environment and the emergence of what has been called 'the electronic mob', which gets out of control when, as with X and now with Facebook, there is no regulation of content. This is actually playing to the 'id' in us, that every

kind of prejudice and violent and hostile and demeaning thought we have about human beings is to be given equal worth and airing in public discussion, and in a sense, maybe the Roman arena is a good image for that, even if no blood is actually shed.

It's a question of working things out for ourselves and although this involves more than the simplistic act of freedom which Sartre portrays in *The Flies* it hinges on our free engagement with it.

Philip Tonner

Another key figure in existentialism is Dostoevsky, and one of the things that struck me when reading your *Conversations with Dostoevsky* (2024) was your discussion of guilt, also another existentialist theme. What is at stake in guilt for Dostoevsky, for you?

George Pattison

This is an important theme in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and it's an idea that first comes to expression when the elder Zosima is talking about his young brother, Markel, who's dying of consumption as a teenager, and who, like a lot of Russian teenagers of the time, split with religion and defied the Church but then, in the last week of his life, comes to a new kind of faith. The key to this, he says, is, 'I am guilty of everything. We are all guilty of everything before everyone, and I most of all', to which his mother says, 'Don't be so foolish. You haven't robbed anyone. You haven't murdered anyone. What have you done?' So what is he driving at?

When my Dostoevsky book was reviewed in the *Church Times*, the late Bishop Richard Harries, whom I greatly respected, objected to this emphasis on guilt. He wanted something more like 'responsibility'. We had an interesting correspondence about that afterwards, and I understand his reasons. Rowan Williams too, in his Dostoevsky book, veers away from using 'guilt', and I understand why he does so because both Catholicism and Protestantism have generated extremely unhelpful guilt cultures, each in their distinctive way. But what

Dostoevsky is talking about is what the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber called ontological guilt, the 'guilt of existence'. Well, you might say, that still sounds pretty bad. But I think what he's driving at is that we all owe our lives to another. As you'll know, the version of the Lord's Prayer used in the Church of Scotland doesn't say, 'Forgive us our trespasses', or 'Forgive us our sins', but 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors'. And I think one of the things that Dostoevsky is driving at is that we don't own our lives, we owe our lives. Obviously, we owe them to our parents, but also we owe them to those who have cared for us, who have educated us, to those who help keep us in existence through looking after us physically, and who help keep us psychologically in existence through engaging with us and encouraging us, and being there with us. We are part of this network in which we owe our lives to others. My life is not just something, like an instrument that I take into my hand, and then use as I wish. It's something I've received, and I think that is what Dostoevsky is wanting us to see there, which then connects with other aspects of the teachings of the elder Zosima, like his insistence on everything being connected, and how we never know the ultimate consequences of our actions. The small act you do may have enormous repercussions elsewhere. It's almost as if he's anticipating chaos theory, that one small act of kindness, or equally one small act of unkindness, can have massive consequences in another person's life that we maybe never see or are never even aware of, but are nonetheless part of our shared reality.

I want to hold on to guilt, then, because if I just say that I'm *responsible* for everything, this is still a bit too proactive. I'm certainly not against taking responsibility, but 'taking responsibility' risks over-emphasising the agency and not the thrownness, the situatedness of human life, not the entanglement of our freedom. I can make myself responsible for something. But I think part of what Dostoevsky is talking about is that we don't *make* ourselves responsible, we find ourselves being responsible, having to deal with stuff that we didn't choose.

Philip Tonner

Alongside guilt, existentialism also frequently invokes nothingness and this is something you address in a number of places. In *Agnosis*

(1997) and again in *God and Being* (2011) you do so in connection to Buddhism, which was sometimes characterised as a 'nihilistic' religion by Western commentators in the nineteenth century, because of their views of nirvana as a state of nothingness. In the twentieth century, these ideas were brought into dialogue with existential philosophy through the work of Nishida Kitarō and the Kyoto School, particularly Nishitani Keiji, who engaged with Sartrean existentialism. Can you explain some of the ways in which these two traditions interacted? What did you draw from your engagement with this dialogue?

George Pattison

Nothingness for Sartre is deeply identified with human existence: we are the site of an upsurge of nothingness in the midst of being in itself and every act of human consciousness is an annihilation of the world around us. A lot of people see that as very counterintuitive but Sartre is pointing out that in the very moment in which I represent the world to myself or when I act within it, then the world is no longer simply what it was. I've changed it just by my existence, by existing 'for myself'. On the human side, then, we have nothingness or being-for-itself, while the world out there, being-in-itself, is essentially alien to human being. It's a kind of being that Sartre describes as viscose and sticky and resistant to action. Berdyaev similarly talked about 'congealed being', as if the world is a kind of heavy solid, whereas we're this light, airy upsurge of freedom. For Buddhism, however, nothingness is on both sides of the self/world divide. The world is just as imbued with nothingness as is the human self and this nothingness that's found on both sides of this divide is, in fact, what unites them. There's a Zen saying, 'great emptiness, great compassion'. There is literally nothing between us. There is no ontological barrier to us becoming fully empathetic, either to other people, or to any other sentient beings. I think that idea would be anathema to Sartre, but it's fairly fundamental to Buddhism, where it's not a question of 'human beings versus the world' but of an interplay between them.

In this perspective, existence is not just human existence asserting itself over against the world or against other human beings but is a co-coming about of human beings with each other and with their world. I have to admit that I ultimately find that Buddhist account more persuasive than Sartre's, though, as I've said, I've found Sartre very helpful in conscientising myself about the ineluctability of the freedom of our actions. Just think about something as simple as the practice of mindfulness in the way in which we in the West have adopted that from Buddhism. Becoming mindful means just focusing on what's there, in this present moment, and stopping our ego from obstructing the flow of life through us, just letting it happen, as it were. But then, there's the thing, we're *letting it* happen. Mindfulness doesn't happen just like that: there is a human engagement in being mindful. It is a practice. It, too, involves our doing and our agency. But in this case, versus Sartrean agency, it is agency directed to becoming aware of the presence to us and within us of what is prior to or beyond our subjective orbit. I should add that Heidegger's model was always more nuanced than Sartre's and he always insisted that Dasein's way of being was being-in-the-world; that is to say, we are never and can never be who we are without some relation to the world. Simone de Beauvoir, incidentally, said similar things, though more ethically oriented than Heidegger.

GOD

Philip Tonner

You say that you find 'nothingness' in Buddhism persuasive. How do you reconcile that view with the traditional Christian notion that God is being?

George Pattison

Let me start by going back a step. Although Catholic theology has long accepted the Aristotelian view of the human subject as an

individual substance having a rational essence, there's a long line of thinkers within Christianity itself that sees the human being as essentially nothing. In Augustine, for example, the fact that we, like all creatures, are made '*ex nihilo*', from nothing, continues to qualify the kind of beings that we are, not least with regard to our fallibility and lack of self-subsistence. This theme would be even more emphasised in the Rhineland and Low Country mysticism of the Middle Ages and in Luther, as well, later, in Pascal, Fénelon and many others. Heidegger quoted the now obscure Catholic preacher Abraham à Sancta Clara who spoke of the human being as a 'six foot nothing'. Fénelon even developed an argument for the existence of God from the nothingness of the human being and in this respect Sartre is actually the inheritor of a long line of Christian thinking. But, as you imply, it's a very different matter to start speaking of God as nothing.

Literally, of course, God is 'no thing', that is to say, God is not an individual entity like a dog or a tree or a mountain or even a galaxy. This is similar to the point that Paul Tillich made when he said that God doesn't exist because God is being itself. That, however, seems to just underline your point. Yet even the traditions that insist on being itself as the best name for God also acknowledge that we cannot know what God is in Godself. Even though it is claimed that there is an analogy between divine and human being, analogy always involves dissimilarity as well as similarity. Kierkegaard could speak of an infinite qualitative difference between God and human beings and, certainly, whatever it is for God to be God is something very different from what it is for a creature to be a creature. One could then say that God's way of being is not like that of any being we know. As Plato hinted, this is, in effect, to say that God is beyond being. However, this can still be understood as saying simply that God *is* in such an exceptional, supreme and unique way, that divine being is beyond compare with any other kind of being.

Another way of putting this is to say that the divine being is immeasurable: there is no standard measure we can bring to gauge such being. In other words, the divine being has an abyssal quality. That is to say that against the conventional way of speaking of God as the ground of beings, God is actually a kind of un-ground or non-ground – the '*Ungrund*' that the German mystic Jacob Boehme

spoke of, the groundless ground from which all beings arise in an infinite and eternal process of production.

At this point it can be as spiritually appropriate to speak of God as 'nothing' as to speak of God as 'being' since the divine being exceeds all the categories we use to understand beings. In either case, however, we are brought before the ultimate mystery of the emergence of beings (that is, of the world and of ourselves as beings within the world), a mystery to which we can only respond in the first instance in silence, wonder and awe (the last a much overused word now, of course, but not entirely devalued). And this, at least, can be common ground for Christians, Buddhists, and indeed anyone who is moved by the mystery of our being here.

Philip Tonner

Along with the view of God as being, is the view that human beings receive their being from God. We are finite dependent beings; God is the very act of being itself, and we exist in so far as we participate in that being. Do you find anything persuasive in this kind of approach?

George Pattison

Yes, this is akin to Fénelon's argument for the existence of God from the nothingness of human beings. In this argument, Fénelon follows Descartes' method of doubt, but where this leads Descartes to the conclusion that 'I think therefore I am' Fénelon finds no immediate assurance of existence in the fact of self-consciousness since this self-consciousness may have no more substance than a dream. Assurance of existence can only come to us from outside, from a being that is, as you say, the act of being itself. But while Fénelon's argument might seem to denigrate human being, it actually does the opposite since it inscribes a relation to the divine being into our basic sense of existence: an infinity of being that opens up at the very heart of our finite being.

That being said, I think it important to emphasise that we must get away from thinking of God as some kind of being external to ourselves and the world, existing on the other side of a line that divides divine and human being, like a frontier that divides one country from another. Here Boehme's model of the divine life as itself rising out of the abyssal non-ground is suggestive: God is not only 'out there' but God is – to borrow another much-used phrase – 'in, with, and under' our lives in the world, encompassing our life, as Karl Jaspers put it, and in doing so drawing us onward, as much into the future as turning us back to the past. Key theological terms such as remembrance and hope remind us that time is very much at issue here, our time, cosmic time, divine time.

When the encompassing nature of the divine being is understood, then acknowledging our nothingness before God is not a matter of slavish prostration but of giving ourselves to the flow of life itself and experiencing the abundance of life that the gospel spoke about.

Philip Tonner

Might there be another approach to these issues, perhaps that of negative theology?

George Pattison

Is that another approach? There is, after all, an element of negative theology in just about every version of mainstream Christian thought. But yes. Dionysius the Areopagite, a seminal figure in negative theology, expressly said that God (he said 'It') is neither being nor non-being, indicating that no human words are ever going to be adequate to speaking of God and everything we say of God has to be negated if it is to serve its purpose.

Back in the 1990s there was an important debate sparked by Derrida's comment that Dionysius was not denying God's being but saying that it is so super-essentially real – that God has, as it were, so much being – that words fail. The counter-argument was that

Dionysius – and Christian theology following Dionysius—really did break with ontology and that God can be understood – like the idea of the Good in Plato’s *Republic* – as ‘beyond being’.

For me, the key thing here can be focused in the question as to whether it is love or being that is ultimately the best name for God. Christian theology – not to mention hymns, prayers, and the literature of the religious life – has used both. As in many situations, there are times when the two can cohabit easily enough but there are also moments in which we are brought before a choice: could we still love God even if God didn’t exist and, just as importantly, could we seek to imitate the divine love in our ever-failing, ever-fumbling way? Ultimately, I think, it’s more important, more essential to affirm the love of God than the being of God and love is, in some sense, before and beyond being.

Philip Tonner

Or, might you find something in Hegel – another point of reference for you – in his view that being and nothing are essentially the same? Or does this take us down a different path?

George Pattison

Hegel addresses the identity of being and nothingness in the opening section of his logic where he seems to be commenting on what is involved in any act of predication. In order to say what something is, we also have to be able to say what it is not. A mammal is not a fish, a painting is not a photograph, I am not you. Definition, in this perspective, is a never-ending process of stating what something is and what it isn’t that enables an ever more concrete, ever more adequate understanding of just what is being talked about. Putting this another way, we can say that an entity only appears as what it is in relation to what it is not. That is also to say that the world and each entity within the world only appears to us in and through its relation to us, meaning that we never fully know what it

is in itself apart from its relation to us and we, of course, are not the entity that we are considering so that, in Hegel's sense, the object is negated by being taken up into human consciousness – even though, through this negation, it is then reconstituted as knowledge, being known for what it is. But Hegel doesn't limit this pattern to logic and epistemology – he sees it in the development of the world itself, a development that is powered by a constant process of negation and recuperation.

He was inspired somewhat by Jacob Boehme, whom he called the first German philosopher, so we can see something of Boehme's mystical vision in Hegel's system, though it is a highly rationalised version of Boehme and, obviously, incorporates many other elements as well. But, yes, for Hegel too God, world and humanity live in a process of continual emergence, negation and transformation.

Philip Tonner

Hegel is, of course, seen by many as essentially demythologising the idea of God and his thought was certainly an impetus to a new wave of radical atheisms. In your article 'Existentialism and Religion' (2011) you note that there are different kinds of atheism, from the Sartrean form to the form held by 'positivists or Neo-Darwinians'. In your *The End of Theology and the Task of Thinking about God* (1998) you point out how Feuerbach (who had been strongly influenced by Hegel) helped to create the climate in which the so-called 'masters of suspicion' (Nietzsche, Marx and Freud) worked and thought, and how those conditions in turn helped to generate the ideology of our own age. Can you say something about the varieties of atheism and how you might respond to them?

George Pattison

Because of the kind of milieu in which I grew up I don't think I've ever really felt that there's this great kind of split between science and religion that many experience. When I was about twelve my

overwhelming enthusiasm was evolution, and I bought and read as many books on the subject as I could, particularly about human evolution. I've never read or seen anything since to make me think either that that isn't broadly true, though obviously I know that there is constant fine tuning and shifting in the theories as to how evolution works, when human evolution happened, and all that kind of stuff. And I've never felt that this is a fundamental problem for Christianity. And yet the idea that there is this split between science and religion has pervaded our society. At Christ Church in the early 2000s I was sitting next to a young postdoc at one of the college dinners. As one does, I politely said, 'so what's your research about?' and she became quite flustered. She knew I was a theologian and it turned out that her research was about hagfish, which are apparently half-way between being vertebrates and invertebrates, and she was researching the evolutionary mechanisms that, so to speak, turn invertebrates into vertebrates. Why she was embarrassed was because she didn't want to offend 'someone like me', because her assumption was that someone who was a believer would necessarily be offended by evolution. I was astonished at several different levels. I grew up in Cambridge in the 1960s and I don't think anyone at that time and place would have assumed that any theology professor would be opposed to evolution, but somehow this essentially American debate has culturally stamped itself on our own society in a very damaging way.

But at the same time, if I think of myself in the 1970s, the protest atheism of Ivan Karamazov, of Camus, and (some say) the Book of Job, moved me very powerfully, and it still does. There's a very fruitful exchange between the Marxist philosopher, Ernst Bloch, and the Lutheran theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, in Tübingen in the 1970s. Bloch said that 'Only an atheist can be a good Christian', to which Moltmann retorted that 'Only a Christian can be a good atheist'. In other words, both atheists and Christians should be outdoing each other in casting down the idols and doing away with all the gods who are not gods – remember that the early Christians themselves were charged by the Romans for atheism because they didn't believe in the gods. If we're not impassioned and angry with God, about the Holocaust, Gaza, child-abuse, then, what sort of human beings are

we? Clearly if our idea of God is some kind of benign, rather soft, mild, liberal father who's presiding over all this, and says, 'Well, you know, it'll all be all right in the end, somehow' – I mean, that just doesn't do it.

For me, one of the powerful things about Dostoevsky is that he has a series of different atheistic characters and really gets inside their minds. Take someone like Ivan Karamazov, who is cited by Sartre and Camus as one of the great voices of protest atheism, yet Dostoevsky, who created him, goes on to argue this isn't the final word. Ivan Karamazov is answered by the Elder Zosima, and his faith that all things are connected, all things are flowing, and that the only hell is not being able to love. Dostoevsky is ultimately opposing atheism, but he's taking it very seriously and he lets it have its voice.

Philip Tonner

Given the challenges of the modern world to the idea of God and the rise of atheism, one could start to wonder how we might even begin to talk about God. In *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking about God* (1998) you develop the idea of a philosophical theology of dialogue that you describe as a 'post-metaphysical, dialogical model of thinking about God' (Pattison, 1998, p. 57). You note that 'dialogue approaches the question of God only with regard to the meaning of God in and for the personal life' (Pattison, 1998, p. 53). Can you explain what you mean by dialogue here? And can you explain what you mean by saying that the *meaning* of God is approached in personal life?

George Pattison

Several times we've touched on my basic, very anti-individualistic view of human life. Donne's 'no man is an island' is, I think, absolutely foundational to the way I experience and think about the world, inclusive of religion. One way of approaching this is by thinking about

language and in recent years I've had my own kind of 'linguistic turn'. Throughout the 1970s and even at the time when I wrote my book about art, much philosophy of religion, certainly in Great Britain, was focusing on the questions of religious language, and what kind of language religious language is. At that time, I found it all a bit much and that sometimes we need to stop talking and just look, and that the visual aspect of the world gives us things that language cannot give us. And I think there's a truth in that.

But in more recent years I've given much more of a fundamental role to Aristotle's insight that the human being is the 'speaking animal', which, as Heidegger glosses it, is that the human being is the being having Logos. Heidegger has this wonderful phrase, 'language speaks' and urges that we must learn to listen to language. This is certainly a saying that's worth reflecting on, because the English language, for example, wasn't invented in order for me to talk about my particular experiences, my particular feelings. It gives me certain possibilities of talking about myself, my feelings, my world, at the same time as it shuts down others, which you soon become aware of if you learn other languages. You say different things. You think differently. Of course, one can translate between languages, but as we all know some things get lost in translation. Language is not something abstract but it's in the concrete situation of one person speaking with another, or maybe, as often happens, three or four people speaking with each other, that language actually takes shape. In other words, it's not just language that's, as it were, manifesting itself through me like light through a lens, but how we interactively speak with one another is itself shaping language. So, we both inherit language and also transform language by speaking it as the concrete persons that we are, with all the commitments that we bring to every conversation.

The Russian linguists of the interwar period made a lot of von Humboldt's distinction between the form and energy of language, the form being the grammatical structures of language that make it possible while the energy, the *energeia* or actuality of language, is in its being spoken, meaning that it's in the concrete reality of lived dialogue that language really becomes language, and that we really become the beings having language. We are who we are in

our words. Once upon a time in the City of London people would operate on the principle that 'my word is my bond', reflecting a basic kind of social trust language enables us to enact. This is why the devaluation of truth and trust in public life are both interconnected and potentially fatal for our being together. And today, particularly in the area of spirituality, there's a kind of downplaying of language, saying, 'Well, no, you have to listen to your feelings, and that's who you really are'. But who you really are only becomes real, only becomes actualised in our speaking.

Let's go back to what Swenson called 'crucial situations in life'. Imagine you're in a situation in which an emergency team has been summoned. What's the first thing they ask? It's your name and speaking to the patient or victim by name is central to keeping them alive, sometimes literally. Similarly, a witness in court has to give their name and give their testimony in words. I don't know if it's actual police practice, but it sometimes happens in TV crime shows that the suspect doesn't say anything but just nods, at which the interviewing officer will say 'for the record, the suspect is nodding his head'. Words and the record of words reveal the reality of the situation. Of course, this is sometimes very challenging for us: someone says, 'But you said' and you think, 'Did I say that? I did say that! Oh gosh! I really did say that'.

I haven't been mentioning God or theology for a while, but all this applies eminently to the God-relationship. What we say about God, what we say about God to one another, what we say about God to our children, and what we say about God in our worship, defines who God is. John's Gospel says, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word became flesh'. People often talk about God becoming vulnerable, humbling Himself in the Incarnation and that's equally true of God as Word, that God puts God's own reality into this very simultaneously powerful and fragile dynamic event that we're calling language.

Philip Tonner

Again, in this work, you say that 'God is not a kind of pre- or sub-conscious stratum of my present consciousness. God is one whom

I hope to address and be addressed by, to know as I am known – but not yet’ (Pattison, 1998, p. 54 n10). What did you mean by this?

George Pattison

In what I was saying before, I was talking about human beings talking about God, and how what we say defines, at least for our generation or for our circle, what God means. Certainly, at the heart of Christian prayer, and some other forms of prayer as well, there is the desire to be in communication with God. But it’s not just a matter of us ‘saying our prayers’ and directing our words to God. It’s also a matter of listening. Christian life is understood as a calling to devotion. One is called to faith and, as every first-year theology student knows, the word ‘church’, ‘ecclesia’ means ‘called out’. But we have to listen if we’re to find out what we’re being called to.

Obviously (I hope), I don’t fantasise that I speak to God in the same way that I speak to you, or that God calls on me to speak in the way that you’ll call on me to speak through your questions. How God is Word for us requires interpretation. Old Testament prophets could see an almond branch in blossom as a word from God. The possibilities are literally endless, meaning that it’s a question of discernment and interpretation. But I think it is basic to the Christian view of life that ultimately, it’s not just ‘being’ that is at issue, but ‘personal being’, and what that means is something we are very far from finding out. Very often part of the problem with traditional Christianity is that it’s as if we have been given this ‘thing’, this historic deposit of faith. We know what it is. The problem is, just how do we communicate it to the world? We’ve got it. How do we get it out there? Unfortunately, I think that this is completely back to front. It’s not just that God spoke once to our fathers in the past, as many hymns and prayers tell us, but that God is actually speaking, calling to us from the future, which, of course, is where none of us have been, and none of us know what that means: that this call is toward the future, for the future, from the future. That faith is being lived, which I think is part of what Moltmann meant with his theology of hope. And again, the argument with atheism is not just about what are the facts of the case, you know, as if we ought to look

around now and say 'Can you see God anywhere? Can you find God?' The question is rather, 'What are we being called to in experiencing our lives as a call from God?' In a sense it's Kant's question as to what we can hope for.

Philip Tonner

In *God and Being* (2011) you argue that it is important to see room for possibility in 'being'. If the divine is identified by the 'name' being, and if that 'being' has the inflection of possibility then, you suggest, God 'may be' (to borrow Richard Kearney's expression) and it may be possible for us to retrieve Christian ontology in its dynamic and world-affirming registers. For my last question in this conversation, can I ask you to explain and expand on this thesis?

George Pattison

If we go back to Thomas, who set the parameters for the mainstream discussion of being in Western Christianity, inclusive of modern theology (in which Neo-Thomism has been a major galvanising force), God is being itself, a formula used also by the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. In Aristotelian terminology, God is pure act, being fully actualised in being all that it could possibly be. Only God is all that God could possibly be, pure act. Everything else is a kind of mixture of potentiality and actuality. The example I used to use in teaching was the oak tree: an acorn is potentially an oak tree. It may actually become an oak tree. But it may not. It may be trampled underfoot, it may be eaten by pigs; all sorts of things might happen to it. But even if the acorn succeeds in becoming an oak tree, even if it becomes a magnificent four-hundred-year-old oak in a royal park, even then it's not the full actualisation of all an oak tree could be, because there might be a taller oak tree or a broader oak tree out there somewhere, it might be missing a few branches, and then there are many different varieties of oak trees and no one tree can be the full actualisation of oak-ness. Even the fullest example of any finite

creature is never going to be the total actuality that God is, and at least for Thomas, or at least for some interpreters of Thomas, God's pure act is almost like a kind of magnet drawing beings from their potentiality toward the maximum actualisation that they are capable of achieving as the particular creature that they are.

But is this approach beyond question? Of course not, not even in Catholic theology. In the sixteenth century a theologian called Luis de Molina came up with a new approach. For Thomas, because God is *actus purus*, God knows everything according to its actuality. God knows the oak tree according to its absolute maximum possible actualisation. This is what God knows in knowing the oak as an oak, and it's because he knows it like that, that it gets pulled toward this actualisation. But for Thomas, God doesn't know contingent future possibilities. In other words, if I'm presented with a choice such as 'Shall I speak with Philip Tonner or not?' and decide to do it, God knew all along that I would. What God doesn't know is what would have happened if I hadn't chosen as I did because that's entirely contingent on my choices. Molina thought that this needed to be rethought and argued that God *can* know future contingencies, that is, he not only knows what it is that I will actually do in becoming the actual human person that I am, but also all the other things that would have happened if, say, I'd decided not to speak with Philip Tonner. Or if I'd been run over at age five or if I'd become a terrorist. God would not only know all these things but also all of the possible consequences that come from all of these different scenarios, which, of course, makes God have to know about a great deal more than just what is actual, because he also has to know all these other conditionals. At the same time, for Molina, this was a way of making a space for human freedom, because it's still my choice as to what I do in any given situation. God's knowing doesn't determine the outcome in the same way as on the classic Thomist model. In this way, probabilism reconciles the need for God's omniscience with scope for human freedom, because God knows all the possibles as well.

This is one of the points of entry of existentialism into theology, that it is the way in which we live our possibilities that counts, not just our conformity with the ideal model of what it is to be a human being. We are discovering other things through our possibilities that,

on a certain model of theology, is not an allowable procedure, because it would trespass on the divine prerogative of knowing all final outcomes. I think Molina, already in the early modern period, shows that there are other ways of thinking about this that allow both for God to be God but also for human beings to be as they are, developing themselves, making themselves, understanding themselves through the shared event of dialogue about what it is that really matters in our lives, what it is we really need to be thinking about. As Heidegger asked, 'what calls for thinking?'

Philip Tonner

And that is possibility. That's the possibility you're talking about?

George Pattison

Yes. In that sense dialogue is not about discovering facts, though facts can be important too. I'm certainly not against facts: but working out what is at issue is a different task and, I'd say, a more important one. Husserl defined the procedure of phenomenology as *zu den Sachen selbst*, which is sometimes translated as 'to the things themselves'. I like to translate that loosely as 'to the matter at issue'. What is it really that we need to be talking about? Shestov, whom you've mentioned, spoke about the task of philosophy as being to discover *to timiōtaton*, meaning that which is most to be honoured, feared or revered: in other words, What is really important? What is it that really matters? And that's what we're still in the middle of working out.

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CONVERSATION 3:

Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Dostoevsky

Summary: This conversation gives Pattison the chance to reflect on and discuss three key influences on his work. It picks up on the significance of Kierkegaard for Pattison, beginning as it does with a question about his choice of topic for his doctorate, which is followed up by reflections on the process of going from thesis to book. In connection to Kierkegaard, we see Pattison reflect on his saying that, to paraphrase, we first learn to be religious before learning to be Christian. Pattison will also discuss aspects of Nietzsche's thinking (including his infamous statement that 'God is dead') in relation to currents of thought relevant to both of these nineteenth-century existential thinkers. The conversation then turns to Heidegger, and begins with a question that invites Pattison to reflect on what it is in Heidegger that he finds so compelling. Heidegger's importance for theological reflections on, amongst other things, technology is taken up by Pattison, before turning to one of the central themes of Heidegger's thinking: death. From here Pattison is able to take up the theme of the subtitle of this book, the meaning of life. From Heidegger we move to Dostoevsky, and doing so allows Pattison to reflect on the importance of the conversation format for exploring not only his own work, but the works and outlook of this great Russian writer whose work has been so important for Pattison and generations of other existential thinkers.

KIERKEGAARD

Philip Tonner

Kierkegaard was the subject of your PhD (*Kierkegaard's Theory and Critique of Art*, Durham University, 1983), which you were to develop into your book *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious*. In our first conversation we found out about what lay behind your choice to pursue a doctorate on him. Can we pick that discussion up now and can I ask, how did you go about converting your thesis into a book?

George Pattison

There is a very close connection between the two, but the thesis was finished in 1983 while the book didn't come out till 1992 and they're different in several ways. The thesis was very historical in terms of contextualising Kierkegaard in the contemporary Danish intellectual environment, whereas the book was more of an interpretation. It also extended beyond the aesthetic works to the religious or upbuilding writings. Probably the first three chapters of the book are pretty close to the thesis, but then it goes further.

A lot of interpreters, then and since, tend to see the aesthetic and the religious in Kierkegaard as two essentially opposed positions. A lot of people don't like the religious stuff at all and limit themselves to writing about the aesthetic or pseudonymous works. Others very much focus on the religious works, but I see them more as part of a coherent, albeit differentiated, development. The book was criticised at the time by Roger Poole, a leading British Kierkegaard commentator, who regarded it as what he called a 'blunt reading', meaning that it subordinated the plurality of voices in Kierkegaard's works – all the different pseudonyms, all the humour, all the irony – to a theological agenda and pressed this plurality into a single mould. But that's not what I was doing at all, at least not in the way Poole meant it.

Certainly, I acknowledge huge internal variety in Kierkegaard's works. That's part of what makes him so interesting to read. But I don't think this precludes a certain coherence, a certain whole, if you like, even if it's an unfinished whole. Importantly, Kierkegaard's thought was always developing and I agree with Poole that there's no final or definitive view, but there are patterns and tendencies and an implicit vision of a whole toward which it is moving. Ultimately, I think we can put this very simply: 'Kierkegaard wrote everything that Kierkegaard wrote', which includes everything that the pseudonyms wrote. What we read when we read Kierkegaard is Kierkegaard, a writer who performed the way of being Christian in the rapidly accelerating situation of early modernity.

If I do write another book about Kierkegaard, I should like to take this as its leitmotif, for if Kierkegaard wrote everything that he wrote, then *what we read when we read Kierkegaard is Kierkegaard*.

Philip Tonner

In your *Short Course on Christian Doctrine* (2005) you spend time reflecting on teaching and learning, and in doing so you engage Kierkegaard. You note that his aim is to 'raise the question as to *how one learns to become moral and how one learns to become, first, religious and, then, Christian*' (Pattison, 2005, p. 18). What did Kierkegaard mean by this? What did you take from his position?

George Pattison

Kierkegaard famously distinguished between the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious points of view. We've already touched on the aesthetic and the religious. In fact, he himself often conflated the aesthetic and the ethical, arguing that contemporary Danish society and, implicitly, bourgeois society across Europe was living in essentially aesthetic-ethical categories. What he meant by this is that by and large people live their lives within a framework of conventional morality that they don't question in any fundamental way, and

that they value life by whether it's interesting or feels good, not whether it's right or even true. The religious, by way of contrast, recognises that we just can't assume that all is as it should be with regard to our society's values or even our own individual moral standing. It therefore involves a deeper self-questioning and a deeper questioning of society.

Kierkegaard then went on to further distinguish the religious from the Christian, since one can be religious in his sense without necessarily being Christian, that is, without an explicit faith in Jesus as the Christ, the incarnate Son of God. At some points he called the first form of religious, 'religiousness A' and the second, 'religiousness B', which last, he argued, was paradoxical and beyond reason, beyond all human understanding.

Faced with all of this, one school of Kierkegaard interpretation, or perhaps it would be better to say, one line of Kierkegaard interpretation, asserts that he rejected everything that isn't radically Christian, and there are indeed many texts that seem to point in that direction. This would be the approach of the early Karl Barth, who took Kierkegaard as representative of the infinite qualitative difference between man and God, a phrase from Kierkegaard himself. However, I prefer to see him as offering a developmental strategy, meaning that the transition from one position to the other can't be forced, but depends on the readiness of the individual for that next step. Kierkegaard doesn't deny the human, but he suggests that there's more. Indeed, in my thesis, I argued that Kierkegaard (quite unconsciously, I'm sure) works with something like the Thomist idea that Grace perfects nature and does not destroy it. In other words, Kierkegaard takes the human and works with the human; he doesn't simply negate the human in the way that early Barth, for example, claimed that he did.

Philip Tonner

Can I just ask a quick follow-up question there? When you were describing Kierkegaard on the religious, Christian and so on, I was reminded of the notion of the 'untimely' in Nietzsche, you know, this

idea about acting contrary to the time. Do you get a sense of anything like that in Kierkegaard at all?

George Pattison

I subtitled the short introductory book about Kierkegaard which I wrote in the '80s 'Against the Age' because Kierkegaard does express a very acute sense of being at odds with the prevailing worldview and life-view of his time. Although there were people amongst his contemporaries who inspired him, and there were people amongst his contemporaries who appreciated him, I think he felt he was quite out of step with the majority view. At the same time, though, and particularly in his religious writings, he was trying to reach people who, even if they weren't theologically educated, even if they weren't 'deep thinkers', were nevertheless trying to come to terms with their lives in something like an existential sense. There's a very touching letter to him from one woman who's clearly only semi-literate and she's just saying, 'I'm only an uneducated woman, but I'd like you to know that I hear you preach whenever I can, and I try to read your books, and I've had huge gain from them'. It's a really touching letter, because it shows that he was reaching some of his contemporaries, even if at the same time the theological establishment largely ignored him.

There's a fascinating little study published just after his death by one of his theological contemporaries, H. P. Koefoed-Hansen, who addressed the view that Kierkegaard had become much too extreme, even a little crazy, in his last years. Are we surprised, he asks, because here in Denmark we had this person who is head and shoulders above everyone else in terms of his intellectual capacity, a thinker of European scope, and yet no one ever responded in print to anything that he wrote. We basically just left him to it, and we didn't dare engage with him, so how can we be surprised if he just got more and more extreme, shouting louder and louder to make us listen?

Philip Tonner

In 2010 you published a selection of Kierkegaard's *Spiritual Writings* (Harper Perennial, 2010). In your Foreword you say that if we wanted to pinpoint 'Kierkegaard's contribution to the history of modern ideas' then we might focus on key terms such as 'melancholy, irony, anxiety, the absurd, the paradox, the leap of faith, the moment, and despair'. Kierkegaard didn't invent these terms, but he did give them new meanings and renewed urgency. These terms would be important for existential philosophy, the theology of crisis, and more recently, for postmodernism. Yet, on your reading, these terms, and the history of their reception, is only part of what is important in Kierkegaard's writings. You say, 'we could go so far as to say that the Kierkegaard known to the history of modern ideas is, in an important sense, not Kierkegaard at all' (Pattison, 2010, p. xii). Can you explain what you mean by this?

George Pattison

Well, this really picks up on what I was just saying about those people in his time who were reading Kierkegaard for their own edification, because what I call spiritual writings in that anthology are what he called *opbyggelige taler*, which can be translated as 'upbuilding' or 'edifying' talks or discourses, and these are, broadly speaking, religious, but not specifically Christian (in fact, that's arguable and needs some fine tuning, but it works for preliminary orientation).

These discourses occupy a kind of middle position between, on the one side, the aesthetic and ethical view that he sees as characteristic of unthinking bourgeois life, and, on the other, the radically Christian view that calls for self-sacrificial discipleship. What they're about is helping the reader to detach him or herself from conventional ways of understanding life and to learn how to face up to their own actual situation and accept responsibility for that, because, on my reading, Kierkegaard doesn't think the Christian choice can be forced on those who are not capable of making a genuinely free response. The religious discourses explore what that involves as they

lead us to face up to and experience our own essential nothingness but also interpret this nothingness as the moment of a new beginning. They show us a Kierkegaard who isn't as witty and ironic as the Kierkegaard of the aesthetic writings and who isn't as severe or as punchy as the Kierkegaard who attacked the church for its compromises with the world. But they do show a Kierkegaard who, for a relatively young man with relatively little experience of the world, had extraordinarily important and profound insights into the ways in which we prevent ourselves from living up to our own essential freedom.

A few years ago, a Danish colleague, Helle Møller Jensen, and I turned some of these discourses into dialogues, as if between a counsellor and a counsellor. Helle had developed this technique in the context of her work as a parish priest and a chaplain in the Danish army, where they've proved very productive and pastorally relevant, particularly in relation to issues of trauma and bereavement.

Philip Tonner

Before you published this collection of *Spiritual Writings* you had published a study on Kierkegaard's 'upbuilding' (or 'edifying') discourses in relation to philosophy, theology and literature in the nineteenth century. Kierkegaard and his nineteenth-century context and reception has been a recurring interest for you. Why is that?

George Pattison

A glib answer would be to say that I think I'm just an instinctive historian, but we have to recognise that texts from the past come from another time and another place. Many theological and philosophical readings of the great thinkers of the past often approach them only in translation and try to read them just in the same way that we read contemporary texts. Of course, there will be, there *has* to be, something in the text that speaks to us and attracts our attention and gets us reading. And sure, if we take a Penguin Classics

version of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* off the shelves and just start reading it in English without any knowledge of its Danish context there's a good chance that it'll wake us up and get us thinking in new and different ways. But if we want to know what's really going on in that text then we need to learn more about the author's work as a whole, which means reading more than the book or passage which first grabbed our attention; ideally, it means reading the authorship as a whole and in the original language. I'm not just talking about Kierkegaard here. I'm talking about any figure of the past.

Then we have to go further still and, as far as we're able, reconstruct the context in which the text was produced, to whom it was addressed, what it meant at just that point in the author's development, and other contextual questions. Kierkegaard, alas, is a prime example of a writer from whom people often detach key quotations from his work as a whole and say 'This is Kierkegaard's view'. The 'leap of faith' is an obvious example. It has been demonstrated that the expression 'leap of faith' never actually occurs in Kierkegaard's Danish writing. So, this is a result of an English translation. Now I don't think you should make too much of that, because the idea isn't entirely alien to Kierkegaard. But this most famous phrase: actually, he didn't write it! So, we have to take a much broader view of the text in context and then consider whether the position being put forward is coherent, persuasive and ultimately true.

Of course, it's not as if you first do all that historical work and then the interpretation. In real life, it's much more like a constant dialectic between the two: you read a couple more of Kierkegaard's works, you find out a little bit more about the context, and all the while you're thinking about how this hangs together, how it connects with other thinkers and other questions.

For me, an exemplary practitioner in this regard is the German philosopher, Michael Theunissen, who isn't as well known in the English-speaking world as he should be, but who, in his magnum opus on Pindar, a great work of classical German scholarship (a thousand pages of it), goes into all the major philological questions behind every passage that he discusses, taking into account the views of the classicists, and of course, with a text as old as that, there's also a question of what the best text is, what text you can

rely on, as well as what all the words could have meant in ancient Greek at that particular point in the development of the language. Theunissen does all that work, and through it develops an original, and very vivid and inspiring view of Pindar as a thinker of hope.

You can contrast that with Heidegger, who, when he lectured on Aristotle or Plato, knew the canon extremely well, intimately even, was very at home in the Greek text, and made his own rather brilliant and challenging translations; but he never engaged extensively with classical scholarship, testing his translation against others. He just said, 'This is what Plato meant', and what he said would invariably be brilliant, if unconventional. But he wasn't really doing the historical work at the same time. The same is true of his engagement with Hölderlin, the nineteenth-century German poet, who, of course, is much closer to Heidegger's own time and culture. But again, he doesn't engage with very much of the commentary on Hölderlin. If he does, it's usually just to wave it out of the way and say, 'That's not relevant for our reading of the poem'. 'We have to hear what the poet says', he insists, as if you can, as it were, have direct access to the mind of the poet.

It's a dialectic and it's not easy but it's crucial, even though, of course, it slows you down. You might have a lot of brilliant ideas as you read a text, but then you have to go back and say, 'Well, does this make sense?' 'Is this what Kierkegaard (or Heidegger, or Plato, etc.) is really saying?' In the case of Kierkegaard, for example, I see him as articulating a radical experience of modernity. But then someone might ask how this was possible in Denmark, which, in Kierkegaard's time, was an impoverished backward country that had been laid low in the Napoleonic wars, chiefly by the British blockade and the bombardment of Copenhagen. And yet there was new building going on after the devastation from the British attack; there was new literature; a new entertainment industry with the opening of Tivoli; a new political order with the democratic revolution in the 1840s. So, there is a very dramatic transformation of Danish society going on. That's an important context for Kierkegaard.

That, incidentally, is why I think that Adorno's famous remark that Kierkegaard didn't know the hour of the modern metropolitan city is mistaken. Adorno was arguing that you can't apply the model of

Baudelaire's Parisian *flâneur* to Kierkegaard because Copenhagen was just a pokey little place and not a great metropolitan city like Paris, but I think that's a failure both of imagination and historical scholarship on Adorno's part. It's true that Copenhagen was a small, relatively backward city in Kierkegaard's time and he himself often disparagingly called it a 'market town'. But it's precisely because of this that the impact of modern international urban culture was all the more marked, just as a small stone makes big ripples in a small pond. And if you had someone with the right antennae, such as Kierkegaard, he was able to read what was going on there – and interestingly, he himself does indeed use the word *flâneur* in a suitably Danishised version. So again, Adorno, a bit like Heidegger, does very little concrete social, historical analysis in this particular work, despite insisting on the need for it. And we do need to do that, whether with regard to Kierkegaard or anyone else from another time and another place.

Philip Tonner

In some of these studies of Kierkegaard you engage with that other important nineteenth-century thinker who is also credited with inaugurating existential themes central to subsequent philosophy in Europe, Friedrich Nietzsche, who is famous for proclaiming 'the death of God'. Nietzsche would become an important thinker for Heidegger. Can you say something about Nietzsche, both in connection to Kierkegaard and the nineteenth century, and to Heidegger?

George Pattison

It is a striking fact that the first ever monograph written about Nietzsche was by a Danish critic called Georg Brandes, who also wrote the first critical monograph about Kierkegaard. Brandes, in effect, discovered both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche for the wider European world, and did a lot to publicise their thought. Indeed, he corresponded with Nietzsche toward the end of Nietzsche's life and

encouraged Nietzsche to read Kierkegaard. He was very interested in doing so but most scholars think he didn't get round to it before he went mad, though it is possible that he did read a very small amount.

Brandes wasn't the only one to see important resonances between their thought, even though Kierkegaard was calling for a more radical Christianity, and Nietzsche was proclaiming the 'death of God'. Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche was a fierce critic of nineteenth-century bourgeois life and at the same time envisaged a radically alternative way of living. In his case, it wasn't a Christian way of living, but an anti-Christian way of living and again, as for Kierkegaard, this involved a negative view of the way in which bourgeois society related to art. For Nietzsche art wasn't just something you'd see in galleries or museums, or in concert halls and opera houses. For Nietzsche, art was a matter of life. You didn't just go to the theatre to be entertained. You had to live artistically, to create your own values and truths in the way that an artist does in a play or an opera. If we're to do this, Nietzsche says, we have to let go of the idea of God or any absolute truth out there that would, as it were, prescribe our lives for us. We have to become our own creators, and because of that, Nietzsche, very consistently, again like Kierkegaard, was driven to experiment in new literary forms rather than writing conventional philosophical treatises. So, aphorisms have a very important role in his writings, as do parables, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is almost a pastiche of a biblical prophetic book.

The most famous of Nietzsche's parables, of course, is about 'The Madman' who comes into a market square in the middle of the day carrying a lantern and saying that he's looking for God. All the people laugh at him and, as he looks around, he's full of despair because he realises that not only is God dead, but that the people who have killed God have still not become aware of it. He goes into a church to sing a requiem for the dead God and then disappears. It's a very powerful parable and is often taken to mean 'Nietzsche says God is dead'. But there's far more nuance in it than that. It's a *parable*! First, God isn't just dead. He's been killed. And that is not just any old event. It's a colossal event that changes every aspect of how we live in the world, but the nineteenth-century bourgeois, who no

longer believed in God, felt that life can go on just as it always did. Some might think it's enough to say that 'I have no need of this hypothesis' and then just let it go and nothing else changes: but for Nietzsche, if you let go of God, everything changes.

The literary way in which Nietzsche expressed this is crucial if we are to be sensitive to what he's saying. Similarly with *Zarathustra*, there's a whole series of parables and speeches (some of which are more successful than others), and at its best it moves us in a way that straightforward philosophical text wouldn't. When Nietzsche talks about eternal recurrence, for example, he's not offering a theory in cosmology. This isn't something for physicists to debate about. It's a question of the existential attitude to life.

HEIDEGGER

Philip Tonner

Heidegger has been a central influence on your thinking. I suspect that you intended the Heideggerian echo in the title of your book *The End of Theology and the Task of Thinking about God* (1998). What is it that you find compelling in Heidegger's work?

George Pattison

George Steiner once said that Heidegger was the only one of our contemporaries who we could be sure that people would still be reading in a thousand years in the way that we're still reading Plato and Aristotle. I probably agree – but I'm not in the business of prophesying.

Firstly, Heidegger is notorious for being extremely difficult and I have to say I find this attractive. I think one of the things that first attracted me to Kierkegaard was just the sheer difficulty of making sense of a text such as *Philosophical Fragments*. What's this guy trying to say? I find that an interesting challenge.

Next, I think Heidegger is particularly important for someone interested in the fundamental questions of religion in our time, for good or ill. Faith and the religious attitude were central to Heidegger's own early development and at one point he wanted to train for the Catholic priesthood, until he broke away and became a kind of independent Protestant for a period, before finally dropping out of church connections altogether. Even so, he himself said that Augustine, Luther and Kierkegaard were philosophically essential for the development that led up to *Being and Time*, although his own approach to these texts wasn't theological but in the cause of what he called a 'fundamental ontology'. Augustine, Luther, Kierkegaard and other religious writers were bringing into view aspects of the human situation which called for interpretation, not in the way that theology interpreted them but as revealing how human beings relate to their existence in the world. Heidegger carries out this reinterpretation in an extraordinarily rigorous and thoroughgoing way, drawing on his vast familiarity with the key works of the philosophical tradition.

By the time he comes to write *Being and Time*, he's not only been reading Augustine, Luther and Kierkegaard, but he's been lecturing repeatedly on especially Aristotle, and also Luther (and that's apart from everything he learned from Husserl and other contemporary philosophers). There's a huge and wide range of materials going into *Being and Time*, and I think that Heidegger was able to enter into the religious attitude to life in his interpretation and to come out with an interpretation which is an extraordinary challenge to faith, since the claim there is that philosophy is actually capable of understanding faith better than faith understands itself.

There are various ways of responding to this challenge. One would be to simply reject it. Or one could follow a number of modern Thomist thinkers who have acknowledged the challenge posed by Heidegger and then responded by explaining why their way is a better one. Yet another way of responding is to use it to reinterpret what the tradition means for Christian existence today. For me, that's more interesting and it's testimony to the importance of Heidegger's thinking that you can see this kind of response across the confessional divides. So you have, most famously, Rudolf Bultmann, a

Lutheran theologian, a colleague of Heidegger's during their time at Marburg, who proposed what he called a strategy of 'demythologising' theology, getting rid of the supernatural elements of theology and re-offering Christianity to the world as a more authentic way of living. In the Catholic Church, Karl Rahner, one of the most important theologians of the Second Vatican Council, was massively influenced by Heidegger. Rahner said of Heidegger, 'I have had many professors, but only one teacher, Martin Heidegger'. The connection to Heidegger isn't as obvious in Rahner's thought as it is in Bultmann's, but if you know your Heidegger well and you read Rahner, you can see that he has very much internalised some of Heidegger's key insights. Then there is the Anglican John Macquarrie, one of the English translators of *Being and Time*, whose *Principles of Christian Theology* takes Heidegger's discourse on being and transforms it into what Macquarrie calls 'Holy Being'. And even in Orthodoxy, there are those, of whom Christos Yannaras is the best known, who are also influenced by Heidegger. And indeed, beyond Christianity, there's the Kyoto school of Zen Buddhism in Japan (which we discussed in Conversation 2), and there's an important Heidegger reception in Iran where several members of the philosophical committee of The Ideology Council of the Islamic Revolution were adept Heideggerians. There, of course, Heidegger's critique of the Western tradition of metaphysics plays especially well.

Since about 2012, I've also been increasingly interested in Heidegger's views on language. It's often said that the emphasis on language is a feature of the later Heidegger and it's true that there is a focus on poetic language in the later Heidegger that you don't find in the Heidegger of *Being and Time* but, in fact, language is already central there. On Heidegger's view, as he explains in the introduction to *Being and Time*, phenomenology is itself the appearing of being in *logos*, that is word or discourse. Then, as we go further into the text, his interpretation of being is approached primarily through the way in which human beings talk about themselves in an average, everyday, and inauthentic way. For example, it's the way in which people don't talk about death or talk about it as something that only happens to others that reveals just how overpowering the confrontation with death actually is.

Philip Tonner

In *The End of Theology and the Task of Thinking about God* you remark that 'Heidegger's failure is important as marking the last large-scale attempt to revivify metaphysics and to give back to philosophy a sense for the question of Being' (Pattison, 1998, p. 28). What did you mean by this? And, if Heidegger's project failed, is it still important that we study it?

George Pattison

I wouldn't express myself quite as severely as that today. Certainly, I think if one reads *Being and Time* as offering a definitive account of human being, then we might indeed talk about failure, but *Being and Time* itself was only intended to be the first part of a larger work, and Heidegger himself said repeatedly that the important thing in philosophy is not staking out positions but raising questions.

A Catholic philosopher called Joseph Owens wrote a book entitled *The Doctrine of Being*, but Heidegger never wrote a *doctrine* of being; instead, he sought to raise the *question* of being, and, if we keep that in mind, he didn't fail. But at the same time, as he himself was very aware, he kept having to redefine his own philosophical approach. So, in the 1920s, in *Being and Time*, he's trying to produce what he calls a 'fundamental ontology', an account of the basic character of being. But by the time he takes up his chair at Freiburg, he's talking about 'metaphysics', as in his inaugural lecture 'What is Metaphysics?' Later in the 1930s he talks more modestly about 'philosophy', and indeed about 'overcoming metaphysics'. At one point he defines his task in terms of 'mindfulness' (*Besinnung*) and then, as in the lecture to which the title of my *End of Theology* alludes, he talks about the 'end of philosophy and the task of thinking'. All the time, then, Heidegger is redefining his approach and his task, and I'm sure that if he lived another fifty years he'd have gone on doing so, because that's part of the point. This is how we should understand the motto for his collected works: '*Wege, nicht Werke*', 'ways, not works'. It's a path of thinking.

Heidegger illustrates one aspect of what this means with reference to the German word *Holzwege* that he took as the title for a collection of lectures and that's sometimes translated as 'forest tracks' – but these are a very particular kind of forest track. If you're wandering around in the forest, you often find yourself on a path that looks very promising and it's fine for the first half mile; gradually it starts to get overgrown, and then it's completely overgrown. You have to turn back and start again. A '*Holzweg*' is this kind of track, a false trail. And for Heidegger, who was a very experienced forest walker, that's also the nature of thinking. You have to keep trying something out, and it doesn't always work – of course it's not always going to work and then you have to go back, and then move forward again. But the guiding question hasn't changed, though it may have become clearer.

For Heidegger, this question is the question of being and how we can think that question without being led down the false trail that Western metaphysics has taken. But this isn't easy and even when he talks about overcoming metaphysics, he also acknowledges that the basic assumptions of Western metaphysics are so deeply implanted in us that it's going to take generations to recuperate from metaphysical thinking. Not least (I know we'll be talking about this in a little while) because for Heidegger, the most striking, perhaps most important manifestation of the continuing power of metaphysics is in what he called 'planetary technology'. The technology of today is the manifestation of what metaphysical thinking really means. And as we all know, technology isn't going to vanish overnight. So there is still a task of thinking in relation to that.

Philip Tonner

You returned to problematics associated with Heidegger in your *Thinking About God in an Age of Technology* (2007) and in *Eternal God/Saving Time* (2015). In the first of these volumes, it is Heidegger's critique of both theology and technology that engages you, while in the later, it is Heidegger's view that 'time is the horizon for the meaning of being' that is at issue. You have also written a

Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to the Later Heidegger (2000). Heidegger is one of those thinkers whose work is sometimes grouped into earlier and later phases. Your work deals with concerns of his in both phases. Firstly, can you say something about this partitioning of his work? And secondly, can you expand upon your concerns with time and technology?

George Pattison

Yes, as I was just saying, one can see a number of different phases in Heidegger's development, and one could just as well argue for five or six different Heideggers, as for two Heideggers, or one can see, as I see, a continuous development, albeit a sometimes fractured development that still allows for important continuity. So, although the book has the title *The Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to the Later Heidegger*, I wouldn't sharply distinguish the later Heidegger from the early Heidegger, though there is definitely a shift in focus. One new development is that Hölderlin becomes a major focus of his thinking, and likewise the question of technology. And you won't see those, or at least they're not very visible in *Being and Time*, or the lectures from the 1920s, for example. Clearly, the way in which he writes changes as well. So, in *Being and Time*, he's writing in the style of Husserlian phenomenology, whilst the later Heidegger is much more poetic, though some of his critics would say it's bad poetry. Good or bad, it's very influenced by his own reading of Hölderlin, and of the pre-Socratic philosophers. The result is not like any kind of philosophy that anyone else was writing at that time. Again, as we've seen with Kierkegaard or Nietzsche, radical new thinking drives people to try to find new ways of articulating it. As Jesus said, you can't put new wine in old wineskins.

Another new theme is technology, which (for Heidegger) is intimately linked to the fate of metaphysics. What is the nature of this link? At its simplest, it's a question of seeing the world from the perspective of the human subject since, for Heidegger, classical metaphysics from Plato through Descartes, German idealism, and down to Nietzsche, places the human subject at the centre, and, as

it were, envisages, measures and understands the world from the human point of view. Moving away from metaphysics would mean decentring ourselves. It would mean letting the world be otherwise than as we want it to be. A key term in many of his later writings is *Gelassenheit*, sometimes translated 'releasement', just letting things be, and not trying to project our ideas onto them.

It's interesting to see that in our contemporary academic culture, even in the humanities, work is now conducted with a vocabulary borrowed from that of science. People no longer 'study Heidegger'. They pursue a 'project' related to Heidegger – but the whole idea of a project is that it is determined from the point of view of the researcher, who is expected to stipulate in advance what the outcomes of that project will be. This is really something quite new. It is, for example, very different from saying, 'Well, I want to spend three years reading Kierkegaard and see what Kierkegaard has to say to me', which is more like how people used to approach doing a PhD. In an essay, 'The Age of the World Picture' from 1938, Heidegger predicted the coming of the 'research man' who is always going from conference to conference, and negotiating with publishers, and who would replace the traditional scholar sitting in his library, immersed in the classics. And that was, I think, very prescient. He could see how things were developing, and even though many readers might sense a note of nostalgia in this, he also said that the 'research man' is likely to have a professionalism and, if you like, a cutting edge that the old-fashioned scholar didn't have – but at the same time, the change from one paradigm to another also involves a narrowing of the horizons.

Philip Tonner

You returned to thinking about Heidegger and theology, this time in connection to death, in your *Heidegger on Death: A Critical Theological Essay* (2016). Why is death so important to Heidegger?

George Pattison

Last time we talked about Jaspers' idea of limit situations, and death is, of course, the ultimate limit situation. With death we come up against the limits imposed, not just by other people, who may have a contrary will to our own, but an absolute limit in which our existence as such comes face to face with its own prospective annihilation. In this situation that question as to what meaning, if any, life can have is almost inevitable. It's the ultimate litmus test for discerning what we think our lives are about.

Again, it's interesting that, although the theme of being toward death is especially associated with *Being and Time*, death continues to be a theme for Heidegger throughout his work, and even in the more poetic, maybe even quasi-mystical later Heidegger, it's still an important theme. For example, when he talks about how human life is shaped by the fourfold of earth, sky, death and the gods, death is still very much there as one of the conditioning factors in relation to our humanity.

In the 1960s Heidegger was invited back to his birth town of Meßkirch in the Black Forest to give a talk on the thousandth anniversary of the founding of the town, and he is, of course, by then a very famous philosopher. He starts by saying that when he arrived at the town he saw what was not there when he was growing up at the end of the nineteenth century, namely, television aerials on every house, and he interpreted this as a sign of the technological transformation of the world that had happened in between. Now, even when people are sitting at home, they're no longer sitting around the fire talking to each other as they did when he was a little boy. They're sitting watching the television, and when you're watching television, you're not at home, you're at the football stadium, or in some imaginary Hollywood dream, or you've escaped to the sun, or wherever: in a very real sense you are not where you are. You've experienced a radical dislocation and Heidegger took this as a manifestation of what he called the 'planetary homelessness' engendered by modern technology – and note, this affects and even afflicts those who, in a legal sense, may be homeowners.

It's important to interject at this point that Heidegger wasn't, as

he is sometimes portrayed, the kind of backwoodsman who thought we could just get rid of all this technology and go back to living simple peasant lives in the forest. He knew that technology was shaping every aspect of the world and was not going to go away. The challenge is not to destroy it or escape it but to find a way of living humanly in the midst of it, to set up what he called a counter-current that would enable us to find a balance between the ever-accelerating rush of technologisation and the need for continuity and coherence. In the Meßkirch lecture, he asked where we might best go to think about this and suggested that the best place would be what he called 'God's Acre', the graveyard, where all those from the past whom we've loved are buried, and we think about their lives. And, thinking about their lives, and reflecting on death, mortality and our place in the succession of generations rather than becoming totally absorbed in the present, is where we start to develop this counter-current. So, death continues to be right at the centre of his thinking, but in quieter, gentler tones than the very heroic-sounding 'running towards death' of *Being and Time*.

Philip Tonner

In the subtitle of this book of conversations, we refer to 'the meaning of life'. That phrase has occurred in a number of places in your writings. Right now, I'd like to ask you about it in connection to Heidegger. You say in *The End of Theology and the Task of Thinking about God* (1998) that Heidegger takes his clue about what we consider to be the 'meaning that life has for us' (Pattison, 1998, p. 26) from how we talk about ourselves. Can you expand upon that for me?

George Pattison

Yes. I suppose another way of talking about 'the meaning of meaning' is to ask what is at issue in our lives. What are our lives actually about? What is it that's important. What really matters? I think of Tillich's

category of ultimate concern, and his redefinition of God as what concerns us ultimately. Sartre has a nice phrase in his essay on Kierkegaard, that although the human being is nothing this nothingness is 'to be lived', *cette non-être, est à vivre*: even if we have no substantial being, here we are, and we've got to get on with our life, we've got to live it – but, then, what is it that's going to be important for us? How are we going to define ourselves through our actions and our sufferings as the particular and unique people that we are?

This is where I see the question of meaning, which is rather different from asking what it means to say that God exists in the way people did in the time (in the 1970s and '80s) when 'religious language' was the dominant concern in philosophy. I prefer Shestov's suggestion that the true subject matter of philosophy is *to timiōtaton*, what is most to be revered or feared, and this is essentially the same question: *what really matters*.

DOSTOEVSKY

Philip Tonner

Another central influence on you has been Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky. Indeed, you recently authored a book entitled *Conversations with Dostoevsky: On God, Russia, Literature, and Life* (2024). What inspired you to approach writing about Dostoevsky in the form of conversations?

George Pattison

I've been reading Dostoevsky for many years, and at Oxford I taught an Honours class on Dostoevsky's religious thought for ten years, as well as giving many lectures, seminars and other courses on different aspects of his work. Against this background, I'd long thought that it would be a good retirement project to pull all this together in a book, going through a sequence of topics that I'd

worked on over the years: Dostoevsky on crime and punishment, Dostoevsky on women, Dostoevsky on society, Dostoevsky on faith, Dostoevsky on Christ, and so on – all in a very conventional academic way. In 2019, with retirement approaching, I was starting to think about this quite seriously, when I went to the International Dostoevsky Society Conference in Boston, which was a truly global gathering of Dostoevsky scholars, including many Russians. Most of the scholars there were from Slavic Studies backgrounds, so they had not only been reading Dostoevsky for many years, but were very familiar with his Russian context, and, given what I've said about serious scholarship needing taking account of the historical context and situation, I realised that I was never going to manage to achieve the necessary level of knowledge for a genuinely academic study of Dostoevsky, especially as I know from my own work on Kierkegaard what that involves. Obviously, I know a bit about Dostoevsky's context, and I'm always seeking to expand my knowledge, but it falls far short of the top level of scholarship in Dostoevsky studies. The result was that I found myself thinking, 'Well, this isn't going to work'.

As I was thinking about this on the plane back, the first line of the book just came to me and I realised that fictionalising my interpretation was the way to go. Originally it went out as a blog, serially. I think I'd maybe got six weeks in advance when I began to post episodes, but there were times when I was down to one week in advance, and, in a small way, I experienced what authors like Dostoevsky himself knew very well, where he would sign a contract for a new novel to be delivered in such and such a number of months, and the days would tick away, and the novel wasn't appearing – it's a very interesting way of working! But it's important to me that there's also a scholarly commentary at the back, where I do go into at least some of the philological, historical and theoretical questions that are at issue. One reviewer, who was generally very favourable, declared himself to be quite bowled over by the novel; but then, he said, 'Professor Pattison puts his boring professorial persona back on and gives us a hundred pages of boring professorial stuff. But you can leave that out and just read the first bit, and that's okay.' But I think it's important that the 'boring professorial stuff' is there, too, because Dostoevsky does come from a very different time and

place and wrote in a language that most of us don't have an easy familiarity with, and we need to acknowledge that.

Philip Tonner

There is a wonderful description of two cities in the first conversation in that work that occurred between the narrator and Fyodor Mikhailovich, as he is addressed there. Glasgow and St. Petersburg, two cities 'fashioned by the contradictions and absurdities of capitalism's hyperactive and misspent nineteenth-century youth' (Pattison, 2024, p. 7). This isn't the first time that you've written about cities in connection to existential thought. Your *Poor Paris* (2010) discusses Kierkegaard's critique of that city. Can I ask you to reflect on place in connection to existential thought? Did place – the city, or the countryside, for example – have an impact in the development of existential philosophy and literature?

George Pattison

Yes. I know that we are going to discuss my interest in Edwin Muir, in a later conversation, and the relationship between city and nature is a big theme in Muir's own writing. He grew up in Orkney before the First World War, which he experienced as a kind of archaic, idyllic, almost primitive way of life, very close to nature, with human beings, landscape and animals living close together. Then the family moved to Glasgow's South Side, and he'd have to walk past the Gorbals every day going to work. Of course, Glasgow then was at the height of its industrial power, a big, dirty, violent, dark city, and Muir was quite traumatised by what he experienced. Subsequently, a lot of his poetry is about poetically recuperating the Orkney of his childhood, which connects also to the theme of Eden in his writings; 'One foot in Eden still I stand', which reflects a sort of dialectic between the paradisaical world of the garden and the trauma of the city.

I think this has been a tension for me between wanting that Edenic pastoral life and what I experience as the necessary requirement

– the obligation – of the city, and of the modern world. We can't just opt out of the city, because even if we do go off and spend a lot of time up a mountain, on an island or in a wilderness we remain connected to the global city that we all inhabit. Only a very few heroic types can break those ties completely, for life. Obviously, there are various degrees here, but that dialectic is still there, even though it works out differently for each of us.

So, Kierkegaard: you mentioned *Poor Paris* and I see Kierkegaard as very much a man of the city; anticipating in his own life attitudes that would perhaps only become familiar later in the nineteenth century in the figure of the *flâneur*. At the same time, he was someone who loved to take carriage rides out of the city, and to walk around in the forests and the cliff tops of Sjælland (Northern Zealand, the island on which Copenhagen is situated), and these are reflected in discourses he wrote on the lilies and the birds from the Sermon on the Mount and learning from them about the great simple truths of life – quite Wordsworthian, in a way, but for Kierkegaard, it was a kind of back and forth between the city and 'out there'.

Sartre, of course, comes across as a thoroughly urban man, and we talk about 'Left Bank existentialism', locating existentialism right in the midst of the city and the cafe culture, the theatres, the political clubs and so on. Everything about it is urban, though I think he did like skiing, and indeed he did go for long rambles in the country with Simone de Beauvoir. By way of contrast, Heidegger is associated with the Black Forest. He had a little hut up in the forest, where he would go and work on his own. At one point in the 1930s, he was offered a chair in Berlin, which he considered taking, and in a rather famous passage (that most people find rather cheesy), he wrote about how he was talking to one of the local farmers about it, and the farmer just looks at him, shakes his head, and Heidegger knows he has to stay in the country with people who understand things with this peasant simplicity and directness, and none of this hyper-complexity of the city. Nevertheless, as I've been saying, Heidegger understood that you can't just opt out of the age of technology – wherever you go, it's with you.

Dostoevsky for his part is intimately associated with St. Petersburg,

the setting of *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot* and some other novels, though interestingly, *The Devils* and *The Brothers Karamazov* are set in provincial towns rather than big cities, and in *The Idiot* itself, the action goes backwards and forwards between the city and Pavlovsk, a town on the outskirts of St. Petersburg, which is more rural, with big parks, and where people have their summer houses, away from the smell and the dirt and the rush of the city, so that's very much there, too. And I think this is a very important dialectic for me, and I think it's very important for our time. As I say, we can't opt out. But, on the other hand, allowing ourselves to be totally absorbed by the hyperactivity, the constant acceleration of contemporary urban life, our contemporary way of being urban, is undermining something essentially human in us. How we work this out is going to be very different for every individual, but also culturally as well.

Philip Tonner

Your *Conversations with Dostoevsky* is masterfully written. In it, there is a suggestion that we must all 'become artists to see ourselves and our world as they truly are' (Pattison, 2024, p. 17). With this book, do you feel that you have taken that step, from academic to artist?

George Pattison

I remember a seminar about Heidegger led by Tom Sheehan in which we were talking about the impossibility of stepping out of our human skins and seeing the world, as science tries to see it, without the interference of human prejudices, presuppositions and projections. Of course, even in the outer reaches of science, in physics, physicists will say that their experiments, their calculations, affect how the world is presented to them and that although science will always try to minimise the human element, it can probably never escape it entirely.

The humanities certainly can't escape it, and I think shouldn't want to escape it. The study of literature, philosophy and religion, history,

will always involve the human. We're reading Shakespeare, not just because someone's told us it's important to read Shakespeare, but because something in Shakespeare has revealed to us a crucial aspect of what we think matters in life, comic or tragic. So, the point is not to get rid of the human, but to become aware of it. What is it in the text that has awoken us, that's stirred us, that's challenged us, that's intrigued us? And as we try to find that out, all the time we're finding out something about ourselves, as well as finding out something about the text. And I would say that the point is not to try to get away from that, but to become aware of it, and to understand it.

This is what Heidegger, for example, referred to as the hermeneutic circle. The point is not to get out of that circle, but to be in it in the right way, so that it's not a vicious circle, as when we're just projecting our interests and our prejudices onto the text. Rather, it's always a two-way process, an ongoing negotiation, in which our interests are being broadened, and our prejudices challenged. It's a never-ending process. One consequence of this is, I think, that work in the humanities inevitably has scope for imagination, for feeling, for entertaining counterfactual situations. It's never just about the facts, but maybe more about what we're making of the facts. Now I think that most people actually do this anyway, whether they're thinking about it or not, but philosophy seeks to make us methodologically aware of what's going on in this process.

As far as I'm concerned, going back to your question, yes, this is a huge step. I have done a number of 'fictionalisations' before. For example, in one of my books on Kierkegaard, I have an imaginary third letter from his pseudonym, Judge William, written a few years on from when *Either/Or* was written. Much has changed in William's life. He's no longer the respectable pillar of society that he is in that work; since then, his marriage (which he was so proud of) has broken down and he's become an alcoholic, and everything's fallen apart for him. So, the question, then, is whether Kierkegaard's idea of the ethical is tied to the rather smug middle-class persona that is portrayed in *Either/Or* and my 'letter' tries to show that it's not. But I've never done anything on this scale before.

Philip Tonner

A critic might say that this sounds like turning philosophy and even faith into a kind of fiction: that it's all just a matter of how we choose to imagine the world? If that is so, then does truth matter at all, and just what is the difference between truth and lies?

George Pattison

And I might respond by saying that as long as we're talking about this we're doing so in language and that language can never fully or finally deliver 'the real'. Language never gives us the thing itself but only ever a word about the thing, to borrow a phrase from one of Wallace Stevens' late poems. The Russian poet Tiutchev wrote that 'Even the truth once uttered is a lie' but one doesn't have to go that far to see that even the most rigorous philosophical argument or exposition can only ever achieve an approximation. One rather obvious illustration of this is how, even when one philosophical theory achieves complete dominance in its field, it is going to find itself replaced or revised beyond recognition just a few years down the line. We're always discovering our relation to the world in new ways, looking at it from new points of view.

That doesn't mean that language is entirely free-floating – although there are kinds of writing that favour maximally free invention. In speaking about the world or some aspect of the world, we keep the world in view, we attend to it, we are constrained by it, we respect it, but in speaking our relation to the world, the world itself has been changed. Nineteenth-century aesthetics liked to speak of art offering a transfiguration of reality and there's a lot in that – reality, but 'otherwise'.

Heidegger's view of truth as unconcealment is relevant here, which, in plain English, means bringing an aspect of our being in the world that had previously remained hidden from view out into the open so that it can be seen for what it is. If we add Hegel's dictum that 'the truth is the whole' and the biblical idea that truth is evidenced by the power of enduring or abiding, we can say that the

measure of truth is the power of what is said to disclose the world in an aspect that has bearing on the whole of our existence and that maintains this power over time.

Now, even when writers in the realist tradition, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky for example, set their novels in the recognisably real world of their time, they were not offering a description that could be tested for accuracy. Even their descriptions suggest a transcendence of that world, an opening up of possibilities that were maybe hidden from their contemporaries until they wrote about them, both as critique of the existing order and as revealing a larger, fuller and more whole view of human life. In this sense, even though everything they wrote is fiction, it is both rooted in the reality of their time and offers insight into the truth of the human condition.

By way of contrast, what is untrue shuts down our view onto the whole and even hides what belongs to the aspect of reality in question. To stay with the world of fiction, Ian Fleming (for example) limits the range of human thought, feeling and action to a very particular mode of being human and also glosses over much that belongs to the real-life world of human espionage. The world of James Bond is no more fictional than the world of Anna Karenina or Alyosha Karamazov, but compared with these it offers semblance rather than truth – and, to be fair, probably doesn't even intend to achieve the latter.

Whether, in a given case, such and such a work really does offer compelling and truthful insight is not, of course, to be taken on trust but is something that gets worked out in the ongoing conversations, professional and amateur, that it generates. To adapt the title of a book by the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce, we're all constantly engaged in sifting out what is living and what is dead in any body of writing or any worldview that comes to us from the past. Does it really illuminate what human living is about? And does this illumination endure?

I've focused my remarks on literature, but the point could easily be extended to other arts and even to science.

Philip Tonner

Tell me about the onion.

George Pattison

The onion refers to a story in *The Brothers Karamazov*, told by Grushenka, who is the object of desire of both the old man Karamazov and his son Dmitri, a conflict that leads to the central catastrophe of the book. At a crucial point in the narrative, Grushenka is visited by Dmitri's brother Alyosha, a saintly young postulant, and she takes it into her mind to seduce him. She doesn't expect this to be difficult as she's a woman of experience and he's very young and naïve and, despite his religious aspirations, has the sensuous Karamazov nature, so that it could happen 'just like that'. But then she learns that his beloved Elder, the Starets Zosima, has just died, and Alyosha himself is in a state of spiritual crisis, so she pulls back. As she says, 'I had a little bird in my hand, and instead of crushing it, I let it go', and she illustrates this with a story of the onion. How she comes to know this story, or what role it played in her life, we don't know – possibly it's an old Russian folk-tale.

So. Once upon a time there was an extremely mean old woman, who'd been mean to everyone all her life and when she died, the devil came and took her and dragged her down into the lake of fire, where the damned are tortured for all eternity. Her guardian angel was very upset by this and went to God and said, 'I know she's really mean but isn't there anything we can do?' And God said, 'Well, okay, you can go down to her in the fiery lake, and if she can remember one good deed she can be saved'. So the angel goes down and finds the woman, in extreme agony in the lake of fire, and asks whether she can remember just one good thing that she did in her life. And she says, 'Yes, once I gave an onion from my garden to a beggar who was passing'. So the angel took an onion which he held out to her so that she could be lifted out of the fiery pit. She grabbed on to it, but as she was being dragged out, the other damned souls saw what was going on and swam over, or whatever you do in the

fiery lake, and started to grab hold of her feet so that they could be pulled out as well. But she kicked them away, saying, 'this is my onion. It's for me. It's not for you. Don't weigh me down'. And of course, the moment that happened, the onion snapped and back she fell forever into the lake of fire. There are several little morals in there, and, as he often does, Dostoevsky uses an almost absurd and ridiculous story to make some very important points. That's the onion.

Philip Tonner

May I ask a short follow-up question: is the idea, then, that you're damned by your own selfishness, or you are your own undoing?

George Pattison

Exactly, and also that we can only come to salvation together. Obviously, this is very different from Western Protestantism (at least as popularly perceived), where it's very much about individual merit and everyone stands alone before the judgment throne like the criminal in the dock in an earthly courthouse.

Philip Tonner

Do you think that reading Dostoevsky helps 'to make faith possible'?

George Pattison

Yes – and precisely through his fiction. I've spoken of the importance of Heidegger for twentieth-century theology, and I think one can say the same for Dostoevsky. There's both the challenge to faith that's found in his writings, but also the possibility of faith that's found in those same writings. This has been recognised by several

of the major modern theologians. Karl Barth is one example, while the Catholic theologian, Romano Guardini, wrote a whole book on Dostoevsky, and he is important also for Henri de Lubac, in his *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*. Obviously, Anglicanism's own Rowan Williams wrote an important book on Dostoevsky, and it almost goes without saying that Dostoevsky is a major point of reference for Orthodoxy – nearly all the major figures of modern Russian religious thought have engaged with Dostoevsky significantly. Many have produced whole monographs on his work. So, he is someone who has been very much present in the twentieth-century discussion of faith.

Can he help make faith possible? In his novels, Dostoevsky shows a series of people losing faith, defying faith, struggling for faith, finding faith, and doing so in extreme situations: personal situations, passional situations, political situations, situations of crime and punishment; the novels and stories often involve the insulted and the injured, to take another of his titles, that is, people who have been pushed to the margins, whether through their own bad choices or through social circumstances. Understandably enough, and whether it's for psychological or ideological reasons, many of them experience finding faith extremely difficult. Yet Dostoevsky typically suggests that there is some promise, some possibility of betterment, even in the darkest corners, even if it's only in a small little blade of grass poking up above the frosty ground. Maybe that reflects his own experience of rediscovering his own faith in the context of the extreme brutality of the prison camp where he was for four years.

There are many atheists in Dostoevsky's work. And one of the things he does, is to give the atheists their own voice, exploring atheism from within. One of his characters, Ivan Karamazov, offers a relentless denunciation of God's justice, pointing to a whole series of atrocities in the world, from massacres to abuse within families, and argues that if God allows all this, then I don't want any part of His kingdom. Ivan's 'rebellion' (as he called it) was taken up by the protest atheism of the twentieth century. Sartre cites him in his lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism* and Camus too sees Ivan as an authentic voice of atheistic protest. But Dostoevsky also wanted to look at the

complex psychological and ideological motives at work in Ivan's life and, as he does so, we are given reasons to doubt Ivan's testimony. He also presents us with a radical alternative in the life and teachings of the saintly Elder Zosima, which offers an image of what Christianity might look like once it had passed through what Dostoevsky described as his own 'crucible of doubt'. This is not the kind of Christianity that says, 'Don't doubt, just believe what the Church says' but is a faith that has, in effect, been broken on the anvil and that has come together on the other side. That kind of process was, for Dostoevsky, essential for faith.

Philip Tonner

A lot of the thinkers we've been speaking about marked out the times they lived in as being a point of crisis, whether that crisis occurs in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. We, now, are often hearing that we are also living in a time of crisis. I wondered what you think about the possibility of making an intellectual response to that crisis now. Is some kind of radical new thinking required? Or some kind of more or less radical re-engagement with thinkers from the past?

George Pattison

As we discussed last time, we often hear the expression 'existential challenges' in the media and there is also an emergent eco-existentialism. The link back to classical existentialism is when we look back beyond the exigencies of survival and ask, 'How do we want our lives to be in the face of this situation?'

Take the climate crisis. There's no doubt that we need science, engineering and political strategies to help us deal with this and to mitigate the current and coming impacts. There are massive practical challenges, both in terms of alternative forms of energy production, environmental mitigations and so on. All of that matters. But there's a further question as to what we are looking for in our lives. What

we think matters. I'm always amazed when, in the aftermath of some major climate event, I open my papers, and there's a whole section on some new exotic holiday destination, the further away the better. The younger generation are meant to be much savvier about this than we are but those who have the money seem to think nothing of going to the other side of the world for recreational purposes, which means so much more CO₂ being pumped into the atmosphere. I've loved travelling myself and I don't want to be puritanical about this, but there often seems to be a massive disconnect between what's really happening at the interface of human beings and their environments and how we want to be living. I'm not calling for a travel ban, but we all – self included – have to think twice about what our lifestyles are doing to the planet.

To go back to what we were saying before, perhaps we need to be rediscovering the island or the garden in the middle of the city, and to be doing less rather than more. So when governments talk about the need for growth we also have to ask 'Growth for what? What kind of growth?' There certainly seem to be societies that are on a much lower economic level than we are that are nevertheless much happier because people are living more for each other, with a greater sense of responsibility and care for each other. It's a question of belonging together that we have to get back to. I say, 'have to' and I think it would be desirable to relearn that sense of belonging. But the reality is that human beings' capacities for self-destruction are still being tested, and being tested to the limit. Tragically, both ancient and modern history show that civilisational progress is not guaranteed and even where progress is sustained at a technical or managerial level, it can be at the price of losing a sense of who we really are and what really matters – remembering again Shestov's dictum that philosophy is about discovering *to timiōtaton*, what most commands reverence – and it is in this regard that our conversation with the past comes into its own.

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CONVERSATION 4:

A Philosophy of Christian Life

Summary: This conversation focuses on one of Pattison's major achievements, his three-volume *A Philosophy of Christian Life*. He himself acknowledges that this trilogy represents a flowering of his reflections on the meaning of the Christian life, together with the fact of self-consciousness, that stretch back some fifty years. Here Pattison considers Luther's maxim, 'theology is a practical not a speculative science', and he brings home the point that the importance of both philosophy of religion and theology is the work that they are put to in service of our attempts at 'transformative' living for the better. Pattison will reflect on what this means for the devoutly religious life, and he will relate this to some very 'down to earth' recommendations in the work of Francis de Sales. Not one to shy away from the meaning that devout Christian life could have for people living in 'the real world', Pattison will find in de Sales a meditation on Christian living that is still of fundamental importance today. Realising, on the completion of what became the first volume of a trilogy, that his *A Phenomenology of the Devout Life* (2018) raised a number of questions without answering them, it was crucial to follow up his discussion with works that would complete what he had started with the first volume, namely, 'a movement from desire, through word, to love'. The themes of calling and love loom large for Pattison, and the importance of prayer in devout living itself became the theme of a 'companion piece' to the trilogy, his *A Philosophy of Prayer* (2024). Pattison also discusses the more technical

aspects of his approach in this conversation, such as his development of a phenomeno-graphical method, and takes the time to reflect on his distance from and/or proximity to other contemporary philosophers and theologians, such as Jean-Luc Marion.

APPROACHING A PHILOSOPHY OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

Philip Tonner

Your trilogy *A Philosophy of Christian Life* is a major achievement. Can I ask, how do you situate this philosophy with respect to your work as a whole?

George Pattison

In part it grew out of a line of questioning that came out of collaborative work with a small group of theologians and philosophers of religion, including the late Arne Grøn, a Danish philosopher of religion and Kierkegaard specialist, who was developing a phenomenological interpretation of selfhood inspired by Heidegger's early lectures on the phenomenology of religious life. In addition to Kierkegaard, we were both interested in exploring the value and significance of passive and receptive states, rather than, say, the Sartrean focus on pure activity. Others involved in this were Claudia Welz, Clare Carlisle, Gavin Flood and Anna Yampolskaya. More broadly, the *Philosophy of Christian Life* developed my long-standing view that there's not much point to theology and philosophy of religion if they're not *rooted in* and *serving* transformative living, or at least our attempt at transformative living. As Luther said, 'theology is a practical and not a speculative science', and I think that's right.

In the acknowledgements to the third volume of the trilogy, *Metaphysics of Love*, I wrote, 'I've gradually become aware that this

work is in some ways a recapitulation of a nearly 50-year-long attempt to understand Christian life as an appropriate response to the astonishing fact of self-conscious existence', to which I'd want to add 'self-conscious existence that's engaged in the task of actively letting itself be transformed'. When I say recapitulation, that's partly because I realised after the event that de Sales's *Introduction to the Devout Life* took me right back to the beginning of my attempt to live a Christian life as a young adult. De Sales was recommended to me by the Diocesan Director of Ordinands, which is extraordinary, really, and I don't think any Diocesan Director of Ordinands would recommend it now because it's a text that in many respects belongs to another age and speaks a very different language from our own. But I chose this work to begin with because I see it as a classic expression of a kind of Christian spirituality that was both normative and also ecumenically received from the Early Modern period through to the twentieth century. There are all sorts of things about it that require interpretation, and de Sales's rather flowery style, with a fondness for avian metaphors, can be fairly off-putting for a contemporary reader, but at its heart it's a very common-sense attempt to take seriously the work on the self that has to be done if we're to become open to God's love.

It's also important to say that it's one of those classic works of Christian spirituality that attempts to work out what it means to be living a devout life, a Christian life, a spiritual life, in the midst of the world. The people for whom it was written were people living in the world with worldly responsibilities, married with families, and this was something of a breakthrough in the history of Christian spirituality that, in the Catholic context, had focused very much on the monastic life as the supreme way of being Christian. Admittedly, many of those to whom de Sales and Fénelon gave direction were from the very upper levels of the French aristocracy, so their concerns and their commitments were rather different from our own, and therefore, again, that requires interpretation. But a lot of it is very down to earth, very basic. And even today, very sensible.

Philip Tonner

This is a philosophy explored in three parts. Did you set out to write a trilogy, or did it evolve into one?

George Pattison

While I was working on it, I remember someone saying that a lot of people were doing trilogies recently. And of course it's true. David Jasper did a very interesting trilogy, as did the Orthodox thinker Antoine Arjakovsky. One might suspect, of course, that there's something about Christianity (I wonder what it could be?) that makes people think in threes – it seems almost natural: I once heard a paper in which the fact of there being three Karamazov brothers was already seen as theologically significant! In fact, *A Phenomenology of the Devout Life* was originally conceived as a standalone. Then I saw that it needed to be extended because it raised more questions than it answered, or, to be more precise, I couldn't get all the questions I wanted to address into it, as I attempted to focus on the one thing needful. But in principle it could have been a two- or a four-parter. But there is something very neat about a trilogy and not only theologians but many novelists, many writers and many filmmakers like to work in threes as well.

Philip Tonner

You very succinctly state the trajectory of your trilogy as being 'a movement from desire, through word, to love' (Pattison, 2018, p. 2). These three terms correspond to the titles of each part of your trilogy, *A Phenomenology of the Devout Life*, *A Rhetorics of the Word* and *A Metaphysics of Love*. Can you explain these three terms please, and can you outline how they relate?

George Pattison

De Sales and other members of the French school didn't ask very much of those setting out on the devout life. As I said, their counsel was oriented toward those living in the world with all sorts of other things to do. Apart from practising religious devotion in a formal sense, all that was necessary, they said, was the desire to live a devout life or, in more modern parlance, to 'take their religion more seriously', to *want* to do it. That was all. No other qualifications were needed at this point. It was a matter of what they called an *attrait*, being drawn to devotion without really understanding why, in much the same way that a mountaineer is drawn to mountaineering or musicians to music. It's just something that people want to do or, more precisely, feel they have to do.

Then, however, there's a switch, at least in the case of the devout life, as the person discovers that it isn't just a matter of a vague feeling but is a *calling*, and I lay a lot of stress on the thought that a calling or a vocation is something that has the character of a word event, even if it's as simple as someone calling 'come', or, what becomes a major theme in Part Two, 'calling by name'.

Love, I suppose, speaks for itself. Dante's final vision of God as the love that moves the sun and other stars is, across the board, regarded as the ultimate goal of Christian living. Few people would quarrel with that. But, as de Sales says, love is not just the goal: it's there from the beginning, because everything in the church is, or should be, from love and for love. Once again, of course, that requires considerable interpretation. We know that Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor claims that his *autos-da-fé* were done out of love for humanity, because people need miracle, mystery and authority to coerce them into a kind of conformity that enables them to live more or less contented lives. That's definitely not what de Sales meant, but just the word 'love' on its own isn't enough. What love actually means, that's the crux of it.

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE DEVOUT LIFE

Philip Tonner

In the first volume of your *Philosophy of Christian Life* you make the case for a 'phenomeno-graphical approach'. Can you explain what you meant by that, and can you explain how this relates to the approach of phenomenology to religion?

George Pattison

Yes, people sometimes write about or practise phenomenology in a way that suggests that phenomenology can somehow obtain a clear view of its subject matter, perhaps in the way that birdwatchers are always trying to get a clearer view of the bird they're watching. In the case of the self, the idea would then be that we're trying to look at the self as it shows itself in and as itself, a pure self, as it were. And that's what the phenomenologist, as opposed to various other kinds of scientists, psychologists, sociologists and so on, is getting at. But in reality the self is only revealed to us in and as it is articulated in the event of language. This means that phenomenological interpretation becomes a matter of interpreting a historically and culturally situated way of living.

The primary form of language in which Christian tradition is available to us is written language, religious books, the record of all those who've been doing this thing before us. In the case of my trilogy, this meant beginning with de Sales, but also engaging a whole series of others who've gone before us, and I think this has always been the method of Christian theology and, in practice, it is also the normal method of philosophy. The Oxford moral philosopher R. M. Hare famously said that philosophers don't have time to read books because they're too busy doing the work of philosophy, by which he meant, I suppose, engaging in Oxford-type tutorials with their students and with each other. But if you read his books, he, too, has indices in which he flags names like Thomas Aquinas, Kant and others,

so even in that case there is some kind of relation to a written tradition going on. I think it better that we acknowledge that and work with it. That's why *phenomeno-graphical*.

Philip Tonner

One philosopher whom you come back to in all three volumes of your *Philosophy of Christian Life* is Jean-Luc Marion. In the first volume, you note that your project could bear some comparison to his 'experiment in using texts of revealed religion as the starting point for a phenomenological investigation of givenness' (Pattison, 2018, p. 50); in the third volume you note that your discussion of love and being may have some parallels with Marion's arguments about the limits of ontology. Can you say something about this 'critical distance' or 'critical relationship', however you would like to describe it, please?

George Pattison

Yes, though it's quite difficult. I want to agree with Marion. And yet I always end up finding myself not quite agreeing with him. I remember when *God Without Being* came out in English, or when I first heard of it, round about 1990. There was much excitement in the postmodern faction and I was really looking forward to reading it but, in the event, I found it disappointing. This had to do with the way in which, to my mind at least, he made the transition from a supposedly purely philosophical phenomenology to some robust theological claims rather too easily, including, as I remember, a forceful argument for the importance of bishops. I have nothing particular against bishops, but I don't place the same value on them as he, at least at that time, did.

So, in this respect, I'm more cautious as to what phenomenology can achieve. But there's no doubt that Marion is a formidable intellectual presence. He also has a strong historical basis, having been a central figure in Descartes studies. He offers a string of important

insights and raises crucial questions. I think I mentioned Rowan Williams' article about Don Cupitt entitled 'On not quite agreeing with Don Cupitt' in a previous conversation, and I feel like that with Marion: I keep on 'not quite agreeing with Jean-Luc Marion'. Interestingly, it was in his Glasgow Gifford Lectures, which were relatively late in his career, that he revealed that what he'd really wanted to do all along was to use theological texts, specifically the New Testament, as the starting point for his phenomenological investigations. But the earlier work sounds more like he's still buying into this idea of a pure phenomenology, looking at this pure subject. So, for example, in his big book on Love, he (again a bit like R. M. Hare, despite all the differences) says that in this book he's not going to quote any secondary literature. He's just going to focus on the thing itself. But it's pretty obvious as you read through it that there is an implicit dialogue going on with a whole multitude of others who've worked on the theme of love. It makes for an easier read, of course, but methodologically, it's a bit tricky.

Philip Tonner

Staying with the first volume of the *Philosophy of Christian Life*, you explore key dimensions of the 'Christian self before God'. You say here that your study will contribute to contemporary philosophical reflection on 'selfhood'. In this regard any light that might be shone on 'religion', 'mysticism' or 'spirituality' is secondary to that aim. This is complex. Can you explain what you meant?

George Pattison

Having just accused Jean-Luc Marion of being a bit tricky, I think that remark is a bit tricky itself, something of a rhetorical move, and remember what I just said about there 'not being a pure self that could be abstracted from the whole concretion of its being in the world'. What I was wanting to get at in saying that was that, in that particular volume, I was not seeking to promote any particular

theological position, let alone any practical recommendations for how readers might become more spiritual or anything like that. Instead, I was wanting to look at the phenomenon of the devout life in purely human terms and to see what the devout life told us about being human. In a sense, though, I'd ask whether we can ever really do anything else in any field of inquiry – looking at “it” in human terms? It's only when the idea of a call supervenes on that of an *attrait* or a desire that the issue of something that's not merely immanent gets into gear, though even by the end of the trilogy I'm still quite deflationary or very cautious as to what can be said about that. But in the beginning, we begin with the human.

There's a Danish thinker, N. F. S. Grundtvig, who was a contemporary of Kierkegaard, though they didn't get on at all well, who had a famous saying, ‘human first, and then the Christian’, and that was essentially what I was wanting to do there.

Philip Tonner

Again, in *A Phenomenology of the Devout Life*, you argue that what is distinctive about Christian life is that it is rooted in the kind of freedom that enables people to embrace and commit themselves to such a life. Can you unpack this?

George Pattison

Yes. By our standards, de Sales's world is a very hierarchical world, both in society and in the Church, a world in which monarchy, order, discipline from above really set the parameters for people's lives. Nevertheless, he is always insistent that those who are to enter the devout life, specifically those living a devout life in the world, must do so freely. It must be a choice, and he has a series of spiritual exercises directed toward getting you ready for that choice.

That freedom continues all the way through. It's not like getting a qualification. You pass the exam, and then forever after you have your degree or certificate: but you're only devout as long as you go

on being devout. In a sense, the devout life, as de Sales understood it, is a pedagogy of freedom, and he also has a very keen sense for something that Kierkegaard would also see, the mimeticism that powers social conformity and which means that we often do things we know are wrong because we're afraid of standing out and being different. What he's encouraging us to do instead is to find the courage to do that, and to make our decisions for ourselves rather than on the basis of what everyone else is explicitly or implicitly telling us to do.

Philip Tonner

Can I ask a quick follow-up question on that, if I may? Do you see an existentialist thread, then, in de Sales?

George Pattison

I do. And I know later on you want to ask a question about the book I did with Kate Kirkpatrick on existentialism and mysticism. Her work has focused on the French side of that, and I think Sartre and de Beauvoir are part of the French literary tradition in which de Sales, but even more importantly, Fénelon, were major figures. Fénelon was not only an important spiritual writer but a political theorist and one of the great stylists of the age of the Sun King. I think it's also important to note that they were contemporaries of Descartes, and I see them as offering a nuanced variation on the view of the self that comes to expression with Descartes, which has, of course, been seminal for virtually the whole of the modern discussion and especially in France. Even where people disagree with him, he's nevertheless a primary point of reference.

As I mentioned in our second conversation, Fénelon wrote a treatise on the proof for the existence of God from the nothingness of the human self in which the first few chapters are a kind of pastiche on Descartes' *Discourse on Method*, and, like Descartes, Fénelon too sets out to doubt everything that he can possibly doubt. But

he parts company from Descartes when he suggests that the fact that 'I think' doesn't entail that 'I am', because maybe it's not me that's thinking and maybe 'I' am just a nothing. The conclusion of his argument, then, is that my existence can't be demonstrated by an analysis of the fact of thought, meaning that this existence must come, somehow, from outside. Thought alone is not enough to, as it were, guarantee my existence, a point that becomes a major theme in much existentialist writing, as, for example, in Kierkegaard's polemic against Hegel, in which he accuses Hegel of preoccupying himself with pure thought at the expense of existence. That may be a slight misrepresentation of Hegel on Kierkegaard's part, but clearly one of the things he reacted negatively to in German Idealism was this focus on the thinking self.

Philip Tonner

One philosopher who was particularly important for you in your Philosophy of Christian Life was Heidegger. I'd like to ask you two questions about this. The first question is, why was Heidegger helpful to you in formulating your philosophical project across these three works?

George Pattison

As I said before, the beginning of this inquiry had Heidegger's lectures on religious life as an inspiration, and Heidegger modelled the phenomenological approach to existential questions that went beyond the kind of epistemological questions that dominated philosophy of religion when I first got involved in it. Unlike Sartre, he also had a profound understanding of, and feel for, what is at stake in religious life, even though he was to abandon his own early religious beginnings and embrace some kind of atheism, at least methodologically. So, Heidegger is often a very helpful point of reference, even at those points, and there are many, where I disagree with him. One such disagreement – that actually plays a big part in

A Rhetorics of the Word – is the account of conscience. For Heidegger, conscience is to be understood very much in relation to Dasein's awareness of its own inevitable death, a remembrance, as it were, of its nothingness, rather than in relation to anything like a moral sense, which is the usual context in which we talk about conscience. More positively, his writings on Hölderlin also inform my account of poetic vocation in that volume, both in its own right, and as modelling the reciprocity of calling and being called. Levinas once referred to Heidegger as 'a necessary passage', and I think that's right. Attempting to do phenomenology of religious life without engaging Heidegger would be self-harm on a grand scale.

Philip Tonner

My second question for you about Heidegger relates to your reading of him as '*not* a philosopher of love' (Pattison, 2021, p. 4). Reading this statement made me think of Michael Inwood's reminder that 'Heidegger's thought has often been seen as akin to Duns Scotus', even as 'secularized Scotism' (Inwood, 1999, p. 235), and Scotus is the philosopher-theologian of love *par excellence*. Can I ask, what is your take on this identification, and what led you to your view of Heidegger as not a philosopher of love?

George Pattison

Well, on the relationship between Heidegger and Scotus, I definitely defer to you! As I'm sure you know, for a long time it was believed that Heidegger wrote his Habilitation thesis on Scotus, and he himself thought that. But more recently it's been discovered that the text he worked on was by one Thomas of Erfurt. It wasn't, in fact, a text in which a name appeared, but it simply said, 'the Scot', and subsequent editors assumed that the Scot was Scotus. All it really meant was that the author belonged to the Scottish College at Erfurt (which, confusingly, was actually the Irish College).

There's been a long-standing debate amongst Heidegger scholars

as to whether his thought in *Being and Time* (in particular) leads to what we might call existentialist individualism, what the Marxist George Lukács called 'parasitic subjectivism', and it's true that Heidegger's image of a person becoming authentic through an utterly individuating confrontation with the prospect of death seems to take precedence over the mutual obligations implicit in human relatedness, as opposed to Buber, for example, who very emphatically places relationship, I-Thou, at the very centre of his thought. Heidegger does, of course, talk about *Mitsein*, about being-with, but I don't interpret this, as some do, as involving ethical responsibility for the other. It's simply the recognition that we live in a world populated by others, that the language we speak, in which we attempt to understand ourselves, is not a language that each of us invents for ourselves, but a language that comes to us through participation in a language community. This is why Heidegger says in *Being and Time* that we always have to start with average everyday discourse, which is fallen and inauthentic, because it's where we all do begin, in the language we've got from our society, from others, and then we have to work out a more authentic way of understanding ourselves.

Unfortunately, when Heidegger's thinking does take a more social turn in the 1930s and he starts to develop a social and political philosophy, most notably in his lectures on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, it turns out to be deeply entangled in his own personal commitment to Nazism. In relation to this it's telling, I think, that he buys in very strongly to the Führer Principle (*Führerprinzip*), which is itself essentially individualistic in the sense that it sees one man as being able to take responsibility for the collective fate of the community. Hitler alone, the Führer alone, is German reality, Heidegger would, alas, say – though I also think that by 1941 this was a position he'd abandoned, seeing it as the ultimate expression of Western nihilism as explicated in Nietzsche's idea of the will to power.

That, of course, opens up an enormous and hugely controversial discussion. And I should emphasise that I'm not one of those who think that because Heidegger was for at least a certain period a strongly committed member of the Nazi party, everything he wrote

is therefore just to be rejected. Unfortunately, there are very few in history who can be exemplary in all aspects of their lives, and intellectuals in particular have a strong history of falling for some pretty awful social and political attitudes.

Philip Tonner

Can I ask a quick follow-up on that? I was reminded when listening to you about Heidegger's engagement with St. Augustine, and that perhaps that comes through in Heidegger's placing emphasis on our 'fallenness', and that everything in our everyday state is in a sense marked by that, and then there comes this one individual who can act as saviour – that perhaps there is a rather dark inversion of some Christian themes here?

George Pattison

Yes, again – as you probably know – some of Heidegger's early lectures on the *Phenomenology of Religious Life* were focused on Augustine's *Confessions*, and he himself acknowledged in the 1920s that Augustine, Luther and Kierkegaard were 'philosophically essential' for the project of *Being and Time*. Luther, too, of course, was an Augustinian monk, and very deeply steeped in Augustinian teaching. So that's undoubtedly one of the elements in there.

To mention Kate Kirkpatrick again, in her thesis on Sartre she argued that Sartre's existentialist view of the world was basically an Augustinian view of the human condition under the sway of sinfulness, of fallenness, and you could say that there's something very similar in *Being and Time*. Only there, the possibility of redemption isn't something coming from without but is something we have to work out ourselves and the best we can do, the authentic thing we can do, is simply to confront and face up to the bleakness of our situation. Later on, in his more poetic Hölderlin-influenced period, Heidegger would say in a famous interview with *Der Spiegel*, that 'only a God can save us', that if there is to be some kind of salvation,

we can't give it to ourselves – which is very different from what he was saying in *Being and Time*. Clearly, as you imply, a cultural focus on a Messiah figure can enable – and has enabled – a whole series of false Messiahs, but this doesn't of itself falsify the original impulse. It just means that we have to be very cautious in how we deal with it.

A RHETORICS OF THE WORD

Philip Tonner

In *A Rhetorics of the Word* (2019) you discuss a key feature of Christian life, namely the requirement that such a life understands itself in relation to the 'exigency of divine calling' (Pattison, 2019, p. 3). You state this view in connection to your discussion of what theologians have called a 'word-event', which you link to Christian baptism. You go on to point out that there are those who see religious life as more a matter of feeling, and that they will generally resist this linguistic emphasis. In extreme cases, and you quote here the Orcadian poet Edwin Muir, they may argue that this linguistic emphasis turns God into 'three angry letters in a book'. There is a lot to unpack here. Can you please do that, and can you tell me where you sit in this debate?

George Pattison

One of the things that people say about the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism is that Catholicism emphasises the sacraments, and Protestantism emphasises the word. Tillich, for example, says something very like that in the third volume of his *Systematic Theology*, saying also that the world of the sacraments is both older than the world of the word, and that it is also essentially a silent world. Like many such generalisations there is a grain of truth in that, but of course it soon breaks down, because Protestantism, too, has a sacramental life, even if it reduces the sacraments from

seven to two, and Catholicism, of course, also knows about the word, as in preaching and catechesis, and, indeed, the words of the liturgy itself are crucial.

As you pointed out, I emphasise that calling implies articulate speech. As we've been seeing, this idea of calling or vocation is integral to the Catholic idea of the devout life, which indicates that the word here isn't exclusively a Protestant thing and, as I develop the theme in *A Rhetorics of the Word*, I also take a turn to the Orthodox world, specifically to the emphasis in modern Orthodox theology on the name. You probably know the so-called Jesus Prayer, or the prayer of the name which consists in the recitation of the name of Jesus in the form 'Jesus Christ have mercy on me!', a practice particularly associated with Mount Athos. In the perspective of this practice, what we're called to is a life in which we are continually able to call upon God. What is at issue is something reciprocal that, at its most intense, becomes a matter of reciprocal naming. A human analogy would be when lovers whisper each other's names in such a way as to seal their intimacy, maybe even having special pet names for each other that are exclusive to them.

When I say 'the word', however, this word doesn't need to be extensive. It doesn't need to be many words. It doesn't need to be fifty-five volumes of words. We remember Jesus's warnings about those who like long prayers. It can be a few words, or even just one, but inhabited with the full intensity of existence. This is a point we find in the medieval treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing*, where the writer says to the person wanting to know how to pray not to bother with lots of words but just to use one. When people are in a house that's on fire, he says, they don't need a lot of words, they just shout out, 'Help!'. They go straight to the heart of the matter, and that's right. But I'd also say that there's a difference between the language-less cry of an animal in peril of death, and the human experience in which we cry out for help in a word, articulately, to another human being – a point that Hegel makes.

Muir's criticisms aimed at something that did unfortunately go wrong with Protestantism, when the dominant focus on Scripture became fused with a rather stern moralism, as it did in Scottish Calvinism, so that God became those three angry letters in a book.

In the poem Muir specifically refers to 'King Calvin with his iron crook', and he sees the Knoxian regime in Scotland as anticipating the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century. On Muir's analysis, Knox really was a disaster for Scotland – but he was sufficiently interested to write the Reformer's biography. The tragedy is that Calvinism, including Scottish Calvinism, has in itself the resources with which to avert this deformation, but for whatever reasons it failed to do so. By way of contrast, we might think about the contemporary American writer, Marilynne Robinson, who is an avowed Calvinist, but who is able to discover and communicate the beauty to which Calvinist theology at its best points us.

So, certainly, the word can become deformed. The word can become a means of abuse, a means of violence. But it can become the form of our self-discovery and of the communication of love. And I think it's important even in our culture which so emphasises feelings – watch just about any soap opera, or any romantic film, and very often the woman will say, 'but you never say you love me. You don't say it. You've got to say it.' The word doesn't suppress the love or the feelings, but it brings that love and those feelings to a new kind of level.

A wonderful example which I discuss in my Edwin Muir book is Helen Keller, who was born deaf, dumb and blind but was taught speech by her teacher, Miss Sullivan, when she was about seven or eight years old. She herself describes the difference this made, giving a vivid picture of how the world she lived in before she had language was dark, chaotic, utterly random, but when she learned to speak, to communicate with words, she entered a world in which there was love, friendship and beauty. There were things to learn and things to do. It became, in the Heideggerian sense, a world, and not just a chaos.

Philip Tonner

I'd like to ask a follow-up question, about Edwin Muir and poetry, if that's ok? You devoted a short work (2013) to exploring existentialism and faith in one of his poems. Why?

George Pattison

Again, I have to admit to a certain Heideggerian inspiration in this case, since much of Heidegger's later thought takes the shape of meditations on poems by Hölderlin. The poem in question is a posthumous poem without a title. It begins with the lines, 'The heart could never speak,/ But that the Word was spoken'. That, in effect, sums up what I've been saying about Helen Keller, for example, but maybe also the essence of my trilogy in just two short lines.

The last lines of the poem, 'Time, merciful lord, Grant us to learn your word', similarly pinpoint an issue that's been nagging away at me for many years, and that's central to existentialist theology, because they are ambiguous. They can be read as a prayer to time, where 'time' is in the vocative and is being thought of as the ultimate horizon of human existence (as it is for early Heidegger) and figured as our 'lord', so that this prayer means that the truest word about who we are is the word that time, and time alone, reveals to us. But they could also be understood as addressed to the Lord, to God, 'Time, merciful Lord, Grant us to learn your Word'. In this case we are asking for time to hear God's Word about who we are, and in that case, a word that's not reducible to what we learn in and through time, it's a word that can say something more than what time says.

I think the tension between these two interpretations is the crux of what's at issue in the existential approach to faith, and it would solve the problem as to Muir's intention if we knew whether the I/ Lord was written with an upper- or a lower-case 'I'. But, as I mentioned, this is a posthumous poem, and the editors speak of the difficulty of making out Muir's handwriting, so we don't really know. And of course, we don't know if he would have revised it further. But perhaps it's better that way rather than coming down on one side or the other. It's the tension that's important.

Philip Tonner

You recently co-edited *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought* (2020). You also edited *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*

(2015). You taught for a time in both Moscow and Aarhus, and you were recently a Senior Co-Fund Fellow at the Max Weber Centre at the University of Erfurt. Clearly, language has been important to you, not only as a writer in English, but as a student of other languages. How have you approached your language studies over the years, and did your experience of language learning affect your approach to language in *A Rhetorics of the Word*?

George Pattison

I have to admit that the course I taught in Moscow was only for a week, and I should also admit that it was in English, and the students did very well to listen to me in English. It's an all too frequent and slightly shaming experience that wherever you go in Europe and beyond Europe, students and colleagues will listen to what you have to say in English, in many cases where we're incapable of speaking with them in their own languages.

Coming to your question, I must admit that there's something fairly haphazard about my language studies. French came from school, where I did French at A-level. I wasn't at all a star pupil. I think I got a B, but I probably did well on the literature side and less well on the grammar. I'd only done German to O-level, but when I had the chance to spend a semester at Tübingen University, while I was studying for my B.D., I cranked that up and, in a sense, I really learned German through reading groups on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in Tübingen, in Hegel's own college. Then, when I came back, I did my B.D. thesis on Tillich's religious Socialist writings, which were then only available in German. The decision to focus on Kierkegaard led me to Danish. Now, it's possible to do a PhD and write interesting things on Kierkegaard without knowing Danish. Many people do. But knowledge of the language is essential if, like me, you have a historical and literary, as well as a systematic, interest. If you're purely reading Kierkegaard as a philosopher or as a theologian, then there's much you can do without Danish, but for me, and we've discussed this before, historical context is important.

As far as Russian goes, I didn't learn Russian with a specific

purpose in mind. When I was in my mid-forties, I felt I wanted to learn a new language, and the toss-up was between Russian, Chinese and Persian, but I decided on Russian. This was not only for reading Dostoevsky, though that was a significant factor, and there's still more that I want to read in the original, chiefly Chekhov's short stories, which are very challenging in terms of vocabulary, but are extraordinarily 'pathos filled', to use a Kierkegaardian expression, as well as being amongst the relatively few works of classical Russian literature that aren't marked by an obtrusive nationalism.

I think it's right that living in a number of languages over a number of years has reinforced my sense for how important language and the word are: indeed, philosophy itself can ultimately be seen as a kind of translation exercise. A poem may be, in a sense, untranslatable, but because philosophy aims at universality of understanding, a philosophical argument must, in principle, be translatable. Consequently, if we come across some seemingly absurd idea or expression, we just have to nag away at it until it breaks down and yields its fruit.

One of the very best seminars I ever took part in, a series of seminars, in fact, was set up by the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre at the University of Copenhagen with the aim of discussing issues in translating Kierkegaard. The participants included scholars translating Kierkegaard into Swedish, Russian, Chinese, Spanish, French, English and other languages (including Lithuanian), and there were various exercises we all shared in. For example, we took the same passage, and had it translated by a philosopher, a theologian and someone from literary studies, and then discussed the differences that their different antennae picked up on. Then again, we sometimes looked at the way in which passages that were very difficult in one language were not in another. One example is the first sentence of Kierkegaard's first published work (*From the Papers of One Still Living*), which takes up nearly a whole page: it's notoriously difficult in English, but a Spanish translator said, "Oh, this is a wonderful sentence. It is entirely congruent with Spanish rhetorical practices, there's no problem here". So, it's fascinating to really get into the work of how the ideas of Kierkegaard are so enmeshed with language, and our approach to them is so conditioned by the language that we speak.

Philip Tonner

You take up the question of mysticism again in *A Rhetorics of the Word*. Just the year before the appearance of that work you co-authored a book with Kate Kirkpatrick, entitled *The Mystical Sources of Existentialist Thought: Being, Nothingness, Love* (2018). In *A Rhetorics of the Word*, you cite approvingly Jean-Louis Chrétien's distinction between the philosophical mystic who stands in silence in face of the impersonal absolute, and the silence of the believer awaiting a God who can, in some sense 'speak', or for whom 'Word, is not alien' (Pattison, 2019, p. 4). Can you tell me what is at stake in this distinction, and why there is a question about language to answer in relation to mystical experience?

George Pattison

If mystical experience is understood, as it is understood in the main Christian traditions, as being about the love of God, then it is about the relationship between God and the one who prays. But in the Christian economy, the idea of heaven, the mystical body of Christ which is the blessed company of all true believers, is integral to that relationship, meaning that we're dealing with a community of love and, since (as we've been saying) love must express itself, love therefore needs language. Just what language it needs and just how much language it needs are open for discussion, however.

There's a very famous passage near the beginning of his *Works of Love*, in which Kierkegaard says that there's no word in the language that cannot become a word of love, according to context, how it's used, and how it's intended. And, equally, there is no word of love that cannot become a word against love. I mentioned before the Grand Inquisitor, who claims to love the people that he terrorises with his miracle, mystery and authority. 'I'm doing it for your good', the classic line of the sadistic parent or the cruel headteacher in some Victorian novel. So, one doesn't know from the formal appearance of a sentence whether it is or isn't a word of love, but one has to interpret and understand. With regard to Christian mysticism,

Kierkegaard says in one of his *Upbuilding Discourses*, that your prayer might not be answered, but at least by praying, you have established a relation to God, and that's actually the thing we really should be praying for. The process of prayer, of speaking with God, is in itself the answer to prayer because it is establishing the relationship [to God].

A METAPHYSICS OF LOVE AND A PHILOSOPHY OF PRAYER

Philip Tonner

You remark in *A Metaphysics of Love*, in connection to your discussion of the epistemological value of love, that 'without the possibility that feeling and practice can contribute to philosophical understanding, this enquiry couldn't have got off the ground' (Pattison, 2021, p. 3). What did you mean by that?

George Pattison

When I was first being inducted into philosophy of religion it was very much about how religious propositions make sense. These propositions were isolated from all contexts, except for some slightly weird parables thought up by philosophers. And of course, there are still some philosophers who think that we should isolate propositions from all contexts and look at them in themselves. But over the last couple of generations there's been a very widespread rediscovery of philosophy as being about trying to live a better life in the world, rather than just solving logical puzzles. People often now refer back to the beginnings of philosophy in Ancient Greece, where it was very much the question of how to live a good life and what understanding of the world provides the best basis for such a life. This is what mattered to thinkers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus. It was not, to recur to Luther, that philosophy wasn't a speculative

science, but a practical one: it was a speculative science, but it was one for which a certain practice was necessary. I wouldn't say that this approach is now the norm, but it's very widely accepted, often with reference to Pierre Hadot, who was one of the first to reintroduce this way of looking at philosophy. Martha Nussbaum in America and John Cottingham in England are just two representatives of this approach, and something like it was also astir in the radical theology of Don Cupitt and, more recently, in the work of Clare Carlisle.

In the old days, people used to look at the human psyche in terms of the three faculties of feeling, thinking and willing. We no longer think in terms of that faculty psychology, though in a rough and ready way, it can serve us quite well as an everyday way of speaking, but we now know there isn't a sort of faculty somewhere in the brain for feeling, and another one for thinking, and another one for willing. What we know now is that these three all interact constantly, and at every level, and that's what we should recognise and work with in our own thinking.

Philip Tonner

The term 'metaphysics' has a long and complex history, and you have engaged with questions in that history in several places, particularly in *God and Being* (2011). You return to issues of metaphysics in this last volume of your trilogy on the Philosophy of Christian Life, but you do so in connection to love, rather than to, say, the question of the existence of God. Can you explain this choice, and can you say something about the contemporary possibility of metaphysics?

George Pattison

So let me start with the Dostoevsky short story, *A Gentle Spirit*, that is the starting point of my book on Dostoevsky. This story is narrated by the husband of a woman who's just committed suicide

by jumping out of the apartment window clutching an icon. He's standing by her body, waiting for it to be taken away for burial, and he's retelling the story of their relationship. He isn't aware of it, but we, the readers, are able to see very clearly that it's his own mental cruelty that has driven her to what she's done. Nevertheless, without her, his life is desolate, and he has a vision at the end which, set against the deterministic physics of the nineteenth century, sees his own unhappiness in a cosmic context: that the world is simply an ensemble of mechanical forces, subject to entropy, gradually winding down without any interest in human beings or what happens to them. 'Men are alone upon the earth', he exclaimed. That's what's terrible. Some say we should love one another, but in a universe like this, love has no basis in reality. Love is at best nothing more than the sublimation of the reproductive instinct. I think that situates the metaphysical choice quite clearly. Either there is only an ensemble of mechanistic forces programmed by the need for reproduction and a concomitant will to power, or there is something 'more', namely the possibility of a love that is rooted and grounded in human freedom.

But then there's a further choice, which I refer to several times in *A Metaphysics of Love*, that this quality of love, this irreducible quality of love, may ultimately be something quixotic. It may be something that has somehow arisen in the evolutionary and social development of human beings, that it is something that we have created, a world of values that nevertheless lack any ontological ground – this, incidentally, would be something like Don Cupitt's non-realist view of God. An analogy to this is what happens when we read literature, since the world that Dostoevsky describes or the world that Tolkien describes doesn't really exist. The world conjured forth in literature is a world of fantasy, a world of imagination, and maybe everything we know of love is like that: a beautiful fiction. So in that case, putting our faith in love would be quixotic, like Don Quixote's fantasies about knight-errantry. Now, we may decide that, even if that is the case, even if we know them to be ultimately quixotic, that it's still humanly better to pursue those values, even though we know that they are essentially absurd and have no ground in being. Or we may want to affirm that these values do have an ontological ground

such that, even if love started off as a sublimation of the reproductive instinct, it has developed beyond that, and this development is actually revealing something about how the universe is to us, so that in this perspective God becomes the ontological ground of the possibility of loving and love is the best clue we have to what the universe is like. Going back to our last conversation, even if love is a fiction it reveals something true about the world. Again, it's a question as to whether it is love or being that is to define the focus of theological and philosophical thinking.

Philip Tonner

In 2024 you published a collection of essays under the title of *A Philosophy of Prayer: Nothingness, Language, and Hope*. While the essays collected there were written over nearly a twenty-year period, you refer to the volume as something like a 'companion piece' or 'foil' to *A Phenomenology of the Devout Life* (2018). Can you say something about how these two projects interact?

George Pattison

Despite the publication dates, the *Philosophy of Prayer* is, in a sense, the earlier work, although it's all been extensively revised for publication. A lot of the chapters go back quite a long way (I think to 2010, in one case). As you indicate, there is a close connection between these works. The devout life is, after all, a life focused on prayer and in prayer. Praying is an essential part of the devout life, but in another sense, the devout life is more than prayer. The devout life is also about how we deal with our social relationships, how we relate to other people, and in this sense the book on prayer has a narrower focus. The devout life is more expansive. It's our life as a whole, and not only our life in the very specific focus of prayer.

Philip Tonner

One thing that struck me in reading *A Philosophy of Prayer* was your discussion of attention. This stood out to me as a reader given my recent *Conversations with Tim Ingold* (2024): Tim argues that what ‘makes the difference between leading life and living it is *attention*’ (Ingold, 2018, p. 20). You describe attention as an act, something that we do, and something that involves intention: ‘we must intend to attend if we are truly to attend’ (Pattison, 2024, p. 79). In such attending ‘we hold ourselves or stretch ourselves out toward what is not ourselves and toward what we do not have power over’ (Pattison, 2024, p. 78). This, in my mind, connects with Ingold’s account of education (which draws on the philosophy of Jan Masschelein) whereby we, by a kind of exposure, attend to the world in such a way as to correspond with it. The example Ingold quotes from Masschelein is that of going for a walk, which involves a kind of active undergoing which puts our position “at stake”; we have to *make* our way in a world that we are not master of in what Masschelein describes as a kind of ‘cutting the road through’ (Masschelein, 2010, p. 278). What is nice about this example is that it connects to that second aspect of attention that you discuss: namely, that while an act there is also a ‘passivity, a waiting-upon’ in attention, which resonates in the English phrase ‘attending upon someone’. Again, there is a kind of risk taken by the subject who is awaiting. There is much more to your engagement with ‘attention’ in your philosophy of prayer than I have here alluded to. Can I ask you to revisit your discussion and to explore the road it takes with me please?

George Pattison

I was led to the phenomenon of attention by Simone Weil, for whom it’s a very important theme. She sees spiritual discipline as essentially a matter of attending, attending to that which is beyond ourselves, perhaps also in the sense of ‘waiting on’. In this sense, even though there is a very radical ascetic element in Weil and even though her idea of what is at stake in religious life goes beyond knowledge, she

places huge value on what she calls “school studies” as part of spiritual preparation. Why? Because school studies teach us to immerse ourselves in and, as it were, submit to the evidence of something that is greater than ourselves.

It’s a theme that also resonates with a lot of contemporary interest in mindfulness, although this can go two ways. A key theme in mindfulness is just focusing on the present moment in its passing, but this can either mean a focus just on ourselves, on our own feelings and sensations, or becoming open to that which is more than ourselves. What I like to refer to as ‘outwith the orbit of the self’. In this connection, I remember a number of years ago thinking about what I did in my life that was really worthwhile, or, if you like, the activities which I felt were most rewarding, and they came down to something like listening to Bach, listening to a mountain stream, or the waves crashing on the shore, watching wildlife, letting myself be taken out of myself by something that was there long before I came along and that would be there if I didn’t come along. Weil herself, when she’s talking about nature, emphasises that, as opposed to certain romantic views of nature, the important thing is not the resonance between the human being and nature, but that nature presents us with this ‘more’, something we can’t grasp – somewhat like what the late eighteenth-century philosophers would call the sublime: something that exceeds the human, but that, nevertheless, draws our attention to it. The object, as it were, grabs us, but we then have to live up to what’s required by that experience, that ‘grabbing’. We hear a snatch of Bach, and we think, ‘Oh, that’s nice’, and then in the course of a busy day, that’s all we think, and we go away, and something else comes along – or it could be the beginning of a serious immersion in Bach’s music and following it in the entirety of its development and progression.

Philip Tonner

In *A Philosophy of Prayer*, you return to post-Kantian existential religious thought, and you note in your Preface that for thinkers in these traditions, the ‘possibility and meaning of prayer’ was fundamentally

challenged by the 'questions and dissonances' characteristic of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Secular modernity has arrived, and the 'horizon of faith' must be explored in new ways. Can you outline some of these ways for me and relate them back to your own experiences and practices of Christian life?

George Pattison

Yes. I was drawn to church as a child, and I still find myself very much at home in church, to the point where it almost comes naturally. But church cannot be for us what it was in the past, not even for those of us who are at ease with it. Until Kierkegaard, it was more or less assumed that faith and church were equivalent. Faith was what the Church taught. The Church was the community of faith. But I think the modern experience has exploded any easy identification. Some of the most radical thinking about what this new situation implies goes back to Bonhoeffer's question, developed while he was in prison, 'What if Christianity is not a religion?' What if it's all long been a mistake to think of Christianity as a religion, modelling it on the lines of the religions of the ancient world in which Christianity first developed? In a similar mood, Ronald Gregor Smith, who was my predecessor at Glasgow, talked about 'secular Christianity'. Of course, as many critics have complained, this seems rather rapidly to lead to formlessness, in which everyone just kind of mooches along and does what they like. Where does any idea of a shared agenda go?

And then one has a counter movement, like Radical Orthodoxy, which likes to describe itself as red-blooded, and to reaffirm the full, maximum power of Christian doctrine, like John Milbank, claiming that theology remains the queen of the sciences and only theology can overcome metaphysics (a major theme in the post-modern philosophy of the 1990s). In practical terms, this can be very embarrassing: I was once involved in a job interview with a young person who held that view and the interviewing panel comprised a number of exceptionally eminent people from across the humanities and social sciences, historians, sociologists,

psychologists. And the question arose, 'Are you really saying that theology can set the agenda for all these different sciences?', to which the candidate said, 'Well, yes'.

It was just clearly inappropriate. What matters today is doing the work, not claiming pre-eminence. When you've done the work, then you can hope for respect – but not before.

Bonhoeffer himself was only raising a question. He didn't live to follow up on it. We don't really know where he'd have gone from there. So, speaking for myself, some forms of church life remain valuable, not least the critical tradition of theological reflection! But I think this probably needs to be more lightweight than the full body of institutional authority and official teachings that 'church' meant in the past. And we also have to recognise that, as an Oxford colleague said to me the other day, theology is *en route* to disappearing from British universities, except perhaps in one or two or three institutions. But even in those, there might not be much more than a generation left. Who knows, but what 'church' will become is still emergent. With reference to my own theme of calling, the church is simply the community of those who are called, those who are called out from the world. But I no longer think that we have to understand this as escaping the world and scrambling on board an ark of salvation. It's more like being called out onto a rather open-ended journey, joining those who the French writer, Léon Bloy, called the 'wanderers of the Great Dream', people who don't necessarily have institutional associations with each other: perhaps something like a politics of friendship, to borrow Derrida's phrase.

We talked about how in my own life I've taken inspiration from Buddhism and Judaism as well as Christianity, not to mention philosophy. Many people would perhaps see that as perhaps typical of a kind of Bonhoefferian churchless liberalism and use negative words like eclecticism – and that's certainly how it's going to look if you're thinking about this within a strongly institutionalised context. But eclecticism is, I think, where we're at. To draw a comparison that many others have also made, there's something very similar to our situation today with the situation of the second and third centuries, when Christianity was first taking shape. Christianity, then, was very eclectic. It was going around, and it was borrowing a bit from

Platonism here, and a bit from Stoicism there. It was making itself up as it went along, and I think it's possible to see that as a virtue rather than as a failing. To use another image that, again, a lot of other people have used, it's a bit like a guerrilla army that has to forage as it goes along, rather than a conventional army with clearly defined supply lines and power structures.

An important theme here, I think, is creativity, and the role of literature and the arts in helping us to draw all these multiple influences and references into a coherent whole, both as individuals and as communities. Creativity has, in the past been, I think, rather under-emphasised in Christianity. It's often been said that only God can create. God created the world out of nothing, but human beings, being themselves creatures, can't really create. The Russian thinker, Nikolai Berdyaev, argued that human beings are made in the image of God, and if God is the Creator, then human beings are created to be creators. Creativity is not an infringement on God's divine rights but is celebrating the gift of the divine image that God has given us. If you look back through the history of Christianity, it has been extraordinarily creative and has reinvented itself many times. Sometimes, we might say, it's been reinvented very badly, but sometimes very well. Thinkers as diverse as Paul, Eckhart, John Bunyan, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Edith Stein – an extraordinary range of figures – have re-created the image of Christianity for their time and for subsequent generations.

Philip Tonner

Now that you have had some time to reflect, is there anything in your Philosophy of Christian Life that you would wish to revise, revisit or engage with again in a new way?

George Pattison

There's certainly a lot that I'm continuing to deal with, in the sense that the question is unanswered. Heidegger said that the point of

philosophy is not to reach conclusions but to ask the question, and *The Metaphysics of Love* ends with the question that we've just been discussing, the question as to whether love is a revelation of the ontology of human being, or whether it's a quixotic dream, a fiction. And that's a question that continues to nag away. It's not a question we can provide a simple answer to. It's a question to be experimented with in life.

Now, certainly, I know from responses that much of what I say in my *Philosophy of Christian Life* is open to misunderstanding and objection. Some of these misunderstandings I anticipated, but in a rather cheeky way, laid myself open to them. Certainly, some readers have taken it as an argument for the reassertion of a theological heteronomy, and clearly, at several points, we've discussed that my work does involve a sustained critique of autonomy, and a preference, or a natural affinity, for passivity as opposed to activity. On this point, though, I agree with Paul Tillich, who was very clear about this whole issue, perhaps a little bit too clear, but helpful. He said that in relation to heteronomy, Christianity should always take the part of autonomy, in other words, that we shouldn't be content to do what the Bible says, or what the priest says, or what the professor says, that the voice of the individual, the self-affirmation of the individual, have to be affirmed. But, on the other hand, he argued that human autonomy itself can't create anything new, it can't create substantial values. And if we only have autonomy, then we'll find ourselves living in an essentially empty world, where various arbitrary centres of volition are constantly clashing against each other. His solution was what he called theonomy, meaning that we shouldn't submit without questioning to Bible, to church, to authority, to Grand Inquisitors sacred or secular, but over against God, we should indeed recognise the limits of our autonomy. But God, in this case, is not a power external to us, God is the inwardness of our inner being, closer to us than we are to ourselves, as Augustine said. There's a prayer I used to use quite often in Evensong, which says, 'God, subdue our hearts to teachableness', and I think we have to be teachable. We have to be able to learn from what is more than ourselves. That's a theme we've talked about several times now, namely, recognising that what is most important is perhaps not what we make ourselves.

Then there are several specific criticisms that people have made. One critic said there wasn't enough feminism in it, and another that there wasn't enough liberation theology. Indeed, I didn't bring in either of these extensively, though I would say that feminist theology, in the very broad sense, was a central part of my own formation. I've understood from the beginning that theology is a community of men and women. I was very fortunate to study in Edinburgh at New College, where (though I couldn't tell you the exact percentage) there were many women from reformed traditions studying for ministry alongside men, and it just seemed entirely natural and the right thing to be doing. Again, what I experienced in Tübingen was very much a dynamic community of men and women going about the theological task together, whereas in England at that time it was even more dominantly male in the Anglican context than in the Scottish context. My PhD supervisor, Ann Loades, was a leading British feminist theologian and was, of course, a significant influence on my development.

Some forms of feminism do, however, strongly commit to a high doctrine of autonomy. An example in the British context is Daphne Hampson, who is one of the leading feminist theologians of her generation, though interestingly, not a Christian. She thought Christianity was bad for women, but she was still a theist and, as such, a theologian. But, for Daphne, the development and the strengthening of autonomy was crucial. And this was what society in general and Christianity in particular had denied women. I'd agree (again with Tillich) that we have to affirm autonomy against heteronomy, because clearly the sort of context in which a wife is there simply to do what her husband tells her is unacceptable. I think it always was unacceptable. But clearly society has accepted it in part for a long time. Interestingly, though, the most extreme ideologist of absolute autonomy was a woman, a Russian-American woman, Ayn Rand, whose novels – which many people think are very bad novels (*The Fountainhead* is the only novel that Donald Trump has acknowledged ever having read) – are all about how basically Nietzschean supermen have the right to do as they will over against all the mediocrities who insist on keeping to the rules.

I don't directly discuss liberation theology, though it was totally in

the air during my student years, and I learned a lot from it. I did my bachelor's thesis on Tillich's religious socialism, which was developed in the 1920s and 1930s. Of course, that was a long time before liberation theology was heard of, but there are many similarities. On this point, though, I think it's important to remember that, as many liberation theologians themselves would say, liberation theology developed in Latin America, but we're in Europe. The circumstances and the contexts are very different. In the context of *A Rhetorics of the Word*, I make some of the points that liberation theology is wanting to make by reference to Hermann Broch's novel, *The Death of Virgil*. This novel, translated by Edwin and Willa Muir, takes the scenario of the poet Virgil, who is dying and starts to think that he wants to burn all his works, because he's come to see, perhaps a bit like Thomas Aquinas came to see, that all these writings are untruthful. In a long dream sequence he realises that what's missing from his writings is the cry of the slave (or the cry of the oppressed, as Marx would put it), and that it's only when we are attentive to the cry of the oppressed that we can begin to think and write truthfully. Of course, as we know, he didn't burn his poem and many people would be glad for that. But Broch's Virgil nevertheless comes to this crucial recognition that 'hearing the cry of the slave' is a presupposition of truthful discourse.

I did, in a way, anticipate these criticisms. I could have perhaps, at various points, expressed myself more cautiously, added in a few other texts, but actually, I don't think increasing my footnotes even further, or extending my bibliography any further would really have helped, because it's philosophy, it's not about 'isms'. It's not about feminism. It's not about liberationism, it's not about existentialism, and not even about what the French call Christianity. It's about trying to get *zu den Sachen selbst*, as Husserl put it, which I'd like to translate, not literally, as 'getting to the matter at issue', to focus in on the key question, and not to shackle oneself to a 'school' or 'ism'. This is a very ancient problem in theology, since theology has a natural affinity with schools, and a particular school will always have a particular angle that it pursues. That's maybe one of the things we need to shake ourselves out of. So of course, we can take from Thomism, Scotism, Lutheranism, existentialism, but we should not be bound by them.

Further Reading

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CONVERSATION 5:

Living forwards, understanding backwards

Summary: This chapter begins with a reflection on the saying of Kierkegaard that gives the conversation its title. In order to understand the implications of this saying, Pattison takes us back to one of the foundational figures of philosophy, Plato, in his discussion of knowledge as recollection (*anamnesis*). Doing so allows Pattison to reflect not only on Plato's epistemology, but also his importance to Christianity. Hegel too, who famously wrote that 'the Owl of Minerva flies at dusk', is brought into this discussion, enabling Pattison to draw out the importance of lived historical experience as a distinct and crucial theme in philosophy and theology. This foundation will allow Pattison to explain what Kierkegaard meant by 'repetition', and why this has relevance for his own life and work. Somewhat in the vein of our first conversation, Pattison weaves the story of his life, his work and his philosophical and theological commitments to, in Kierkegaardian form, 'what we shall be', where 'we' is crucial. As we found out via our discussion of the story of the onion recounted by Grushenka in *The Brothers Karamazov* (Conversation 2), it is how we engage in a transformative life together that matters for Pattison. We discuss Pattison's foray into blogging and into how this led him to conceive of his *Conversations with Dostoevsky on God, Russia, Literature and Life* (2024). Pattison reflects on the situation that the modern university finds itself in, and draws on some prescient remarks by Martin Heidegger in this regard.

The conversation closes by repeating a question that was often put to the theologian Hans Küng, ‘be quite honest: just what do you personally believe?’ Readers will find Pattison’s answer instructive, not least because it allows him to answer the question ‘what most calls him to thinking’.

Philip Tonner

Firstly, can you explain the title of this chapter? It relates to something in Kierkegaard, doesn’t it?

George Pattison

Yes, it’s a short version of Kierkegaard’s saying, ‘Life is lived forwards but understood backwards’. The idea that life is understood backwards is not new, however.

Plato taught that all knowledge is recollection – *anamnesis*. Plato’s thought was that we couldn’t know anything for what it was if we didn’t already have a pattern or idea of it in our minds. He suggested that prior to our births our souls were engaged in the contemplation of the eternal ideas of all that can be known, a knowledge that is lost when we are born into the body – unless or until we are reminded of it by a beautiful form. For most people, though, this is only rather occasional and haphazard, but to study philosophy is to dedicate oneself to remembering the pure forms of ideas and progressively detaching these from the fluctuations of emotional and sensuous life. This is the ultimate background of Wordsworth’s line ‘our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting’.

In Kierkegaard’s time, Hegel had recently modified Plato’s teaching to incorporate everything we experience in historical, incarnate life. Where Plato counselled us to turn *away from* the body toward the eternal forms, Hegel suggested we should go *through* everything we experience in individual and collective life as a precondition of being able to see how it all hung together. As he put it, the Owl of

Minerva, the goddess of Wisdom, flies at dusk, when the day is drawing to an end. That is to say, we only know what our lives are about when we see them in retrospect and can see the truth in the whole and not (versus Plato) abstracted from it.

It's possible to see this emphasis on lived historical experience in Hegel as deriving from Christianity since, even in the more Platonic versions of Christianity, the truth is only knowable as true because it is revealed in the incarnate life of God in Christ. In this regard it is suggestive that Jesus himself is reported as using Plato's term '*anamnesis*' at a crucial point in his life, when, at the Last Supper, he told the disciples to do this 'in remembrance of me'. But in Christian *anamnesis*, it's not the timeless ideas we are to remember but a very specific historical life in time. One conclusion to draw from this is that Christian spirituality will involve thinking about and discerning what is really worth remembering and, I've suggested elsewhere, we might even define God as what is most worth remembering.

Kierkegaard, however, offered a sharp reminder that Christian living isn't only about contemplation, it's also about action and action is not directed backwards, to the past, but to what we imagine and hope will result from our action. I swing the bat to make the ball go in the direction I want it to go in and as I strike I imagine it curving over the boundary as it has on previous occasions (at least, when I've been on good cricketing form). Kierkegaard called this forward-looking kind of imagination 'repetition' and said that it was essentially the same movement as recollection or remembrance but in the opposite direction, into the future rather than toward the past – remembering 'what we shall be'.

Whether or not Kierkegaard would agree, though, I think that this is best seen as a constant to-and-fro, since our actions are – or should be – directed at bringing about or (to use a Kierkegaardian expression) bringing into or maintaining in existence what is most worth remembering, where 'what is most worth remembering' encompasses both our actions and our receptivity (that is, not only what I *do*, but, for example, the sky I see or the music I listen to). What this means concretely may take a bit of working out, of course. For example, what would it mean in relation to a beautiful landscape

I remember seeing long ago? Perhaps no more than sharing that memory with others so that they too can have the benefit of the specific mood which that vision evoked. In the context of human relationships, it might mean striving to put into practice a kind of moral heroism I've seen in others. In relation to the Eucharist, it would mean allowing one's life to be shaped by the pattern of taking, blessing, breaking and self-giving that is instantiated in Christ's own actions. The possibilities are, practically, endless!

Philip Tonner

You have had a long and successful academic career, during which you have worked in a number of different departments at several different universities, and you have also held honorary positions. You have been a prolific writer throughout this time. Looking back, can you identify any unifying themes to your life and work during the different stages of your career?

George Pattison

When Paul Tillich wrote a short autobiographical essay, he called it 'on the boundary', because he felt that his life had always been 'on the boundary' between competing claims and worldviews: between church and society, theology and philosophy, Marxism and idealism, to name just a few. I feel much the same and, from what we've been discussing, it's clear that some of my 'boundaries' are similar to Tillich's – again, church and society, theology and philosophy, Marxism and idealism, agnosticism and faith. I'd throw in a few others, though, including the tension between academic study and active spirituality, likewise between theology and creative practice, and between language and silence.

At the intellectual and personal level, I've never really stopped searching for the place at which it becomes possible to think about God in a way that is appropriate to who God is. Sometimes I think I've seen it in the distance and sometimes a word or phrase seems

to fit, but mostly I think of the medieval theologian quoted by Karl Barth who said all our talk about God was just *balbutia*: babbling. And yet I carry on, it's something I can't not do. That makes it sound very much like a private passion but it's also looking for a way to bear witness in such a way as to move others and therefore a matter of gratitude and loyalty to those whose words, spoken and written, have moved me.

There is, of course, a roll-call of thinkers who have been fairly constant companions, although as with many human friendships, there are periods when we don't see each other for a long time: Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Dostoevsky are the most obvious, but also Plato, Augustine, Berdyaev, Tillich and even Hegel. Then there's literature and theatre: Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Eliot, Dante, Tolstoy and Chekhov have all been important over many years (though Dante could also be counted amongst the thinkers), not to mention painters and musicians, from Manet to Bach to Dylan.

Philip Tonner

As an academic, a central part of your work has been teaching students. Can you tell me about your approach? Has your approach changed over your career?

George Pattison

To take the second question first, it has varied rather significantly, not least because of the various different contexts and teaching roles that I've had.

Apart from a year teaching in a secondary school shortly after I first left university, my first real academic teaching experience was teaching at the Suffolk College in Bury St. Edmunds. This was for a qualification called the Cambridge certificate which, as I recall, was estimated to be at a first-year undergraduate level and the students were a very small but loyal group of adults who listened to me trawling through the biblical history, book by book. Other

adult teaching I did at that time also covered some basic issues in the philosophy of religion. This laid a good foundation for which I've always been very grateful since.

In the 1990s, my position at Cambridge meant that most of my teaching was one-on-one or small group supervising. The model back then was that students would write a weekly essay that they'd then read to the supervisor followed by discussion. This could work brilliantly, but it didn't suit all students and a significant minority weren't really intellectually prepared to engage in an hour-long discussion one-on-one with someone they regarded as a senior academic. I did do some lecturing, but this was mostly extra-curricular and did not require assessment.

Aarhus was different again, because whereas in Cambridge I taught to a syllabus that I hadn't myself devised, there I had to devise, deliver and examine courses within the parameters set by the statutory definitions of 'practical theology' – and, of course, do so in Danish! Latterly, I co-taught the primary course with a colleague who had a background in New Testament studies, which I found very fruitful.

Oxford and Glasgow provided further new situations, both involving lecturing (often to quite large classes) and seminars. At Oxford – at both undergraduate and graduate levels – I put a lot of work into developing a culture in which students had at least a significant shared curriculum, having discovered that many students studied only what their college tutor proposed to them, often with a strong confessional or other ideological bias. I was very influenced in this by my experience of the way in which Danish students worked very collaboratively, whereas the English model tended toward a pyramid-like structure in which study became more and more isolated the higher up one went.

Across all these differences, though, I've remained convinced that, at least in the humanities (and I count theology as a humanities subject), teaching is not and cannot be a hierarchical top-down process. I've always baulked at being called 'Sir', though it's hard to talk American students out of it. Teaching is only possible in the context of a community of learning in which students are as proactive as their 'teachers'. As the early Romantics argued, philosophy

is always *Symphilosophie*, and *Symphilosophie* requires friendship amongst those who participate in it. It also means that teaching and learning become essentially conversational rather than didactic.

Philip Tonner

Two of your books – *A Short Course in the Philosophy of Religion* (2001) and *A Short Course in Christian Doctrine* (2005) – grew directly out of lecture courses that you delivered (at the St. Andrew's Biblical-Theological Institute in Moscow and at the University of Aarhus, respectively). Can you tell me about the process of developing your teaching notes and lectures into a finished book?

George Pattison

These were actually two very different processes. I hadn't thought of the Moscow course in terms of a book, but after I got back and reread my notes I thought that it could rather easily and rather nicely be developed into a short book. In the case of the doctrine book this involved pulling together elements from a couple of courses repeated over two years. The first really was very close to what was taught in the classroom, while the latter involved much more editing, discarding and supplementing.

Philip Tonner

Following on from that, you have reflected on teaching and education in your work. For example, in your *Short Course on Christian Doctrine* (2005) you discuss the relationship between *doctrina* and teaching, and in your *Phenomenology of the Devout Life* (2018) you discuss teaching, learning and education, in connection to themes associated with the work of Paulo Freire, which are familiar to philosophers of education.

George Pattison

From the beginning of my theological studies, I've reacted very negatively to a kind of catechetical approach that sees Christian doctrine as a list of propositions proposed for our assent and leaving out the existential dimension that gives doctrine its real meaning. Christianity is about the development and transformation of the whole person, so doctrine or teaching therefore properly and even necessarily involves the whole person. This means that it is a subjective or, more accurately, inter-subjective process rather than something objective. In that sense, I affirm Kierkegaard's view that what matters is not the 'what' but the 'how'.

All of this resonates with what I find in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where he criticised what he called the banking concept of education, meaning taking a set of facts, concepts, examples, etc. from a standard source and having the students learn them – by analogy with taking money out of a bank. In this way the student is merely a passive recipient and not a co-learner.

Some of my students in Aarhus objected to this because they argued that it led to a loss of content. In the case of theology, for example, there would seem to be certain givens – the Bible, Christian history and tradition, the whole body of theological writing is all *there*. Learning can't be reduced to what we just happen to want to discuss today. There are things that have to be *taught*.

I accept that objection in part and, indeed, I think it very important to open up the resources of scripture and tradition to each new generation of students. However, scripture-and-tradition is not a fixed entity but itself changes according as to how we engage with it. Our questions are the means by which scripture-and-tradition become open to us and today's innovation is itself tomorrow's tradition.

Obviously, there's a certain external objectivity involved in any textual study: Augustine, Aquinas and even Kierkegaard wrote what they wrote and, as I've said before, we have to approach that with a proper historical and philological caution. But these texts only become interesting – they only live – when we see their existential import for ourselves. This may mean that we end up rejecting them,

as in modern theology's move away from the classical proofs for the existence of God, or it may mean re-envisioning the sources or looking beyond the accepted canon for alternative texts. In this regard, feminist theology has been exemplary, both in terms of drawing attention to the problematic aspect of key canonical texts and also in bringing neglected elements in the tradition back to life.

So, I'm not arguing for content-free education. The fact that teaching occurs in and as language brings us into a trans-historical community, since the language we speak comes to us as freighted with layer upon layer of past meaning. I've often quoted Derrida's statement that 'I have only one language and it is not my own'. He wrote this with reference to his own experience of being an Algerian Jew writing in French, but it's true for all of us. English wasn't invented to serve my need for subjective self-expression. The poet Denise Riley wrote that, 'The souls of the dead are the spirit of language / You hear them alight inside that spoken thought' and really to think seriously about what we're saying engages us in a conversation that is much longer than our own life-span and requires us to look beyond ourselves.

Philip Tonner

In that text (*Phenomenology of the Devout Life*) you also discuss activity, passivity and the formation of the self in connection to 'learning truth' (Pattison, 2018, p. 41). How does that connect with what you've just been saying?

George Pattison

I've been saying that we need to be active learners, questioning, curious, and refusing to be fobbed off with platitudes, but we also have to be able to receive, to hear what's said to us from the past, from another culture, or from those within our own culture with whom we radically and profoundly disagree. Bakhtin's idea of polyphony is highly relevant here. For me, the paradigm of truth is

not a single true proposition but the maximally rich presentation of the matter at issue. The more true something is, the more ways there are to say it. And, for me, this is theologically grounded. I think I once wrote that ‘the world is the continuation of the divine Trinity’s internal conversation “by other means”’. Another way of putting this is to say that the work of language is envoicing the Word that was in the beginning.

Philip Tonner

You recently started blogging: how have you found the process? Have you had any feedback?

George Pattison

The title of my blog is ‘Confessions of a Devout European’ and I started blogging as a response to the 2016 Brexit referendum, with an initial view of using it to affirm my own European identity – it started when I was spending a year at the Max Weber Centre in Erfurt. Neither my readership nor feedback has been quantitatively enormous, but it’s a way of keeping a connection to a number of friends and some do give regular comments and add their own perspectives or direct me to other relevant sources.

I have to admit that my commitment has flagged since 2022 and the invasion of Ukraine. Like many people, I feel that this has cast a shadow over Europe in the face of which our words have been drained of relevance and power. Since then, other events, including what we see happening in Gaza and the whole MAGA movement, have furthered that sense of powerlessness. I’m aghast that the medium-term future of our society is in the hands of Trump, Putin, and Netanyahu. It’s very easy – especially for an old person – to think ‘we have seen the best of our times’. At one level, all the more reason to struggle for the words that will provide a counter-movement – so I haven’t given up, but I struggle.

When I went on to develop my *Conversations with Dostoevsky* as

a blog I did get more feedback, some of it rather lively – again, precisely in relation to the invasion of Ukraine and how that has changed our perspective on the representation of Russia in Dostoevsky’s writings.

Philip Tonner

Conversation has been a recurring theme in what you’ve been saying and, of course, what we’re doing now is having a conversation. What is the importance to you of the conversational model – not only in relation to Dostoevsky but to your overall approach to theology and philosophy?

George Pattison

Yes – conversation is a constant element in our lives, although there are multiple kinds and levels of conversation. In fact, we’re rarely *not* conversing. However, a good conversation is not just a free-flowing association of ideas (though that can be fun too, especially with a young child), but is *about* something. In our everyday conversations, we constantly digress from what it’s ‘about’, leaving it hanging and moving on to something else, and then maybe looping back to it much later on. If we’re thinking of conversation as a model for scholarly work, however, it’s fair to expect that ‘about’ to be more consistently thematised. At the same time – and, again, Bakhtin’s model of polyphony is relevant – an academic argument need not be limited to following a single, highly focused line of development but can engage a manifold of alternative voices and points of view along the way. And just as it’s very difficult to have a good conversation with someone who’s determined to have the last word, scholarship doesn’t always have to end with a Q.E.D. To the extent that we do have to give a last word, that last word can point to what is unresolved or to new questions that arise out of what has been said.

Looking for a response and being open to other voices is integral to conversation and, in this respect, even the driest ‘paper’ has

something conversational about it since it is written or delivered in anticipation of some response. At the same time – and this was really brought home to me in writing *Conversations with Dostoevsky* – reading too is a kind of conversation. To open a book is to become open to the voice or voices that speak from the book, to be ready to listen. Of course, in the ‘real’ world, none of Plato, Augustine, Kierkegaard or Dostoevsky are going to turn up in my study and start answering my questions, but my questions are also part of what is going to make their texts live, at least for me. Again, it’s a two-way (or, sometimes, a many-way) process that requires both active engagement but also being ready to listen and become receptive.

I accept that this can easily be dismissed as a very old-fashioned view of what’s going on in serious, scholarly work – OK for amateur ‘reading’, maybe, but not for ‘research’. In a 1936 lecture on what he called ‘The Age of the World-Picture’, Heidegger anticipated the coming of the ever-active ‘researcher’ whose projects, networks, conferences and measurable outcomes would supplant the old-fashioned scholar sitting with his books in a library, and that is arguably a process that is now almost complete. Nevertheless, I still think that envisaging what we’re doing as a conversation brings to the fore something of the humanist quality of education that reaches back to the Renaissance and beyond. I think again of Denise Riley and of the engagement with literature as becoming attentive to the voices of the ancestors, and perhaps especially of those voices that have been forgotten, neglected or distorted. In the particular case of Christian theology, for which the crucifixion of Jesus is a defining moment, this will often mean learning the meaning of hope through the memory of suffering.

Philip Tonner

Who are your favourite theologians and philosophers writing today?
And what theories and problems do you find most compelling?

George Pattison

There are probably too many different conversations going on for me to start naming names. I've just been extremely fortunate to have been able to be in dialogue with some of the most distinctive and creative figures of my teachers' generation as well as my own contemporaries and the generation of my students. Sometimes, of course, those who influence us most are not our 'favourites' but those who offer a very different and sometimes even antipathetic point of view on a given question.

What is most exciting is to see how new generations are coming forward with new questions and perspectives, and rediscovering thinkers and issues who had faded from view (for example, a number of younger scholars have recently become very interested in Simone Weil, whom no one has really talked about very much in the Anglophone world for about thirty years).

In terms of issues, I continue to think about questions arising at the intersection between phenomenology and spirituality, and how this helps us bring the whole person, inclusive of affects, into the task of thinking about God. These dovetail with questions of language and writing, and I want to work more with the tradition of Russian linguists such as Bakhtin, Shpet and Losev, for whom language is not just a means of describing a world that's already there but is how the world we actually live in, our life-world, is brought into being. This doesn't mean flooding the landscape with words, to adapt an expression of Merleau-Ponty. Silence too matters, but I don't see silence as the absence of speech; rather, it's a particular modality of listening and responding and, as such, it can be understood as a form of speech.

Then there's God – but I think we're going to come onto that shortly!

Philip Tonner

What do you think are the biggest issues facing the modern university?

George Pattison

I mentioned Heidegger's 1936 prescient lecture on 'The Age of the World-Picture' and I think we see much of that being realised in the contemporary university, a development we can see as the replacement of scholarship by research and study by 'projects'. Now Heidegger was clear that this development is unstoppable and has its own rigour, but it also generates its own problems. In the UK we've seen the humanities having to adapt their work to a model of research that may be appropriate in some areas of science and technology (though colleagues I've spoken to suggest that it's problematic there too) but doesn't reflect what I've been calling the conversational character of the humanities.

Some years ago, I was a panel member for the national research council of one of the Scandinavian countries. After we'd sifted through the various grant applications, it became clear that the front-runner was in fact the project that I and other panel members found least intellectually interesting – but it ticked all the boxes required by the very quantified research requirements: international, precise methodology, measurable outcomes, a clear path to dissemination of results, etc. Other projects that looked intellectually innovative and exciting fell at the first hurdle because although they'd identified an important topic and brought together a very exciting group of participants, they couldn't predict in detail the way in which it would develop.

A further problem in the UK is the distortion produced by proactive private funders who have particular interests of their own for which they are ready to give large amounts of money, but which don't necessarily reflect where the best work in the field in general is happening.

All that being said, I count myself exceptionally lucky to have seen first-hand and to have been part of a very exceptional research initiative, namely, the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre in Copenhagen, set up in 1995 with the primary aim of producing a new and definitive edition of Kierkegaard's works with a full scholarly apparatus. At its peak, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the centre had a whole team of philologists comparing the various manuscript

stages of Kierkegaard's works, the sources of all his – very many – quotations, references, allusions, etc. At the same time there was a series of more interpretative projects and seminars examining Kierkegaard's work in theological, philosophical and literary perspectives, as well as a series of outstanding seminars on translation issues, bringing together scholars working on translating Kierkegaard into multiple languages. The level of resources out into all of this was extraordinary and I don't know of any humanities project in the UK that's been funded on that scale over such a long period. The main aim of a new standard edition was certainly achieved, but it also did many other things as well. So I'm not against organised research but, often, the problem is in the application – in the British context, at least, intrinsic issues with the model are compounded by the fact that colleagues are having to produce proposals under pressure and, if they succeed, don't necessarily get time off their regular duties to lead the project (by way of contrast, one Danish colleague recently had a semester free of teaching to prepare their proposal).

Other challenges are much more mundane, but still attritional: funding, staff/student ratios, lack of cultural preparedness amongst students (i.e. standards of writing at entry level), students often having to work long hours to maintain themselves. Some of these can be fixed – at Glasgow Theology and Religious Studies we developed a very effective programme for improving students' writing skills over the course of their studies, but academics who are specialised in one particular area don't inevitably have the pedagogical skills to initiate and manage such development.

When I was in Oxford, I often heard the expression 'research-led teaching' and I think there's also teaching-led research: in other words, humanities depends on the constant interaction between teaching and research. However, policies that have re-envisioned research and made it central to funding can create a split between what become in effect small research institutes run by senior staff and their research teams and liberal arts colleges run by temporary and part-time staff. But this only contributes further to the imperilling of the humanities. In fact, there's a lot to be said for the promotion of liberal arts colleges in the UK, geared to giving students

a broad humanities education and with full-time tenured staff. As I say, in some ways this is what many humanities faculties are actually delivering while being constrained on the one hand by the institutional prioritisation of research and on the other by the fact that so much of the teaching is being done by junior colleagues stuck in the precariat.

Philip Tonner

What do you think are the biggest issues facing the kind of theology and philosophy that you practise today?

George Pattison

I mentioned the lack of cultural preparedness of many students arriving at university and in the case of theology there's the further difficulty that the last forty years has seen a very sudden and very dramatic collapse of mainstream Christian culture in Britain. This is not just about whether people believe in God or not but about the general level of understanding of Christian tradition and symbols. People just don't get it and take the various caricatures of Christianity in the media as good money, meaning that they are also insensitive to the huge and manifold ways in which Christianity is (or has been) present in culture. Philosophy is in some ways better off, as you don't need a lot of cultural baggage to begin philosophising – as in Socrates questioning the slave-boy!

In this regard, philosophy is often likely to prove a better way of approaching theological questions than beginning with the magisterial texts of Christian doctrine. Contemporary interest in spirituality is also relevant here, not least in the light of the rediscovery of philosophy itself as having begun as an enquiry about how to live well in the world in the light of the true nature of things. Today we're seeing these connections in even quite popular works such as *Live like a Stoic*!

In this way, the collapse of ecclesiastical Christianity could even be

seen as an opportunity for theology, because it gives us a chance to see again why the questions of theology are humanly important. In a way, I see thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky intuitively responding to this situation and pioneering ways of raising theological questions in terms that were accessible to readers who, even in the mid-nineteenth century, had become sceptical of ecclesiastical claims.

Philip Tonner

If you were able to offer advice to your younger self, what would that advice be?

George Pattison

Don't be in such a hurry all the time and take time to remember what it's all about.

Philip Tonner

Following on from that: do you have any regrets about any aspect of your professional life?

George Pattison

I'm very self-critical and can't claim to look back on any period or aspect of my life with great satisfaction though, at the same time, I'm continually grateful for some of the wonderful and illuminating meetings and opportunities I've enjoyed.

To talk particulars, I've been repeatedly guilty of taking on too much and then not doing anything thoroughly. Especially at Oxford I had way too many research students and although they were all individually very good I sometimes think I didn't really give them the time they needed. Again, I've often had so many writing projects,

conference papers, teaching, supervision, administration, etc. in hand that there's been an ever-growing list of things I should have – and would very much like to have – been reading but haven't. As I've been saying, it's important to be receptive as well as productive!

I do regret having written some over-negative reviews: one should always remember that (unless there are very clear signs to the contrary) any author is going to have invested a great deal of themselves as well as their technical expertise in a book and that should always be respected.

Philip Tonner

What are your plans for the future?

George Pattison

I've reached the age at which I should be becoming a forest-dweller and retiring from the world! In fact, I used to imagine myself continuing in active teaching and research all the way into the sunset but the pressure of contemporary academic life becomes too restrictive after a certain point. And there's still a lot I want to read, write and think about, and if I can do that in conversation with others then that's going to be more than enough.

I have several book projects in mind. As I mentioned in our first interview, I've just taken on editorship of the journal *Theology* and I'm also currently working on a short quasi-hagiographical novel about our local saint, Adrian of May, martyred according to legend in the ninth century. Not much is known about him, so this gives me a fairly free hand. I picture him as tending the shrine of an earlier Pictish saint on an exposed island in the North Sea, awaiting the end of civilisation under the force of Viking attacks. It's probably influenced by books such as Buzatti's *The Desert of the Tatars* and Jünger's *The Marble Cliffs* that also have 'waiting for the end' themes, although my 'research' for it also included spending a week on the island in lashing spring gales.

I also have plans for collecting and revising a number of articles and papers on existentialism and faith into a book. Then there are a couple of Kierkegaard things I'd like to do, one on Kierkegaard as writer, which would draw on a lot of published material, the other on Kierkegaard's reception in the twentieth century, but doing it in fictional mode (a bit like the Dostoevsky book). It begins 'The last time I saw Kierkegaard was in Kyiv, in the first summer of the war . . .'

And then I have a long reading-list, including things that have been waiting for me for many years!

It all sounds like a lot but as I get deeper into retirement an ever-growing part of my life is just learning to attend to the basic powers of earth, sky, sea and the seasons as well as a deepening awareness of the ephemeral nature of our own civilisational moment – and, inevitably, the ephemeral nature of our individual lives. I'm not yet a 'forest-dweller' but learning to renounce the world before the world renounces me is, I think, a useful and timely task. As one Baroque writer put it, 'Whoever dies before he dies does not die when he dies'.

Philip Tonner

Lastly, in the Preface to his *What I Believe*, the theologian Hans Küng quoted a question that he was asked countless times: 'Be quite honest: just what do you personally believe?' What would you say to such a question?

George Pattison

I've never liked the word 'belief' because it suggests the model of a semi-detached observer weighing up the pros and cons of a proposal made by a third party. When I took over the journal of the Modern Churchpeople's Union, which was at that point called 'MC', I got them to change it to 'Modern Believing' because believing incorporates the lived experience of the believer in a way that 'belief'

does not. On the whole, I prefer 'faith', though again we can distinguish between the faith that is believed, and the faith by which we believe.

Basically, it's a matter of attending to what engages our attention – that word *attrait* again, or Gabriel Marcel's idea of the 'exigency' of thought – what we find ourselves having to think about. It's in this sense that what repeatedly most calls me to thinking is: God.

Of course, God is a word that immediately raises many hackles. After I gave a paper at an American university, it became clear that some in the room were very uncomfortable that I'd spoken of God without, as it were, quotation marks. We do have to recognise all the problems with this word, but (as Martin Buber once commented) it's a word for which there is no substitute. There's a nice formulation by the Russian theologian Pavel Florensky: 'The name of God is God but God is not the name of God'. 'God' is a provisional stand-in, a formal indication, of what most merits thinking, what – or who – allows us to make most sense of our lives as a whole. 'God is what is most worth remembering'. Why? Because God is both the ground of our having come into existence but also the power that calls us forth into a future in which we are given time to realise the best possibilities of our existence. *Deus semper maior*: God is always greater than we can think or imagine but also calls us to be 'more' than we think or imagine ourselves to be.

At the same time, it's important – essential – to add that God doesn't come alone, so to speak, and to think about God is also necessarily to think about 'the Kingdom of God': the 'idea' of God is inseparable from the idea of a human society which is based on solidarity, mutual respect and care, and love. Faith is never just faith in God, it's also faith in humanity – just as Kant recognised that the exercise of the moral will presupposes a moral community. In this perspective 'God' is intimately connected with the cry for justice, the demand that the innocent be protected and the insulted and injured helped to flourish – all of which takes us back to the psalmist's cry, 'Where is God?' 'How long, O Lord, how long?'

How long! In the world today that kind of community is still far off and many might say it's what Kant himself called a *focus imaginarius*. As in biblical times, both rulers and peoples connive in or

are impotent in relation to injustice. It's tempting to say that it's all 'impossible'; but even if that's true, just going on hoping is something and the thought of God is a way of keeping hope alive, the thought that there must be a better world than this. We have to be simultaneously realistic and hopeful. To borrow a phrase from Tillich: 'utopia, no: the spirit of utopia, yes.' In the particular case of Christian theology for which the crucifixion of Jesus is a defining moment, this will typically mean learning our hope from the memory of suffering and from those texts in the tradition – starting with the gospels – that speak of the memory of suffering and of suffering endured and redeemed. That sounds a bit sermonical, but (of course) it doesn't and can't involve turning away from the everyday reality of suffering as we see it daily in a thousand different contexts in our world. But, equally, without faith the sight of that suffering is likely to make us turn away and bury our heads in the sand or opt for fantasy solutions that are no solutions at all.

In these terms, what I believe in is the importance and urgency of remembering, remaining hopeful and being vigilant.

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KIERKEGAARD'S QUEERNESS:

A RESPONSE TO CONVERSATIONS WITH GEORGE PATTISON

Clare Carlisle

These conversations bring to the foreground what often remains in the background of academic writing: the relationship between a scholar's life experience and his or her intellectual position. George Pattison's story of his career is typical in its specificity. Fortuitous human connections – for example, the parish priest who took a teenage George to a lecture by the Hindu-Catholic theologian Raimon Panikkar – can be as formative as a university degree programme. In my own case, being sent to George for supervisions in my first term at Cambridge, aged eighteen, was among the fortuitous encounters that shaped my thinking and indeed my life. Yet while we come into contact with our teachers by accidents of timing and geography, we are not influenced by them all equally. We seem to be especially receptive to those teachers who offer something that appeals to desires, tastes and inclinations that are already present within us, even if we're not yet aware of them.

So it isn't too surprising that I like and agree with almost everything George says in these conversations. Perhaps when I first turned up in his study in King's College in 1995 I already shared, inarticulately, his view that 'the true subject matter of philosophy is *to timiōtaton*, what is most to be revered or feared', in other words, 'what really matters'. Orienting one's philosophical practice to significance, rather than to justified true belief, need not entail a Nietzschean

rejection of truth. Nevertheless, it recognises that an ultimate concern for unambiguous watertight propositions can sometimes become a narrow path to triviality. I feel particularly sympathetic to George's conclusions about the sorts of things he finds most worthwhile: music and nature ('listening to a mountain stream, or the waves crashing on the shore'), and indeed those moments of listening, in which we 'learn from what is more than ourselves', that such things call us to.

Despite our common intellectual ground and shared sensibilities, George and I have fundamentally different relationships to Christianity. I'm not sure how much this difference matters (which is itself an interesting philosophical question, given the conception of philosophy sketched in the preceding paragraph). It is certainly no obstacle to admiration or friendship, and it might not even involve disagreement. But since it is the most obvious point of divergence between us, I will make it the focus of this essay. And I will discuss it with continual reference to Kierkegaard: the most obvious point of convergence in our academic work.

George describes how over many decades he has felt 'at ease' in, and called to, Christianity. I do not feel at ease with Christianity, nor called to it. That's not to deny that aspects of Christian tradition hold for me a certain aesthetic allure. In fact, George embodies a particularly attractive version of Christianity: undogmatic, non-judgemental, socialist, genuinely ethical, open to different religious perspectives, and light on references to Jesus (who has simply never appealed to me). Still, I've come to share with Kierkegaard a deep suspicion of forms of Christianity that enjoy worldly prestige – a feature common to the nineteenth-century Danish State Church to which Kierkegaard struggled to belong, and the Church of England that I have experienced, from the outside yet at fairly close quarters, during my professional life. Although the Church of England has lost much of its political power and cultural influence, within academic theology in the UK it remains quite dominant. As a student and later as an academic, many of my conversation partners and closest colleagues have been Anglican Christians.

Like George, Kierkegaard felt called to Christianity; like me, he was not at ease within it. Or, to sharpen the point by putting it the

other way around: Kierkegaard was not at ease with Christianity yet nevertheless felt called to it. I want to probe this rather tragic Kierkegaardian experience, because I think there is something in it that George overlooks or understates. Several years ago I wrote a biography of Kierkegaard, in which I scrupulously refrained from speculating on his sexuality. Since then, I've become increasingly convinced that the clue to Kierkegaard's life and thought, and to their complex interrelation, lies in his queerness – a concept that involves sexuality, without being reducible to it. I like how bell hooks described it (speaking in New York in 2014): 'Queer not as being about who you're having sex with; that can be a dimension of it, but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.' That sounds Kierkegaardian to me.

Before I make the case for Kierkegaard's queerness, let me say more about the concept of 'queer', and particularly about its contrast with a concept discussed in George's interviews: authenticity. As the quotation from hooks suggests, 'queer' is not essentially a sexual orientation. It is true that it is sometimes used to categorise people in this respect, as in 'LGBTQ . . .'. But it is really a concept of what is anti-categorical. Queerness twists and stretches and blurs. Here's bell hooks again: 'Not belonging is the essence of queer.'

Having said this, what counts as queer depends on specific conventions. These can be summed up in the concept of heteronormativity: 'the assumption of heterosexuality and gender difference as prescriptive norms', as philosopher Elizabeth Brake explains in her 2014 book *Minimising Marriage*. Heteronormativity is doubly binding: it prescribes gender roles, which define heterosexuality; and it prescribes heterosexuality thus defined. (A good example is the Church of England's definition of 'Holy Matrimony' as 'the union of one man and one woman' – although of course norms can be very powerful without being so explicit.) This is why heteronormativity involves sexuality, yet is not reducible to it, and why the same can be said for 'queer'. Queerness troubles binary distinctions between heterosexual and homosexual, between man and woman, which structure some of the most basic customary categories concerning

people and their relationships. For this reason, 'queer' can be a radical concept.

It can be compared with the existentialist ideal of authenticity advanced by Heidegger and Sartre, since both concepts – queerness and authenticity – gain their meaning in relation to a sort of base-line conformity to conventional ways of being. George invokes an ethic of authenticity, for example, in suggesting that both François de Sales and Kierkegaard criticise 'the mimeticism that powers social conformity, and which means that we often do things we know are wrong because we're afraid of standing out and being different'; becoming authentic involves finding 'the courage to . . . make our decisions for ourselves rather than on the basis of what everyone else is explicitly or implicitly telling us to do.' For each person, this amounts to realising a certain kind of individual freedom, by resisting – through some self-exertion – the conformist pull of the crowd.

The ethic of authenticity harbours two features that are fundamentally at odds with queerness (and which Kierkegaard subjected to vehement critique): universalism and moralism. According to this ethic, everyone is equally responsible for his or her own life. It is up to each individual to be true to his or her own self. Heidegger emphasises mortality as the universally human fact that underscores every particular call to authenticity. The mantra of *Being and Time*, that Dasein's life and death are '*in each case mine*', is individuating and universalising in the same breath: 'in each case' here entails 'in every case'. And as George's reference to courage suggests, the call to authenticity can easily become moralising. Being inauthentic is represented as a failure of courage – a moral or quasi-moral failure for which each person is individually responsible, maybe even blameworthy. I'll add that while courage itself is, so to speak, gender-neutral, it has traditionally been conceived as a masculine virtue, exemplified paradigmatically in military contexts. (I mention this because Kierkegaard's queerness involved non-conforming to certain norms of masculinity embedded in his culture.)

The ethic of authenticity can itself be regarded as an historical phenomenon. It seems distinctively modern – as Charles Taylor and Noreen Khawaja have argued – and it's especially conspicuous in twentieth-century existentialism. Yet its proponents suggest that

anyone (and everyone) can (and should) strive to be authentic, regardless of cultural or historical circumstance.¹

Queerness, I have said, has common ground with authenticity, insofar as both concepts indicate ways of not conforming to social conventions. But while authenticity at least pretends to a universalist, transcultural scope, queerness has a more particular character, linked to the experience of a specific heteronormative culture. According to the ethic of authenticity, anyone (if not everyone – see my footnote) can in principle become more authentic, truer to themselves. Its underlying idea is that fitting in is the easy thing, the path of least resistance, while it takes courage and resolve to stand out. In practice, though, social conventions do not affect all people equally. For some, conforming to heteronormative expectations is easy – it's swimming with the tide – while for others it is profoundly difficult, if not impossible. Queerness is the experience of this difficulty or impossibility. It involves the blend of activity and passivity that George rightly highlights in criticising the macho existentialism of Heidegger and Sartre: 'we are enduring and suffering, as well as acting, beings'. Queerness can certainly be an act of resistance to heteronormativity. It can also mean trying and failing to fit in; finding yourself oppressed or excluded or deformed by a social world not of your making. The ethic of authenticity regards wanting to belong as weakness. From a queer perspective, having the option to belong – to lapse easily into 'inauthentic' conformity – may look like a privilege.

Turning now to Kierkegaard's queerness, I'll make two important provisional points. First, this is not merely a biographical matter. One distinctive feature of Kierkegaard's philosophy is how conspicuously it is rooted in his life experience. If that experience can be considered a queer experience, then his philosophy can – to some extent, at least – be considered a queer philosophy. Among Kierkegaard's core philosophical questions are the connection between 'the single individual' and 'the universal'; whether one's true self can be

1 Perhaps there is incoherence here: if being authentic means daring to stand out from the crowd, does the conceptual possibility of authenticity depend on an inauthentic majority? Are we thus forced to conclude that if everyone were authentic, then no one could be authentic?

communicated to others; and the extent to which an ethical demand for disclosure conflicts with different imperatives of concealment. So when I make the case for Kierkegaard's queerness, 'Kierkegaard' signifies the philosophy as well as the person. It also signifies the literary oeuvre – the authorship – produced by that person.

Second, affirming Kierkegaard's queerness does not entail any speculations about his sexuality. Queer, as I understand it, means not fitting into a heteronormative culture, nor into its underpinning categories. To regard Kierkegaard as queer in this sense, we need only appeal to indisputable biographical observations and some pretty straightforward textual interpretations – interpretations, that is, which aren't in my view especially controversial. This leaves open (or indeed closed) to speculation the distinct, further question of *why* Kierkegaard did not fit in. Such speculations might range over his sexual orientation, his attitude to his own sexuality or to sex in general, how he experienced sexual situations, his desires and fantasies, his feelings about emotional intimacy; any of these possibilities might be attributed to an innate disposition, to his upbringing or to some childhood trauma. The concept of queer leaves such things undetermined, and likewise we can consider Kierkegaard's queerness without entertaining any such hypotheses. And there is good reason to refrain from doing so, since these are very sensitive matters. I do see, though, that this important caveat does not exempt me from blame for presuming to speak of Kierkegaard's 'experience', especially aspects of that experience that he did not himself discuss outright and indeed sought to conceal. My only defence is that such presumption is difficult to avoid once you decide to write a biography.

Sticking to the biographical facts, we can safely say that, for reasons he did not fully disclose, Kierkegaard felt unable to marry. Having embarked on the conventional path to family life by getting engaged to Regine Olsen in 1840, he quickly and painfully realised that this life was not possible for him. Still, it took him a year to end the engagement. When he was close to death in the autumn of 1855, Kierkegaard summoned his old friend Emil Boesen to his hospital room in order to confide the secret he called his 'thorn in the flesh' – also mentioned a few times in his journals. 'That [i.e. the thorn]

was what was wrong with my relationship to Regine. I had thought it could be changed, but it couldn't', Kierkegaard told Boesen. He 'therefore concluded' that his 'task was to be extraordinary.' To our ears this might sound rather boastful, since nowadays 'extraordinary' is often used to mean exceptionally brilliant. But in its context Kierkegaard's remark makes most sense read, more literally, as describing his realisation that he had to make a life out(side) of the ordinary, outside what was considered 'normal'.

These poignant words echo a letter in *Repetition*, written in 1843 in the wake of Kierkegaard's broken engagement. Here a fiancé describes waiting in vain for divine intervention ('a thunderstorm – and a repetition') that will 'make me fit to be a husband . . . render me almost unrecognisable to myself . . . transform me.' Meanwhile, he writes, 'I am doing my best to make myself into a husband. I sit and clip myself, take away everything that is incommensurable in order to become commensurable . . . – but it does not work'. This is no existentialist defiance of convention, but, on the contrary, a failing struggle to conform. The passage is cryptic, but certain key words are suggestive: 'honour', 'pretend', 'secrecy', 'hide', 'bury'. (*Either/Or* had already articulated a lonely wish to connect with others who felt the same: 'a fellowship of buried lives'.)

In *Fear and Trembling*, written during the same period, Kierkegaard explores the predicament of a merman: a tragic 'seducer' who is at once a man and not a man; who hides his true nature; who cannot live on the land with those who are fully human. 'If the merman could believe, his faith could perhaps transform him into a human being', Kierkegaard wrote in his journal, echoing his oft-quoted remark that if he'd had faith – he meant the faith of Abraham, who expected 'the impossible' – he could have married Regine. He sketched his own version of the folk tale of Agnes and the Merman, in which the merman longs for intimacy and belonging, but 'cannot do' it: 'The merman is a seducer, but when he has won Agnes's love he is so moved by it that he wants to belong to her entirely. – But this, you see, he cannot do, since he must initiate her into his whole tragic existence, that he is a monster at certain times etc., that the Church cannot give its blessing to them. He despairs and in his despair plunges to the bottom of the sea and remains there, but leads Agnes

to believe that he only wanted to deceive her'. Kierkegaard connected this with his own story: he tried to make Regine believe that he only wanted to deceive her.

That reference to 'the Church' is, of course, significant. The nineteenth-century Danish Church – like the Church of England – was a bastion of heteronormativity. The most decisive event of the Protestant reformation may have been Luther's defection from monasticism to marriage, which inaugurated a new model for Christian life: the priest as family man. George's remarks in Conversation 1 about the pressures on his home life exerted by 'the cluster of expectations around clergy families' show how this model – blurring the professional and the personal, the public and the private – could be oppressive even for those who conformed to it with relative ease. And Kierkegaard found himself unable to conform to it. That this was essentially a queer experience is one blindingly obvious (but overlooked) way of interpreting his obsessive reflections on the difficulty of being a Christian in Christendom, or his insistence, in *Fear and Trembling*, that living at ease in the world is even more difficult than the 'monastic movement' made by his medieval forebears. In that work, the inaccessible, inimitable Knight of Faith – whether Abraham descending Moriah or a nineteenth-century 'bourgeois' Copenhagener wondering what's for dinner, maybe roast lamb with vegetables – is a man going home to his wife.

Kierkegaard's increasingly bitter attack on the Danish Church's complacency and worldliness often focused on the apparent conflation of Christianity with a lifestyle based on marriage and parenthood. Thus in December 1848 he protests in his journal that the Christmas festival has become 'pure paganism', a *hyggelig* mythology of the nuclear family: 'Its idea or thought is thus as follows: a child is what saves, or to become a father and mother is life for a second time, something that purifies, ennobles. Life's earnestness truly begins when one leaves a generation after oneself and only then comes in a deeper sense to live in love for one's offspring, with responsibility for their upbringing, etc'. Kierkegaard refuses this conventional ideal: 'No, the Christ child is related to the spiritual category of becoming a human being, and thus is not related to marriage, father, mother,

child, but to every individual human being as spirit'. Here it's striking that the category of 'spirit' signifies for Kierkegaard a freedom and a refuge from the heteronormative conventions that gave the concrete ethical sphere (Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*) its determinate shape.

A fresh wave of polemic on the marriage question came in 1850. Now Kierkegaard disputed Bishop Mynster's claim – against those calling for civil marriage – that Luther's marriage to Katherine von Bora was a Christian union, not just a civil contract. Kierkegaard argued that Luther's marriage was essentially anti-conventional. Luther was, he claimed, making a subversive religious statement, echoing the 'divine scandal' of Jesus's mission, with the sole aim of 'defying Satan, the pope, the whole world'. Notice, again, how this interpretation spiritualises and desexualises Luther's marriage (which in fact produced six children). According to Kierkegaard, it was an entirely symbolic act: it would have made no difference, he said, if Luther had married a doorpost.

His Church's sanctification of marriage entrenched, intensified and moralised a more aesthetic heteronormativity pervading Danish culture. Many of the *Corsair's* cartoons of Kierkegaard ridicule him for falling short of certain standards of manliness. His legs are too thin, his spine too curved, his shoulders too narrow, his chin too weak; his trousers are all wrong; he looks stupid riding a horse, or fighting a duel. One image depicts him being carried upon a woman's shoulders: this at once alludes to his literary exploitation of Regine, and suggests emasculation. These cartoons built on an *ad hominem* critique by Peder Ludvig Møller (himself a notorious womaniser) that deemed Kierkegaard's extraordinary productivity unhealthy, abnormal and not properly human: 'instead of eating and drinking, he satiates himself by writing; instead of reproducing himself with a baby a year like a normal human being, he seems to have a fish nature and spawns'. (Is the resonance with the Merman's tale intended, or an accident?) Møller diagnosed Kierkegaard's hyper-reflective intelligence as 'a severe sickness', and dismissed his intense religiousness as risible 'pusillanimity'. Kierkegaard had deliberately provoked the *Corsair's* attack, fed up of his work being ignored in Copenhagen's literary media. But I doubt he'd anticipated it taking this particular form, targeting his masculinity, pressing on the thorn in his flesh.

Surely that is what wounded him so deeply, and so transformed his relationship to the public. Kierkegaard's peers – more to the point, his neighbours – were telling him what he probably already felt, and hoped to conceal: that he was literally the wrong shape.

In such a culture, being unmanly was bad enough. But Kierkegaard had the misfortune to be born into a Christian moralism that condemned deviation from the heteronorm as a *sin*. On this view, any queer desires he may have felt – not just his body, but his will, his heart – were misshapen in the eyes of God as well as in the eyes of the world. Yet the task of faith, as he saw it, was to believe that it was God who had made him this way, and not as punishment but out of love. He had to find a way to believe – if only on the strength of the absurd – that his queerness was a 'good and perfect gift' from God.

This is why he drew inspiration from Abraham on Moriah, and from Mary at the Annunciation: biblical figures who are called by God himself to transgress the ethical. It is, I believe, no coincidence that these particular transgressions involve familial (and in Mary's case, sexual) norms. Abraham's divine calling entails failing in his duty as a father and a husband; Mary is called into the shame of unmarried motherhood. In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard insists, against the grain of the biblical text, that Abraham *cannot* speak. Maybe the truth in this interpretation is that Kierkegaard considered his 'thorn in the flesh' unspeakable – except, perhaps, to Boesen, on his deathbed. Unable to speak it, he dissembled it. He spiritualised it; he assumed manly postures of defiance of social convention, of disdain for the judgements of his peers; in *Either/Or* he donned, not at all convincingly, the disguise of a Byronic seducer. All this masking has made it easy to mistake Kierkegaardian queerness for macho authenticity.

I wish the concepts of queerness and heteronormativity had been available to Kierkegaard, because I think they would have helped him to make sense of his experience. These concepts certainly help me to make sense of him. They help me especially to understand his bitterness, his fury, which for a long time I dismissed as excessive – an irritating character trait. Now I see better where he was coming from, and what he was up against.

It would take more time, and more pages, to make a really robust textual and biographical case for reconceiving 'Kierkegaard' – the thinker and author as well as the person – as queer. I'm confident it could be done. I hope I have already said enough to give context and concreteness to George's observation that Kierkegaard expresses 'a very acute sense of being at odds with the prevailing worldview and life-view of his time'. Although George is right to draw attention to Kierkegaard's 'profound insights into the ways in which we prevent ourselves from living up to our own essential freedom', there's a risk that this generalising way of putting it glosses over the fact that the established Churches have often led the way in preventing certain people – and it's important to stress, certain people more than others – from living freely.

Yet George is Kierkegaardian enough to emphasise that 'the religious . . . recognises that we can't just assume that all is as it should be with regard to our society's values or even our own individual moral standing. It therefore involves a deeper self-questioning and a deeper questioning of society'. And he is, I think, Kierkegaardian in locating the Church on the side of 'our society' and not on the side of 'the religious'. His own Church, he notes, is 'as fallible in all its expressions and dimensions as everything else'. I wonder if Kierkegaard would go further, and say that a Church is not merely *as fallible*, but *worst of all*, insofar as it conflates 'our society's values' with religiousness – insofar as it sanctifies and moralises those values, legitimises them, and entrenches them in official doctrines and policies?

Of course, such values have changed a lot since Kierkegaard's time – especially in recent decades – and so have the Churches. Since 2012, same-sex couples have been able to marry in Denmark's *Folkekirken*; the Church of England now fences its 'one man and one woman' definition of Holy Matrimony with platitudes about 'welcoming' and 'valuing' 'LGBTQI+ people'. How deep those changes go, especially on the core issue of heteronormativity, is an open question.

What most incensed Kierkegaard was the presumption of eminent churchmen bearing emblems of prestige – velvet robes, Dannebrog crosses – to preach. How to preach, how to teach about what is

most significant, about the spiritual life, about the human relation to God, is a recurrent Kierkegaardian question, not least in the *Postscript* and throughout his various Discourses. Reading his last writings on a velvet-clad Bishop's entitlement to preach Christianity, you can almost hear his blood boiling. And in recent years I've felt, rightly or wrongly, a similarly intemperate rage at the moralising pronouncements of certain senior clergy. Yet preaching is in their job description: if they can be criticised for doing their duty, they could equally well be criticised for neglecting it. For a churchman, one rather paradoxical way through this predicament is to preach without preaching: to disavow moral authority, and refuse to fall back on ecclesial authority. This is a Kierkegaardian solution. George himself has carried it out to an unusual degree, and with unmistakable sincerity. His parishioners in Newcastle, in County Durham and in Suffolk recognised this a long time ago, and I too have witnessed it first-hand. George holds in delicate tension proper reticence and humility, and a willingness to stand (literally) by his belief that 'there is something sacramental in the phenomenon of a person standing up and addressing others about what Tillich called our 'ultimate concern'' – and, crucially, 'with the implication that the preacher is going to stick around to see if reality lives up to what has been said'.

Reflecting on these issues brings to light an interesting dialectic between individual conduct and institutional behaviours. Institutions and the individuals who sign up to them (let's say: churches and priests, universities and professors) can't be entirely separated; nor are they quite reducible to one another. Look at Emil Boesen: an ordained pastor who travelled over a hundred miles to the deathbed of his Church's fiercest critic, and a man to whom Kierkegaard felt able to confide his most painful – because, sadly, most shameful – secret, rightly trusting that it would go no further. Conversely, I think certain personal interactions were decisive for Kierkegaard's critique of Christendom. He felt personally let down by Bishop Mynster, who led the Danish Church for almost the whole of Kierkegaard's adult life. If Mynster had defended him during the *Corsair's* attack in 1846, for example, his long-standing ambivalence toward the Church might have remained on the side of contentious loyalty, instead of tipping over into outright attack. Likewise, my

distrust of the Church of England has been crystallised by happenstance encounters with a handful of powerful churchmen (and women) – not least a Dean of my College, an Archbishop of Canterbury – who seemed to be caught up in their own status and prestige, and distracted from the attentive care for others that, in my view, really matters in life.

One lesson to draw from Kierkegaard's witness is how difficult it is to inhabit with real integrity, real intelligence, real grace, the roles of priest and philosopher, of preacher and teacher – the more difficult, apparently, the more prestigious the role. It's remarkable, then, that George has managed to do this. And all the more remarkable that he makes it look easy.

RESPONSE TO CLARE CARLISLE

George Pattison

I am, of course, very grateful to Clare for having read the interviews presented here both carefully and critically, and am pleased that what she has written provides an opportunity for further clarification of some of my positions and also a challenge to consider a perspective that I have not significantly addressed before.

Dis/agreements often start with quite small words and it's two such small words that I want to begin this response with: 'ease' and 'to'.

Clare picks up on my own expression of being at ease with the life and worship of the Anglican tradition. Of course, 'at ease' is probably an unfortunate choice of words, since Christianity in all its forms challenges us to step out of our comfort zones – as Kierkegaard never forgot. As one hymn I sang as a child put it, 'Father, hear the prayer we offer, not for ease that prayer shall be, but for strength that we may ever live our lives courageously'. More of courage later, since it is a term that helps Clare focus her criticism of the ethics of authenticity – but the point here is that 'at ease' does not mean going with the flow of whatever the church is, says, sings or does, but of knowing one's way about the language, rituals and behaviours of the church, like speaking one's native language (and we don't all use our native language for the same purposes). Clare – perhaps like the majority of our contemporaries – does not feel this ease, and this, in the end, is probably just part of the contingency of life. However, it is not quite accurate when she goes on to say that I feel called 'to' Christianity.

The idea of 'calling' plays a central role in my philosophy of

Christian life but the point there – that I’d repeat *insistently* here – is that the call is always and ultimately a call to love. Christianity in any of its manifold and more or less ecclesiastical forms is only ever (and at best) a means by which or a milieu within which to attend to and live out that call. That call presents itself in the first instance as the call of the other human being who requires our presence and, in the very broadest sense of the word, our action – the widow, orphan and stranger that Levinas called our ‘masters’. This is a necessary starting point, although as the contemporary experience of planetary crisis is teaching us, the call also calls us to a transformed relation to our larger cosmic milieu.

As in Levinas’s own philosophy, it is perhaps undecidable as to whether the call presupposes only a human and cosmic horizon or whether it is, in the end, the call of God. I was recently struck by something said by a character in one of Charles Williams’s eccentric supernatural novels: ‘She was doubtful also about God; Love would have been sufficient by itself but it was necessary at first to concentrate on something which could be distinguished from all its mortal vessels, and the more one lived with that the more one found that it possessed in fact all the attributes of deity.’²

Probably, arguments over whether the ultimate basis of the call is immanent or transcendent cannot be decided on the basis of experience alone, but I would argue that being able to draw on language, imagery and ritual that appeals to God as the one who calls offers a valuable hermeneutic attunement that opens up a larger understanding of the call. At the same time, the phenomenon of the call provides us with a certain rather rigorous criterion of what God can mean for us: the possibility of the call to love. Beyond that, what God is or could be belongs to what Buddhism has called ‘questions that tend not to edification’. For believers of a more speculative disposition, that’s probably not enough – but I’d then question why we think we need more.

An important part of Clare’s response is her reading of Kierkegaard as ‘queer’, which not only raises interesting questions about Kierkegaard-interpretation but also about how what she experiences

2 Charles Williams, *The Greater Trumps*, Eerdmans, 1976, p. 125.

as the overly macho language of authenticity and the failure of universalising diagnoses of the human condition such as the church presumes to offer. Her argument raises issues that require much further thought on my part before I could give an appropriate response. For now, the comments that follow are very much of the nature of a first reaction.

I've no doubt that a queer reading of Kierkegaard could be done and could provide fresh insights, and a paper on reading 'The Diary of the Seducer' as a queer text was presented at the annual Kierkegaard conference in Copenhagen several years back – though in light of Clare's attention to the situation of the person who is not so much wanting to disengage from the crowd as to find social acceptance, Hans Christian Andersen is a more obvious candidate (and the differences between Kierkegaard and Andersen in this regard are telling). Clare states that it is 'blindingly obvious' that Kierkegaard's was an essentially queer experience in conflict with the hetero-norm, but I don't find it that obvious. Whatever his private feelings, the writings to and about Regine (not to mention some few words about Bolette Rørdam) seem to be composed within a 'hetero' paradigm – though many are, of course, evidently mystifying, intentionally or not. The rage against the church's sanctification of the marriage in the writings of his final period can't be denied, though how it relates to the anguish of the engagement crisis isn't so straightforward – biographically or conceptually. At the same time, as several feminist critics have argued, both the early and the late Kierkegaard seems to have thought issues of sex and gender within existing nineteenth-century paradigms and to have done so in a manner that is strongly misogynistic. Quite how this would intersect with a queer reading is unclear.

Clare is rightly cautious with regard to the 'actual' nature of Kierkegaard's thorn in the flesh although, as she notes, deciding on Kierkegaard's own sexual identity is not itself essential to a queer reading. Yet the queer reading seems essentially connected to sexual politics and to the extent that this is so, it seems to obscure rather than to clarify what is at issue by raising a complex of questions that perhaps say more about our theoretical engagements than they do about Kierkegaard.

However, the question of applying queer theory to Kierkegaard may be decided, Clare's more urgent point – in this case 'charge' – is that an ethic of authenticity obscures what is essential in queer experience. She notes that I have criticised the heroic register of the philosophy of *Being and Time*, but the quotation she offers from my *Phenomenology of the Devout Life* indicates why I too might be considered an adept of the cult of authenticity, that is, that we should seek 'the courage to . . . make our decisions for ourselves rather than on the basis of what everyone else is explicitly or implicitly telling us to do.' At the same time, however, I would argue that authenticity is not to be measured against some universal standard, whether that is the Heideggerian consciousness of death or some version of Kantian ethical idealism, since authenticity is always singular – as in Kierkegaard's idea of 'governance' leading him to a task that was uniquely his. This is distinct from conventional ideas of divine providence precisely by virtue of its relation to the individual, Kierkegaard's '*den Enkelte*'.

I certainly do argue in that work that the courage to be oneself is one strand in the process of self-discovery and self-affirmation and that this connects devout life spirituality and modern existentialist thought. However, it is also something that I qualify rather severely and in several ways. 'Authenticity' itself is not thematised as such in the *Phenomenology of the Devout Life* or elsewhere in my work, but many of the issues associated with it are dealt with in my criticisms of a certain valorisation of autonomy. On this point (and making what is admittedly a gross generalisation), I have long noted that there is a significant divergence between North American and European perspectives. North American philosophy inherits Emerson's discourse of 'self-reliance' and 'to your own self be true': the linked projects of authenticity and autonomy *are* achievable. We *can* be whoever we want to be and achieve whatever we want to achieve if only we are courageous enough to try. The European perspective, on the other hand, sees such a can-do orientation with a more sceptical eye – Sartre's account in *Being and Nothingness* of the necessary failure of any attempt to make ourselves the ground of our own being and his judgement that life is therefore a 'useless passion' being an extreme but telling indication of this scepticism.

More important than becoming authentic (he argues) is becoming aware of our limitations, fallibility and failure to be moral exemplars. Aspects of Heidegger's idea of 'thrownness' and Jaspers' 'limit-situations' point in the same direction as, in theology, does Paul Tillich's reworking of the Lutheran '*simul iustus et peccator*' theme. Thus framed, 'courage' doesn't have to be conceived of as a 'manly' virtue but has more of the character of 'humble courage' to which Clare herself has several times drawn attention. Brecht, after all, chose a woman – *Mother Courage* – as this virtue's eminent exemplar for the dark times in which he lived.

In my own Philosophy of Christian Life trilogy, the striving to become self-aware and to pass through the experience of individualisation – learning the task that is exclusively 'my own' and having the courage to embrace it – is only one moment in discovering that the ground of our being is, indeed, not within ourselves but is to be found in our attention to the claim of the other, which (as I have indicated above) I also understand to be the claim of God. 'Self' and 'becoming a self' is only one facet of being human.

In recent years I have favoured the word 'solidarity' to express this fundamental interdependence of our being human together – a condition for which John Donne's recognition that we are none of us an island but all 'a piece of the continent, a piece of the main' provides a classic formula. Solidarity is far from being the kind of immersion in the collective feared by Kierkegaard. Solidarity is more a matter of being together in our very basic human needs around birth, death, eating, suffering and celebration. During a short stay in hospital a couple of years back I had a vivid realisation of what this could mean in practice as, for however brief a time, the team of doctors, nurses, cleaners and caterers worked around resolving my bodily malfunction – and I too was a part of this 'team'. Our 'identities' (in the sense of contemporary identity politics) were entirely irrelevant to this basic human task: whether I or any of them was gay, straight or trans, Christian, Muslim or Hindu, didn't even appear as an issue (and quite likely most of the above were involved at some level). Perhaps we also see this solidarity in spontaneous interactions between adults and children in public spaces, manifesting a shared obligation for the safety

and happiness of children who may have no kinship, class or national connection to us.

This solidarity is, I think, a surer basis than what Clare describes as universalism which, together with moralism, she sees as oppressive in relation to those who do not belong to 'the universal'. At the same time, however, solidarity provides a perspective within which the truth of universalism and moralism can better be seen, that is, as a means of articulating and focusing what is involved in our basic interdependence, even if each of them abstract from this solidarity in particular ways. Even so, each has their function.

Let me give an example. The modern discourse on human rights is generally argued in universalist terms. This may, in the end, not be the best or final way in which to achieve the ends that human rights advocates envisage. But, meanwhile, it does good work, something we often realise only when the universality of the claim is rejected. I was vividly struck earlier this year by the testimony of a Ukrainian officer who had been subjected to severe mental and physical abuse by his Russian captors. Early on in his captivity he had appealed to the Geneva convention on the rights of prisoners of war, to which his interrogator replied that this was not a war but a special military operation and that the universal scope of the convention did not apply in this case. I imagine the horror of a prisoner realising just what that means. Of course, that can be seen as illustrating the failure of supposedly universal rights but, at the same time, it is a chilling warning of what a world without such rights might be like.

Understood against the background of solidarity, morality too is perhaps less malign than Clare's term 'moralism' might suggest. 'Moralism' is, of course, a rhetorically charged term, implying a narrow judgementalism, especially in relation to sexuality and what many might regard as relatively minor social transgressions (swearing, body-revealing clothes, etc.). Usage is what it is, but 'moralism' shouldn't obscure the fact that it is in the name of moral principles – and, indeed, universal rights – that many individuals and organisations have campaigned on human trafficking, the protection of children, fair employment practices, the arms trade and much else. That being said, I agree that when both universalism and moralism

are detached from a living, rich and concrete sense of solidarity and attempt to dictate to a reality they do not understand, they lose their force and can themselves become repressive.

In relation to this, I have long thought that whatever their claims to account for ethics in general, ethical theories themselves are strongly contextual. In other words, recalling Wittgenstein's image of the artisan's tool-bag with a multiplicity of tools adapted for specific jobs, theories of ethics (Kantian, virtue, existentialist, etc.) mostly work quite well within specific areas of application that usually relate to the problems that they were developed to address. Move away from these and they start to falter. Although they are often presented and argued for as mutually exclusive, it is maybe again a matter of aggregation rather than exclusion. In some situations, we may be best to be Kantians, virtue ethicists in others, and situation-ists when neither Kant nor Aristotle nor Thomas seem really to help. The difficulty, of course (and I don't underestimate it), is knowing which is most fitting and when.

I return, finally, to the church. Of course, Clare's hard words about the contortions, the cruelty and insensitivity of the Church of England's response to the massive cultural change regarding gender and sexuality through which we are currently living (to which one could add still darker episodes from history) are hard to gainsay. Here too, the principle of solidarity is relevant and my being at ease within the church has to acknowledge the obligation also to share the distress consequent on realisation of its manifold failures and to make some contribution to repairing its continuing complicity in harms and self-harms. I have never had what might be called a 'high' ecclesiology and learned early on from Karl Barth's commentary on Romans that (in words he cited from Goethe) 'everything transitory is but a parable' – including the church. Even so – and this is only one area where this applies – I care enough and owe enough to have to keep with it. I'm sure I *could* live without at least the occasional inspiration of sacramental worship, but I know I'd be much diminished.

Many of my theological colleagues complain about the pick-and-choose culture around religion or, more precisely, *spirituality* in today's post-ecclesial society. I'm not so sure. Of course, there is

much that is superficial and easily satirised in the contemporary spiritual landscape, but François de Sales (the main focus of my *Phenomenology of the Devout Life*) was insistent that the only spiritual path that will work for any of us is the one to which we are drawn, often by an *attrait* that is at first neither rational nor even verbal. A contemporary apologetic must take this lesson to heart. The task is no longer to demonstrate that Christianity offers a superior vision of the world but merely that it offers a means by which those who are drawn to it can live a humanly worthwhile life. This may seem little enough, but in an age in which probably a majority view sees Christianity as defined by a mindset that is authoritarian, pre-scientific and pre-dates the sexual revolution, it is a start.

APPENDIX

Into the future: An interview with Professor George Pattison (May 2016)

Philip Tonner

I'm delighted to be joined today by George Pattison, Chair of Divinity at the University of Glasgow. Over the last twenty years Professor Pattison has emerged as one of the key figures in contemporary British philosophical theology: if every generation of theologians and philosophers starts afresh when approaching the 'big questions' then Pattison, by anyone's estimation, is surely one of the key voices of his generation to have entered the debate. Professor Pattison is a prominent figure in contemporary Kierkegaard scholarship and through his work he has reinvigorated interest in theological thinkers drawing on the work of existential figures such as Kierkegaard and also Martin Heidegger. Prior to entering academia, George spent fourteen years as a parish priest in the Church of England. From there he went on to serve as Dean of King's College, Cambridge (1991–2001), before moving on to become Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford (2004–13). George has been in post as Professor in the School of Critical Studies at the University of Glasgow since October 2013. He is currently working on a new book provisionally entitled *Eternal God/Saving Time*.

Philip Tonner

To begin with, perhaps you would like to say something about your move from being a parish priest into academia? Do you find the two roles continuous at all?

George Pattison

This is now a long time ago – 1991 – although, in fact, my first university post as Dean of Chapel at King’s College Cambridge involved pastoral and worship roles alongside teaching, so it was not entirely abrupt.

In the past, it was generally expected that parish clergy would keep up with scholarship through their own reading. The idea of a priest-scholar is an ancient one and involves several important elements that I think are still true. Firstly, that Christian teaching involves ongoing reflection on the Bible and on Christian tradition. Although this doesn’t have to be narrowly academic it has to be serious, critical and imaginative, and this needs dedicated time. Unfortunately, this is getting harder and harder and for several reasons. Academic life is becoming ever more specialised and internationalised so that it is now hard to ‘keep up’ with developments even in a small sub-field (e.g. New Testament studies or philosophy of religion), let alone across the subject (theology) as a whole. At the same time, parish clergy are required to take further training in areas of management and leadership that cuts out time for study – not to mention the demands of parish life. So maybe I’m one of the last generation for whom it was possible to move to academia after a longish period in parish life.

Philip Tonner

Going back, how did you become interested in philosophy and theology? Do you find the concerns of one domain (philosophy or theology) more pressing than those of the other? How do you relate the two disciplines?

George Pattison

This goes back at least to studying Sartre (*The Flies*) in sixth form and at the same time starting to read Plato, but probably also before that. When I was sixteen my parish priest took me to my first-ever theological lecture. It was by Raimundo Panikkar, a Catholic theologian who explored the convergence of Christianity and Eastern mystical traditions – he’s got a lot of videos on YouTube. This still remains an interest today, since for all their doctrinal differences there really do seem to be commonalities between Christian and Asian practices of prayer and meditation and the cultivation of a quiet and attentive mind that both enjoin.

Philosophy too involves quiet reflection, really thinking something through and taking time over it, so even if meditation is often seen as emptying the mind, there is a kinship in mental attitude – as thinkers such as Plato, Plotinus and, more recently, Martin Heidegger have known. Plotinus’s philosophy was fulfilled in moments of ecstasy, while Heidegger spoke of the piety of thinking. Nevertheless, there are also important differences. If meditation inculcates attentiveness, philosophy involves relentless questioning. Both can come together in attentive questioning or questioning attentiveness, although there’s still a difference of emphasis.

As far as the content goes, Christian theology clearly takes up issues of belief and practice specific to the Christian tradition. Nevertheless, all academic disciplines have a philosophical element once we start to ask about the kind of truth at issue in them.

Philip Tonner

Your work has centred on a number of themes. One of these is summed up in the word ‘hope’. Another key term that you revisit is ‘love’. Firstly, can you explain what you mean by these terms and can you say how they integrate with your thought more generally? Secondly, what is the role of the future in connection to hope? Does hope relate to something ‘distinctly impending’ or does it relate to a more general sense of something ‘to come’? Is there an

eschatological dimension to your thought here? Finally, do you feel that your concerns with hope and love (and so on) are distinctly theological or do you think that there is a role for hope and love in philosophy? Are these themes that you discuss in your new book project *Eternal God/Saving Time*?

George Pattison

One of the books by Emmanuel Levinas, an important Lithuanian-French-Jewish thinker whose life spanned the twentieth century, is entitled *Time and the Other*. This title reflects two themes that Levinas was led to see as basic to human existence: we are (as Heidegger had discovered) thoroughly temporal beings such that there is nothing we can think, do or say that is not conditioned by time, but (as most people think Heidegger didn't sufficiently emphasise) we are who we are through our relations to others. For Levinas this meant above all taking responsibility for the weak and marginalised in society – the biblical command to care for the 'widows, orphans, and aliens in the land'. *Time and the Other* therefore gives us the basis for identifying hope and love as fundamental philosophical and (I'd say) theological categories.

But there is a leap between time and the other and hope and love. Sartre, for example, thought despair not hope was the outcome of recognising our thoroughly temporal nature. For Heidegger himself, the best we could hope for was a heroic acknowledgement of death. Regarding relations to others, Sartre thought these were necessarily violent and competitive, while Heidegger largely neglected them. If we want to see the world in the light of hope and love, and if we don't want these to be written off as mere wishful thinking, there's therefore a big job to be done. We have to show that hope and love are not just desirable but they are both based on and help us to understand aspects of the human condition that are crucial to our being human. And, yes, that's a large part of the agenda of *Eternal God/Saving Time*. The point of the title is that whereas traditional theology looked toward divine eternity as offering hope for salvation from time, our modern experience

suggests that maybe time itself has saving possibilities and that it is in time-experience itself that we can best discover what it means to talk about God as eternal. I say 'modern' but, in one of the chapters of the book I discuss how these questions are already relevant to the work of Pindar, one of the earliest Greek poets. But the modern focus on time has, I think, sharpened the question again.

Philip Tonner

You have a sustained interest in existential thinkers: figures such as Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Can you explain why that is? What is it about their thought that is so compelling to you?

George Pattison

In their (very) different ways Kierkegaard and Heidegger have returned philosophy to what it was in the ancient world: not a merely academic specialism but a lifelong commitment to searching out the best way to live and why we might want to live like that. For Kierkegaard this is very specifically focused on the issue of how to become a Christian and what Christianity requires as a way of life. Therefore he was very critical of those who thought of Christianity solely in terms of belief and limited their practice to Sunday Church-going. It's your whole life that's at issue in being a Christian, he insisted, and it makes or should make a difference to everything. Heidegger rejected Christianity and turned philosophy itself into a way of life. In many ways he is not a very attractive character (he was, at least for a time, a Nazi and never really faced up to his responsibilities for helping promote Nazism amongst the young), but his original thought and his interpretations of other philosophers' works achieves levels of subtlety and force that are scarcely matched in modern times. (Kierkegaard, by way of contrast, was certainly a very uncomfortable person to have around, but his mix of religion, irony and humour is also very attractive and it's striking that many of those who write about him choose to use his first name – Søren

– since after reading him for a while he really starts to feel like a friend, albeit a prickly one.)

Philip Tonner

As well as being a key figure in the history of existentialism, Heidegger is also a key representative of the phenomenological tradition in philosophy. As a movement, phenomenology is around a century old. Do you feel that phenomenology still has something to offer us today? If so, what do you think that is?

George Pattison

Phenomenology has a lot to offer and is offering a lot today! Of course, as with any school of philosophy there are several varieties of phenomenology. Some, like that of Jean-Luc Marion (who in 2014 gave Gifford lectures in Glasgow), see phenomenology as helping show how God can be present in human life. Other phenomenologies take a more atheistic view. But – going back to my use of attentive questioning and questioning attentiveness as characterising the way of philosophy – if analytic philosophy excels in questioning, phenomenology is a discipline of attentiveness, whether to what is going on in perception, in language or in, for example, ethical issues. Phenomenology doesn't necessarily tell us what's out there in the world or even what we ourselves are, but it does help us understand how the world shows itself to us and how we experience ourselves in our relation to our world.

Philip Tonner

Coming back to the future, in your view, what are the key challenges and questions facing philosophical theology in the twenty-first century?

George Pattison

Universities today are increasingly subject to managerial systems that favour quantifiable outcomes and that demand practical applications. These are also systems that, like so many businesses, want short-term results. Philosophy goes against this tendency, since philosophy won't get anywhere unless it's prepared for a long, slow haul. It's a lifelong process and one whose 'outcome' is, in the first instance, the transformation of the philosopher's own life. Theology invites us to go further and ask whether what we value most in our lives (e.g. hope and love) reveals something ultimate about reality as such. Putting these together in 'philosophical theology' then means something like letting our thinking itself be transformed by a consistent and sustained questioning of what is of greatest importance in the experience and conduct of life itself and then also asking whether this also reflects a more encompassing truth, namely, that life is a gift for which the most fundamental response is gratitude. As Heidegger said, 'thinking is thanking'.

Philip Tonner

Professor Pattison, thank you!

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George Pattison is an internationally recognised theologian and philosopher. Over the past four decades, he has not only advanced thinking and research within the discipline of theology but also made significant contributions to a wide range of debates in philosophy, existential thought, art and aesthetics, technology, modernity and faith, mysticism, religious studies, and the life of the Anglican Church. Characterised by a series of highly original attempts to synthesise and develop ideas and concepts from theology, philosophy, phenomenology, education and aesthetics, his work is innovative, accessible and engaging. It offers an original perspective on, among other topics, the devout life, prayer, hope, what it means to be human, and God.

This first book-length introduction to his thought provides a highly accessible and comprehensive account of Pattison's life and career in the form of a set of interviews he gave to Philip Tonner, a philosopher based at the University of Glasgow. The interview format allows Pattison to present his ideas in his own words, and the book covers the entirety of his career, from his earliest publications to his most recent collection of essays, *A Philosophy of Prayer: Nothingness, Language, and Hope* (2024). It includes new reflections on some of his key influences; Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Dostoevsky.

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