On Re-reading Goldman

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I'm sitting next to Evelyn, in the choir stalls of the hospital chapel. Evelyn, who has been a patient in this hospital for at least twenty-five of her fifty years, is singing away lustily with the rest of us. But the words she is singing are quite different from the ones I'm singing. So different in fact that I can't make them out at all. But, no matter; 'God is his own interpreter, and He will make it plain', the rest of us sing.

In *Religious thinking from Childhood to Adolescence,* Ronald Goldman says that 'some religious experiences are so profound and personal and mysterious that it is doubtful if they are communicable at all, except through the emotional language of the arts'. In Evelyn's case, it is simple enough. She can't read. She is simply feeling religious emotions and singing religious words in a religious way; the result is, she sounds just like the six-year-old child quoted by Goldman:

> 'Thy deliberately Faith I full,
> Faith against almighty worship God,
> And Faith all unto you,
> Faith against thy holy prayer'.

In fact, Evelyn is perfectly capable of what Goldman would consider to be 'adult' religious thinking, and I know this because I'm preparing her for Confirmation in a few weeks' time. In the meantime, not understanding the words of Cowper's hymn is certainly not stopping her from undergoing a genuinely religious experience. In fact, she is worshipping more completely and wholeheartedly than we are. She is more totally involved in an experience of Divinity. Although they are opaque to us, the words she is using fit her experience exactly. The parallel with glossolalia is obvious.

Which brings up the whole subject of the way we think about God, and the way we express our thoughts about him. The way we think about God: Dr Goldman is firmly of the opinion that we think about God in exactly the same way we think about any other subject. He quotes William James, to the effect that 'there is religious fear, religious joy, and so forth. But religious love is only man's natural emotion of love directed to a religious object; religious fear is only ordinary fear . . . the common quaking of the human breast insofar as the notion of divine retribution may arouse it', etc. Goldman quotes other authorities apart from James, and concludes that 'religious thinking is no different in mode and method from non-religious thinking'.

This being so, it follows that our religious awareness will be subject to the same rules that govern our thought in general. In other words,

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1975.tb02180.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

it will follow the developmental or maturational course proposed by Piaget. Our 'thinking skill' may be expected to pass through three stages, 'the levels of intuitive, concrete, and propositional thought'. In the 'intuitive stage', 'there is little systematic thinking, the pattern of thought in a given situation being parallel, fragmented, and inconsistent': in the 'concrete stage', 'the child concentrates on relating things visibly or tangibly present': in 'propositional thinking', 'the child achieves the ability to think in symbolic and abstract terms' (Goldman).

At any particular point in our life, the stage we are in will affect the way in which we learn things. In the first two stages of the development of our thinking ability, we cannot learn things about God which involve the manipulation of a symbolic code of communication, which has been elaborated by people who have attained the final stage of thinking, the adult stage.

This certainly seems most reasonable. It is obvious that a primitive method of organised perceptions will not be able to respond to information which has been encoded in accordance with more sophisticated mental mechanisms. Great play is made by Goldman's followers of the laughable nature of the mistakes made by those whose minds are not yet sufficiently mature to grasp the mysteries of 'religious language'. And yet, they hasten to point out, to adult minds such language no longer has any mystery at all.

But there is a danger here; the danger of assuming that the adult ability to think metaphysically about God and use abstract language to describe him, is a superior way of expressing the relationship between men and the wholly other. It may be a good way of organising the world; it may be, biologically speaking, inevitable; but is it the best way of approaching *God?* We should beware, I think, of regarding the natural adult way of talking and thinking about God with too much satisfaction. It is too easy to speak glibly of our own 'readiness for religion'.

'Unless you become as little children. . .'. During our sojourn in 'pre-operational thinking', we may have been closer to the experience of Divinity to which the Gospel refers, and from which it proceeds, than we are now. The ten-year-old who understands Jesus to be saying that a man cannot live only on bread because he needs fish too, is at least aware that to eat the word of God, whether in human or spirit form, is by no means an ordinary, sensible, idea. But the adult Biblical scholar, or member of a church congregation, who is accustomed to 'the metaphorical language of the Bible', will not hesitate over it at all; he has learnt to 'infer from other non-religious experience, the nature of the divine', and to 'support such concepts upon previously acquired concepts'. Goldman maintains that it is because our own children 'have no concept of sheep-farming' that they find the opening words of the twenty-third psalm hard to grasp. It may be that their bafflement at the juxtaposition of the ideas of an invisible, all-powerful person and woolly animals is actually closer to the experience of the psalmist: for 'The Lord is my Shepherd' is not merely informa-

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tion about a provable, relatable, proposition—it is the statement of a miracle. How blithely the mature mind, the understanding that is completely at home in abstractions, approaches the idea of God! How easily He seems to fit into our arguments and relates to the ordinary world of thought!

This is not to discount the value of language itself, language of any kind, as a means of creation. At the very least, language is a way of 'pointing' experience, of chrystallising understanding, so that it may not so easily slip back into formlessness. At its most considerable, it leads on into new experience—it is the creative consciousness in its critical state, the condition in which the mind is most open to the challenge and the reality of otherness, most responsive to the unknown and the unknowable. Religious language is 'frontier language', in which the symbolic process of homologisation takes place with a beckoning newness, a newness which has power to expand the entire life of assimilated experience which offers itself up to it. It is this 'frontier' quality of religious language which must be preserved.

We are confronted here by two opposing principles, the principle of clarity, which is concerned with the ease with which we may grasp an idea, and the principle of truth—the task of preserving the authenticity of our relation to the object of thought. The fact is that our thinking about religion is not the same as our thinking on other subjects; or it cannot be, if our experience of religion is to be mirrored in our apprehension of its objects. Research into the autonomy of religious language and religious world-views has led, *pace* William James, to a growing consensus that there is in fact a religious instinct, and that religion is a *chose en soi,* an 'independent variable', something that makes its own rules, and dictates its own use of language—and consequently of thought. Some experiences, not only religion, but also sex and art, affect the subject so drastically that they involve a radical revision of the way in which he is accustomed to view the world. He cannot think and speak about these things in the way he is used to thinking and speaking about his experiences. Such a thing can happen to anyone, at any stage of his life; but a sophisticated 'adult' world-view finds it much easier to accommodate because such a world-view necessarily involves an advanced ability to order and relate a wide variety of kinds of experience.

In the case of religion, however, we have reason to believe that things are different, and that religion—that is, genuine religious experience, what Ramsay described as 'the disclosure experience'—is not in fact altered by the processes of thinking, but itself alters those processes. Religious thinking sets out to be different from other systems of thought. It enshrines itself in codes, which, upon inspection, reveal themselves to be fundamentally non-naturalistic; that is, to have a primary reference to something other than nature, and only a secondary reference to nature. Levi-Strauss has demonstrated that religious thought-systems exist in contrast to the natural experiences of men and women, and not in conjunction with them, or as a com-

mentary upon them. Systems of religious thinking obey their own interior rules, and function according to their own totally 'unnatural' relationships and objectives.

Indeed, it is the whole purpose of religion that nature should imitate *it,* rather than that it should reproduce forms and experiences which are simply natural. It is nature's tutor, rather than its partner, and religious ideas and forms exist in order to point a contrast and mark out a way in which nature itself may become un-natural. Religion 'raises phenomena to a parity of value with itself'; here it is the difference from ordinary thinking, feeling and acting which is treasured. As G. K. Chesterton pointed out, 'all romance and all religion consist in making the whole universe stand on its head. That reversal is the whole idea of virtue: that the last shall be first, and the first last'. In primitive religions, taboo systems exist in order to provide an alternative thought-world, a code for human existence which is understood to be superior in every way to the world of ordinary experience. The religious code is the expression of a tangible aspiration which is unintelligible except in its own forms. In Christianity, the contrast between religion and nature takes place in the ethical or behavioural sphere, and in the sacramental reality of symbolic ritual.

Thus, it belongs to the nature of religious thinking to go on beyond the point where other kinds of thinking stop. As Geertz points out, 'the religious perspective differs from the common-sensical in that it moves beyond the realities of everyday life to wider ones which correct and complete them . . . it differs from the scientific perspective in that it questions the realities of everyday life not out of an institutionalised scepticism which dissolves the world's givenness into a swirl of probabilistic hypotheses, but in terms of what it takes to be wider, non-hypothetical truths'. In a real sense, religious thinking can afford to be bolder than ordinary thinking, for in it 'all empirical contradictions are mystically resolved' (V. W. Turner).

We are faced, then, with a 'non-natural instinct', the instinct to move outside nature, outside the given, to discover a truth with which to criticise nature: a truth which, when it is brought into relation with other experience and incorporated within the given, will give criticism the power to transform nature. Religion addresses itself to that instinct in man whereby his whole being aspires to something radically other than itself; to what we might call, in terms of concept-formation, the instinct of *ontological inquisitiveness.* Thought which starts out in the ordinary way is drastically altered by the nature of the material it works upon, the apprehension of Divinity, beyond and above and through nature. The process of thinking about a being-change as a possibility among other possibilities differs radically from describing such a change as an experienced reality, which is, in the event, experienced not as possibility at all, but as impossibility—as miracle. There is a tension here, between the desire to communicate a quality of experience in language, and the necessity of remaining faithful to the truth of the experience: as we have said, the specifically religious contrast between clarity and truth.

Somehow this tension must be preserved. If the truth of the Gospel is to be the truth of religious experience, then its metaphors must always be shocking. The answer to the question 'what on earth does "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" mean' is—nothing on earth. Or nothing only on earth. Its meaning belongs to the divinised nature of the Kingdom, the realised eschatology of religious experience, the unique quality of experience which is able to transform our mode of being in the world. The ability to understand this is the ability to understand, not simply metaphor but sacramental truth, the truth which proceeds from an experience of religion which does not *depend on* orthodox propositional logic, though it may refer to it. We are not primarily concerned with the development of necessary skills in arguing from the concrete to the abstract, or from an example to a genre, but the ability to read a special kind of language, one which only yields its true meaning to those who have undergone a unique kind of experience, an experience known to be different from any of those experiences for which ordinary logic, and ordinary language, manage to provide a more or less efficient, but always appropriate, tool.

Here, of course, we have come up against the basic problem of religious language; that 'normal', non-religious, language communicates by a process of homologisation of novelty and familiarity, in which the new is referred continually back to previous experience, and included within that experience. The truth and reality of religious life, however, cannot sustain this homologisation without suffering an ontological reduction. Here, religion's only true friend is art; that non-Promethean art which proclaims its own identity as invention, *human* invention, and serves as a pointer, rather than as a passport. For this, it seems, such attributes as wonder and imagination are likely to be more useful than argument. For truth's sake, the religious identity of the experience must be preserved. Too much clarity is a distortion of understanding, and not an enrichment. Jesus's own incursions into the sphere of the non-propositional, as in the incidents recorded in St John's Gospel concerning the adulterous woman (John 8:3-11: 'They asked him this as a test, looking for something to use against him. But Jesus bent down and started writing on the ground with his finger') and the blind man (John 9:6f: 'Having said this, (Jesus) spat on the ground, made a paste with his spittle, put this over the eyes of the blind man and said to him "Go and wash in the Pool of Siloam" ') show that he was aware of the discontinuity between his own miraculous newness and the world of natural expectations and deductions from experience.

It may be that one of the things that God has 'hidden from the learned and clever and revealed to mere children' is an encounter with the spiritual reality and force of the 'impossible-possible'—that bread is bread and wine is wine, and only Divinity, only the un-thinkable, can cause them to be, in any sense whatever, the essence and wholeness of the Living God.