JOHN MACQUARRIE                    *Ivor Fields, Oxford*

# John Macquarrie
## 1919–2007

JOHN MACQUARRIE, known as Ian to family and friends, was the foremost Anglican systematic theologian of the twentieth century. His many books cover a wide range of topics, from studies of existentialist philosophy to expositions of systematic Christian theology, writings on mysticism and world religion, and analyses of ethical thought. He was always a theologian of the church, seeking to state Christian beliefs in a positive and attractive way. But he did so from a very distinctive standpoint, using a philosophical vocabulary that united philosophical Idealism, existentialism, and Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy in an original and fruitful way. Thus he could rightly be called an original and creative philosopher, though one who used his philosophy in the service of Christian thought, and who exemplified his philosophy in his own life and religious practice. But he preferred to be thought of as a theologian and apologist, who devoted his life to the reformulation of classical Christian doctrines in terms which would be accessible to those who live in the more secular thought-world after the European Enlightenment. This blending of philosophy and theology is relatively rare in modern theological thought, and Macquarrie's work is a paradigm model of a scholarly synthesis of twentieth-century philosophical reflection and traditional religious belief, whatever judgement the future makes on the final plausibility of such a stance.

## In Scotland

John Macquarrie was born on 27 June 1919 in Renfrew, Scotland, the son of a Gaelic-speaking shipyard pattern-maker, who was an elder in the

Church of Scotland. He was brought up there and in Paisley, and attended Paisley grammar school. He went to Glasgow University at the age of 17, and took a first-class Honours degree in Mental Philosophy. Glasgow still had a flourishing Hegelian tradition at that time, and he studied the philosophy of F. H. Bradley in detail, and was taught by the eminent Scottish Hegelian A. C. Campbell. He graduated MA in 1940. Macquarrie then took a BD in 1943, and qualified for the Presbyterian ministry, gaining pastoral experience in Dumbarton and Paisley. But the war intervened, and he became an Army Chaplain, serving from 1943–8. He later said that he then saw Christian theories of the incarnation and atonement as 'a waste of time', or even as little more than systematic superstition. Yet he was firmly committed to Christian ministry and to the Christian way of life. Perhaps, like many Idealist philosophers, he saw popular Christianity as a mythical way of adumbrating deeper philosophical truths. Yet even so, he had a strong personal sense of what Rudolf Otto called the 'numinous' or the holy. He was never a merely intellectual or purely rational Idealist, but there was in him the sort of personal experience of a transcendent reality that was to keep him close to the thought of Schleiermacher.

In 1945 he was given responsibility for coordinating religious services for German prisoners of war in Egypt. This deepened his knowledge of German, as well as his sense of the diversity and complexity of human lives and motivations. After the war, he was called to the parish of St Ninian's in Brechin, where he ministered from 1948–53, and in 1949 he married Jenny Welsh from Renfrew, whom he had already known for eight years. Their marriage was to be happy and life-long, and they had two sons and a daughter. While at Brechin, he took a part-time Ph.D. at Glasgow under the supervision of Ian Henderson on the thought of Rudolf Bultmann, which involved an in-depth reading of Heidegger. He was appointed to a tutorship in systematic theology at Trinity College, Glasgow, in 1953, and completed his doctorate in 1954. His Ph.D. became his first book, *An Existentialist Theology* (London, 1955)*,* and Macquarrie found in Bultmann what was missing in Bradley, a belief that in Christian faith there is a saving power from the despair and guilt of inauthentic human living. Macquarrie believed that the analysis of human being found in Heidegger is not simply an anthropology, or an analysis of subjective experience—an accusation often made against the German philosopher. It implies an ontology (as Heidegger always said it did, and for that reason disliked being called an existentialist), or a view of the nature of Being itself. So Macquarrie wanted to unite Heidegger's analy-

sis of authentic and inauthentic existence with Bultmann's claim that authentic existence is a gift of divine grace. He called his own method an 'existential-ontological' method. The analysis of the sort of being-in-the-world that human persons have provides clues to the ultimate and objective nature of Being. It discloses the need for 'salvation' from inauthentic life, and recognition of the true nature of Being as 'holy' or 'gracious'.

Idealism is not renounced. But it is no longer a dispassionate rational and purely theoretical analysis of reality as the self-expression of Absolute Spirit. It begins from an apprehension of human being as thrown-into-the-world, as beset by anxiety in the face of the need to choose a way of being that must end in death, as faced with despair before the threat of nothingness, as alienated from a sense of being an authentic self, and as assailed by the guilt of having fallen away from the innermost possibilities of its being. All this shares with Idealism the central idea that the ultimate nature of reality is spirit or consciousness. But for existentialism consciousness is embodied in the world, terminates in death, and is always in danger of losing its distinctive nature in a world of objects or 'things'. The cool rationality of *Geist* has become the passionate and anguished awareness of being-towards-death.

For Heidegger it is doubtful whether one can any longer speak of God. For Bultmann, however, Heidegger's analysis provides an exposition of human life without hope and without God. The proclamation of the Cross provides such hope and the possibility of a truly authentic life—though Bultmann's view of what God is remains enigmatic. Macquarrie counters Heidegger with the affirmation that Being itself is 'holy'. There is possibility as well as facticity, rationality as well as irrationality, responsibility as well as impotence, hope as well as anxiety. Ronald Gregor-Smith aptly said that Macquarrie was 'an existentialist without *angst*'. Whereas the Lutheran Bultmann had seen the world as intrinsically dark, with salvation occasionally breaking through like shafts of lightning, Macquarrie sees the world as intrinsically graced, already thoroughly interpenetrated by the prior activity of a gracious God. It is not surprising that Macquarrie progressively moved out of the Reformed Presbyterian tradition to the sort of Catholic view represented by Karl Rahner, a theologian he came to admire. But Macquarrie's was an Anglican sort of Catholicism, unwilling to accept any infallible source of authority, yet deeply committed to seeing the world as sacramental of divine reality.

John Macquarrie's translation in 1962, with Edward Robinson, of *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*, London, 1962), which many hold to be

untranslatable even into German, showed the depth of his understanding of Heidegger. When Macquarrie spoke of God, he used the Heideggerian term 'Being', the source and ground of all particular beings, but not itself a being among others. God was referred to as 'He who is more than being', but is a power or potency that is realised in the beings that are. God is 'the *incomparable* that *lets-be* and is *present-and-manifest*' (*Principles of Christian Theology*, London, 1966, p. 105). Again, 'God is the religious word for Being, understood as gracious' (*Studies in Christian Existentialism*, London, 1966, p. 11).

It is hard to imagine Heidegger saying such a thing. Yet if it is possible to live a truly authentic life, one that realises its innermost possibilities with hope and creativity, perhaps one could speak of Being as containing the demand for and possibility of fulfilment and fully personal flourishing for the things-that-are. Such a God would not be a fully personal and separately existing entity, with the power of envisaging and freely creating a universe, or of not doing so. God would be a word for the deepest character of Being itself, as manifested in beings. This is a sort of panentheism—a word Macquarrie did not particularly like (preferring the expression 'dialectical theism'), though he sometimes used it—a view that the world is part of God, or that God is not a being distinct from the world who is fundamentally unchanged by it.

This reflects a Heideggerian opposition to so-called 'Cartesian dualism', the belief that Spirit or Mind is different and distinct from all things material. For Heidegger, mental or conscious being is in the world, embodied and expressed in it, and without the world it would not exist. So for Macquarrie, God is embodied and expressed in the world, so that there is no Being without beings, but Being and beings are 'inextricably intertwined'. Ignoring the fact that this expression is precisely the one Descartes actually used about the relation of mind and body, the substantive point is that for Macquarrie, God and the world are not ontologically separable, though they are conceptually distinct. Being lets beings be, and is present and manifest in them. It is as though finite beings are necessarily (though freely) actualised from the infinite potency of Being, and the character of Being becomes present and manifest in and through them, in various ways and to various degrees.

That the ultimate character of Being, thus expressed, is 'gracious' accounts for the relative lack of *Angst* in Macquarrie's existential ontology. The bare possibility of authenticity, rarely achieved, becomes a real and available conscious sharing in the holiness of Being. But this is because Being, through all the polarities and ambiguities of its manifes-

tation in finite beings, is an active power that can and will bring all to fulfilment. Heidegger's pessimism can only truly be transcended if there is a transcendent power to fulfil what seems humanly impossible.

During his time in Glasgow Macquarrie also largely completed *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought* (London, 1963), a survey of twentieth-century writing in systematic theology, philosophy, and the study of religions. He gives lucid and concise descriptions of each writer, and provides judicious and sympathetic comments and criticisms throughout. This book makes it quite clear that Macquarrie was interested in placing Christian theology in a wide intellectual context, and to see it as a rational system in debate with that context. He insists that religion is concerned with truth, not just with the fulfilment of some sort of psychological or emotional need. He stresses that religion should be reasoned and comprehensive and subject to intellectual revision when necessary. And he denies any possession of absolute truth, counselling calm acceptance of an element of provisionality in all statements of belief. The book is a masterly summary of twentieth-century thought about religion, and it evinces the characteristic qualities of its author—concern for accurate understanding, for appreciating the views of others, however alien they may seem, and for arriving at reasoned conclusions which are as inclusive as possible, without being relativistic. His understanding of existentialism did not represent some sort of flight from reason to introspective morbidity. It was part of a rational pursuit of truth, seen more widely than just in terms of Idealist philosophy or of scientific investigation.

## In America

In 1962 Macquarrie accepted the Chair of Systematic Theology (which he presumably no longer regarded as systematic superstition) at Union Theological Seminary in New York. During his eight years there he wrote a book a year. But his masterpiece was the 1966 *Principles of Christian Theology,* which works through almost every aspect of Christian doctrine in the light of the concepts of human nature and of God that he had forged from Idealism, from Heidegger, and from an increasingly sacramental and mystical approach to Christian faith. Partly influenced by his colleague John Knox, he moved away from the rather austere liturgical traditions of Presbyterianism towards the more mystical and symbol-rich heritage of Catholicism. His critical, revisionist, and provisionalist attitude to theology decreed that it was in the Anglican form of Catholicism

that he would henceforth find his religious home. He was ordained as an Anglican priest in 1965, and became happily settled in New York, where Jenny taught mathematics, and where his family began their education.

The first thing most readers notice about the *Principles* is its remarkably eirenic, reasonable, and positive tone. Macquarrie had never viewed Calvin with much favour, particularly disliking the doctrines of predestination, of penal substitution, and of eternal Hell. But the respect in which he most obviously differs from Calvin is in the unpolemical and unfailingly charitable tone of his writing. In typical dialectical fashion, he looks for something true and positive even in views he does not like, and tries to include them in a wider, positive synthesis, which makes no claim to be complete or inerrant.

The book starts with a section on Philosophical Theology, in which Macquarrie enquires into the possibility of any theology whatsoever, and in which the nature of religious language and of revelation are considered. It may seem strange that an analytical interest in the language of religion should be combined with a Continental European interest in existential phenomenology. It was certainly unusual. In fact, however, there is a natural affinity between an interest in human experiences that seem to convey a sense of transcendence, and an interest in forms of language that may express, rather than describe, such experiences. So when Schleiermacher and Rudolf Otto speak of an experience of 'the infinite in the finite', or of 'a sense of the numinous', they are using language in a distinctive way to convey what cannot be straightforwardly described. In the *Principles* and in *God-Talk*, Macquarrie evinces a strong interest in the way language can be used to convey types of human experience that seem to be descriptively inexpressible.

Heidegger had seemed to speak of an immediate apprehension of Being that had somehow been lost by involvement in a world of objects to be used or manipulated. Macquarrie claimed, in the tradition of Schleiermacher, that there is a basic religious sense which is not just a perception of yet another rather unusual entity called God. It is rather a quasi-aesthetic sense of the wholeness of Being, hidden under the plurality of beings, yet able to manifest itself to those who are open to such special apprehension.

For Macquarrie, Being is active and gracious, willing and enabling human flourishing. Such a view cannot be established by rational reflection alone. It requires a revelation, a self-disclosure of Being as gracious. Revelation is a disclosive experience of the holy. As in Schleiermacher, such revelation is not confined to Christianity. Primordial or paradigm revelations occur in many religious traditions, and Macquarrie was in

1995 to write of nine leading religious teachers, including Mohammed and Gautama Buddha, who were the recipients of such disclosures of Being. Their primordial revelations gave rise to communities that took them as classical sources of disclosure, and that sought to repeat or re-enact their disclosive experiences in new contexts and cultures.

In the case of Christianity, the self-communication of Being takes place in the life and person of Jesus of Nazareth. Christian revelation is not primarily in verbal statements. The Biblical records are witnesses to the disclosure of Being in Jesus, and they have the primary purpose of evoking or repeating within the Christian community the sort of primordial disclosure that the first disciples had discerned. The credal statements that became so important to later Christianity are not part of revelation and they are not either infallible or irreformable. They express the divine self-manifestation in the philosophical terms that seemed most illuminating for the community at a particular time.

In the modern world, when the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle is no longer so appealing, the classical doctrines of Christian faith may need to be reformulated, not in order to change the 'faith once handed to the saints', but precisely in order to preserve the possibility of an authentic repetition of the original primordial revelation. For such a conception of revelation, Christian doctrines are not primarily descriptions of some supernatural entity, 'a strange person without a body' who acts in miraculous and publicly identifiable ways. They are ways of seeking to express and evoke an apprehension of the graciousness of Being, an apprehension that occurred in a primordial way in and through the person of Jesus.

Christian doctrines are not just the propositions of a philosophical worldview. That came to seem, for Macquarrie, the error of Idealism, which sets out to describe how Reality is from a purely rational point of view. It can also lead to seeing systematic theology as systematic superstition, when what is offered is a description of highly improbable supernatural states of affairs. Christian doctrines are recommendations for sets of linguistic usages embedded in distinctive ritual behaviours and practices that have the function of evoking liberative experience of Being.

Seen in this light, some traditional Christian doctrines can seem too objective, descriptive, and dispassionate. They can appear to describe all too clearly some objective supernatural facts, known by some sort of supernatural dictation, and having little immediate practical import for one's own conduct. This is why existentialism appealed to Macquarrie. It dealt with personal experience of despair and anxiety, or of hope and trust in being, and in its Christian form it proposed a practical way of liberation

from inauthentic existence, by living encounter with a power that could evoke hope and trust.

This is a creative and powerful reformulation of Christian faith. It can reasonably claim to have ancient roots in the long Christian apophatic tradition, which insists that God is unlike any finite form of being, and cannot be described in any straightforward way. It also has roots in contemplative traditions of prayer, which appealed strongly to Macquarrie, and which move beyond all descriptive words, or beyond words altogether, into the silence of resting in Being. And it is reminiscent of Aquinas' insistence that God is not a substance, or a member of a genus or species, but is Being itself (*esse suum subsistens*). It is suspicious of the sorts of minute technical distinctions that abound in some late Scholastic neo-Aristotelian theology, where thirty-two kinds of grace have sometimes been conceptually distinguished. For Macquarrie, such an exercise would be too precise and schematic to express the mysteries of faith. Macquarrie seeks to avoid grand metaphysical theories and purely theoretical disputations, and to root faith in a form of apprehension that transforms the life of the one who apprehends. Faith is at once experiential and critical, committed to a sacramental life of seeking the grace of Being in and through the beings immersed in time, and yet sceptical of any final and definitive formulation of the revelation (the apprehension of Being as gracious) and redemption (the gift of authentic life) that is apprehended in and through the person of Jesus.

Naturally enough such a representation of Christian faith has its critics. From the philosophical side, some would find Heidegger, or existentialism in general, to be an insecure basis for any sort of faith-commitment. Concentration on such subjective psychological phenomena as anxiety, despair, and fear of freedom and death, may seem unduly introspective and self-obsessed. For many philosophers, consciousness itself is little more than a by-product of evolution, and the practicalities of survival in an endangered environment may seem more important than the fairly useless business of looking anxiously at one's own states of mind.

In response, however, it may plausibly be said that attention to the feelings and thoughts of human consciousness does provide knowledge of aspects of reality that science and public observation cannot provide. These may well be important aspects of reality, and it is cavalier to reject them as useless. They may provide clues to the character of Being itself, since they undoubtedly manifest potentialities inherent in the structure of Being from the first. If they do provide such clues, that may suggest that there is much more to Being than the existence and survival of physical

objects, and that the personal may somehow manifest the deep structure of Being in a distinctive way.

Even if it does seem important to analyse subjective states of mind, it may then be said that such states vary so much from person to person that it is very doubtful that one could find anxiety and guilt to be universal to human existence as such, or that one could find agreement on what exactly would constitute an 'authentic' mode of human existence. Why should there be just one type of authentic life, and what would make it authentic but some purely personal and perhaps idiosyncratic preference?

It is an uncomfortable fact that Heidegger colluded with German National Socialism under Hitler, and that does not inspire confidence that his analysis of authentic existence is morally above suspicion. It is a standard criticism of existentialism that, if there are no objective moral values and one is free to choose one's own life, it hardly seems possible also to claim that there is one authentic form of existence that ought to be chosen by all. If you choose to live under a dictatorship, with all decisions taken by one who mystically embodies the will of the people, what is that to anyone else?

So there are both philosophical and moral objections to existentialism. It may be thought to be too subjective and introspective. It may fail to provide any firm moral guidelines, except the feeble and possibly dangerous suggestion that one should consciously live as a free individual. These points are an important element in Karl Barth's dispute with liberal theology. In talking about God, one must be speaking of something objective and independent of what anyone thinks or feels. And there must be an objective morality that is not just personally and freely invented. Perhaps only an objectively existing God (fully personal and independent of the cosmos) and the objective demands of a revealed divine will can save existentialism from subjective individualism and moral relativism.

But Macquarrie has constantly insisted that he does believe in an objectively existing God. He was a firm critic of all 'death of God' theologies, and of all attempts to deny that God was an objective reality. He began from an analysis of human experience only because he thought this could provide an entry into religious belief for those to whom the traditional language of Christianity failed to communicate. In particular, traditional language about Jesus Christ being two natures in one person, or of the Trinity being three persons in one substance, probably means little to most people, and completely fails to connect to any practical issues that people have. One does not need to master Heidegger to understand that reflective human beings face major issues of finding value, meaning,

or purpose in their lives, and that such issues may be repressed rather than resolved by immersion in the pursuit of ambition, desire, and power.

It seems plausible to suppose that interest in religion arises, not so much from theoretical speculation about the nature of the universe, as from a sense of dissatisfaction with many of the ordinary goals and routines of human life, and a desire to find some greater purpose or meaning in existence, or at least to see if such a thing is possible. The question is whether existentialism can provide a plausible account of such objective purpose and meaning. Heidegger's thought is deeply ambiguous, and it certainly provides nothing like a traditional religious belief that the cosmos exists in order to realise a morally worthwhile purpose, and that the meaning of human life lies in helping to realise that purpose by responsible moral commitment. Indeed, there is at least a suspicion that he would regard the idea of an objective purpose to which humans ought to be obedient as an example of inauthentic existence, as conformity to a purpose other than one's own to which one just had to submit.

Bultmann, in seeing authentic existence as given by the proclamation of the crucified Jesus, introduces an element of objectivity and moral obligation. But, as a New Testament scholar, he did not work this out in any systematic way. It is Macquarrie (and, in a different but related way, Paul Tillich) who attempts to fill out the ontological implications of there being a truly authentic human life that is both morally demanding and existentially fulfilling. Existentialist philosophy as such does not lead to any form of theism. There are at least as many atheistic existentialists as there are religiously oriented ones. Yet existential analyses may clarify what might be meant by authentic human existence, and it may clarify what makes human existence so often inauthentic. The striving to live authentically as a person may not be in itself religious, but it is a goal that many religions share, and one that they may amplify and refine from their own perspective.

For both Bultmann and Macquarrie, authentic life is not disclosed by philosophical analysis. It is a matter of revelation, of a gift of insight and transformation that comes from beyond human existence, from a self-communicating disclosure of Being itself. For that reason it is plain that Macquarrie is committed to the truth and objectivity of God as holy and gracious Being. What he wants to stress is that God is not another being external to the universe who interrupts it occasionally as an alien force. God is the inner character of Being. That character is disclosed more fully in and through some finite beings, and it is disclosed most fully in personal beings.

The possibility of an incarnation of God in finite persons is already inherent in Macquarrie's definition of God as Being that is manifest and present in particular beings. Such a God is not a reality complete in itself even without any finite beings. At this point the God of classical theism, as portrayed by Aquinas, is radically modified. That classical or 'monarchical' God is impassible and unchanged by the world, and as infinite in being it excludes from its own being all finite beings. For Macquarrie, however, the world is part of God, and God is changed by the world, accepting the risk and suffering of the world's existence, and including the world as part of the self-manifestation of creative, continually active Being. This is a God that completes itself in and through particular beings, and especially through persons. To be fully a person is to be a full disclosure of the character of Being, and mediator of the power of Being. And to be fully God is to manifest the divine presence and power in and through finite personhood.

Macquarrie disagrees with Bultmann's thesis that all that Christian faith requires of Jesus is that he dies on the Cross, or even that the Cross is proclaimed as the possibility of authentic life in an inauthentic world. For Macquarrie, if Jesus is to be truly a manifestation of authentic human life and of Being as manifest in such a life, then the life of Jesus must be a truly authentic life. Such a thing could never be established by neutral historical research, but it must at least be a plausible interpretation of Jesus' life. A primordial revelation occurred around the person of Jesus, and the life of Jesus must therefore have been such that the occurrence of such a disclosure was appropriate. Jesus must at least have been morally and spiritually extraordinary, living authentically in the power of holy Being, a primordial self-communication of Being in his life and teaching as well as in his death.

It is in the second part of the *Principles*, entitled 'Symbolic Theology', that such matters are treated in more detail. For Macquarrie it is not the case that God is a transcendent person, and that Jesus is an autonomous human person, and that somehow these two are fused together in an almost schizophrenic way, like two minds locked together in one body, one mind being immensely more knowledgeable and powerful than the other. God is Being that manifests its innermost nature in and through finite persons, so that God is intrinsically able to manifest itself in finite persons, and persons are intrinsically able to manifest holy Being.

This general approach gives rise to a distinctive interpretation of the Trinity. Being is discerned by us, in its relation to created beings, in three 'movements' or relations. First is Primordial Being, the abyss of possibility

from which all things arise. Second is Expressive Being, in which possibilities are actualised in a finite reality that carries the risk of alienation and estrangement, as the finite persons who emerge by natural laws from the cosmos exploit their relative autonomy and creativity. Third is Unitive Being, the return of the finite into the unitive reality of Being, giving Being itself a new and complex structure in which nothing of positive goodness in creation is lost, but in which all is reconciled and harmonised in a creative way.

This is a depiction of a truly cosmic Trinity, carrying echoes of Plotinus and Hegel, but remaining faithful to the basic monotheism of Christianity, and providing an illuminating account of Christian beliefs about Jesus as Son of God. It does not speak of three separate centres of consciousness in some complex set of internal relationships within a God who is also classically said to be 'simple'. But it does speak of God as creative origin or Father of all created things. It speaks of the *Logos* or wisdom (or 'Son') of God as the archetype of creation, and as taking finite form in the historical process of an objective world of beings. It speaks of the Spirit as an active power in the world making for good and reconciling all creation in the unity of Being. These three 'movements' in Being do not occur one after the other, or as optional ways of dividing up the unity of Being. Being is always and inseparably the primordial source, the expressive vitality, and the unitive integration of the beings in which its creative activity consists. The Trinitarian symbolism is irreducible, and necessary to the apprehension of the character of Being as gracious and holy that is revealed in and around the person of Jesus.

Accordingly the crucial question for Macquarrie is not how incarnation is possible, since the whole cosmos is in a sense a divine incarnation, and its apotheosis in God is the resurrection and ascension of the finite into the infinite. The question is why incarnation should be apparently confined to the one person of Jesus, a male individual at a specific time in human history, rather than being a symbol for the whole history of the cosmos. The answer to that question requires a fuller treatment of the person of Jesus and of the role of the church in the history of the cosmos. The latter topic, ecclesiology, is treated in the third part of the *Principles*, under 'Applied Theology'. But its main themes were to receive fuller treatment in later works.

While at Union, Macquarrie also wrote *God-Talk* (London, 1967), a treatment of religious language that relates the thought of Ian Ramsey and British analytical philosophy to the philosophy of existential phenomenology. And in *Three Issues of Ethics* (London, 1970), he developed

a view of ethics based on natural law or human reason, though natural law was revised so that it did not advocate conformity to 'the purposes of biological nature', but rather pointed to the sort of personal fulfilment that was implicit in a fuller manifestation of Being in distinctively personal lives. As always, he provided excellent summaries of the thought of many writers in the Christian tradition, but grounded his own ethical theory in an analysis of human anthropology, as illuminated by the demand and promise of holy Being. These books show that Macquarrie's thought was not narrowly confined to existentialism, but also encompassed classical and analytical traditions of philosophy, though he always managed to include elements of those traditions within his own basic perspective.

## In Oxford

Meanwhile, John Macquarrie's life was to change. In 1970 he was offered, without his prior knowledge, the Lady Margaret Chair of Divinity at Christ Church, Oxford. With this Chair a Canonry of Christ Church is allied, so that it offers opportunities for research, for graduate teaching, and for priestly involvement in the life of a Cathedral (the College chapel also being the Cathedral of the Anglican Diocese of Oxford). To the great satisfaction of all concerned, he accepted the Chair, and the rest of his university life was spent at Christ Church. Jenny, continued to teach mathematics, now at the Cathedral School, and the children made the transition to Oxford with good grace.

As a preacher, a priest, a supervisor of graduates in Theology, and a prolific writer, John Macquarrie was a much-loved, wise, and saintly person. He kept largely aloof both from the little disputes that enliven academic life and from the larger matters of international consequence that have troubled the Anglican communion in recent times. He was always ready, however, to act as a mediator or interpreter, ready to find good in many differing points of view, and being a charitable and gracious reconciler by nature. As a theological consultant at two Lambeth conferences, in 1968 and 1978, he commended an inclusive faith that would permit many shades of opinion. On the thorny issue of the ordination of women, to which the Roman Catholic church was and is implacably opposed, he confessed that he could see no theological objection to ordaining women. But he nevertheless counselled caution, and refraining from any action that would cause offence. Thus he adopted a rather conservative stance on many matters of ecclesiastical policy.

It is perhaps rather ironic that one whose theology was very radical in many respects—advocating the mutability of God and accepting very critical interpretations of the Biblical material—was deeply conservative in practice. He argued for the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament in the Cathedral, and wrote in favour of the service of Benediction, that most Catholic of rites. Yet he rejected Catholic doctrines of Papal infallibility, and remained loyal to a Church which included forms of Calvinist thought that were quite inimical to him. As an ex-Presbyterian he was, of course, used to such things, and he possibly remained at heart a Reformed Christian who turned out to have a deep love of Catholic spirituality and sacramental thought, though he could never accept the hierarchical view of ecclesial authority that often went with it. He regarded himself as a dialectical theologian, and he tried to hold together as many different strands of thought as possible, while being in practice rather conservative. With that conservatism, however, went a great and genuine humility, so that he was almost unduly generous to his opponents.

He continued to write with immense fluency, sometimes addressing a Church constituency, and sometimes writing for a broader public interested in philosophy and Christianity. A book from early in his Oxford days was *Paths in Spirituality* (London, 1972), which shows his strong interest in prayer and spirituality, and the fact that, however innovative and radical his theology may seem to some people, there can be no doubt that his work was always rooted in the practice of prayer and devotion. 'Holy Being' was something close to Macquarrie's own personal experience, and that, rather than any intellectual philosophy, was the motivation of his life and work.

When the 'myth of God Incarnate' controversy occurred, in 1977, he found himself enlisted among the respondents in *The Truth of God Incarnate* (edited by M. Green, London, 1977). However eirenic he was, he drew the line at those who wanted a purely secular or religionless Christianity, and had already attacked secular versions of Christianity a decade earlier, in *God and Secularity* (London, 1968). Worship was for him the centre of Christian life, and worship required the existence of a transcendent spiritual reality of grace and holiness. Nevertheless, what he actually wrote in *The Truth . . .* could well have appeared in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (edited by J. Hick, Oxford, 1977), and he found himself pretty much endorsing his Christ Church colleague Maurice Wiles' statement that Jesus had lived 'a life that embodies God's character and action in the world' as an adequate statement of the Church's faith. Macquarrie was no literalist about Scripture, and his conception of religious language

as symbolic was far removed from the characterisations of God as a supernatural person that some other defenders of 'the truth' were concerned to defend. He wanted realism without literalism, and the distinction was often hard for others, on both sides, to grasp.

There was obviously more to be said about the central pillar of Christian faith, the incarnation. As a way of saying more, he first investigated the question of what it means to be truly human in his book *In Search of Humanity* (London, 1982). Then he explored again how we might think of God, writing *In Search of Deity* (comprising the Gifford lectures, published in London in 1984). Having prepared the ground, he turned explicitly to Christology, and *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London, 1990), for which he received the Collins religious book prize, is his most extended work on the subject of how the truly human can be identical with the fully divine.

In a sense, for Macquarrie the whole history of the cosmos is the self-unfolding and manifestation of Being. But only in personal lives can this manifestation be apprehended as a self-communication, as an appropriated and understood manifestation. So while God is deeply involved in all creation, it is in personal consciousness that such involvement takes on a new character of communication, response, and conscious co-creativity between primordial Being and Being as expressed in beings. Thus the idea of progressive degrees of self-manifestation is already implied by the nature of cosmic history, as is the idea that it is in personal agency that divine manifestation will find its fullest form.

If, in such a scheme, a full manifestation of Being in the beings is to exist, it must have a specific temporal origin. There must be some historical time when it begins, some process through which it extends to others and perhaps even throughout the cosmos, and some time when it reaches its most extensive cosmic completion.

With regard to Hegel's rather similar scheme, its detractors complain that Hegel sees himself as the final manifestation of Absolute Spirit in the world, or that at least he sees the Prussian State as a plausible candidate. This is probably quite unfair, but it is clear that Macquarrie could not accept any such possibility. An adequate self-communicative disclosure of holy Being could only occur in a life in which the negative poles of the dialectic of human existence—anxiety, despair, immersion in hatred or desire, and fear of death—had been radically overcome in a life of hope, joy, healing, forgiveness, and self-renunciation. It would also have to be a life in which the graciousness of Being was powerfully present. Perhaps the fullest manifestation of Being would be a community of persons in

which such grace could be mutually given and received. But any such community would need to be inaugurated by one who was fully open to and intimately conscious of Being and had become an effective channel of the power of Being.

This is a conceptual possibility, framing an explanation of why the full self-communication of Being might be expected to occur in one originative disclosure in and through a charismatically unique person, from whose life might spring a community where that disclosure could be effectively repeated. But such a conceptual possibility did not originate by pure speculation, without any historical source. In fact it sprang historically from the claim that in the person of Jesus just such a self-communication of ultimate Being did occur, and that it did give rise to the existence of a new sort of community, the Church, in which the originative revelation is repeated throughout the world. Conceptual possibility and historical testimony coincide, and are reinforced by present experience of liberation for authentic life within the community of the Church.

In this way Macquarrie was able to account for the historical particularity of Christianity in a way that the Idealists had not quite managed, yet that did not involve a supernatural 'invasion' of the natural world. Incarnation is not a unique, odd, and arbitrary intrusion by a supernatural person into an otherwise closed and complete causal framework of physical facts. It is the natural completion of the expressive cosmic process of the self-manifestation of holy Being in its expansion into a world of finite beings, and the beginning of the unitive cosmic process of including personal beings in co-creative communities that can bring holy Being to a final realisation of its innermost possibilities for fulfilment. As Macquarrie puts it, 'God is deeply involved in his creation', and 'the centre of this initiative and involvement is Jesus Christ' (*Stubborn Theological Questions*, London, 2003, p. 81).

Divine-human unity is in principle open to all persons, though it is likely to be rare in an alienated world, and even unique in the historical context of its occurrence. So Macquarrie does not hesitate to say that 'the difference between Christ and other agents of the Logos is one of degree, not of kind' (*Jesus Christ* . . ., p. 392). Moreover he opposes any supernatural intervention that would make Jesus sinless and perfectly God-conscious from the first. He rather favours a natural growth in the consciousness of Jesus towards a vocation to proclaim the kingdom, and a process of growing into union with God, a sort of 'progressive incarnation'.

If Jesus is in every sense a normal human being, then the miraculous elements of his life, such as the virgin birth, his ability to heal or raise the dead instantaneously, and his literal bodily resurrection, will be regarded as legends. With regard to the resurrection, Macquarrie offers two possible endings to the story of Jesus, one happy and one austere. The happy one speaks of resurrection, ascension and coming again. These narratives are surrounded by 'clouds of mythology', but may point to some fulfilment of history by a 'gradual process'. The austere ending, which, he thinks, conserves the essential truths of Christianity, interprets talk of resurrection as 'an attempt to express the meaning of the historical figure of Jesus and the events of his life' (*Jesus Christ* . . ., p. 43). That ending preserves what he names as the essential core of Christian faith, that God is love, and is revealed in Jesus.

This account shows Macquarrie's desire to be as inclusive in theology as possible, and to allow a measure of truth to differing viewpoints. He prefers the 'happy ending', but does not exclude the austere ending, which may be forced on some theologians by their reservations about what can be established by historical research about the person of Jesus. It is surprising that he was not more often attacked by more conservative Christians, and I suppose one reason for that is that he was always insistent on the objectivity of God and committed to a profound life of prayer, clearly centred on Jesus Christ. He was just transparently what Christians ought to be.

His exclusion of supernatural divine acts that cannot be explained by natural laws, his embrace of a progressive move in the life of Jesus towards sinlessness and union with God, and his vision of the church as 'a new corporate reality . . . the historical embodiment of the new humanity' (*Principles*, p. 388), and 'an ever-widening fellowship which cannot stop short of all creation' (p. 408), still seem unconvincing, however, to many theologians. This is because it is hard to see how one can justify faith that in Jesus a fully perfect humanity, and therefore a full divine-human unity, was achieved, without a more robust concept of special divine action to bring this about.

Macquarrie insists on the need for grace—for 'a power from beyond man which can heal his estrangement' (*Studies in Christian Existentialism*, p. 8). But he also insists on a non-supernaturalist interpretation of grace, as the power of Being expressed in and through natural laws that are not interrupted by supernatural causes. Can such an interpretation really

guarantee the unique and full perfection of Jesus? And is it really plaus-
ible to suppose that the Church, divided and quarrelsome as it is, actually
embodies a new humanity? Or that, as one religious institution or set of
institutions among many in our world, the church will come to include 'all
creation' at some far future time?

The import of all these rhetorical questions is the same: can the tradi-
tional Christian faith really be preserved by a wholly non-supernaturalist
ontology? Perhaps the ancient tradition requires that Jesus is supernatu-
rally preserved from sin from the first moment of his life; that the Church
is the normative channel of divine forgiveness and sacramental grace, but
not a fellowship of divinised humans; and that the realisation of the
divine purpose will not be the culmination of some 'gradual process of
history' (*Jesus Christ . . .*, p. 411), but a radically new creation.

These questions are pertinent only because Macquarrie saw himself as
primarily concerned to be a spokesperson for the historical community of
the catholic faith, maintaining the creeds, the continuity of the heritage of
faith transmitted by the apostles, and the decisions of the ecumenical
councils. He wished above all to be remembered as an apologist for the
Christian faith. But some would hold that what he did was to provide a
systematic and comprehensive restatement of that faith that seems to be
very different from anything the apostles or the Church Fathers might
have accepted.

However that may be, the philosophical theology he did provide was
ambitious, exciting, and challenging. It is one of the most profound and
intellectually coherent accounts of religious faith to have been written in
the twentieth century. And it was a religious faith, not just a philosophy.
For it is rooted in prayer and worship, and in a personal awareness of
Being as gracious that made Macquarrie's own life one of transparent
holiness.

This approach to Christian faith places it in the context of a general
human anthropology, and this opens the possibility that there is a more
general sense of 'faith' that is not confined to Christianity or even its close
analogues. In *The Mediators* (London, 1995), he gave sympathetic por-
trayals of nine great religious teachers from whose lives or teachings had
originated various religious traditions. It seems natural that Being could
disclose itself in various ways and cultural contexts, making authentic life
possible through a common power of Being that is symbolised in many
different ways. It may seem possible to go further, and say that if all reli-
gious affirmations are in symbolic form, and if the ascent to conscious
unity with Being is entirely natural, without specific supernatural intru-

sions, the way is open to seeing various religious paths as more or less equally valid sets of symbols and rituals. Macquarrie was too firmly rooted in Christian tradition to take such a step, and his insistence that religions must seek for the truth, and that truth must in the end be one, so that it cannot include all opinions as equally acceptable, kept him firm in a commitment to the final truth of Christianity, in some interpretation perhaps yet to be provided. For he always emphasised that our grasp of truth is far from secure, and that other perspectives on human life usually have something positive to offer in coming to the widest and deepest possible view. So he remained a decidedly Christian theologian, but one whose work displays remarkable humility, charity, and breadth of understanding.

He retired from his Chair and Canonry at Christ Church in 1986, having been elected a Fellow of the British Academy two years earlier. He had the unusual distinction of having two Festschriften dedicated to him, *Being and Truth*, edited by two former pupils, Alistair Kee and Eugen Long, in 1986 (London), and *In Search of Deity and Humanity*, edited by Robert Margan, and also celebrating fifty years of publishing with SCM Press, in 2006 (London). During his academic life he accumulated the TD in 1962, for service as an Army Chaplain, a D.Litt. from Glasgow (1964), a DD from Oxford (1981), and honorary doctorates from the University of the South (1967), General Theological Seminary (1968), Glasgow (1969), the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest (1981), Noshotah House (1986), and the University of Dayton (1994). These honours testify to the high regard in which he was held both in America and in Britain. He continued to write and lecture around the world for many years, on Christology, existentialism, comparative theology, the sacraments, the church, Christian ethics, contemporary religious thought, and mysticism.

A life-threatening illness at the age of 80 curtailed some activities, but amazingly his writing and his pastoral and teaching work in Christian churches did not cease. He died on 28 May 2007, at the age of 87, and those who knew him in his last days speak of a luminous quality about his person even in the final stages of his illness. All who met him could sense in his person the grace of Being present and manifest in an unmistakably Scottish form.

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