Stewart Ross Sutherland

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elected Fellow of the British Academy 1992

by

KEITH WARD
Fellow of the Academy

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STEWART SUTHERLAND

Stewart Ross Sutherland, Baron Sutherland of Houndwood, was a distinguished philosopher, an outstanding College Principal and University Vice-Chancellor and a notable public servant who sat on the cross-benches of the House of Lords from 2001, and was made a Knight of the Most Ancient and the Most Noble Order of the Thistle in 2002.

Stewart was born in Aberdeen on 25 February 1941, and was educated at Woodside School and Robert Gordon's College, Aberdeen. He took an MA in philosophy at Aberdeen University, gaining a First, and then gained another First Class degree, this time in Theology, at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. The philosopher of religion Donald McKinnon was to be an important influence on his philosophical journey. While in Cambridge he married Sheena Robertson, whom he had met at the University of Aberdeen, where she studied medicine, then went on to have a career as a clinical virologist. They had three children, Fiona, who runs a gallery in Kent, Kirsten, who is a structural engineer, and Duncan, who is professor of nanoscience at the University of Aarhus in Denmark.

Stewart's first academic appointment was as a lecturer in philosophy at Bangor. At that time Welsh philosophy was much influenced by Wittgenstein (both for and against), and there was a strong interest in spelling out the distinctive and irreducible nature of religious language, as a set of language-uses which could only be coherently understood as part of a general form of life. This too was to be an important influence on Stewart's philosophical work. In 1968 he returned to Scotland as a philosophy lecturer at the newly established University of Stirling, later becoming a reader in the department. His main interests were in philosophy and literature, and he typically approached the traditional problems of philosophy by referring to important literary works. Dostoyevsky was a special interest, though Stewart did not hesitate to use detective stories too where it seemed appropriate. While in Stirling, he took an interest in Religious Studies, which was at first part of the philosophy department, and that interest was to influence his subsequent philosophical publications.

He was a Fellow in the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University in Canberra in 1974, and in 1977 he was appointed to the Chair of the History and Philosophy of Religion at King's College London, overseeing a Department of Religious Studies as well as contributing to the teaching of philosophy in the University and especially for the BD degree at King's College. His administrative skills quickly became apparent. He had an uncanny ability to chair meetings in a way that often defused arguments and led to new constructive proposals, most of which he had already carefully prepared before the meetings. He was, nevertheless, always ready to consider suggestions from others and incorporate them into the final decisions that were made.

Recognition of this skill led to his appointment in 1985 as Principal of King's College. There he initiated and oversaw major organisational changes, including

mergers with Queen Elizabeth College and with Chelsea College, and with the School of Medicine and Dentistry. The latter merger helped to prepare the ground, some years later, for the further union with Guys and St Thomas's. The first Institute of Gerontology was founded at King's in 1986, marking what was to be a life-long interest for Stewart. With remarkable political skill, he oversaw the development of the Thameside Campus, taking over the lease on Cornwall House, and allowing the life sciences to be expanded and placed on a single site. He was thus a prime mover in enabling King's College to cement its place as a College with a truly international reputation. Before the mergers, King's College had between three and four thousand students. After them there were six thousand students, and now there are over thirty thousand. That is a remarkable development.

His administrative skills were noticed, and in 1990 he was appointed by the Crown to the Vice-Chancellorship of the University of London. This unique federation of nineteen very diverse institutions was going through a fissile and schismatic period, in which various colleges were asserting their independence and a new understanding of the federal nature of the University needed to be achieved. Stewart's voice of reasoned and persuasive influence was important in guiding this process, and he was able to pursue a number of projects of his own. He was a Governor of Birkbeck College from 1988-1991. He was particularly keen to stress the importance of including vocational training for teachers in the University—something that he was also to stress later in Edinburgh. And, while strongly supporting scientific research and innovation, he also insisted on the importance of the Humanities as essential parts of an education which could make provision for the ethical and political values which form the basis for a good personal life and a humane society.

The move to onerous and challenging administrative positions naturally affected his ability to publish, but the three volumes he did publish were important and original contributions to the field of philosophy, and to the philosophy of religion and the philosophy of literature in particular. He was the editor of the journal *Religious Studies* from 1986 to 1991, and he established it as the premier journal in the philosophy of religion. After his move to a primarily administrative and public career, he continued to publish papers and articles which, though they were short, were incisive and well argued, and constituted important defences of the value of a broad education which would include a stress on the humanities and on human values as well as on scientific research. He also managed to give no fewer than eleven series of named lectures at British Universities including the Wilde Lectures at Oxford in 1981–4, and was a Gifford Lecturer at Edinburgh in 2011.

He became Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in 1992, and in that capacity he was responsible for overseeing the formation of OFSTED (the Office for Standards in Education), which was a great improvement on the rather haphazard system of

schools inspections that had then existed. He continued to argue publicly and forcefully for forms of education that would contribute to a personally fulfilling and socially cohesive life. In this, he continued the tradition of philosophy that was concerned with seeking what it is to be good as an individual, and what it is for a society to be ethically as well as materially rich. He showed that philosophy was not merely an abstract academic discipline, but an important resource for contributing reasonably, reflectively and humanely to major human institutions and to the public good.

In 1994 he moved to Edinburgh as Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Edinburgh. There he instituted many significant developments, establishing a more secure financial structure, formulating a new staffing strategy and a restructuring of the University management, as well as a restructuring of the various curricula of University departments. These were thoroughgoing changes, and they were effected largely through a policy of choosing good people and letting them do their jobs without undue interference, while always making clear what he wanted done, and always being accessible and supportive.

He was successful in seeing that the University achieved excellent results in research excellence exercises, and also in enhancing attention to the quality of University teaching, as evidenced in a very positive institutional review by the Quality Assurance Agency. He convinced the University that there were strong educational reasons for including teacher education in a university context. To that end, he oversaw the merger of the Moray House College of Education with the University. This expressed his strong conviction that teaching practice should be based on a solid research foundation, and also that research-active institutions of higher education should be concerned to share their findings with schools to a greater extent. The title of one of his papers, 'The price of ignorance', given as the Hume Lecture in 1995 and published by the David Hume Institute, showed his belief that a strong foundation of both knowledge and values, laid at an early age, was a condition of a morally healthy and flourishing society.[1]

Stewart was also keen to expand the University's participation in relationships with other universities around the globe—for instance, with Stanford and with members of Universitas 21. He strengthened the already high reputation of Edinburgh for research in the sciences, overseeing the construction of new Medical School facilities, strengthening ties with Research Councils, and with such bodies as the Wellcome Millennial Clinical Research Facility and the National e-Science Centre, established jointly with the University of Glasgow. Stewart was the first Principal of the University for many years who was neither a scientist nor a medic, but he justified his appointment in full in that while he argued for the essential place of the Humanities in

[1] S. Sutherland, *The Price of Ignorance* (Edinburgh, 1996).

University education, he was wholly committed to promoting excellence in scientific and medical research.

In 2002–8 he was Provost of Gresham College, London, and in that capacity he introduced the practice of making videos of the lectures available on the world wide web. They have given these lectures and the College an international reputation for excellence. He also expanded the work of the College to make it a lively forum for debate in the heart of the City of London.

His combination of philosophical acumen and personal leadership skills led to his involvement with many fields of activity outside the University system. He served on the Board of the Higher Education Funding Council for England, on the Hong Kong University Grants Committee—for whom he conducted a major review of higher education—as Vice-Chair of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (now Universities UK) and as Convener of the Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals/Universities Scotland. The Secretary of State for Scotland appointed him as Chairman of the Committee on Criminal Appeals and Miscarriages of Justice Procedures. The work of this committee formed the basis of the 1995 legislation which introduced the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission.

In 1997 he was appointed as chair of the Royal Commission on Long Term Care of the Elderly. This recommended that all nursing and personal care should be provided by the government, either in care homes or if possible in their own homes. It also recommended that health and social care should be considered together and their budgets merged. The recommendations proved to be too radical at the time for the UK government. Yet the problem is increasingly obvious. The population of over-70s is predicted to reach 7–9 million by 2020, and Age Concern has characterised the situation of care for the elderly in England as unacceptable in a civilised society. The report of the Commission was examined in an independent review of free personal and nursing care in Scotland, in 2008, and the core proposals were implemented there.

These involvements in crucial issues in care of the elderly and in criminal justice were complemented by his membership of the Council for Science and Technology, and by his Chairmanship of YTL Education (UK), and of Frog Trade from 2013—both important enterprises concerned with educational standards and opportunities in Malaysia as well as throughout the world. He chaired the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music 2006–17, and was on the editorial board of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* from 2005, both appointments demonstrating his impressively wide range of interests. He was President of the Royal Institute of Philosophy 1989–92, and of the Society for the Study of Theology in 1985. He was for many years a member of the Goldsmith's Company, chairing their education committee, and becoming Prime Warden in 2012–13. The Company has founded ten Goldsmith's Sutherland

Scholarships for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds to study philosophy of religion under the supervision of Pembroke College, Oxford.

Stewart was President of Alzheimer Scotland/Action on Dementia, President of the Saltire Society, President of the David Hume Institute, and of Scottish Care. His interests ranged over concern with the care of the elderly, with issues of criminal justice, with defending the importance and excellence of education in both the humanities and the sciences, with philosophy and theology, and with new problems and opportunities raised by advances in science and technology. To all of them he brought innovative ideas and firm and positive leadership.

In recognition of his work in so many diverse fields, he was knighted in 1995 and became one of the first fifteen new independent 'people's peers' appointed to the House of Lords in 2001, taking the title of Baron Sutherland of Houndwood after the Berwickshire home in which he took such delight. He has received honorary degrees from universities around the world, and holds honorary fellowships at King's College London, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and the University College of North Wales, Bangor. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1992 and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1995, being President 2002–5.

His intention was to return to academic research, and in particular to complete long-awaited books on world religions and on further thinking about the nature of religion in the modern world. It is no surprise that he had been unable to do this in the midst of his remarkably busy and successful administrative career. After his retirement, he continued to work hard on issues of special concern to him in the House of Lords, and unfortunately his illness and early death left his academic work uncompleted. Nevertheless, his contributions continued in a great number of occasional papers of substance and originality, and his published work remains important and relevant for younger scholars as they seek to address the problems and perspectives with which he dealt.

He was a philosopher with a main but not exclusive interest in religion, particularly in Christianity as a 'form of life' which offers a distinctive practical understanding of what it is to live well as a human being. He explicitly set out to provide a revisionary development of Christian tradition, believing that the legacy of Christian theism offered something of great value to society and to individuals.

He said himself that his revisionary view would probably not score very highly on the scale of orthodoxy. But he thought that the language and practices of Christian faith made possible a view of life and a way of living in the world that was distinctive and difficult, if not impossible, to express in any other way. Thus, his view seeks both to preserve a specific religious outlook and yet to revise that outlook in radically new ways. It neither defends a form of religious orthodoxy nor dismisses religion as false or irrelevant. What he writes is a significant contribution to thinking about the place

of religion in the modern world, and an important contribution to rethinking the nature of religious faith.

His view is outlined in many papers and articles, but mainly in three books, *Atheism and the Rejection of God* (Oxford, 1977), *Faith and Ambiguity* (London, 1984), and *God, Jesus, and Belief* (Oxford, 1984). The first of these is an engagement with Dostoyevsky, especially with *The Brothers Karamazov*, and with the central conversation in that book of the brothers Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov about the reality of suffering and evil in the world.

This interest is central for Sutherland, for it illustrates the importance for him of literature as a vehicle of philosophical reflection, and also his conviction that any thinking about God must begin from a full acceptance that much suffering is real, morally unjustifiable and destructive of many traditional ideas of God.

Both of these convictions are controversial. Since the time of Plato, many have suspected that there is a war or at least a tension between poetry and literature on the one hand and philosophical speculation on the other. The conversation of the Karamazovs illustrates this well. It states the opposing views of both brothers, giving perhaps the most powerful argument against a good God in world literature, and leaving Alyosha without any obvious reply. Yet there is a sort of reply, in Alyosha's rejection of bitterness and rebellion, and insistence upon love of the beauty of the world and the cultivation of compassionate love. Can Alyosha's life be a reply to Ivan's arguments? Not, Sutherland suggests, in a purely intellectual or rational way. But perhaps the lesson here is that 'there is no single metaphysical picture' that can give a complete understanding of the world. That is the strength of great literature, that it provides no such coherent picture. It usually presents an ambiguous reality, a picture on the borderlands between belief and unbelief, where emotions can lie deeper than reasons, and where forms of life and ways of seeing the world are not based simply on the provision of publicly available and agreed reasons or evidence.

The grand metaphysical systems of the past, from neo-Platonism to the revised Aristotelianism of Aquinas and Hegelian Idealism, seem to many to have been dissolved by the sheer range and variety of specific forms of modern knowledge. Human minds have enough difficulty in mastering the small areas of research in which they are most interested. The task of forming a vast over-arching picture of reality into which all areas of research could be coherently fitted seems out of reach. Perhaps Hegel was right in suggesting that knowledge progresses in a dialectical fashion, by thesis countered by antithesis, as different aspects of human experience and knowledge continually interact with one another. But perhaps Hegel was wrong (as was Marx, in his version of Hegel-standing-on-his-head) in thinking that there was some super-rational synthesis into which this dialectic could be fitted. What we have are

fragments of knowledge and belief, interacting indeed but never achieving 'the system', the absolute metaphysical truth.

This is very apparent in the work of Kierkegaard, and in works of literature, such as those of Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky and Goethe, which stress the plurality and diversity of human forms of life and ways of seeing the world, and the lack of any unifying synthesis that could resolve all these perspectives under one rational and intelligible system. Where there is scepticism about the ability of any one world-picture to be the obviously rational and coherent one, it will be impossible either to accept a world-view based on the natural sciences alone or one based on religious or philosophical considerations alone. This sort of deep metaphysical scepticism, which is yet allied to a serious search for truth in its various particular guises, lies at the heart of Sutherland's approach to philosophy.

The acceptance of ambiguity and lack of finality in our ultimate judgements about the world has an effect on what we take to be philosophical truth. In particular, theodicy becomes impossible, if that is thought to be the provision of good reasons that a personal God might have for creating or permitting horrendous suffering. Sutherland is clear that the idea of God as a wholly good person or even as an individual object, supernatural or natural, with whom one might have conversations or personal relationships, is untenable. It is totally incompatible, as Ivan claims, with the suffering of innocent children.

That is indeed going to require a revision to most traditional religious views, though it is probably nearer to sophisticated expositions of a traditional Thomist position than most people suspect. But the word 'God' still, he argues, has a distinctive use. That use is to make possible a view of the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. The phrase is perhaps best known because of its use by Spinoza, who wrote, 'Those things which are conceived as true or real we conceive under the form of eternity and their ideas involve the eternal and infinite essence of God' (*Ethics*, Part 5, prop.29, note). Again, 'eternity is the very essence of God, insofar as that essence involves necessary existence' (Prop. 30). Sutherland does not usually explicitly refer to Spinoza, and the idea that all things devolve by necessity from God, who contains the essential natures of all things, is not one with which Sutherland might be comfortable. Yet the ideas of non-temporality and of necessity seem to be implied, so that what is being said is that there is something non-temporal and non-finite (therefore not 'a thing') beyond contingent and transient existence. That is not another separate and distinct reality, but an aspect of this reality in which we exist, and an aspect which cannot be denied without the loss of sensitivity to important features of human existence.

However, for Sutherland this should not be thought of as an object or set of objects which we could contemplate or intuit. We do not, as Schleiermacher said, 'intuit the eternal'. Rather, we intuit this world in the light of eternity. Like Kant's

regulative ideas, the idea of eternity does not correspond to a knowable reality. It enables us to see the world from a viewpoint which is not that of any human being or group of human beings. As Kant put it, it is like a 'focus imaginarius', an imagined 'absolute view of things as they are', beyond all partial and finite perspectives. It is ideal rather than real. As Sutherland puts it, it is a possibility rather than an actuality. Yet to appeal to it even as a humanly unrealisable ideal enables us to see the world in a distinctive way.

Nor is this just one possibility amongst others. It is (though he does not, I think, use this word) an authentic possibility. It enables us, and he does say this, to 'see our world as it is'. Thus, it is not just one option among others. It reveals an important truth about the world, which is that the world is more than just a collection of finite ultimately material entities. There is no appeal here to God as an extra or supernatural entity. It is admittedly difficult to see precisely what is meant by seeing the world from the perspective of eternity. One clue lies in a statement by Kierkegaard, to which Sutherland refers in *Faith and Ambiguity*, that eternal significance cannot be found in world-historical terms. It is 'inward' and involves a certain sort of passionate commitment. The real subject is the ethically existing subject, Kierkegaard writes. Such ethical existence requires self-knowledge and a purity of heart which provides the perspective of eternity on [one's] doing and deciding.

Like 'eternity', purity of heart is left undefined and perhaps indefinable, but it points to a state in which one's attention is not fragmented and scattered among a number of no doubt pressing temporal projects, but is concentrated on a 'transcendent' order beyond finite concerns, 'a transcendent order of eternal values', which are real but never completely grasped or embodied in temporally identifiable forms.

Sutherland's approach has been and is still of importance in philosophical enquiry. Philosophers such as John McDowell and David Wiggins have explored the possibility that values are objective features of reality, and have proposed a form of 'enriched naturalism' which does not invoke any sort of supernatural reality, but sees values as part of the natural world. They are reluctant to speak of God in this context, though the philosopher Fiona Ellis has argued that some ideas of God can be included as pointing to objective features of reality without deploying the idea of a 'supernatural' order of beings. This is very similar to Sutherland's position, which is sceptical of full-on metaphysics, yet does wish to see values, and the associated purposeful activity of pursuing values, as part of the furniture of the natural world, and thus as part of our ordinary and natural—not 'religious' in positing special forms of unusual experiences or unknowable types of supernatural entities—way of being in the world.

Sutherland resists the thought that the term 'God' can be translated without remainder into any other terms, even the terms of an objective but secular ethics. The meaning of religious language, he says, is internal to the practices of worship, prayer,

reverence, love and humility, which define religious life at its best. The temptation at this point may be to say that these are just subjective attitudes which one may care to adopt. But attitudes are specified by their objects. They point to features of reality to which the adoption of specific attitudes is appropriate. Those features, in the case of an ethical life, are possibilities rather than actualities, and we are not to just contemplate them as pure ideas in a quasi-(or pseudo-) Platonic sense. Sutherland says, 'possibilities define ontologies'. That is, the structures of reality allow the possibility of commitment to transcendent goodness, a commitment which is 'inward' and, as Kierkegaard put it, 'incognito'. I think that in fact for Sutherland they do more than allow; they demand, they have normative significance.

For Sutherland the idea of God is something like, though not adequately translatable without remainder into, the idea of a transcendent order of values, eternal because they do not change with time, and infinite because they are not particular existent objects within the world. They are not entities for contemplation, or entities beyond the world which can enter into causal relations with world-historical events. Therefore, Sutherland is not interested in miracles as physically discernible extraordinary events, in virgin births or physical resurrections. He is interested in identifying features of the world which make inward goodness possible, which demand such goodness, and in the light of which all human motives and goals must be judged.

For such a view, there can be no theodicy, for there is no supernatural person to blame for the ills of the world. But there are objective possibilities and objective demands, which are not just invented by human minds. Alyosha's answer to Ivan is that there is a demand to be compassionate and to love the world, and that it is possible to live so as never to be overcome by evil, even though one might be oppressed by suffering. Bitterness and rebellion are never appropriate. There is no grand coherent metaphysical picture of human life in the world that explains why suffering and evil exist. Here Dostoyevsky, Hume, Kierkegaard, and Camus—about whom Sutherland writes so sensitively and tellingly in *Faith and Ambiguity*—are right to expose the radical ambiguity of human existence.

I believe that a return to Spinoza's idea of necessity might be helpful at this point. It would suggest that there is no positive reason why evil should exist except that the possibilities of evil exist necessarily in God, and they, or some unknown range of them, are necessarily actualised in this or in some or perhaps in all possible worlds. This is not because they are necessary means to good, or because they are freely chosen by a supernatural person, but just because they must be. We cannot 'see why' suffering exists, because there is nothing to see. Ivan cannot 'return his ticket', because he is simply compelled to travel. We cannot see why or how some things might exist by necessity, and in that way we are unable to attain a finally compelling metaphysical picture. But we may at least see that this is a possibility that the structure of reality

might allow. The question is how one will react to this situation; that is our 'inward choice'.

In this ambiguous and imperfect world, Sutherland writes that 'the inheritance of theism includes the cultivation of an awareness of the eternal in human life' (*God, Jesus, and Belief*, p. 208). Among the necessities of being, there is a transcendent order of eternal values. Awareness of them takes the form of 'a demand from without', and its main elements are concern for others and humility (importantly, in the way one holds one's beliefs as well as in the way one comports oneself in social life). Human lives are an 'intersection of the eternal and the temporal, the finite and the infinite'. Though Sutherland is perhaps too metaphysically sceptical to follow Spinoza here, one could say (Hegel did say) that the temporal and finite is necessarily and essentially imperfect, even though it essentially expresses part of what God (*qua* impersonal source of beings) is. The eternal and infinite remain in the essence of God, as timeless and spaceless possibilities of being, and they are known by human beings as possibilities to be realised in human lives.

At this point Sutherland finds value in the Christian claim that 'the transcendent has been manifested in time'. For him this will mean (though I am over-simplifying a little here) that the eternal values of compassion and humility have been manifested in a human life. They are not just possible ideals. They can be, and have been, realised in time. There are, however, two important points he makes about any such manifestation. One is that such a thing cannot be established by historical research. Such research is always doomed to be inconclusive and can only arrive at contestable results. Thus, there can be no question of historical 'proofs' of Jesus' divinity or of the claim that he is a 'manifestation of the eternal'.

The other point he makes is that the goodness of Jesus, like the goodness of any human being, must remain incognito. We can never show that when he died he was not overcome by evil or at least by doubt and despair. Yet if his death on the cross was in faithfulness to his vocation it shows something important about the nature of God—it shows that the triumph of good over evil is possible, and it makes possible a certain form of hope and ultimate optimism. This is not hope for some future good, or a belief that everything will in fact turn out for the best historically. Things have certainly not always turned out well since the death of Jesus. Nor is it a hope for future immortality which might compensate for this life's miseries. The idea that somehow future bliss might compensate for or in some way balance out present suffering is not one that appeals to Sutherland. The hope is rather that goodness cannot be defeated, that true goodness is possible, and that the nature of goodness is not worldly success, but a sort of self-renunciation and commitment to action for the sake of goodness alone.

This is coherent with a picture of God, not as a dictatorial sovereign, but as one who experiences suffering or a self-renouncing attention to goodness. Of course, for

Sutherland such anthropomorphism must itself be renounced. There is no supernatural being who dictates or who suffers. This is a picture of the possibility of goodness and its manifestation in the human world, and that goodness will take the paradoxical form of inward self-renunciation and attentive and compassionate love of the world and of others without possessiveness.

There is a significance in the life of Jesus, but it is not one that can be established by historical research, or that requires acceptance of detailed records in the Gospels of his life and deeds. Rather, that person and that life in fact generated in history a startlingly distinctive view of God, or of the possibility of incarnating transcendent goodness in a human life. This possibility assures the triumph of good over evil, even though it does not guarantee a successful outcome, in worldly terms, of human activities. Jesus' death on the cross was not a success in worldly terms—the Kingdom did not come. But it achieved an ultimate hope and optimism, and the faith that eternal values can be manifested in time, and that they give ultimate significance to a human life, however the history of the world goes on.

Seen in these terms, the life of Jesus is not an eruption of the supernatural into the natural world, replete with miracles and physically inexplicable events. It is the revelation of an authentic possibility and demand that human lives should manifest eternal values, that goodness cannot be defeated, and that that the real significance of human lives will be found in an intersection of the eternal and the temporal.

Though the testimony of history will always remain ambiguous, the idea of such an intersection originated in the life of Jesus and in the perceptions his disciples had of him. This idea took a distinctive form, largely because of the history of Israel, its basic values and its forms of life, and was recorded in different forms in the Gospels, as Jesus' early followers sought to express how it seemed to them that the idea was manifested for them in his life and person. That does not provide or require irrefutable evidence of exactly what happened in history. It requires only that at that point in history a distinctive perception of God arose, a new way of living *sub specie aeternitatis*, and a new possibility of manifesting a transcendent order of values in the ambiguities of the temporal world was discerned.

There are those believers—to be honest, probably most believers—who would wish for a greater place for something like 'a power making for righteousness' in history and in human lives, and who would hope for a more unequivocal triumph of the good either in history or in the world to come. Surely, it may be said, goodness cannot be wholly incognito. There must at least be prima facie evidence that a person has not done evil things or harboured vengeful thoughts. Yet it is true that it is hard to detect the innermost motives of the human heart. Even a person who acts outwardly in a wholly good way may be motivated by prudential self-interest. And a person whose life has been marked by intense suffering, whose personality is warped

by genetic and neurological disorders, and whose environment has encouraged and rewarded tendencies to personal greed and suspicion, may have done as much as they possibly could to live a good life. In that sense goodness, as the actualisation of the best moral life that one could logically be held responsible for, is indeed incognito—at least if one takes a rather Kantian view of the importance of the inner lives of human beings.

It might also be asked what exactly the importance is of believing that the transcendent has been manifested in time. It might be held that transcendent ideals may exist, even though they have never been fully manifested. It may be enough that humans should strive to manifest them as fully as possible, though humans are doomed always to fail to some extent. Would that really matter, since the triumph of goodness of which Sutherland speaks is not and never will be associated with the elimination of evil from the world or with the elimination of suffering from human lives. Is Sutherland's 'ultimate optimism', which seems to consist in the claim that goodness can persist even in the face of great evil, a realistic form of optimism?

I think there is a sense in which Sutherland holds the high ground here. He looks for no facile material reward for goodness, which must be sought simply for its own sake. The example of a good life lived out in face of great suffering can be morally inspiring and can encourage one's personal efforts to resist evil. Yet it must be confessed that the Christian story does not end with the crucifixion. Stewart always questioned whether the life of Jesus was really a tragedy, as it has often been said to be, since it continues with the resurrection and with an actually triumphant 'return' of Jesus in glory at the end of history. Perhaps human life really is tragic, as a form of life which demands goodness without reward in a world where suffering and evil will never be finally eliminated.

If the Christian story is one for which eternal values are not just possibilities, but are actually manifested in a reality of supreme value; if this is a value which has some, however indirect, influence on the way things go in the world; and if there is a cosmic purpose that finite sentient beings should consciously share in that value in some future state, then there is a more obvious sense in which ultimate optimism about human life is appropriate. But for Sutherland, such imaginative possibilities raise too many problems to be convincing. There are problems about whether humans can survive the death of their bodies, problems about saying that there is some positive purpose in a universe ruled by the laws of entropy, problems about the coherence of the concept of a being which somehow manifests all possible values at the same time, and problems about the causal relation of such a being to the universe.

There are just too many problems of a metaphysical, and therefore undecidable, nature for the ethical lives and responsibilities of men and women to depend upon there being a satisfactory answer to them. It may be that some revelatory forms of

personal or public experience could give assurance that such problems could be resolved. But revelation only appeals to some people, and it is not wholly satisfactory to found basic existential decisions about human life on such disputed data. What is clear is that suffering exists, and that morality demands. That clarity should not be obscured by the diverse and conflicting imaginative speculations of metaphysical philosophers or by appeals to revelation which are also conflicting and always subject to reasonable doubt.

In his Isaiah Berlin Lecture to the British Academy in 2004,[2] Stewart expresses this view by distinguishing 'pilgrims' (those who believe there is one clear goal of life to be attained by all) from 'tourists' (who simply seek new and stimulating experiences and purposes) and from 'nomads' (who accept that they are ineluctably bound by space and time, yet seek to preserve and enhance what they find to be of value in their own unique paths through life). Such findings are provisional and fragmented, and suggest a plurality of perspectives, eschewing all bold claims to full and final truth. His recommendation is that the way of a nomad, affirming value and integrity in human life without imposing on others one path to one clearly conceived goal, is the ethical task best suited to the human situation.

If some form of Christian faith is to be defended, Sutherland's contribution to the philosophy of religion must be taken seriously. His view does not necessarily exclude a more metaphysical account, if one could be given. And he would be the last person to think that his view is the final word on the subject of religious belief. Yet he is arguably right in querying any claim that God is a supernatural person who can intervene in history at will, and in refusing to make the hope for a better future an essential or primary motivation for ethical existence. He is right in his insistence that transcendent values are not objects to be contemplated for their own sake, but function to lay down possibilities for temporal existence. He is right to stress that all our insights into such values are provisional and fragmentary. Furthermore, any morally acceptable view of God must find a way of accepting that there is horrendous suffering which is not in any way a means to a greater good, and which cannot be justified by any amount of future happiness. That almost certainly means that God is not one separate person or individual beyond the universe who is wholly benevolent, and who is one of the things that exist, even if a supernatural one.

He is also right in arguing that the significance of the life of Jesus is that it is the originating basis of a distinctive form of the belief that human lives can become manifestations of eternal values, and that in this way finite and infinite can be united in human existence. This cannot be established by historical research, or by claims that physical miracles have occurred. There is no external sign of the vindication of

[2] Lord Sutherland, 'Nomad's progress', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 131 (2005), 443–63.

goodness, which must remain ultimately inward and incognito. But there is an insight that was discerned by the disciples in and through the person of Jesus, that gives rise to an ultimate optimism that good cannot be defeated by evil. The legacy of theism is to preserve this ultimate optimism and a form of life which makes sense of practising reverence, love and humility, by maintaining a commitment to the ethical in an ambiguous world.

When Sutherland considers Dostoyevsky, David Hume, Kierkegaard, Weil and Camus, he claims that they too find in human consciousness a claim to some sort of objective goodness which does not entail over-ambitious theories about the evils of the world as ultimately justifiable or good. Such theories are not what seeing things *sub specie aeternitatis* provide. What that way of seeing provides is the awareness that we need not be defeated by suffering or by despair at human evil. There is something eternal that we can to some extent and in some way manifest in time, and that no evil can defeat—at least in the inwardness of human lives. Such a faith is not separated by an impassable gulf from the lives of those who reject talk of God, but who have an awareness of the inescapable demands of morality. There is a real and vitally important sort of faith that lies on the borderlands between belief and unbelief. Talk of God is a way of preserving that awareness by placing it within a more general way of seeing the world and the possibilities it contains, and talk of Jesus as 'the Son of God' is a way of seeing that this is a possibility that is truly open to men and women. One can, he claims, avoid metaphysical abstractions, and preserve this view of the possibilities and ideals of human lives, and perhaps that lies at the heart of Christian faith.

To say these things, and to say them with the patience and subtlety, the humour and insight that are characteristic of Sutherland's writings, is to increase one's understanding of the phenomenon of religion, to suggest new and penetrating ways of approaching Christian faith in the modern world, and to deepen one's insight into what it means to exist as a human being.

Note on the author: Revd Professor Keith Ward is Regius Professor Emeritus of Divinity at the University of Oxford, and Professor of the Philosophy of Religion at Roehampton University. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2001.