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REVIEW ARTICLE

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RATIONALLY DECIDING WHAT TO BELIEVE

Terence Penelhum, *Reason and Religious Faith* Pp. 166. (Colorado and Cumnor Hill: Westview Press (Focus Series), 1996.) £32.50 hb, £10.95 pb.

A little boy at Sunday School once defined 'faith' as 'believing firmly what you know isn't true'. The religious believer does not normally take himself to be in quite that desperate epistemic plight, even if he accepts Tertullian's motto *credo quia absurdum*. All the same, an uncomfortable tension is apt to appear between his religious beliefs and their rationality, and his other beliefs and *their* rationality. Like this: if 'God exists' seems or feels true, nonetheless it does not feel true *in the same way* that 'There are nine planets in the solar system' feels true. There are at least five contrasts. First, that there are nine planets in the solar system is not a belief that any sensible person will ever feel great fervour about (outside such improbable scenarios as those where they are struggling to resist being brainwashed by the Flat Earth Society). Second, it is immediately clear how the belief about the planets might be shown to be false. Third, no one is accounted morally praiseworthy for believing that there are nine planets in the solar system; that belief is even epistemically praiseworthy only in a very minimal sense. Nor (fourth) is someone worthy of moral *blame*, exactly, if they don't believe that there are nine planets – unless perhaps they *refuse* to believe it in the teeth of clear evidence. By contrast (a fifth point) some have apparently thought that praiseworthiness or importance of believing in God's existence is not only not dependent on the evidence, but actually inversely proportional to it.

Perhaps the difficulties arising from these contrasts between religious and other sorts of belief are the kind of problems which the Inquisition saw coming if Galileo was given his head. Certainly, since Galileo's time, creationists, deists and others have agreed with the Inquisition in insisting in one way or another that God is a hypothesis that not even the Laplacean scientist can do without. But to react this way to the problem is just to deny its existence. The nature and rationality of religious belief remains obstinately different from that of other sorts of belief, such as scientific belief. To treat 'God exists' as a proposition strictly parallel to 'There are nine planets in the solar system' gives us, or ought to give us, a deep sense of incongruity. As

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Aquinas pointed out a long time before the Inquisition began treating scientists as heretics, God is not a thing among things. Discovering His existence *could not* be like discovering the existence of a tenth planet. For one thing, if it was like that, the discovery could not lead to a *religious* belief. To put it another way, such a discovery would not be a discovery of *God*.

Some have thought that what this point shows is that 'religious belief' is a virtual oxymoron: if religious then not really *belief*, and if belief then not really *religious*. Thus Don Cupitt argues that – at present at any rate – authentic religion must involve giving up on merely (merely?) factual claims. Again, take Richard Braithwaite, D. Z. Phillips and others influenced either by emotivism or by the later Wittgenstein or by both. If I understand them aright – perhaps they would rather not be paraphrased with too much clarity – they argue for a view of religious language which makes its function purely expressive, so that what we are really at in asserting apparently propositional claims like 'God exists' is simply the affirmation of our own commitment to a certain way of living. If so, then naturally the question of the rationality of religious belief can no more arise than can the question of the rationality of a sneeze, or of a reflex cry of 'Whoops!' when spilling one's coffee all over the Vice-Chancellor's dog.

These are the literalist and anti-realist extremes between which Terence Penelhum's sensitive and intelligent discussion of the rationality of religious belief or faith tries to negotiate a course in its six chapters. In Chapter One, Penelhum sets up the contrast just identified between the different ways in which different sorts of belief may appear to be true. In Chapter Two he tells a historical story, tracing a debate about faith's rationality from Augustine to Wittgenstein via Aquinas, Descartes and Kierkegaard. In Chapter Three, which I personally found the most interesting and thought easily the best in the book, he discusses the difficult issue of the voluntariness or otherwise of belief. In Chapter Four he argues convincingly against the view, which he finds in both Aquinas and Kierkegaard, that faith necessarily involves subjective certainty about the objectively uncertain (i.e. an inner sense of absolute conviction about matters regarding which the available evidence in fact gives no warrant for absolute conviction). In Chapter Five he argues that the 'basic belief apologetics' offered by Plantinga and others offer only 'a negative, and not a positive, apologetic' (p. 104). This means that Penelhum thinks Plantinga quite right to claim that there is nothing irrational in supposing that we do or could have special mechanisms for acquiring specifically religious beliefs, or that the beliefs thus acquired could count as rational beliefs. On the other hand, and by the same token, Penelhum argues that Plantinga is not equipped to show that there is anything irrational about supposing the contrary, as the doubter does when he supposes that we have no such mechanisms, and hence that no such beliefs can be rationally acquired. Finally, in Chapter Six, Penelhum discusses the

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phenomenon of 'religious ambiguity' noted by John Hick and others – the phenomenon of a world that is (at least *prima facie*) equally well interpretable by a whole variety of theistic and atheistic views – and suggests some ways in which that ambiguity (which Penelhum regards as essentially a Bad Thing) might be dispelled or lessened.

I have one comment to offer on Penelhum's discussion of religious ambiguity, and another on what he says about belief and the will. These two comments will bring us back – by way of a conclusion – to the earlier questions of what sort of belief religious belief is, and of how it is or might be rational.

First, ambiguity. Penelhum tells us that there is religious ambiguity in the world because it is true that 'the believer and the unbeliever share a common world', have access to the same facts, arguments, experiences and other data, in such a way that neither 'can convict the other of failing to meet doxastic obligations' (pp. 110–111). What is more, not only does this 'doxastic stalemate' obtain between the atheist and the theist; it also obtains between such different kinds of theist as the Muslim and the Christian, and again between their views and those of such non-theistic religious views as those of (certain types of) Buddhist.

The first problem is this. If ambiguity in this sense obtains anywhere, then why shouldn't it obtain everywhere? Suppose the world is, as Penelhum thinks, ambiguous between the three views that 'Jesus is the son of God', that 'There is no god but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet' and that 'God doesn't exist and Darwin explained everything'. Then why shouldn't the world also be ambiguous between these views and the fourth view that God is a Venezuelan tree frog, or the fifth view that Thor and Odin will be angry unless we sacrifice thirteen virgins at every new moon? Again, why shouldn't the world be ambiguous between the view that the Apostles' Creed ought to include the phrase *filioque*, and the view that it ought not? If we admit *some* ambiguity into the world, then it may become difficult not to admit *total* ambiguity. But if the world is totally ambiguous, then for one thing the most barbaric and absurd religious beliefs are on an equal footing with the most sublime, and for another the most intricate theological controversies within any religion are strictly irresoluble.

Penelhum's answer to this obvious objection rests, I think, on his appeal to the notion of 'disambiguation' (pp. 131 ff.). This is the notion that we can and should be looking now for further evidence by which to settle the competing claims of differing world views. That, Penelhum thinks, is what philosophers of religion are for. No doubt he would say that this is how we can already exclude barbaric religious views such as those which entail the necessity of human sacrifice. They have dropped out of consideration because there is already plentiful evidence against them. But here we want to know what sort of evidence this is. Has anyone actually *disproved* the existence of

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Thor and Odin, with their exorbitant ritual demands? If so, how different was the disproof of Thor and Odin from the kind of disproof that might be offered of religious views that Penelhum wants to say are among those between which the world is ambiguous? Since the notions of ambiguity and of disambiguation are both notions about the status of the evidence that confronts any inquirer, they are notions that oscillate uneasily between appearance and reality. Hence Penelhum faces an awkward dilemma. First horn: if the world is capable of disambiguation, then it seems doubtful that it was ever really religiously ambiguous in the first place. Rather, some single view will, all along, have been unambiguously correct, and all the others, equally unambiguously, are just *wrong* – as wrong as tree frog worship or the cult of Thor and Odin, even if for subtler reasons. Second horn: if, on the other hand, the world really is religiously ambiguous, then there seems no reason to hope for *any* disambiguation. Certainly if figures of the stature of Jesus, Mohammed, Guru Nanak or the Buddha were unable to provide such a disambiguation at the very outset of their projects, it would seem unrealistic or perhaps even arrogant to hope for a disambiguation of the world, at this late stage, from such relative intellectual (and spiritual) pygmies as ourselves.

Again, one might also wonder whether it is consistent with serious commitment to any of 'the great world religions' (as they are called, no doubt to the chagrin of Venezuelan tree frog worshippers) to admit that there is any ambiguity in Penelhum's sense. Compare Islam and Christianity. Both, at least in their orthodox forms, characteristically claim to provide all the disambiguation of the world anyone could want *from within their own resources*. Disambiguation of the world is precisely the point of the Muslim claim that Mohammed was the 'seal of the prophets'. It is also precisely the point of the opening remark in the Epistle to the Hebrews, that 'God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken to us by his Son'. What is this if not a contrasting of an ambiguous and equivocal past revelation with an absolutely clear and unequivocal new revelation?

In view of these considerations, one may be inclined to say that Penelhum's analysis mislocates the source of the alleged ambiguity. Perhaps the reason why it seems (to some) that there is equally good evidence for at least several incompatible views about religion is not because there *is* such evidence, but because people *behave as if* there were. In short, perhaps the source of 'religious ambiguity' is not the evidence, but the will. This suggestion brings me to Penelhum's discussion of belief and the will.

Penelhum's position about the relation of belief to the will is this. We cannot *choose* our beliefs 'because belief is not an action and therefore cannot be commanded or done to order' (p. 41). (This is a position which Penelhum calls 'involuntarism'.) On the other hand, we can choose to engage in processes which will influence the beliefs we come to have. Hence there can

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be 'doxastic ethics: prudential and moral rules about how to affect our processes of belief formation' (p. 47). Hence also it can make sense to speak (as we already have) of such things as doxastic obligations, or to say that someone is to blame for believing what they believe.

But first, to argue that we cannot choose our beliefs because belief is not an action looks like a *non sequitur*. Plenty of things that are not actions can nonetheless be chosen: the colour of a carpet, for instance, or a baby's name, or again a disposition like a virtue. So if beliefs cannot be chosen, it cannot be because a belief is not an action. In fact it would be more to the point (though still strictly an invalid argument) to say that a belief cannot be chosen because a belief is not a desire. As Anscombe pointed out in *Intention*, one salient difference between beliefs and desires is that desires operate to align the world to themselves, whereas beliefs operate to align themselves to the world. What determines the nature of our beliefs is the way (we think) the world *is*; what determines the nature of our desires is the way (we think) the world is *not*, but (in one sense or another) ought to be. In this sense, it seems, any mental state which consisted in a choice to believe something simply because one wanted to believe it would normally involve gross irrationality. For while almost any desire can, with sufficient luck, be made operative (i.e. fulfilled) simply by choosing to pursue it, almost no belief can – whatever one's luck – be made operative (i.e. true) simply by choosing to adopt it.[1] Any rational thinker is bound to recognize this point. But to recognize it is, it seems, to make voluntarism about beliefs a wholly impossible position.

I say 'it seems' because actually there is more to the issue than that. To see this, consider a second point about Penelhum's discussion of belief and the will. This second point is that, in fact, there are at least three senses in which we *can* choose our beliefs after all. Hence there is no particular problem about the idea that we can choose our religious beliefs; and hence there is no need to court the dilemma described above, by locating the source of religious ambiguity in the world rather than in people's decisions about what to believe.

To see the first way in which beliefs can be chosen, notice that the reason why Penelhum's claim that we cannot rationally choose beliefs, although we can choose belief-forming processes, is untenable, is because his distinction between beliefs and belief-forming processes is untenable. In simple cases Penelhum is quite right to say that I cannot choose what to believe, although I can choose which belief-forming processes to expose myself to – just as I cannot choose what I will see if I open my eyes, but I can choose whether or not to open them (or which eye to open, if like Admiral Nelson I have only one good eye). But – as is perhaps not noticed by Penelhum – there are other

[1] There is a small class of exceptions; e.g. the belief that 'I have a belief' is rendered true by its mere adoption. But these are unimportant for present purposes.

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cases of belief where the foundations of the belief are a good deal less like the foundations of a simply, e.g. perceptually, acquired belief. In these more complex cases the very notion of having a belief is intimately connected with a variety of other notions, such as theoretical economy, beauty and simplicity, usefulness, fit with other going theories, and so forth. Just for this reason, there is in such cases no clear distinction between what we believe and the belief-forming process whereby we come to believe it; nor, therefore, between the voluntariness of the belief and of the belief-forming process.

Good examples of such cases are ready to hand, in those sciences where it is very often the case that there could not possibly be anything like a perceptual foundation to one's belief. Thus the scientist trying to decide whether to adopt the many-worlds interpretation of quantum physics is not in a situation where he either faces up honestly to some sort of obvious evidence, or else self-deceivingly fails to do so. Rather, he is in a situation where he has to decide whether the many-worlds interpretation fits certain criteria: for example, whether it (i) is internally coherent, (ii) explains what it is meant to explain, (iii) fits well with other evidence and other theory, (iv) has no impossibly unpalatable consequences in some other area, and (v) – let's face it – *appeals to his own gut feeling* or 'instinct for truth'.

Notice two points about the scientist engaged in this exercise. First, notice that if the scientist thinks that the many-worlds interpretation satisfies all these criteria, or even merely more of them than any other going interpretation of quantum physics, then what he will do can be described by saying just this: that he *chooses to believe* that interpretation. Second, notice however that the correctness of this description is not entirely determinate, for the reason that there is simply no clear answer to the question whether, in submitting the many-worlds interpretation to these tests, the scientist is choosing beliefs or belief-forming processes. For the scientist's resultant belief in the many-worlds interpretation is not readily separable logically speaking from the network of theoretical decisions and methodological preferences which led to it. The application to a case like this of Penelhum's alleged distinction between unchosen beliefs and chosen belief-forming processes would have to be a contrast between the physicist's involuntary attitude to the many-worlds interpretation and his voluntary attitude to the theoretical norms which he accepts and which led him to that interpretation. But there is no such contrast. The physicist's attitude to both norms and interpretation is one and the same, for both are part of the same seamless web of theory which he accepts; both are (in a sense) the products of a variety of choices about what to believe; and neither is forced upon him in such a way as to be either theoretically unrevisable or indispensable.

So here is one way in which we can and do choose what to believe – sometimes, in certain circumstances, subject to certain, actually quite rigorous, constraints. Decisions about what counts as inference to the best

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explanation are not always necessary (not e.g. in simple perceptual cases). But where they are necessary, they can, generally speaking, quite properly be called cases of deciding to believe.

A second point about deciding to believe, closely related to this first point, is the following. A crucial research skill, as any academic knows, is *knowing when to stop*: knowing, that is, at what point it is reasonable to assume that the results at which one has already arrived are probably not going to be much improved or altered by further questioning or testing them. This skill is of obvious use to the scientist, who must at some point decide that the experimental data he has now got does indeed say what it seems to say, and that this is the result his work has arrived at, however counter-intuitive it may seem. But the skill in question is not only needed by scientists. It is also needed by, among others, moral philosophers. One ethicist's firmly accepted conclusion is another ethicist's *reductio ad absurdum* of the methodology that generated it. For instance, Michael Tooley thinks he has arguments that genuinely show the permissibility of infanticide. Other ethicists, such as the present writer, are inclined to agree with Tooley that that is (probably) what his arguments show – but then wish to add that if this *is* what they show, then there is no chance of their being sound arguments, since no sound moral argument could possibly lead to such obviously abhorrent conclusions. So what Tooley's conclusions demonstrate is not the permissibility of infanticide but that Tooley's whole methodology is wrong. As I say, this sort of disagreement can be characterised as a disagreement about when to stop one's inquiries, and settle for whatever results one already has. This skill of knowing when to stop can often be a matter of fine judgement. Though, I should say, it is a pretty obvious judgement which suggests that we ought not to be content with the stopping-point of *Tooley*'s inquiry, there are other cases, such as that of the physicist considered above, where it genuinely is more like a matter of temperament or instinct at what point one stops inquiring any further. Applying this fine judgement about when one ought to stop is, to some extent, a matter for decision – and it is increasingly a matter for decision as the cases to which one has to apply it get more and more theoretically complex and less clear-cut. Here, then, is another sense in which what we believe is what, within certain parameters, we decide to believe.

A third point about decisions to believe also has to do with ethics, more directly this time. Aristotle famously remarks, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that ignorance of the first principles of action is not the sort of ignorance which excuses us from wrongdoing: on the contrary, such ignorance is the hallmark of wickedness. For a mature human, not to discriminate good things from bad things in the right way *is* to be a bad human. But, of course, to be a bad human is blameworthy, and blame is not typically appropriate to those who do not do what they do voluntarily. It looks, as if Aristotle must say that there is a sense in which our beliefs about the first principles of action – our

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most basic ethical beliefs – are voluntarily chosen, at least in the sense that if we do not reject them, then this decision not to reject them is a voluntary one. (And, I think, Aristotle does say this, though I shall not try to argue this delicate exegetical point here.) From all of this it follows that, for Aristotle, we can decide what to believe in ethics. Indeed such decisions are a cornerstone of character: for the difference between a good and a bad character, on Aristotle's view, just is the difference between making them well and rationally, and making them badly and irrationally.

Here then are three senses in which deciding what to believe can perfectly well happen – and (note well) can happen by way of a rational process. For to say that we can sometimes decide what to believe is not to advocate doxastic anarchy. Not every case is one where a decision about what to believe is called for. Even in those cases which do fit this bill, our freedom about what to believe is always limited to the going alternatives, and therefore may be curtailed by future developments when these show that alternatives that appeared to be going actually aren't. What we are certainly never rationally free to do is simply to believe whatever we feel like believing, just because we feel like believing it. But the constraints on our doxastic freedom are not, as Penelhum thinks, always fixed and always the same. They vary a great deal, depending on what subject-area of belief we are talking about.

All three of the above senses of 'deciding to believe' seem relevant to religious belief. For deciding what one believes about religion is certainly a matter of assessing complex evidence, much of it far removed from any perceptual or quasi-perceptual source, and trying to decide not only what thesis it best supports, but also what 'supports' means in this context. (Consider here the work of Richard Swinburne.) It also often involves following one's intuitions about what could count as a satisfactorily complete inquiry into such questions, and about what stopping points cannot be acceptable. (One example of an argument that a given stopping point could not be acceptable is Hume's argument that no testimony for the occurrence of a miracle could ever be good enough.)

Most importantly of all – and this is the aspect which, in closing, I want to stress – decisions about truth in religion are also decisions about what is *important*, and why. That is to say, they are choices of ethical values, and indeed of whole ways of living. This perhaps is what is most obviously distinctive about them; and this is what explains why the discovery that God exists cannot rationally be a matter of (relatively) mild and casual interest, as the discovery of a tenth planet in the solar system would be to an astronomical layman. Any religious system worth the name is also a moral system – which is to say that it represents a series of complex and character-constituting decisions about what is or could be important, relevant to our human situation, or potentially life-transforming. This in turn is why one

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way of (for instance) rejecting Christianity would be to agree that Christ rose from the dead, but deny that it matters whether or not he rose from the dead. It also shows the sense in which Penelhum is right to question Aquinas' thesis that those most bitterly opposed to the kingdom of God (the devils) can have some sort of religious belief. For – as St. James insisted in his epistle – there is indeed a sense in which belief in God is sometimes not *religious* belief: namely, when that factual belief is quite disconnected from, or indeed altogether at odds with, any sort of ethical or personal orientation. As Penelhum himself nicely expresses it (p. 74), 'The ideal of faith is the transformation of one's nature into a state where trust in God is wholly unreserved'.

Thus my two basic disagreements with Penelhum's fine book concern religious ambiguity and the relation of decision and religious belief. As we have seen, the two disagreements are clearly connected. Since Penelhum holds that *no* belief can be a matter of decision, he also holds that we cannot hope to explain the world's evident diversity of sincere religious beliefs by appeal to different decisions about what to believe. Hence, for him, it must seem that the world really is such that the sources of that diversity must be squarely located in the available evidence – the equipollence of which is what he means by the phenomenon of religious ambiguity. By contrast, I have questioned the very existence of that phenomenon. Hence I need to explain the diversity of religious views in another way. I have done this by arguing (i) that it is only in the simplest cases of the evidence–belief relation that we have no latitude at all about what we choose to believe; (ii) that in particular, our ethical beliefs are very much a matter for decision; and (iii) that in this respect our religious beliefs are crucially related to our ethical beliefs.

To repeat, none of this is to say that religious beliefs (or for that matter ethical beliefs) are altogether free from rational constraint. On the contrary, it is in our choices of these sorts of beliefs that it is most important to get it right – to decide on the right theory and to stop in the correct place. But it is argued that, at least to some extent, whether or not we get our religious and ethical beliefs right is within our own control, and therefore up to us. For assessment of what counts as a good explanation, and of when an explanation is complete, and of what are the sorts of goods in the world (or beyond it) which we ought to recognize – all of these are processes which are, under the guidance of rationality, without our control. This, in turn, may help us to give a somewhat different answer from Penelhum's to one of his central puzzles – how it could be that, provided God exists, faith might be a virtue.

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