RECOVERING RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS
SWANSEA STUDIES IN PHILOSOPHY

General Editor: D. Z. Phillips, Rush Rhees Research Professor, University College of Wales, Swansea and Danforth Professor of Philosophy of Religion, Claremont Graduate University

Philosophy is the struggle for clarity about the contexts of human discourse we engage in. What we need is not theoretical explanation, but clarification and elucidation of what lies before us. Recent returns to theory in many fields of philosophy, involving more and more convoluted attempts to meet inevitable counter-examples to such theories, make this need all the more urgent. This series affords an opportunity for writers who share this conviction, one as relevant to logic, epistemology and the philosophy of mind, as it is to ethics, politics, aesthetics and the philosophy of religion. Authors will be expected to engage with the thought of influential philosophers and contemporary movements, thus making the series a focal point for lively discussion.

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RECOVERING RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS
Closing Epistemic Divides

Rush Rhees (edited by D. Z. Phillips)
MORAL QUESTIONS
Recovering Religious Concepts

Closing Epistemic Divides

D. Z. Phillips
Rush Rhees Research Professor
University of Wales, Swansea
and
Danforth Professor of Philosophy of Religion
Claremont Graduate University, California
To my Claremont colleague
Jack Verheyden
on the occasion of his retirement
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All but two of the essays in this collection were written in the 1990s. The essays have been modified, since their original publication, to emphasise the continuity between them. I am grateful to the editors and publishers indicated below for permission to reprint.

‘Where We Are: at the Mercy of Method’ was first published as ‘At the Mercy of Method’ by Claremont Graduate School, where it was my inaugural lecture as Danforth Professor of the Philosophy of Religion. It was reprinted in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, edited by Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr, Macmillan and St. Martin’s Press, 1995.


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‘In the Beginning was the Proposition – In the Beginning was the Choice – In the Beginning was the Dance’ was first published in Midwest Studies in Philosophy, Vol. 21, 1995/6.


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DZP
Claremont/Swansea
Preface

The essays in this collection show how unnecessary epistemic divides can be created between the philosophical epistemologies we create and the spiritual roots of religious concepts.

In the first essay, I illustrate how these epistemic divides have been created by various methods which have dominated philosophy of religion since my undergraduate days in the fifties.

In the second essay, I show how an unnecessary epistemic divide is created between us and ‘God’ by a ‘monstrous illusion’: the assumption that religious practices depend on a metaphysical belief said to be logically prior to them. This assumption is not a healthy respect for realism, but the needless creation of a rootless conception of ‘how things are’.

The third essay illustrates one of the deepest confusions, not simply in the philosophy of religion, but in epistemology more generally, namely, the assumption that epistemic practices are hypotheses about or descriptions of reality. In fact, epistemic practices are the contexts, the conceptual parameters within which our beliefs, true or false, have their sense. By turning these conceptual parameters into beliefs, we are robbed of the realities in our midst. What we need, as Wittgenstein said, is realism without empiricism. It is highly ironic that empiricists, who think of themselves as realists, deny that we are acquainted with ordinary certainties in our lives. These certainties are turned into probabilities. Even ‘seeing a chair’ is said to be a matter of having a good reason for saying that it is highly probable that we are seeing a chair. And this is said to be realism! Wittgenstein reminded us that it is part of the grammar of the word ‘chair’ that ‘this is what we call “sitting on a chair”’. Are we to say that ‘sitting on a chair’ gives us a good reason to say that it is highly probable that we are sitting on a chair? Analyses such as this create epistemic divides which are a retreat from reality.

This retreat from reality is illustrated in the fourth essay. The cosmological argument turns the celebration of God’s creation into a causal hypothesis about the origin of ‘everything’. This notion of ‘everything’ depends on treating it as though it were
one big thing. Celebration of creation is pressed into a category and a mode of argument too impoverished to accommodate it, or to mediate its sense. The fifth essay provides a further example of this conceptual poverty, the offering of too narrow a range of concepts in which to discuss religious belief.

This narrowness is found in an empiricist account of 'experience', from which we attempt to construct authoritative contexts in which we can be said to be certain, to know, or to believe such-and-such. In essays 6, 7 and 8, we see what happens when this attempt is made with religious concepts. For example, with respect to revelations, one is led either to the unintelligible notion of self-authenticating revelations, or to the conclusion that we must be necessarily agnostic about the truth of any revelation. Similarly, we are deprived of any authoritative context in which claims concerning miracles can be discussed. Once again, epistemic divides separate us from the notions of revelations and miracles.

Epistemic divides may also separate us from an intelligible notion of the self. In essays 9, 10 and 11, we see how the notion of the soul can become a metaphysical abstraction. The self of solipsism obscures the connection between 'I' and the realisation of a world, my world, which death will end. Instead, immortality is turned into a hypothesis, one pursued, sometimes, by trying to turn a seance into a science. In short, we are offered a language in which to discuss the immortality of the soul which ignores the soul in the words of religion.

Epistemic divides can only be closed if we pay attention to concept-formation in religion. In essays 12 and 13 we see how intellectualisation and romanticisation can obscure what concept-formation comes to, not only in religion, but in the very different context of sense perception too.

Notice that I have talked of epistemic divides separating us from 'God', not from God. This is because I am concerned in these essays with philosophical analyses which rob us of the sense of religious beliefs. Issues of sense are logically prior to issues of truth and falsity. It is only when we appreciate the sense of religious beliefs that we can see what calling them true or false comes to. In the fourteenth essay, I argue that truth in religion is confessional in character. To fail to appreciate this detracts, not only from religious belief, but from rejection of religion also.

Many of my fellow philosophers are engaged in either
establishing the truth, the falsity, or the meaninglessness of religious belief. In the final essay of the collection, I argue that we need a sensibility in the philosophy of religion which transcends the distinction between belief and unbelief. In fact, it is a sensibility which, I hope, is present throughout the collection; a sensibility which can be content with nothing less than the recovery of religious concepts from those epistemic divides which separate us from them.