

# God and the Soul: A Response to Paul Badham

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## I

Professor Paul Badham argues that ‘Christian faith in God is dependent on accepting the authenticity of the religious experience of entering a relationship with God’ and that the ‘Christian faith in God has always been utterly interwoven with belief in a future life, and that this belief is necessary to the intelligibility and coherence of Christian theism’.<sup>1</sup> So far he would get extensive support from traditional Christians. Indeed he might of necessity get universal support, for to have such a set of beliefs may be partially definitive of what we mean by someone being a ‘traditional Christian’. But dissent will begin within the traditional Christian community over Badham’s third thesis, namely that the concept of the soul is a necessary condition for both the above claims so that to have a coherent Christian faith we must have a ‘belief in God, in the soul and the future life’, where these three beliefs are taken to be ‘interdependent beliefs each of which relies on implicit assumptions about the validity of the other beliefs for its own coherence’.<sup>2</sup> As Badham is well aware, some traditional Christians will not go along with him concerning his belief in dualism and in a soul as an immaterial substance, but, while remaining as firmly anti-dualist as a materialist, some traditional Christians believe in bodily resurrection.

I have no desire to adjudicate this dispute between traditional or orthodox Christians. As I argue in my ‘The Faces of Immortality’, the choice between bodily resurrection and an immortal soul as a immaterial entity is the choice between a patently false belief and a probably incoherent one.<sup>3</sup> But my first concern with Badham’s account is to argue that even if dualism is both coherent and true, and even if the soul is immortal and immaterial, the truth of these claims will not help him out in the slightest with his claimed non-sensory encounter with God or his claim that there is a mystical-intuitive immediate awareness of God. He may be right in claiming, as he does, that there can only be this awareness if dualism is true but

dualism could be true, as C. J. Ducasse and C. D. Broad saw long ago, and belief in God could still be utterly mistaken and, as J. E. McTaggart argued, again many years ago, we could be immortal even if there were no God, though again, as Ducasse argued, dualism could be true and it still could be the case that there was no independent existence, even for a short time, of an immaterial soul which is just to say that there is no immaterial soul. I do not want to suggest even for a moment that I think dualism is the least bit plausible. Indeed, work at the cutting edge of the philosophy of mind takes it to be an utter non-starter. (I refer here to the work, in certain important respects very different, of Hilary Putnam, Daniel Dennett, Paul Churchland, Patricia Churchland, Thomas Nagel and Derek Parfit.) But my bone of contention with Badham is that even if dualism were true, and in addition the soul was immortal and immaterial, his case for an immediate intuitive awareness of God would not be furthered.

I agree with Badham that Christianity is and ought to be a religion of salvation and not just some rather arcane metaphysics. The Christian concept of God is that of a caring God who loves and protects Her creation. 'Living faith', as Badham puts it, 'requires more than a bare acknowledgement of divine existence'; it requires, as well, 'a further conviction that God's existence makes a difference'.<sup>4</sup> But, as I am confident that Badham will agree, that does require the affirmation of God's existence.

My trouble with Badham's account starts with his account of how we can know or come to be aware of God's existence. He tells us that our 'living commitment to God is always based on personal experience of God'. A religiously significant concept of God, he goes on to claim, is of a God who is 'concerned for, interested in, or able to communicate with, his creatures'.<sup>5</sup> This leads him to speak of, what he calls, an 'experiential awareness of God . . . which is not mediated by the senses'.<sup>6</sup> This we might have now or only after the death of our bodies in an eschatological verification. God, on such an account, is not an inferred entity but an experienced reality with which, if we have faith, we will enter into a trusting and loving relationship. People of faith, he tells us, have 'the sense of living in the divine presence'; they share an awareness of God that is so vivid that this experience is an undubitable factor in their experience. They have, he tells us, a direct encounter with God that carries with it a sense of certainty. Moreover, in traditional Christianity, the God we

are said to encounter is also the God who promises us everlasting life and, at least if we are faithful, a life of everlasting bliss in heaven.

However, this alleged encounter with God or awareness of God is a very strange one. It is said to be a mental awareness that is not mediated by the senses. After all we surely do not understand what it would be like literally to see or hear God. But our awareness of God is not like that. It is a kind of mental experience that surpasses at the same time both sense and intellect. It is something which is immaterial. God, that is, makes 'the reality of his presence felt other than through neural pathways'.<sup>7</sup> Our movement 'of thought from the world to the transcendent depends upon pre-existing mystical-intuitive immediate awareness of God which can only be a reality if dualism is true'.<sup>8</sup> 'Spiritual things', as St Paul avers, 'are spiritually discerned'. (I Corinthians 2:14). This experience is said by Badham (following E. L. Mascall) to be cognitive but non-sensory. God, on this account, is knowable in himself directly.<sup>9</sup> To be aware of God, to have an encounter with God, it must be the case that we have such a non-sensory awareness and for this to be possible, Badham tells us, we need an immaterial self or soul.

Like most contemporary philosophers, I find the very concept of *immateriality* problematic: the immaterial self as well as God. (The problematicity of that immaterial self is not in the slightest lessened if it is only momentarily disembodied in going from one body to another. It is what it could be in just that short-lived independence that is problematic.) However, in this first section I will assume that both of these concepts, though puzzling, are coherent. My trouble here is with someone in the world, dualism or non-dualism, encountering God, as God has come to be conceived in the developed strands of Jewish, Christian and Moslem theism, that is, a concept of God that is no longer a cosmic Mickey Mouse. On such a conceptualisation, God, to use Richard Swinburne's unexceptional characterisation, is taken to be 'a person without a body (that is, a spirit), present everywhere, the creator and sustainer of the universe, able to do anything (that is, omnipotent), knowing all things, perfectly good, a source of moral obligation, immutable, eternal, a necessary being, holy and worthy of worship'.<sup>10</sup>

I will argue that such a putative reality could not be directly encountered or could not be something of which we are directly aware. Such a God is, as a creator and sustainer of the universe, transcendent to the universe as well as being an infinite individual.

Now if we are in the universe, immaterial or not, we could not, logically could not, encounter or be directly aware of something transcendent to the universe. We ourselves, material or immaterial, would have to be out of the universe to so encounter or so to be aware of what was 'beyond the universe'. But Badham places us squarely in the universe, as indeed we are, and still claims such an awareness. But then if we encountered God or were aware of God, God herself would be in the universe.

Suppose we say, to counter this, that, given the above definition of God, God is somehow also immanent as well as transcendent, and let us assume for the nonce that we can make sense of that. God, being everywhere, like smoke in a smoke-filled room, is immanent as well as transcendent and it is in her immanency that we are aware of God and encounter God. We know God in her immanency but not in her transcendency. But then we could hardly have anything like a religiously adequate knowledge of God for it is God in her transcendency that is vital to grasp.

Perhaps? But it still could be replied that we have gained an experiential foothold here in directly encountering God as an immanent reality who is everywhere. However, if she is literally everywhere – there is no place at all where she is not – we cannot encounter her for we cannot identify her. For to identify a person, or an individual, is to be able to distinguish that person or individual from some other person or individual, but that which is literally everywhere is not so distinguishable and thus not identifiable. But we cannot be aware of or encounter, sensorily or non-sensorily, what we cannot identify.

Someone might respond, in effect conceding a lot, by saying 'Drop the part about being everywhere and only conceive God – as creator and sustainer of the universe – as being transcendent to the universe'. We would, of course, then have trouble with God being caring or in any way acting in the world, but let us set that aside and go back to the claim that spiritual things discern spiritual things spiritually. Let us further say, to avoid the above difficulties, that we do not experience God in this life but that we experience God – encounter and become aware of God – in the next life when we, as purely spiritual beings, or spiritual beings with a 'spiritual body', are transcendent to the universe ourselves. We live by faith now without an awareness of God, but after death we will, so to say, meet God face to face, as two transcendent beings, two spiritual beings, one

infinite, one not, meeting each other, both residing outside the universe.

There are a number of distinct criticisms to be made of such a conception. God, whether inside or outside the universe, is said to be both a person and an individual who is also infinite and omnipresent. If God, as spiritual person, an individual, outside universe, is said to be infinite and omnipresent, then again she is not identifiable and if she is not identifiable she cannot be encountered and we cannot be aware of her for we cannot pick her out as a person, and thus, an individual, distinct from other individuals. Being finite, immaterial or partly immaterial persons ourselves will not help us one bit, for we still will not understand at all what it is we must encounter to encounter God and become aware of her existence. We do not understand, for example, how something could be both infinite and an individual. We do not understand what it would be like to meet an infinite individual. That combination of words doesn't even make sense.

If it is said, in turn, I am being too literal here, I will respond that Badham talked as if he were speaking, or at least trying to speak, literally. If we resolve to speak metaphorically or analogically then we must, if we are to get anywhere at all, explain how this works, explain what our metaphors are metaphors of, and show how we are saying something that has some family resemblance to what in a stumbling way we were trying to say above, taking the words in their plain senses.

However, even if the criticism, raised in the paragraph before the one immediately preceding this paragraph, could be somehow met, the amended position ascribed to Badham would still not give him what he wants. He wants to show how we, if we have immaterial souls, can now, as embodied persons in a dualistic universe, by a movement of thought from the world to the transcendent, be aware of God now given that we are finite and fragile creatures in a very material universe. Speaking of beings such as ourselves in our earthly conditions, he wants to give an account of how, for some of us now, as persons of faith, we could now really have an awareness of God that was so vivid that that awareness was an indubitable factor in our experience. Indeed, he wants to claim that it is for them as indubitable a factor as their very physical environment. (We see here again the old quest for certainty. Even in our fallibilistic age, after Peirce's devastating assault on Cartesianism, it still dies hard.)

If my arguments above have been sound there could be for us here and now no such an awareness of God. To say that after we die we can come to have such an awareness does not help us now to show that our faith is rooted in a vivid awareness of the reality of God. Even if dualism is true and beyond that we are immaterial beings or can have, if only for a short time, a disembodied existence, it has not been shown that we can encounter God or understand what it is to experience God. We can, and some of us do, have religious experiences, experience *perhaps* best understood on a Durkheimian or a Feuerbachian or a Freudian or a Frommian interpretation. However, be that as it may, without at all denying the reality of that experience, *qua* experience, we can know that it cannot be understood as an experience *of God* where 'God' is construed in anything like the normal way. If 'God', by contrast, is construed in a Spinozist, Tillichian, Phillipian, or Braithwaitean way, then perhaps we can speak of the experience of God, but, with these reductionisms, even atheistic humanists, nay even Marxists, can be led gently into belief, for then there is nothing of substance that distinguishes the atheist from the religious believer. We can all gather around the tribal campfire together.<sup>11</sup>

## II

I assumed above that it made sense to say that there can be bodily death and that that notwithstanding we could live on as spirits (as immaterial beings) and that, for a short time at least, we could have an utterly disembodied existence. It is a bit of philosophical orthodoxy, at least in analytic circles, that immateriality is problematic. I am in that respect part of that orthodoxy. I shall argue briefly, what I argue in detail in my 'The Faces of Immortality', that belief in the disembodied existence of persons, whatever we might want to say about numbers, is incoherent. I shall be concerned here to meet Badham's particular arguments.

Badham concedes that the 'difficulties of expounding or defending a credible concept of the soul today are truly formidable' but he presses on none the less for he takes such a belief to be a religious necessity.<sup>12</sup> He thinks the concept of the soul can be made intelligible and that there actually is some empirical evidence for the claim that we have souls and these souls are immortal. Suppose I am substan-

tially mistaken in what I have argued in the first section and we can be aware of God. Well, it is clear enough that we cannot see God with our eyes and hear him with our ears. God must be spiritually discerned, if he is to be discerned at all, in a way that requires at least dualist assumptions about a non-material encountering faculty. Because our bodies are constantly going through changes, Badham thinks that the material of which a person happens to be composed can in no sense be regarded as necessary to his ongoing self-hood. What, however, is essential is not some particular stuff he has at a particular time but the having at any time of *some* such particular stuff, linked together in a causal history with other bits of particular stuff that were had at an earlier time by him and with the particular memories that a particular embodied person has. To say that the person is 'the essential part of what we are' or 'the vital principles of our being', 'the pattern of what we are' is perhaps fair enough, but it does not say much until filled in. These things are compatible with an utterly materialistic way of looking at things. Badham takes the word 'soul' to be a term for 'some non-physical principle of continuity' of persons. But I do not see how this can be, for, as is well known, one can be a dualist, as Ducasse was, without believing in immortality or even thinking it is a coherent concept. Memories, on a dualist account, are non-physical and they provide a non-physical principle of continuity. But memories are experiences persons have. That they provided a principle of continuity, if they do, for saying that a certain embodied being, while changing extensively in her bodily make-up over time, is the same person, does not at all show that that person is or could be disembodied. It does not show us that there is a kind of being, a kind of individual, that we call a person that could exist in a disembodied state. It at best only shows us that embodied beings could have non-material properties. Of course, our own sense of self-hood is associated with being a thinking, feeling, willing subject. But that does not show, or even indicate, that we understand the concept that we are disembodied spirits who have those experiences, or even that we understand how those experiences can be given a dualistic interpretation. It is not at all evidence that we have a sense of what it is to be a 'we' without a body. But to say this is not to say that we just think of ourselves as bodies in motion. That we have all kinds of strange notions in dreams shows nothing pertinent here for dreams need not make sense, need not be consistent or coherent and indeed frequently are not. (That they make Freudian sense is another matter.)

Badham has done nothing to show that we are persons capable of surviving bodily death, or that our self-hood is constituted by immateriality. He has not even shown that these puzzling notions make sense. Even if our sense of self-identity is intimately linked with things like memories, it does not show that this establishes our identity so that it can be correctly said, just in virtue of memories and the like, that this is Hans, Pierre or Nadine.

It may be the case, though I doubt it, for it sounds to me like bad scientific methodology, that a single example of para-normal phenomena being genuine, would establish that central state materialism is false. But that would only take us to dualism, not to immortality. Badham has not clarified the concept of disembodied existence sufficiently for us to have reason to think we have or could have any evidence either for disembodied existence or against it.

All the same he presses on with giving us what he takes to be evidence. He thinks telepathy gives us some evidence but the most important evidence, he claims, comes from 'the experiences of people who have been resuscitated from a close encounter with death and who would undoubtedly have died but for modern medical advances'.<sup>13</sup> For some people, though not for the majority, of all age groups and from all educational and social strata, and from different religious backgrounds, some report that at the moment they were near what appeared to be their death, they had a sense of going out of their bodies and finding themselves looking down with interest on the resuscitation attempts. Moreover, and this is surprising, that 'after recovery they accurately described what was going on while they were unconscious and their perspective was from a point of view different from that of the body on the operating table'.<sup>14</sup>

Badham takes these findings, as he puts it, as being of 'absolutely crucial significance for the concept of the soul', for, as he continues, 'if a single out-of-the-body experience is correctly described as such, then the soul is a reality'.<sup>15</sup> These experiences, if they have been correctly described, show, he attests, that 'consciousness can exist apart from the body'.<sup>16</sup> And thus 'the most fundamental barrier across the road to immortality has been removed'.<sup>17</sup>

The catch is in his 'has been correctly described'. What is evident enough is that some people will honestly avow that they have had experiences that they will describe in that way. But that they will talk this way, that they will interpret these experiences in this way, does not mean that this interpretation is the correct descriptive-interpretive account of these experiences or even, in such a context,



that it will be the most perspicuous account of those experiences. Post-positivist philosophy of science has taught us that all data, even the best data, underdetermines theory. That is to say, there will always be the possibility, and frequently the reality, that the 'same data' will be equally compatible with different theories, and that it will never be the case that we can just read off which theory, if any theory, is the correct theory from the data. Moreover, as Richard Rorty has shown us, if not Wittgenstein before him, there is no such thing as nature's own language, and there is no such thing as an utterly neutral description of the world.<sup>18</sup> If, on the one hand, we think the concept of disembodied existence makes sense, and if we are inclined to believe in, or at least hope for, its reality, we will be likely to interpret such data as evidence for disembodied existence. If, on the other hand, we think that the concept of disembodied existence makes no sense or that there being any disembodied beings is extremely unlikely, then we will interpret the data differently. Perhaps we will seek to explain it in terms of telepathic powers, suggestibility, overworked imagination after such a dreadful experience, and the like. If we think the occurrence very improbable, or, even more so, if we believe and have powerful arguments for believing that a belief in disembodied existence is incoherent, we will say, and reasonably so, even if we do not have a good alternative explanation for it, that that cannot be the correct description of what went on because it does not make sense to just speak of consciousness existing where it is not the consciousness of some person who is conscious, and we do not understand what it would be for a person to be disembodied. We have rather some anomalous phenomena for which we cannot, for a given time, give a proper account. But that happens all the time in science as its history attests. If there are good theoretical arguments for thinking that the concept of an immaterial soul is problematic and indeed quite likely incoherent and, given other things we know or reasonably believe, it is highly unlikely that there is any such thing, then some anomalous data, such as the data that Badham adduces, should be treated as just that.

### III

Badham also claims that belief in immortality in some form is a *religious* necessity at least for Christians. Surely this is how traditional Christians saw it and surely he is right in following Anthony Kenny in

arguing that, if immateriality is problematic, that makes both God and the soul problematic as traditionally conceived.<sup>19</sup> But he also insightfully quotes T. S. Eliot as saying, 'Christianity is always adapting itself into something which can be believed'. As Paul Tillich and John Robinson have pointed out, throughout the history of Christianity the way God has been conceptualised has changed – one might even argue that it has evolved – to meet the way we humans have come to understand the world. With what Max Weber has characterised as the steady, and he believed irreversible, disenchantment of the world, we may have reached the point where many of us (particularly if we are intellectuals) can no longer take the God of Christian *theism* or belief in the soul as credible, but, if we are to believe in God at all, we will have to believe in Spinoza's God or Tillich's God, as the ground of being and meaning, or some utterly reductionist account such as we find in plain form in Hare and in Braithwaite and in an evasive form in Phillips and Dilman.<sup>20</sup> All these conceptions of God would go with an utterly naturalistic framework, and with them we could, as did the young Schleiermacher, treat 'immortality as part of the rubbish of antiquity from which Christianity must be cleansed if it is to speak to the modern world'.

However, the God of Christianity is a caring God and Christianity is a religion of salvation. Without a belief in immortality how could we believe in either of these things? Moreover, as Badham puts it, people 'throughout the ages have believed themselves to have encountered God in prayer and worship and they have, as a result, had their lives transformed'.<sup>21</sup> This experience of being encountered by God is, he claims, 'the living heart of religion'.<sup>22</sup> But, again in the face of the incoherency or unbelievability of the traditional conceptions, such notions can be de-mythologised. Being encountered by God can come to be seen as symbolic talk for a categorical commitment to love and care for one's fellow and to relentlessly struggle against the plague. The sense of Christianity as a religion of salvation can be captured by a sense of hope in the world that the lives of human beings can be transformed, first in the direction of decency and later into a human emancipation, where, for the first time in history, there will be an extensive human flourishing. It will take from the Christian message those elements 'essentially concerned with the transformation of life here, and now'.<sup>23</sup> The hope for the future would not be an eschatological hope, but a hope for a new world in which an order of goodness and justice would prevail, and in which human beings in an order of equality would flourish. To

believe in the providential care of an omnipotent God does not require, *pace* Badham, the postulation of immortality. It comes just to a belief, on this de-mythologisation, that such a truly human society with such deep human flourishing will come to prevail. Indeed, belief here may be principally trust or perhaps even just plain hope. And that is plainly in accordance with Christianity as a religion of salvation. It does not, *pace* Badham, deprive the belief of content.

Badham, I am confident, would claim that such a de-mythologisation would not give us an adequate theodicy. Without belief in immortality we are just stuck with the manifest evils in the world. Even if we will eventually get a just and humane social order, it will not make up for the ills some have suffered and, if, as Badham puts it, 'death means extinction, then there is no question but that old age, suffering, disease and death will gain the ultimate victory over each and every one of us, and thereby bring to nothing the belief that each one of us is eternally precious to an all-sovereign God'.<sup>24</sup> But even, as traditional belief has it, an omnipotent God cannot do that which is logically impossible. If belief in immortality really is incoherent, it is logically impossible for it to obtain. It is logically impossible for God to make us immortal. But it does not count against God's providence or his omnipotence that he cannot, to speak anthropomorphically, redeem our suffering by affording us eternal life. But that providential care can manifest itself in coherent ways. It will not all take, or try to take, the turn of traditional Christianity. If there comes to be, against the pervasiveness of evil that is now in the world, a truly human order where the needs and interests of everyone are answered to in an equitable way so that there is extensive human flourishing, we can call that, if we want to talk that way, a firm manifestation of God's providential care. Those who want to use such vocabularies can go on doing so and in doing so make sense out of some things at the heart of Christianity. That such talk is identical, in all but name, to an atheistic humanism that can also be a Marxism only shows that Eliot is right. Christianity can always adapt itself into something which can be believed. We do not need, to make sense of it, as a religion of salvation, to crucify our intellects and make belief in immortality one of the conditions for religious adequacy.

**Notes**

1. Paul Badham, 'God, the Soul, and the Future Life', pp. 36–51 in this volume.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
3. Kai Nielsen, 'The Faces of Immortality', pp. 1–30 in this volume.
4. Badham, *op. cit.*
5. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
10. Richard Swinburne. *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1977) p. 110.
11. Kai Nielsen, *Contemporary Critiques of Religion* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971); *Scepticism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973); and *Philosophy and Atheism* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1985).
12. Badham, *op. cit.*
13. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
18. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).
19. Anthony Kenny, *Faith and Reason* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983).
20. I discuss these forms of evasion in my *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, (Ottawa, Ont: University of Ottawa Press, 1988).
21. Badham, *op. cit.*
22. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 43.