

## Editorial

ROBIN LE POIDEVIN

Roger Trigg's obituary of Basil Mitchell, which opens this issue, reminds us of the challenge facing philosophers of religion in the 1950s and 1960s. The legacy of verificationism was an intellectual culture that was not sympathetic to religious discourse, though that culture was perhaps more prominent in some institutions than in others. The vigorous development of philosophy of religion during that time, and in the following decades, is testament to the success of philosophers such as Mitchell in meeting that challenge.

These days, philosophers of religion face another challenge to their discipline. It is, however, a rather more insidious one, and harder to meet on its own terms. Verificationism was, at least, a *philosophical* objection. In wielding the principle of verifiability against religious language, A. J. Ayer and others were, in effect, engaging in philosophy of religion. It was possible to meet this objection directly, by criticizing the principle of verifiability, or by showing that religious discourse is actually compatible with the principle, or by interpreting that discourse in such a way that the principle simply does not apply to it. But the contemporary challenge I have in mind is not, or not purely, philosophical. It can best be described as a feeling of indifference: a sense by some of those outside the philosophy of religion (what I can refer to, since I am addressing readers of this journal, as 'our discipline') that it has run out of steam, or that the key arguments have long ago been shown to be unsound, or that its object centres on ideas that have been conclusively discredited, both intellectually and morally.

This attitude is in stark contrast to the unflagging commitment of contemporary philosophers of religion to keeping alive the philosophical defence, criticism, or analysis of religious thought, to the extent that our discipline has been a growth area in the last few decades. It is also in stark contrast to the continuing and enthusiastic demand for philosophy of religion among students in higher and secondary education.

Just how widespread this indifference is, and whether it has become more so, are moot points. Should we take it seriously? If it is based on anti-religious prejudice, or a failure even to look at the work now being done in our discipline, then perhaps the best response would be simply to ignore it, and carry on. But where such a feeling exists, there is a loss on both sides. Important lessons for, say,

epistemology, or meta-ethics, that are gained from making religious discourse and practice the focus of inquiry may not be as widely appreciated as they should be. The ideas are too central, too important, intellectually, morally, historically, and socially, to be ignored. And the very reaction to religious ideas itself, even where the reaction is one of indifference, is a source of philosophical questions. Can the indifferent be indifferent *about* their indifference?

A *Religious Studies* editorial is not the place to defend our discipline: not only does it not require defence (any more than any other philosophical area), I would only be preaching to the converted. Instead, I want to issue a call to arms. Those who care deeply about this vital part of intellectual inquiry, which engages with the profoundest questions and deepest feelings the human mind can entertain, need to challenge indifference, where it exists. What I have in mind is not a defensive strategy, which would unhelpfully suggest an embattled discipline, but something much more positive, and intrinsically worthwhile. We should make efforts to offer a new agenda. That is, not simply new thoughts about familiar questions, but new questions, or new methodologies. This, I hasten to add, should not be at the expense of the more established agenda, for arguments can be preserved only if they are continually reconstructed and re-evaluated. But a set of new *kinds* of problem is invigorating for the discipline; it encourages those students who enjoyed the discipline at undergraduate level to take it a step further and pursue it at postgraduate level and beyond, and it is likely to attract the attention and interest of those outside the discipline – rather more effectively, indeed, than any merely defensive attempt to argue for the importance of the discipline.

Devising a new agenda is easier said than done, of course. But new approaches and ideas have emerged in the last quarter of a century: think, for example, of reformed epistemology, religious pluralism, the problem of divine hiddenness, or responses to the cognitive science of religion. Equally, new ideas and methods elsewhere – issues in contemporary metaphysics or philosophy of mind, for example – have had fruitful application to religious concepts. Where else might we look? Perhaps formal epistemology, or experimental philosophy?

A journal such as *Religious Studies* exists to stimulate and celebrate new ideas, support the discipline, and encourage new writers, and we want to exploit a variety of formats in doing so. To mention two recent developments: we have now instituted an annual postgraduate essay prize, and the June 2013 issue will be a special issue, guest-edited by Dan Howard-Snyder, devoted to the work of John Schellenberg.

Finally, I would be most willing to consider submissions to the journal, whose *raison d'être* is not so much a defence or criticism of a particular thesis or argument as the laying-out of a new agenda. I cannot promise to publish them, of course, but I hope that readers of this journal will take up the challenge.