

**UNITY IN ACTION:
PERSONS, COMMUNITY
AND ECUMENISM
IN THE THOUGHT OF JOHN MACMURRAY**

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DECLARATION

I hereby state that the whole dissertation, except where specifically indicated to the contrary, is my own original work.

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ABSTRACT

As both a philosopher and a Christian, John Macmurray (1891-1976), spent his life attempting to show that we are truly called to a life of unity with one another. He makes a strong philosophical case that to be properly human is to seek and to intend communion with others, and in his analysis of the nature of the human person he offers us a way of understanding that the call to Christian unity is not simply a matter of pastoral effectiveness but one that expresses the deepest truth of our human being, that we are most fully ourselves when we are in communion with one another.

The call to unity among the Christian Churches is one that has largely shaped pastoral and theological concerns over the last hundred years or more. The efforts of the World Council of Churches and the writings of many eminent theologians have pushed the question of ecumenism to the forefront of Christian consciousness. It is now generally recognised among Christians of all traditions that the failure of the Churches to give practical expression of the unity for which Christ prayed is itself a major obstacle to the proclamation of the Good News, and one that inhibits the message of Jesus from being properly heard and accepted by many who are seeking meaning in their lives.

In terms of how best to achieve the unity that so many desire, there has long been a divide between those who argue that unity should come about through doctrinal agreement and those who say that, while doctrine tends to divide Christians, unity can be best achieved through a shared commitment to practical efforts to make the world a more peaceful, just and loving place.

Something, however, that has been largely overlooked in the whole ecumenical question is the need to find an appropriate philosophical basis for unity among peoples and among the Churches. Without such a philosophical underpinning, the call to unity can easily be seen as simply a practical pastoral tool for the effective proclamation of the Gospel or as nothing other than emotive rhetoric. In the writings of John Macmurray we are able to find an approach to the question of ecumenism that provides us with just such a philosophical basis for unity.

This dissertation engages in a close reading of both Macmurray's philosophical and religious views, and suggests that, despite some inconsistencies in his own approach, Macmurray offers the whole

ecumenical project a significant philosophical basis for the notion that in seeking unity among the Christian Churches we are being faithful to our nature as human beings. While not denying the sincerity of the countless numbers of those who have committed themselves to the call for unity among Christians, the desire for unity needs to be fortified by an appropriate understanding of human nature. It is argued that the ecumenical movement can be greatly enhanced by the kind of perspective that Macmurray brings to the whole question of unity. His voice still needs to be heard.

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INTRODUCTION

On his very first day of school, a five-year-old boy was asked by his teacher what he wanted to be when he grew up. The answer he gave was that he wanted to be “a man of knowledge”.¹ The young boy in question, John Macmurray, certainly achieved his desire. Born in Scotland in 1891, he lived to the age of 85 and spent his whole life becoming, in his terms, a man of knowledge. He spent most of his adult years in the great halls of learning, first as student and then as lecturer and professor. Despite a wide range of interests, ranging from science to art and from politics to international relations, his main focus was on philosophy, and a mark of the knowledge that he attained in that field is that he was at various times in his academic career a lecturer in philosophy at Manchester University, and at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, before moving on to become a don at Balliol College in Oxford. From there he moved to London to become Grote Professor in Mind and Logic at University College, London and completed his academic wanderings at Edinburgh, where he was Professor of Moral Philosophy from 1944 until his retirement in 1958.

Along with such an impressive list of academic appointments, the wide range of Macmurray’s publications also bear testimony that we are indeed dealing with a man of knowledge. He wrote fifteen books, covering such issues as democracy, Communism, the meaning of history, science, the relationship between philosophy and religion, and the meaning of

¹ John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, Floris Books, Edinburgh, 2002, p.19.

Christianity. He also contributed a great number of articles for a variety of publications, and was largely responsible for the BBC's influential series on philosophy and society of the 1930s'. What emerges from even a brief glance at the range of his publications is that Macmurray was no stereotype philosopher, hidden in his ivory tower. He was a person who believed that if philosophy was to be of any real value then it must engage with the social problems of its times. His own experience of serving, first as a medic and then as a soldier, in the First World War, convinced him that the failure of philosophy and also of Christianity to create the conditions where people could live in peace and friendship, called for a fresh approach to the philosophical and religious questions of what it means to be a human person. The courage with which he intellectually addressed the social and political difficulties of his time reveals that being a man of knowledge was not, for Macmurray, an invitation to solitariness, but that learning and knowledge should be used as a contribution to the well-being of the world. There is a passion to his writing that shows his efforts were not simply about understanding the world, but about changing it.² Such a view of the role of learning, and of philosophy in particular, set Macmurray apart from most of his contemporary colleagues, to such an extent that, despite the highly impressive academic positions he held, he can be said to have never really felt at home in the British philosophical culture of his day.

² It was Karl Marx who famously wrote in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach that "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it". Quoted by H. Kung in *Does God Exist*, Doubleday & Company, New York, 1980, p.231.

At a time when the philosophical agenda was being set by thinkers like Wittgenstein³, Ayer⁴ and Gilbert Ryle⁵, an agenda which refused to see any significant role for philosophy beyond that of linguistic analysis and verification, Macmurray's own philosophical efforts were of wider concern. He was haunted by the attempt to come to an adequate understanding of human nature, and felt that if we could only properly understand what it is to be human then we might more easily find solutions to the many problems besetting society and the world. His efforts received little appreciation from his philosophical contemporaries. Ryle, famous for a book entitled *The Concept of Mind*⁶, dismissed Macmurray for writing and speaking too simply! When Ayer, one of the most famous of the 20th century English philosophers, succeeded Macmurray as Grote Professor in Mind and Logic, his inaugural lecture was made controversial by his refusal to even mention the name of his predecessor.

The growing sense of academic isolation that Macmurray must have felt was perhaps partly lessened by the fact that there were other thinkers, though not in Britain's academic circles, who shared many of his concerns and values. His own philosophical approach was close to that of Martin Buber⁷, author of the seminal work *I and Thou*⁸, and to certain existential thinkers

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951), author of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) and *Philosophical Investigations* (1953).

⁴ A.J. Ayer (1910 – 1989) was one of the most significant of the logical positivists in English philosophy, and best known for his work, *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936).

⁵ Gilbert Ryle (1900 – 1976) was another of the analytic school in English philosophy.

⁶ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, Penguin Books, London, 2000.

⁷ Martin Buber (1878 – 1965) was similar in approach to Macmurray in that he saw human reality as essentially relational.

⁸ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1970.

like Gabriel Marcel⁹. Macmurray himself was fond of telling the story of his lengthy meeting with Buber, after which Buber stated that there was no significant philosophical disagreement between the two. The only difference between them was that while Macmurray was the metaphysician, Buber was the poet!¹⁰

Macmurray's search for an understanding of the nature of human being, one that would be both philosophically and theologically comprehensive and sound, is best summed up in the two books that emerged from the Gifford Lectures¹¹ which he had been invited to give at Glasgow University in 1953 and 1954, *The Self as Agent* and *Persons in Relation*. In these works, we encounter a thinker who was unafraid to enter into debate with such illustrious philosophers as Descartes, Kant, Hobbes and Rousseau. He was convinced that philosophy had taken a wrong turn with the general acceptance of Descartes' understanding of the human person as a thinker, and that ever since, it had struggled to come to a proper understanding of human nature. The acceptance of the Cartesian thinker had brought about a

⁹ Gabriel Marcel (1899 – 1973) was one of the foremost French existentialist thinkers and another who wrote about the nature of interpersonal communion.

¹⁰ John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, p.322.

¹¹ In 1885 Lord Gifford made provision in his will for a series of lectures to be given at the major Scottish universities on the topic of natural theology. Since their inception, the Gifford Lectures have become a significant intellectual event in the question of religion. Lectures are given in the universities at Edinburgh, St.Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen. The first lectures were given in 1888-89. A lecturer is given two successive years for his lectures. The lecturers have included a prestigious and broad cross-section of scholars from such fields as religion, philosophy, physics, and history, and have included scholars such as Etienne Gilson, William Temple, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and, more recently, Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas, to name just a few. The lectures are often published and achieve significant stature in the intellectual world.

dualism between mind and body which made it impossible to account for the unity of human life. For Macmurray, philosophical notions of the human person had, since the time of Descartes, either focussed on a mechanical or an organic perception of the world and of humanity. Neither of these views, though partly true, presents an adequate understanding of the universe or of the human person. The mechanical approach was to see the universe as a determined order of reality, where everything is put in motion and held together by mechanical forces and laws of nature. The organic understanding of the universe was one where everything was seen as part of an unfolding evolutionary process of life energies. While not denying that human beings can partly be presented in these terms, Macmurray felt that history shows the dreadful results of conceiving the human persons in such a limited fashion. Neither a mechanical nor an organic concept of the human person reveals the essential dignity of human beings. To be human is to be more than a machine or an organism; it is to be a person.

The greater part of both *The Self as Agent* and *Persons in Relation* is devoted to an exposition of Macmurray's vision that the universe is more than mechanical and organic but that it is ultimately personal. Modern philosophy, in absorbing Descartes' view that the self is a thinker, could give no real account of the fact that we are both persons and agents. By taking the idea of agency as the starting point of an examination of human nature, Macmurray believed that we might come to a fuller understanding of the universe and our place in it. In examining the nature of the human person from the standpoint of agency he comes to the conclusion that the deepest truth of our humanity is not that we are thinkers or simply part of a great organic process beyond our control, but rather that to be human is to be a person living in a personal world. More significantly, to discover the

personal nature of reality is to come to perceive that our relationship with the world, with other human agents and with God is also personal. To be fully human is to live with the intention of living out our communion with the world, with others and with God in such a manner that peace and goodwill becomes the hallmark of our human lives. Such a personalist philosophy as that expressed by Macmurray will have significant implications in the political, ethical and religious spheres, and many of his writings serve as a guide to what those implications mean in the practical living of human life.

Part of the reason for Macmurray's philosophical isolation can be traced to the fact that, through his search for the meaning of human being, he came to the conclusion that to be human is to be religious, and that the message of Jesus reveals to us our own truest nature. While many dismissed his views as simply another indication of his philosophical unreliability, he himself felt that his greatest achievement was in articulating a coherent account of human nature which gives due weight to the religious dimension of our lives. Macmurray was convinced that the personal and religious nature of all reality is perfectly expressed in the actions and the teachings of Jesus. Christians, therefore, are called to manifest the truth of the personal nature of life, through their own commitment to the intending of communion and fellowship in the world. They are called to continue God's action in history, to be witnesses to the fact that we are created to live in personal relationship with God and with one another.

Sadly, the evidence of Macmurray's life suggests that, despite the depth of his own faith in the person of Jesus, he was no more at home within the institutional structures of the Churches than he was with the kind of philosophy being conducted in the British academic world of his day. His

major problem with the institutional Christian Churches was that, in his view, they had lost sight of the radical nature of Jesus' teaching. In their emphasis on the task of achieving salvation in the next world they failed to grasp that Jesus was concerned with establishing the Kingdom of God here on earth. As a result, they had fallen into the very same dualist notions that impoverished so much of contemporary philosophy. By asking their members to spend their life in preparation for heaven, they had absolved themselves from finding solutions to the problems of this world.

This failure of the Churches to be faithful to the life and teaching of Jesus was most clearly seen in their inability to offer a word of hope during the great social crises of Macmurray's lifetime. The experience of both World Wars showed that, rather than calling people to live out the communion that God intends for the world, the Churches had compromised the truth and had themselves gone along with the political, national and ideological divisions of the time. Macmurray's own experience of this failure of the Churches was to have a profound impact on his own relationship to Christianity and to the Churches. Towards the end of the First World War, while on home leave from the killing fields of France, he was invited to preach at a Church in London. He used the opportunity to call his listeners to focus on the need for Christians to be at the vanguard of the effort to seek justice and reconciliation after the war had ended. His words were not well received, and Macmurray was shocked at the hatred he felt coming from a group of people who called themselves disciples of Jesus. The trauma of this experience was so great that, after the First World War had come to an end, he made a decision not to be a member of any of the institutional Churches, a decision he remained faithful to until he joined the Society of Friends in 1959.

Despite his refusal to participate in the institutional life and worship of the Churches, Macmurray's personal faith in Jesus continued to be of the greatest importance to him. His faith drove him to continually challenge the Churches to rediscover the real significance of Jesus' life and teaching and to accept their task of building communion between peoples whose actions are more often guided by fear of one another than by love. He passionately believed that only by committing themselves to finding practical expressions of communion and love in the world could the Churches properly claim to be made up of disciples of Christ. Only by taking practical steps to incarnate the message of Jesus in the contemporary world could the Churches avoid being irrelevant to the need for human beings to properly understand their own nature.

Some of the practical suggestions that Macmurray offered to the Churches were at the time, and are still today, controversial. While many other Christians shared his view that the lack of unity among the Christian Churches was not only a scandal but also a major obstacle to the proclamation of the message of Jesus, his solution to the problem was to argue that unity between the Churches could not be brought about through doctrinal agreement but only through actions in the world that create fellowship and justice. His assertion that only a complete separation of the structures of Church and State could prevent the Churches from being compromised in their proclamation of the dignity of all human beings did not garner much support from other Christian thinkers of his time. Likewise, his belief that true Christianity was irreconcilable with the economic practices of his day meant that he managed to alienate many well-fed Christians who saw no contradiction between attending Church on Sunday and seeking as much economic and political power as possible during the rest of the week.

It is now more than twenty-five years since the death of Macmurray, a distance that perhaps allows us to begin to properly assess the real significance of his thought. Was the fact that he was never quite at home in the world of either his philosophical or Christian contemporaries a sign that he failed in his efforts to provide a coherent philosophical and theological vision of human nature? Or was he perhaps a prophetic figure, uncomfortable as prophets tend to make us, reminding each of us of the dignity of our human being, and offering the world a way to overcome the horrors of division and war? Does the history of the world and of the Christian Churches over the last twenty-five years offer us any hope that Macmurray's views are no longer to be seen as either politically naïve or religiously utopian?

What cannot be doubted is that the world in which we live continues to be marked by the divisions and competitiveness that Macmurray so abhorred. Human beings continue to be treated as objects, political and ideological divisions still lead to violence and death in many parts of the world, and there is little sense of the emergence of a world community that might overcome the manifold social problems of the contemporary world. Yet, having said that, there are sure signs that the concerns that marked Macmurray's academic and personal life, are being taken up by other thinkers and by the Churches too.

From a philosophical perspective, although it remains true that much of philosophy remains limited by relativism and by an undue humility regarding what it might reasonably express about the nature of reality, there are a

growing number of philosophers, like Alasdair MacIntyre¹² and Charles Taylor¹³, who share Macmurray's belief that it is not possible to understand the nature of human being without appreciation of the central fact that to be human is to be part of a community of human beings, and that community is largely responsible for our human identity, as well as providing the context in which we can understand the ethical nature of our lives.¹⁴ We see similar developments in political philosophy, much of which no longer takes for granted Hobbes' view that human beings gather together in community out of fear and the desire for self-preservation.

It is, however, from a theological perspective that one can see the surest signs that Macmurray's understanding of the nature of the human person is being carried forward. Despite the fact that most Christians will never have heard of Macmurray, it can be said that the vast majority of Christians and Churches have come to share his awareness of the sinfulness of division among the disciples of Jesus. The effort of the World Council of Churches

¹² Alasdair MacIntyre (b.1929), in his famous work *After Virtue* (1981) argues that much of the crisis affecting contemporary moral philosophy arises from the failure of modernity to properly account for human nature, and proposes that we return to Aristotle's notion of virtue ethics, which he believes reveals a more substantive explanation of human nature than those offered in most contemporary ethical accounts.

¹³ Charles Taylor (b. 1931) is best known for his major work *Sources of the Self* (1989), which offers an historical and critical study of the modern concept of the human person.

¹⁴ MacIntyre concludes his work *After Virtue* with a call to create communities which are ethically guided by the sense of what it means to live a good and virtuous life: "What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horror of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope". Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 1981, p.263.

to achieve the unity of all Christians has itself developed, as we shall see, along views very similar to those expressed by Macmurray. The recent assemblies of the World Council of Churches, as well as those of the Faith and Order Movement and Life and Work Movement, have revealed a growing theological awareness that the question of communion is much more than simply a practical expedient in terms of missionary effectiveness. There is a deeper understanding that being in communion with others is the expression of the deepest truth about religion and about human nature.

From a more personal perspective, I have long shared Macmurray's dissatisfaction with the limitations of much of both modern and contemporary philosophy. As a Christian, I have also felt deep sympathy with his criticisms of the institutional Churches and their failures to live out the call to create communities where all can feel at home. I too have longed for an understanding of human nature that is both philosophically coherent and able to guide the Churches towards an adequate appreciation of the central importance of friendship and communion in human life. It is because the experience of real communion is always fragile and easily destroyed that we need to base our commitment to fellowship and friendship on more than a pious desire for unity or an emotional plea to tolerate one another. While I make no claim that Macmurray has been the only thinker to point us in the right direction regarding the significance of communion with others¹⁵, I do believe that his stringent philosophical analysis of human nature, combined with his own profound faith in the

¹⁵ Stanley Hauerwas (b. 1940), for example, is a contemporary theologian who approaches the subject of moral theology from the perspective of the significance of communion and of the importance of narrative in making community possible. Among his works are *A Community of Character*, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 1981 and *The Peaceable Kingdom*, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 1983.

person of Jesus and his desire for the unity of the Churches, offers us an approach that can still deepen the roots of our own commitment to the unity for which Jesus prayed and died.

Given the wide scope of Macmurray's interests, it is necessary here to focus on only a limited aspect of his work. I have chosen to take a close look at his argument that it is by seeing the human person as agent rather than as thinker that we can best come to a correct understanding of human nature. I will next examine his writings on the significance of Jesus and the need for the Churches to actively work towards the creation of real communion in the world. This examination will help to reveal why Macmurray argued so vehemently that the unity of the Churches should only be brought about through practical social action and not through doctrinal agreement. It is my intention in this thesis to show that, while his call for the Churches to be united for the sake of the Kingdom of God is based on his philosophical understanding of human agency, his refusal to accept that unity needs at least a minimum of doctrinal agreement among Christians as to the nature of Jesus and to the nature of discipleship reveals a logical inconsistency in terms of his own philosophical understanding of action. I will conclude that if only Macmurray had accepted that the search for doctrinal agreement among the Churches was itself a living example of what he calls reflective activity, then he would have recognised that the efforts of the World Council of Churches were remarkably close to his own concern for unity and friendship in the world.

The first chapter of my thesis, *The Crisis of the Personal*, will be based largely on Macmurray's book, *The Self as Agent*, and will begin with an exposition of Macmurray's notion that many of the social problems of his time are, at least in part, a reflection of a philosophical and religious crisis too. It will

explain why he believed that the fundamental problem of the day was the difficulty of coming to a proper understanding of the nature of human being. I will examine Macmurray's analysis of the philosophies of Descartes and Kant and see why he felt that their major mistake was to attempt to understand the human person as thinker rather than as agent. In so doing, they had made the theoretical more important than the practical, and were thereby unable to offer an adequate explanation of human action. I will next describe Macmurray's argument that it is only by seeing the human person as agent rather than as thinker that we can avoid the dualism which is inherent in most post-Cartesian philosophical thought. The chapter will also focus on Macmurray's view that, while by taking the self as agent one can philosophically explain thinking, one cannot give an adequate account of agency from the standpoint of the human person as thinker.

The second chapter, *The Significance of Communion*, will involve us in a close reading of Macmurray's work, *Persons in Relation*. Building on his notion that we can best understand human being from the idea of agency, I will explain his argument that as agents we are confronted with the existence of other agents and so with the whole question of relationships. In focussing on the mother and child relationship, Macmurray wants to suggest that all relationships are based on the fundamental attitudes of fear or love. I will describe his argument that, given the fact that our relationships with others will be based on the intention with which we approach them, the question of intention in human action is crucial. This will lead to Macmurray's deep conviction that since by nature we are persons in relation with others, we are only fully ourselves when we overcome our fear of others and relate to them with the intention of creating friendship and communion. The chapter will continue with an elucidation of his argument that our approach to both ethical and political issues will largely be determined by our understanding

of relationships, and will express Macmurray's dissatisfaction with the political and ethical approaches of Hobbes and Rousseau. The chapter will conclude with Macmurray's explanation that while, to be true to our own human nature, we need to intend communion and friendship with others, there is also a deeply religious significance to the concepts of friendship and communion.

The third chapter, *The Significance of Religion*, will continue to focus on the arguments presented by Macmurray in *Persons in Relation* and will enunciate his view that religious experience is always about community and relationships. I will offer a summary of his rejection of the understanding of religion of both Marx and Freud, views which have deeply affected contemporary understanding of the nature of religion. The chapter will also examine Macmurray's notion that religion is not only about communion, but that it is properly inclusive too. The intention of religion is always to overcome division and fear, and, given the fact that community life is always fragile and easily broken, religion helps to create the conditions where unity is preserved and deepened. I will then explain Macmurray's distinction between what he terms real and unreal religion. If religion is to be real then it must accord with the fundamental truths of human nature, that we are agents in the world, and that through our agency we intend communion with one another. This will lead us to another fundamental aspect of true religion. If our experience as persons is that of agents in communion with others, then our relationship with God must also be personal and concerned with communion and friendship.

The fourth chapter, *The Significance of Jesus*, will attempt to express Macmurray's understanding of the person of Jesus, an understanding that is in harmony with the philosophical views already shown in the previous

chapters. The thoughts of Macmurray on this question will largely be drawn from his book *The Clue to History*, published in 1938. The starting point will be Macmurray's belief that to be a Christian is not so much to share in a set of doctrinal beliefs about Jesus, but to have some share in the intention that directed Jesus' own life and actions. I will next reveal why he felt that Jesus' intentions and actions can themselves only be properly understood when seen within the context of the history of the Jewish people. The great value of the Jewish religious consciousness, for Macmurray lies in the fact that it sees all action and the whole of history from a profoundly religious perspective. Thus, Judaism manages to avoid the dualistic division, between theory and practice and between doctrine and action, that is to be found in most other religions. The other significant factor that Jesus inherits from the Jewish religious tradition is that religion is concerned with this world and with the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. The chapter will then focus on Macmurray's argument that the clear intention of Jesus was to lead people to be true to their own nature and so to build communities of love and friendship. For Christians, to intend communion and friendship with others is to share in the intentions of Jesus. I will conclude the chapter by examining Macmurray's view that through the compromises that the Churches have made in history, such as the linking of the Christian faith with the powers of the Roman Empire, the Churches have failed to continue to act with the intention of Jesus in seeking the unity and communion that God wills for us.

The fifth chapter, *The Significance of Unity for the Churches and for the World*, will begin with a description of Macmurray's own personal faith journey, and will attempt to show that his philosophical and theological understanding of the nature of human beings and of the reality of religion, was itself built on a personal relationship and commitment to the person of Jesus. Attention

will be paid to his decision not to give allegiance to any of the institutional Churches, a decision which stemmed from his view that the Churches had been unable to offer any meaningful answer to the crisis of the First World War. I hope to show that, despite his decision, he remained convinced about the truth of Christianity and indeed continued to be deeply involved in the effort to make the Churches more faithful to the message of Jesus. The chapter will also focus on a late work of Macmurray's, *Search for Reality in Religion*, in which he addresses his fellow Quakers, the Society which he joined in 1959. In this book he covers much of the same ground as that discussed in the previous chapter, but I will pay particular attention to what Macmurray considers to be the main failures of the Churches; that in shifting the main focus of Christianity from action to doctrine they fall into dualism, and that by calling believers to work towards the Kingdom of God in heaven they fail to take seriously the need to establish the Kingdom here on earth. I will conclude the chapter by noting Macmurray's view on how the Churches ought to act in the future if they are to have anything worthwhile to contribute to the needs of the world. The major tasks that the Churches must commit themselves to is to bring about the unity of all Christians, to avoid the temptation to seek worldly power and, within the economic and social sphere, to find a practical means of expressing the solidarity of all peoples.

The sixth and final chapter, *A Sign of Hope: The Ecumenical Movement*, will begin with a review of Macmurray's position on the need for the Churches to offer a visible sign of unity to the world, and with his position that such unity can only be brought about through practical social action and not through doctrinal agreement. I will then compare his views with the efforts of the Ecumenical Movement in the 20th century to come to that unity which is called for by God. Particular reference will be made to the

assemblies of the World Council which took place during Macmurray's own lifetime. It will be my argument that although the Ecumenical Movement has also experienced a tension between moving towards unity through action and through doctrinal agreement, the documents of the World Council of Churches suggest that both elements are needed if unity is to be properly achieved. I will also contend that Macmurray failed to appreciate the complexity of achieving unity even when it is intended by Christians, and that it can be even more difficult to find agreement about what actions Christians should take in the world than it is to come to doctrinal agreement about the nature of Jesus and the self-understanding of Christians. While admitting that the efforts of the World Council of Churches do not necessarily prove that Macmurray was mistaken in his refusal to see any meaningful role for doctrinal agreement between the Churches, I will conclude my thesis by suggesting that Macmurray's argument can be criticised from his own philosophical view of the human person as agent. Given his view that the person is best understood from the perspective of agency, Macmurray argued that thinking can be described as a form of reflective activity, and done for the sake of action. I will suggest that Macmurray's refusal to see any value in seeking doctrinal agreement points to a logical inconsistency in his own thought, and that if he had seen the efforts to find doctrinal unity as a form of reflective activity, conducted for the sake of the Kingdom, then he might have viewed the efforts of the World Council of Churches as offering the world a practical image of his own philosophical and religious vision.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CRISIS OF THE PERSONAL

The Crisis in Contemporary Philosophy

John Macmurray was invited to give the Gifford Lectures at the University of Glasgow in 1953 and 1954. His lectures were subsequently published in two volumes, *The Self as Agent* and *Persons in Relation*. A careful reading of these texts reveals that they present Macmurray's mature thought on the nature of the human person and on the significance of religion in human life and therefore offer us a way to critically examine his ideas. In the opening chapter of *The Self as Agent* he offers the reasons why he had chosen to focus on the question of the form of the personal in the Gifford Lectures.

For this choice I had two main reasons; the first, that it is, in my judgement, the emergent problem for contemporary philosophy; the second, that it directs attention to that aspect of our common experience from which religion springs and is in this respect appropriate for the purpose of the Gifford foundation. For it is characteristic of religion that it behaves towards its object in ways that are suitable to personal intercourse; and the conception of a deity is the conception of a personal ground of all that we experience. If then human reason, unaided by revelation, can contribute anything to theology, it is through a philosophical analysis of the personal that we should expect this to be brought to light.¹⁶

¹⁶ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, Humanity Books, 1999, p.17.

Macmurray is quick to assert that the attempt to express a natural theology in the terms he has just described is problematic. Natural theology is seen as a theology which is based on our common human experience of the world, and which is not dependent on particular religious experiences or a particular faith content. It is rather something which should be discovered by reason alone. Yet many people would deny that a natural theology is even possible.

In our time philosophers and theologians tend to unite, it would seem, in agreement that religion must rest upon its own evidence, and that any knowledge we may have of the divine must be revealed to us in 'religious' experiences whose validity is evidenced by an inner conviction of their authenticity in those to whom they are granted.¹⁷

It is Macmurray's view that while both theologians and philosophers tend to see an unbridgeable gap between faith and reason, the whole movement of philosophy since the time of Descartes has moved in the general direction of atheism.

The more closely modern philosophy keeps to its programme, and the more purely objective its procedure becomes, the more inevitable is the atheism of its conclusion. Within the limits of its assumptions no other result is permissible. Yet I cannot accept the conclusion, in spite of its logical necessity...The view that there is no path from common experience to a belief in God; that religion rests upon some special and extraordinary type of experience apart from which it could not arise – this seems to me hardly credible.¹⁸

¹⁶ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.18.

¹⁸ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.19.

One of the reasons why Macmurray finds this viewpoint hardly credible is because, in his understanding, religion is the original and universal expression of the human capacity to reflect on the meaning and purpose of life. While this does not in itself prove the validity of religious belief, it does at least suggest that there is value in coming to a proper philosophical understanding of the nature of belief. He goes on to suggest that by examining the emergent problem of contemporary philosophy, which he considers to be the form of the personal, one will come to a deeper realisation of the centrality of religion in human and personal being, and so move away from atheism to a more theistic vision of reality.

It is clear that the first task is therefore to articulate in more depth the problem that contemporary philosophy is facing. In Macmurray's view there is a clear link to be found between philosophy and the social context in which it arises. The philosophy of any historical period will be at least in part determined by the social realities of that same historical age. It follows that times of significant social change will demand a change in philosophical outlook too; and the history of the 20th century, one of real social and political change, presents a major philosophical challenge to the contemporary world.

We need only recognise the break with tradition which is apparent in all fields in our own society – in religion and morals, in politics and economics, and in the arts. In such circumstances we should expect to find a break in the continuity of philosophical development, a radical criticism of traditional philosophy and a search for new ways and new beginnings. And this we do find.¹⁹

¹⁹ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.26.

Macmurray suggests that a philosophical response to the contemporary break with tradition can be found in both logical positivism²⁰ and in existentialism²¹. While offering very different approaches to the need for a new philosophical expression, they share an understanding that the traditional methods of philosophy can no longer be sustained in a radically changed world. Although Macmurray agrees that there is a need to find new philosophical expressions, he argues that both logical positivism and existentialism fail to provide an adequate response to the crisis of the world which he sees as being a crisis of understanding the nature of personal being.

Existentialism has discovered, with sensitiveness of feeling, that the philosophical problem of the present lies in a crisis of the personal; logical empiricism recognises it as a crisis of logical form and method. Both are correct, and both are one-sided. The cultural crisis of the present is indeed a crisis of the personal. But the problem it presents to philosophy is a formal one. It is to discover or to construct the intellectual form of the personal.²²

²⁰ Logical Positivism was a philosophical movement which began in the 1920s and was very popular for a period of about 30 years. In its focus on verification and the belief that any meaningful statement needs to be verifiable it led to the notion that the assertions of religion and ethics, insofar as they cannot be verified, are ultimately meaningless.

²¹ Existentialism was a philosophical and literary movement that emerged in France in the aftermath of the Second World War. Jean Paul Sartre, Gabriel Marcel and Karl Jaspers are among the more famous existentialist thinkers. Philosophically, Existentialism focuses on the uniqueness of human individuality rather than on the notion of abstract universal human qualities.

²² John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.29.

Macmurray suggests that a brief look at the crisis of the personal in terms of contemporary history may enable us to specify more clearly the nature of the questions that philosophy has to respond to if it is to find a meaningful answer to the problems of contemporary society. He declares that two of the major trends in society that point to the real crisis in the world are the growing power of the state and the decline of religious belief and practice. These two trends are closely related, as can be seen in the fact that there is a growing tendency to seek salvation through political rather than religious authority. It is Macmurray's belief that "the apotheosis of political power involves the subordination of the personal aspect of human life to its functional aspect".²³ The two great political movements of Macmurray's time were Communism and Fascism, and the reason he was ultimately so opposed to them is precisely that as ideologies they reduce the human person to the status of a functionary. The political crises of his time were therefore to be understood as largely arising from an inappropriate conception of the nature of the human person.

It is likewise Macmurray's opinion that the crisis in religion and the decline in religious belief can largely be said to arise from a failure to understand human nature. He states that the decline in religious belief manifests and also intensifies a growing carelessness and indifference to the personal values that are most significant for all human beings.

Christianity, in particular, is the exponent and the guardian of the personal, and the function of organised Christianity in our history has been to foster and maintain the personal life, and to bear continuous witness, in symbol and doctrine, to the ultimacy of personal values. If this influence is removed or ceases to be effective, the awareness of

²³ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.29.

personal issues will tend to be lost, in the pressure of functional preoccupations, by all except those who are by nature especially sensitive to them.²⁴

There is, for Macmurray, a clear link between the social crises of the 20th century and the need for philosophy to create an adequate notion of human being. Modern philosophy has, no doubt unwittingly, contributed to creating a world where people are seen as functionaries rather than as persons, and as isolated individuals rather than as beings who find true fulfilment through being in communion with others. Macmurray suggests that in order to find a way out of the social, philosophical and religious crisis of the contemporary world it is necessary to find a new philosophy that will allow us to discover what it is to be a human person.

The form of the personal will be the emergent problem. Such a new phase of philosophy would rest on the assertion that the Self is neither a substance nor an organism, but a person. Its immediate task would be to discover the logical form through which the unity of the personal can be coherently conceived.²⁵

In order to make the fundamental philosophical shift that will allow us to understand human nature more properly, Macmurray suggests that we need to approach the question of the Self not in terms of the Cartesian thinker, but from the more practical standpoint of the human person as agent. Also, it is necessary to see the human person not as an isolated, individual being but as a being who can only be rightly understood in terms of being in relationship with other persons.

²⁴ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.30.

²⁵ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.37.

The isolated, purely individual self is a fiction. In philosophy this means...that the unity of the personal cannot be thought as the form of an individual self, but only through the mutuality of personal relationship. This...compels us to abandon the traditional individualism or egocentricity of our philosophy. We must introduce the second person as the necessary correlative of the first, and do our thinking not from the standpoint of the 'I' alone, but of the 'you and I'.²⁶

This is the task that Macmurray sets out for himself, and he declares that the remainder of *The Self as Agent* will be devoted to the attempt to understand personhood from the aspect of agency while the second volume of his Gifford Lectures, published as *Persons in Relation*, will examine the significance of the mutuality of the personal.

Romanticism, Kant and Descartes

Macmurray next turns to an examination of the ways that Romanticism has influenced philosophy, and how Romanticism emerges as a reaction to the philosophical ideas of both Kant and Descartes. His hope is that by making a deep study of each of these influential views he might more clearly show why it is necessary to make agency rather than thought the perspective that manifests the true nature of the human person.

According to Macmurray, Romanticism has often been understood as being primarily concerned with matters either literary or artistic. While it was undoubtedly a literary and artistic movement, he prefers to see Romanticism as something that created a revolution in terms of both social outlook and thought. The Romantic philosophy that emerged in eighteenth and

²⁶ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.38.

nineteenth century Germany, and particularly the Romantic understanding of reason, can be seen as a response to Kant's philosophy of reason. Indeed, some of the most notable German Romantic philosophers, such as Herder²⁷, were in fact pupils of Kant. Writers such as Hamann²⁸, Herder and Lessing²⁹, in turning away from the abstract and scientific notions of reason they found in Kant, proposed rather that aesthetic intuition and the imagination are the purest and fullest form of knowing available to us.³⁰ Given such a view, it is feelings and emotions that are closer to the fullness of knowing than is pure intellect. One should trust more to the power of intuition than to scientific reasoning.

The Romantic understanding of the human person is also radically different from that of Kant. For the Romantics, each person is part of both nature and society. Because each person is social by nature one can suggest that it is culture rather than the laws of science that provides us with the most appropriate means of understanding personal existence. Another significant aspect of Romantic philosophy is its organic view of the human person and indeed of the whole of life. According to the teleological view that is inherent in Romanticism, each individual being is aimed at a

²⁷ Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744 – 1803) studied theology at the University of Königsberg and while there fell under the intellectual influence of Kant.

²⁸ Johann Georg Hamman (1730 – 1788) was another German philosopher who lectured at the University of Königsberg.

²⁹ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729 – 1781) was an influential figure in the Romantic Movement. He believed that all religions share an equal dignity. No single religion possesses the fullness of truth; rather, they present only moments in the ethical and practical history of humanity.

³⁰cf. John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, Floris Books, Edinburgh, 2002, p.131.

progressive self-realisation and fulfilment. Indeed, the whole of creation can be understood in this way, so that all things in our world are participating in a progressively unfolding universe. Romantic philosophy therefore encourages the notion of an evolutionary world, where each being aims at both personal growth and at finding its proper place within the wider evolutionary pattern of the universe.

While Macmurray is grateful to Romanticism for offering a view of the human person which gives space to the emotions as a valid form of knowing, he remains unconvinced that their organic and evolutionary understanding of the person and of the universe is finally sustainable. In particular, he believes that Romanticism ultimately offers a diminished vision of human nature, one where each person is only part of a greater evolutionary process. It is precisely such a view that, in failing to take account of the freedom and the dignity of each person, has permitted the great atrocities of the twentieth century. According to Macmurray's understanding therefore, Romanticism can at best offer only a partial explanation of the human person, one which highlights the fact that knowledge has as much to do with feeling as with thinking.

Having examined Romanticism in terms of its reaction to the ideas of Kant, Macmurray is now ready to look more closely at Kant's own philosophical views. He begins by applauding the central place that Kant³¹ enjoys in the history of philosophy. His is a philosophy that is notable for the comprehensive unity of its concerns and for the way in which all subsequent

³¹ Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) is recognised as being one of the most important philosophical thinkers of modern times. Among his works are *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785).

philosophy has been unable to ignore Kant's vision. Macmurray believes that Kant's approach to Romantic philosophy was one of critical sympathy. The major difference between Romantic philosophy and the earlier philosophical views of Descartes lies in the place each gives to the role of the imagination in knowledge. While Cartesian philosophy sees the imagination as unreliable in terms of producing certain knowledge, the Romantics argued that it is precisely imagination that underlies all experience and all forms of knowing. Kant, while being sympathetic to the role of the imagination, is at the same time critical in that such imaginings must necessarily elude necessary objectivity. Imagination cannot yield certain knowledge.

In turning to a deeper examination of Kant's philosophical notions, Macmurray acknowledges that he is not offering a sufficiently detailed criticism of Kant, but rather that "we must confine ourselves...to those general features of Kant's doctrine which are essential to our purpose".³² However, in order to make sense of Macmurray's criticism of Kant it may be helpful to offer a brief synopsis of the main aspects of Kant's views.³³

It has often been suggested that Kant is responsible for creating a Copernican revolution in philosophical thinking, one that all subsequent philosophers have been unable to escape. He attempted to move beyond what had been seen as an inevitable dichotomy between rationalism and empiricism. The rationalists had argued that we are able to understand the world by the use of reason while the empiricists had long argued that all our

³² John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.47.

³³ A good summary of Kant's thinking is to be found in the article on Kant in *The Philosophers*, edited by Ted Honderich, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 115 – 122.

knowledge must be based on experience. Kant's way forward, and indeed his Copernican revolution, was to suggest that we need to examine the whole question of epistemology from a different angle. Rather than ask how it is that we are able to understand the world, we should ask how it is that the world comes to be understood by us. Instead of suggesting that it is reason or experience that allows our concepts to match the actual nature of objects, in fact it is the structure of our concepts that give shape to our experience of objects. The truly radical nature of Kant's argument emerges when he suggests that we cannot know anything at all of the world as it is in itself but we can only know the world as it appears to us. If taken seriously, Kant's view would have profound implications not only for epistemology, but also for ethics and for religion.

Much of Kant's philosophy, particularly in *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Practical Reason*, is concerned to show how reason determines the conditions under which experience and knowledge are possible. He draws a distinction between what he calls *a priori judgements* and *a posteriori judgements*. All *a priori* judgements are based solely on reason, independent of any sensory experience, and therefore apply with complete universality. *A posteriori* judgements, on the other hand, are grounded in experience and are consequently limited and uncertain. Kant next draws another major distinction between *analytic judgements* and *synthetic judgements*. Analytic judgements are those whose predicates are completely contained in their subjects; they are purely explanatory and add nothing to our concept of the subject. Synthetic judgements are those whose predicates are wholly distinct from their subjects, and they must be shown to relate to them through some connection which is external to the concepts themselves. Synthetic judgements are therefore informative in that they do tell us something about the subject but they require justification by reference to an outside principle.

Kant argued that synthetic a priori judgements are necessary to provide the basis for much of our human knowledge. Mathematics, arithmetic and geometry provide us with examples of such judgements, and natural science depends on synthetic a priori judgements in order to explain natural events. Metaphysics, Kant suggests, must also be based on such judgements if it is to offer anything meaningful. But how is it possible to make synthetic a priori judgements at all? This is the crucial question that Kant must answer if his thesis is to be maintained.

Turning first to the question of mathematical principles, Kant suggests that they offer us a clear picture of synthetic a priori judgements at work. Taking the example of a triangle, how can we know that the interior angles of a triangle must add up to a straight line? Our knowledge of this must be a priori, since it applies with complete universality to all the objects of our experience without having been derived from that experience itself. Our knowledge of the triangle's interior angles adding up to a straight line must also be synthetic since, although such knowledge contributes to our understanding of the world, the sum of the interior angles is not contained in our concept of a triangle. Now, if experience cannot provide us with the required connection between the concepts involved, where does our knowledge of the truths of triangles come from? Kant's argument is that such knowledge is imposed by ourselves. We impose, as a precondition on all the possible objects of our experience, conformity with the truths of mathematics. The same holds true for our knowledge of the natural world. Kant held that the general laws of nature, like mathematical truths, cannot be known to us through experience. These laws of nature are general principles that we impose on everything that we experience. So, rather than suggesting that we are able to know the world through our rationality or

through sense experience, Kant suggest that it is synthetic a priori judgements that provide the necessary foundations for our human knowledge.

This suggestion leads us directly to Kant's distinction between the noumenal world and the phenomenal world, or the world as it is and the world as it appears to us. All our synthetic a priori judgements apply only to the world as it appears to us. The world as it is in itself is absolutely beyond our capacity to know, since we can never have any experience of it. What Kant is here suggesting is that we can know something of the world as it appears to us, but only because we ourselves impose a meaningful structure on it.

In his attempt to describe the possibilities of knowledge Kant is next forced to confront the question of metaphysics. The difficulty of metaphysics is that it aims to completely transcend experience in the attempt to discover the nature of being and reality itself through pure reason. But if, as Kant suggests, we cannot know the world as it really is, how is it possible for us to have any metaphysical knowledge? It is impossible that we can make any synthetic a priori judgements about things as they are in themselves. Kant's way out of this dilemma is to argue that, as rational beings, we have to think of the world as it is in itself as if our speculations about it are in fact true. He suggests that although we cannot have any real knowledge of the world as it is, we are forced to posit certain factors that ultimately we can only believe to be true. Among the things that we need to believe about the world as it really is are the ideas that we are substantial beings, that we are free to act in a world that is causally determined and that God exists.

To conclude this basic summary of Kant's approach to epistemology, he argues that most of the things that we take to be most true about ourselves

are in fact nothing other than expressions of hope that our experience of the world is not meaningless. We are therefore forced to impose order on the world as it appears to us, though with no certainty that there is any connection between the world as it appears to us and the world as it actually is. It was perhaps for this reason that Kant himself came to the conclusion that the real value of his philosophy lay in his ability “to criticise reason in order to make room for faith”.

Returning now to Macmurray’s view of Kant’s Copernican revolution in philosophy, while it is clear that he greatly admires Kant’s efforts, he declares himself unhappy with many aspects of Kant’s philosophical epistemology. In particular he feels that Kant’s distinction between pure reason and practical reason is fundamentally problematic. Given that Macmurray’s main concern is to come to a proper understanding of human nature, he argues that one needs to know the precise relationship between pure reason and practical reason, and that a decision needs to be made as to whether pure reason or practical reason is primary. Such a decision would have important implications in terms of understanding human being and human knowledge.

According to Macmurray, Kant’s way out of the dilemma as to whether pure reason or practical reason is primary is to suggest a distinction between the roles of understanding and of reason. Understanding is concerned with the world of objects as they reveal themselves to us through the senses. Kant produces a set of categories which can be applied to our sense experience and to imagination and intuition in order to produce knowledge of the limited and conditioned world of objects. Understanding therefore offers us practical knowledge. Reason, on the other hand, concerns itself with the ultimate nature of things. It deals with purely formal concepts and offers

rules or principles which can impose proper order on the imagination. Reason, as distinct from understanding, offers us theoretical knowledge. However, while striving to reach knowledge of what lies beyond the world of senses or the world as it appears to us, reason is ultimately doomed to failure in this effort. The root of this failure lies in the fact that reason cannot actually verify anything beyond sense experience. Nor can it succeed in reaching the 'thing-in-itself' which lies beyond the limitations of human categories.

Having interpreted Kant's efforts to express the relationship between pure reason and practical reason as one where they both are necessary but serve different epistemological functions, Macmurray comes to the conclusion that Kant's efforts are doomed to failure. This failure is largely due to Kant's inability to offer a coherent connection between the two worlds that he posits, the world as it is in itself and the world as it appears to us. The idea of the world as it is in itself presumes the primacy of the theoretical in reason while the idea of the world as it appears to us supposes the primacy of the practical. Again, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* presumes the priority of thought, formal concepts and categories, but his *Critique of Practical Reason* argues for the primacy of praxis or action. This inability to relate pure reason to practical reason in any meaningful sense means, for Macmurray, that Kant falls into the fatal trap of dualism. He then goes on to make more explicit the reasons for his ultimate rejection of Kant.

We must now turn to the criticism of Kant's philosophy as a whole; leaving aside all questions of detail, however important. There are two major criticisms to be made, one concerning its coherence, the other with reference to its adequacy. The first is that there is a radical incoherence in Kant's method of relating the theoretical and the practical activities of

Reason; the second that he fails to do justice to the religious aspect of human experience.³⁴

The incoherence that Macmurray finds in Kant stems from the attempt to bring theory and practice together. It is Macmurray's view that Kant constructs his whole philosophical vision on the presupposition that pure reason is primary. A deeper examination of the conclusions of Kant's philosophy however reveals that it is practical reason that is primary. This can be seen clearly in Kant's ethical views on the rationality of ethics, a matter that is inherently practical.

Despite the fact that Macmurray takes Kant's philosophy to be essentially incoherent, he does not deny that Kant offers important insights and creates an opening that may help to manifest more clearly what best defines human being. "The Critical Philosophy (of Kant) points the way, even if it forbids the attempt, to a formal reconstruction which would start from the primacy of the practical, and take up into itself the theoretical as an element within the practical".³⁵ In concluding that reason is primarily practical Kant has opened the door that may allow us to see the human person from a more active and practical standpoint than that of the thinking being.

Having dealt with the inadequacy of Kant's philosophy in terms of its incoherence, Macmurray next turns to what he perceives as Kant's failure to give an adequate account of the significance of religion in human experience. The fundamental weakness of Kant's account of religion is that he fails to understand the centrality of religious belief in human life.

³⁴ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.63.

³⁵ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.69.

It treats religion not as a distinct field of experience, grounded in a form of judgement which claims to be valid in its own right, but simply as a set of beliefs which are justifiable pragmatically in so far as they tend to support the rational will in its struggle against the incitements of inclinations.³⁶

Macmurray's main concern however is not so much with the details of Kant's inadequate account of religious experience but rather the reason behind Kant's views. The major failure in Kant is to be found in the fact that the starting point of his philosophy is the adoption of the Cartesian 'I think' as the centre of reference in the search for knowledge. Such a starting point, Macmurray believes, makes it impossible to do justice to religious experience. Since thought is inherently private, then any philosophy which begins with the idea of the self as a thinking being is committed thereby to viewing the human person in purely individual and egocentric terms. By taking the idea of the self as thinker as being the primary reality of human being one cannot give an adequate account of the mutuality of persons or of religious belief.

The form of religious experience involves the distinction between the first and second persons. The idea of 'God' is the idea of a universal 'Thou' to which all particular persons stand in personal relation. The question of the validity of religious belief is a question of the validity of this form. Consequently, a philosophy which does not formally recognise the distinction between 'I' and 'You' cannot even formulate the religious problem, and a Critique of religion is thus rendered impossible.³⁷

³⁶ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.70.

³⁷ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.72.

The problem that any critique of religious experience has to confront is precisely the problem of interpersonal knowledge. According to Macmurray, Kant's inability to come to an appropriate understanding of religion stems from the fact that he cannot do justice to, or even allow room for, the fact that as human beings we can know one another and that interpersonal relations are constitutive of human experience. This failure in the Critical philosophy of Kant suggests that the roots of all the difficulties are to be found in his inadequate starting point.

These two criticisms of Kant's philosophy – of its formal coherence and its formal adequacy – have a common root. It is that any philosophy which takes the 'Cogito' as its starting point and centre of reference institutes a formal dualism of theory and practice; and that this dualism makes it formally impossible to give any account, and indeed to conceive the possibility of persons in relation, whether the relation be theoretical, as knowledge, or practical, as cooperation.³⁸

A further difficulty that emerges in taking the 'Cogito' as the starting point in philosophy is that it makes the notion of action logically inconceivable. No matter how far we take a process of thought it cannot, by itself, become an action, nor can thought ever spontaneously generate any action.

After this lengthy critique of Kant, Macmurray wants to suggest that despite the many weaknesses of Critical philosophy, it can still provide a way forward in the attempt to grasp a fuller understanding of what it means to be a human person. But such a way forward can only be found if we start from Kant's conclusion that practical reason is primary and thereby avoid the difficulties inherent in the notion that the theoretical is primary.

³⁸ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.73.

The final question then which the Critical philosophy leaves on our hands is this, 'Is it possible to take its conclusion – that reason is primarily practical – as the starting point and centre of reference for a new effort of philosophical construction?' Can we substitute for the 'I think' the 'I do'?'³⁹

In order to strengthen his thesis that it is necessary to begin with the idea of action if we are to come to a correct understanding of being, Macmurray next turns his attention to the philosophy of Descartes⁴⁰. It is Descartes who introduced a radical turn in philosophy by introducing, through his famous Method of Doubt, the idea of the self as a thinker. All philosophy subsequent to Descartes, exemplified in Kant, has taken the 'Cogito' as the starting point of philosophical investigation. The new philosophical tradition initiated by Descartes has of course been criticised but, in Macmurray's view, these criticisms have all been internal criticisms that accept Descartes' foundational principle. It might be better therefore to attempt to criticise Descartes from a different angle.

The 'Cogito' establishes a new starting point and centre of reference for philosophical reflection; it can only be challenged from outside the tradition it establishes, by establishing a different starting point, with which it can be shown to be incompatible.⁴¹

³⁹ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.74.

⁴⁰ René Descartes (1596 – 1650) is universally acknowledged as being the thinker who did most to lay the philosophical foundations of the modern period in the western tradition. His most famous works are *Discourse on Method* (1637) and *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), both of which aim to achieve philosophical certainty without relying on the metaphysical presuppositions of all earlier philosophy and theology.

⁴¹ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.75.

Descartes was able to come to the certainty of the existence of the mind, and therefore to the existence of the self as thinker, through his method of doubting everything in order to find certain knowledge. The end result of doubting everything is that we can be certain that we are thinking, therefore the one certainty that we can have is that the thinking self exists. One result of the acceptance of Descartes' method by most, if not all, subsequent philosophers is that knowledge came to be understood as something utterly different than belief. Only by doubting everything and by a process of rational criticism could one move from belief to true knowledge. Macmurray argues that both Descartes' method of doubt and his notion of the self as a thinking being must be rejected. He suggests that belief and knowledge, rather than being quite different, are in fact closely related. Belief should be seen as being a necessary aspect of knowledge. For anything to be truly knowledge it must also be believed by someone. Knowledge cannot exist in a void; it must always be somebody's knowledge. Macmurray is prepared to accept that a proposition may be true even although no one actually believes in the truth of that proposition, but a proposition, even if true, cannot be an element in knowledge unless it is believed.

Macmurray's major difficulty with Descartes, however, is that his philosophical method inevitably leads to a dualism between practical and theoretical activity. The problem of the 'Cogito ergo sum' is that, in spite of its form, it does not infer real existence from thought but rather identifies the two. Thought becomes the essence of being, and this immediately creates an insurmountable dichotomy between thought and action. The same dichotomy is to be found in Kant's distinction between pure reason and practical reason. Descartes' commitment to the idea of the self as thinker presupposes that the theoretical is primary, and this notion has been

one which has had a profound influence on all subsequent philosophy. Macmurray is anxious to show that such a view cannot do justice to the true nature of the human person, and that it is necessary to find a more complete description of what constitutes human being. In order to do this one must overcome the dualism of mind and body or theory and practice that is an inevitable result of Cartesian philosophy. Action and thinking, rather than being seen as irreconcilable opposites, should be seen as different aspects of a person's being. But, for Macmurray, it is action rather than thinking which is the primary reality.

We are now able to interpret the 'Cogito' in its essential significance, and in doing so to refute it. If thinking is my essence, then I am an active being...My activity of thinking is what constitutes my existence. Now this is a contradiction in terms. Action is practical, and thinking denotes an activity which is not practical but purely theoretical. To exist is to have a being which is independent of thought; and what depends on thought for its being is no thing but a mere idea, like the unicorn.⁴²

Having examined at length the philosophical views of Descartes, Kant and the Romantic thinkers, Macmurray believes that he has shown their vision of the human person to be inadequate. It is this that convinces him of the need to find a better way of understanding human nature, and it is to this task that he now turns.

The conclusion we have reached is that our problem is the form of the personal, and that we may hope to resolve it only by starting from the primacy of the practical. For we have seen that it is the assumption of the primacy of the theoretical in our philosophical tradition which institutes a formal dualism which cannot be resolved; that the basic form

⁴² John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.80.

of this dualism is the division of experience into theoretical and practical, and that this dualism makes it impossible to think the unity of the Self and so to determine the form of a personal experience. We have, therefore, to begin by rejecting dualism through asserting the primacy of the practical.⁴³

The Person As Agent

Macmurray next attempts to reveal the profound implications of seeing the human person from the standpoint of action rather than of thinking. The first thing to be noted is that the human person is one who both thinks and acts, and that thinking and action are to be properly understood as being simply contrasted modes of activity in the same person. This is not, however, to suggest that thinking and action share an equal status in the being of the person. When a person is thinking it is the mind alone that is active, but when a person is acting both the mind and the body are active. Macmurray argues that this simple fact already points to the idea that action is primary while thinking should be seen as being secondary and derivative. This itself is enough to suggest that viewing the nature of the human person from the perspective of action will provide a fuller explanation than that offered from the perspective of the self as thinker.

We may now formulate our starting point more clearly. We have to substitute for the 'I think' as our centre of reference, the 'I do'. The 'I think' is not ultimate; it is the negative mode of the activity of the Self, and presupposes the 'I do'... We must therefore conclude that the 'I do' is the primary principle which is presupposed in all our experience; and that acting and thinking are opposite modes of 'doing', acting being the positive and thinking the negative mode. The Self, then, is not the

⁴³ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.84.

thinker but the doer. In its positive doing it is agent; in its negative doing it is subject.⁴⁴

The question that immediately arises is concerned with the relation of the self as agent to the self as thinker or subject. Is it possible to avoid the danger of a dualistic understanding of the human person by finding the unity of the self through two different modes of activity, doing and thinking? Macmurray believes that it is indeed possible. What is needed is to see that thinking is nothing other than the negative aspect of action, and that thinking is done for the sake of action. However, in order to come to this point of view it is necessary to first look more closely at the nature of action.

It is Macmurray's belief that the fact of our own doing and acting forms the absolute presupposition behind all our human experience. He defines action as 'a unity of movement and knowledge'.⁴⁵ It is the idea of unity that is most significant here. Movement and knowledge, the knowledge that we are acting, are not to be separated but rather to be seen as being inseparable dimensions of all action. It is knowledge, which makes an action precisely an action rather than an event or a happening. In this way, knowledge and thinking can be properly perceived to be a necessary, though negative, aspect of all action.

There are other aspects of action which should also be considered if we are to properly conceive the nature of the human person. By the very fact of acting, a person generates a past by actualising what was previously only a possibility. To act is therefore to determine the future, and that involves a

⁴⁴ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, pp.90-91.

⁴⁵ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.128.

further significant implication. Since the agent is one who, by his actions, determines the future, then the agent must have free will. To suggest that we live in a world where everything is already determined is to deny the possibility of action at all. But, in determining the future through her action, the agent at the same time determines an environment which provides a limiting context for all her further actions. This is what Macmurray calls the principle of the irreversibility of action. Since action is therefore only truly possible when the agent is free, one can state that action is linked to the idea of choice.

To do anything is to do this and not that. After it is done I may wish I had done something else, but I cannot do it. What I have done remains actual and I cannot undo it. Action is thus the actualising of a possibility, and as such it is choice.⁴⁶

It is precisely the concept of choice which allows us to distinguish between an event and an act. Macmurray makes a distinction between the two by saying that for every event there is a cause, whereas for every act there is a reason. To call something an action rather than an event is therefore to refer to an agent as its source. Indeed, he goes even further by suggesting that 'no act can have a cause; and no event a reason'.⁴⁷ The reason for an action will therefore be found in the intention of the agent rather than in some teleological explanation of human nature.

Our point of reference is not the end actually reached, but the end proposed to himself or intended by the agent, and we understand the process of action as a successful or unsuccessful attempt to realize this

⁴⁶ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.139.

⁴⁷ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.149.

intention, which is the agent's reason for acting as he has acted...Action is not teleological but intentional. It is described and understood by reference to the purpose of an agent.⁴⁸

To the extent therefore that action is intentional it presumes conscious intentionality. For Macmurray there is no such thing as an unconscious intention. And to speak of acting intentionally is to imply that knowledge is an essential aspect of action. By now, although not having come to a complete understanding of the nature of action, Macmurray believes that we are at least able to overcome the dualism of Descartes and Kant, and to see that action and thinking are both significant aspects of the human agent.

If we start from the 'I think' there is no possibility of arriving at action; whereas it is possible to derive the theoretical from the practical if we affirm the primacy of action. The first step we have already taken, when we recognised that the 'I do' contains the 'I think' of necessity, as its negative aspect. Without knowledge there may be activity, but not action.⁴⁹

Thinking as Reflective Activity

Macmurray now attempts to clarify exactly what he means by suggesting that action depends largely on knowledge. The knowledge that makes action possible is a practical knowledge, one that allows a person to recognise the various courses of action open to him and that enables him to discriminate appropriately between different possible actions. Going further than that, the knowledge that allows one to act is one that recognises the existence of others in our world. There are no isolated agents, nor are there

⁴⁸ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.150.

⁴⁹ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.165.

isolated actions. Indeed, it is human nature to act always in relation to the other.

It is thus the nature of an agent to act not in terms of his own nature but in terms of the nature of the object, that is, of the Other. However simple and immediate an action may be, so long as it is an action and not merely a reaction to stimulus, then it is informed and directed by an awareness of the Other-than-self as other; and the ground of choice, that is the determination of the action, lies therefore in the agent's knowledge of the Other.⁵⁰

It would appear therefore that in order for a person to be able to act appropriately he needs to have an adequate understanding of the nature of the other, whether it be an object, animal or person. Such an understanding comes about, at least in part, through memory and through reflection or attention. Thus, Macmurray suggests that there are two significant aspects of knowledge which serve to guide our actions: intention and attention. We can only properly act when we intend to act, and we can only act with knowledge when we take the time to adequately reflect and think. So, although reflection is constituted by a withdrawal from action, it is done for the sake of action. Macmurray believes that the life of the human person is made up of action and reflection, and that these combine to create the rhythm of the personal life.

The succession of positive and negative phases, of movement and of reflection, is so characteristic of the personal life that it would be well to have a name for it. We shall refer to it whenever we meet it as 'the rhythm of withdrawal and return'.⁵¹

⁵⁰ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.168.

⁵¹ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.181.

Macmurray states that there are three basic modes of reflection in human life: religion, art and science. These three modes of reflection will be examined in much greater detail in *Persons in Relation*, but they are referred to here as signalling the fact that all reflective activities are derived from practical experience and are aimed at the practical acts of the agent.

Up to this point Macmurray has been trying to show that it is possible to come to an understanding of the nature of the human person which does not lead to dualism, to a split between mind and body. He has suggested that by seeing the self as agent one can plausibly see thinking as a reflective activity, one that leads to action. But now he wants to make clearer what he understands by the notion of an individual act.

An individual act has a beginning and an end of its own, and these are determined by the intention which constitutes it as an act. It begins when it is initiated and ends when it is either completed or broken off. Its beginning and ending are intentional, not merely factual.⁵²

It is in fact because of the centrality of intention in human actions that reflective activity itself is of such importance. It is only in taking the time to reflect adequately that we will be able to find the appropriate action to bring about our intentions. What is clear, however, is that for Macmurray thinking does not define the nature of the human person but is rather a means to an end. All thinking and all knowledge is for the sake of action. "From the standpoint of the Agent, then, intellectual reflection is an activity which intends an improvement of our knowledge of the world as means to our ends".⁵³

⁵² John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.189.

⁵³ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.193.

Along with the notion that reflective thinking and knowledge function as means to an end, which is action, a further purpose in thinking and reflection also needs to be stressed. This is that we not only reflect and think intellectually, but also emotionally. The purpose of emotional reflection is to help us evaluate our actions and our world, and to make decisions about our chosen ends. For Macmurray, therefore, emotional reflection is also linked to the fact that the person is an agent. But whereas intellectual or scientific reflection is always a means to an end, emotional reflection is more directly concerned with the ends of an agent.

We may say of the emotional mode of reflection that it seeks to determine the world as an end in itself, or rather as a manifold of ends. As we called intellectual knowledge, knowledge of the World-as-means, so we may describe emotional knowledge as knowledge of the World-as-end.⁵⁴

In Macmurray's view, the intellectual mode of reflection, when conducted for its own sake, produces science. It enables us to come to a deeper understanding of the nature of the world and, in so doing, helps us to act within an environment that is not entirely alien to our understanding. The emotional mode of reflection, when it is conducted for its own sake, produces art rather than science. It creates a contemplative stance, where a person is able to see and to enjoy what she considers to be valuable in itself, to see the truth in things.

In now drawing his first set of Gifford Lectures to a close, Macmurray is aware that he has only partly managed to overcome what he considers the

⁵⁴ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.194.

serious defects of a Cartesian approach to the nature of the human person. He believes that he has adequately shown that to see the person as agent rather than thinker offers a more comprehensive understanding of human nature. But, up to this point, he has generally examined the agent in isolation from all other agents. This is a failing that he intends to deal with in the second set of his Gifford Lectures, lectures which would be subsequently published as *Persons in Relation*. Macmurray, however, chooses to complete his first set of lectures by making some further assertions about what we can know of the world through the notion of agency. The first assertion that he makes takes him to the murky depths of metaphysics.

The particular metaphysical assertion which I have in mind is that the world is one action. This is the conclusion to which our whole argument moves, and it has been implicit from the beginning. For to think the Self as agent is to think the unity of the world as a unity of action.⁵⁵

Macmurray is here arguing against any idea that the world can be understood as simply an unfolding series of events. He acknowledges that much of science accepts such an idea, seeing the world as either a biological or evolutionary process or as a material process which obeys the physical laws of nature. The problem with such views is that they can offer no coherent account of human action and human freedom, and seem to suggest only a world that is determined.

If the world is a unitary process, it must be a world in which nothing is ever done; in which everything simply happens; a world, then, in which everything is matter of fact and nothing is ever intended. We should have to assert, in that case, that there are no actions; that what seem such

⁵⁵ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.217.

are really events. It will not be sufficient to say that all our actions are determined; for this is a contradiction in terms. The capacity to act is freedom; what has to be denied if the world is one event, is that anything is ever intended...In rejecting this alternative we are merely using the criterion that we established earlier, that since the 'I do' is the primary certainty, any theory which explicitly or implicitly denies it must be false.⁵⁶

So, while it is logically impossible, for Macmurray, that the world should be understood in terms of being a single process or event, it is not logically impossible to understand the world as being a single action. Although it is not possible to come to a purely intellectual conclusion that the world is one action, our own experience of agency does point us towards such a conclusion.

We exist only as agents; and in our existence we are parts of the world, dependent on it for the support and resistance which make our action possible. The thought of the world as a unity is a postulate of action. For any action in the world depends on the cooperation of the world. It is indeed an integration of the movements of the Agent with the movements of the Other, so that in action the Self and the Other form a unity. This integration is the action and its unity is intentional.⁵⁷

What Macmurray is suggesting here is that we should interpret the history of the world not simply as event or process but as action. In so doing, and by reflecting on the centrality of intention in our own actions, we will recognise that there is an intention too in the action of the world. Such a viewpoint itself has important repercussions in terms of our understanding of human nature and of the world. At a personal level, it helps us to appreciate the

⁵⁶ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.219.

⁵⁷ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.220.

fact that our actions are significant and that they influence, at least to some extent, the history of the world. It means too that the intentions behind our actions always carry an ethical dimension.

If we act as if the world, in its unity, is intentional; that is, if we believe in practice that the world is one action...we shall act differently from anyone who does not believe this. We shall act as though our actions were our contributions to the one inclusive action which is the history of the world.⁵⁸

The other crucial corollary of seeing the world as one action is that it enables one to avoid the atheistic conclusions of much of philosophy subsequent to Descartes. Once we accept that it is not only individual human agents who act with intention but that it is possible to see the world as one action and therefore as intentional, we are drawn again to the idea of a God who is the Act of the world.

Very much remains obscure; but there is one result which is sufficiently clear. The argument which starts from the primacy of the practical moves steadily in the direction of a belief in God. To think the world in practical terms is ultimately to think the unity of the world as one action, and therefore as informed by a unifying intention. It may, indeed, prove possible to think the process of the world as intentional without thinking a supreme Agent whose act the world is. But *prima facie*, at least, it is not possible to do so.⁵⁹

It is clear by this stage that Macmurray believes that the notion of agency, when analysed properly, offers us a meaningful way to come to an

⁵⁸ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.221.

⁵⁹ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, pp. 221-2.

appropriate understanding of human nature. But our experience of the world is that we are not the only agents. Indeed, it is largely through our own actions that we discover the presence of others. The next step for Macmurray therefore is to examine the ways in which human agents relate as persons, and to discover what significance this has, if any, in terms of the nature of human being.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF COMMUNION

By the end of *The Self as Agent* Macmurray believes that he has only partly managed to overcome the crisis of the personal. He has suggested that in treating the human person as agent rather than as thinker one is able to move beyond the difficulties inherent in a Cartesian approach to human nature. But, at this point, the agent remains an isolated agent. His intention in *Persons in Relation* is to move towards a more complete understanding of the human person by drawing out the significance of his view that an individual person can only be properly understood in the light of her being in relationship with others.

Relationships and Intentionality

In the opening chapter of *Persons in Relation* Macmurray makes clear his desire to pursue the relational aspect of human being:

“The Self exists only in dynamic relation with the Other. This assertion provides the starting-point of our present argument. The thesis we have to expound and to sustain is that the Self is constituted by its relation to the Other; that it has its being in its relationship; and that this relationship is necessarily personal. Our main effort, therefore, must be directed towards determining the formal characters of personal relationship”.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, (Faber and Faber, London, 1995), p. 17.

It is Macmurray's understanding that the very notion of an isolated agent is a contradiction. To be an agent is necessarily to be in relation to others. Indeed, Macmurray goes further by stating that, apart from this essential relation, the agent does not even exist! The relation between agents must properly be a personal one because persons are constituted by their mutual relation to one another. These are strong claims and it is now Macmurray's task to justify his viewpoint.

At this stage Macmurray introduces a concept which will assume great importance as he continues to develop his idea of the necessity of personal relations if we are to become more fully human. He states that if we are to achieve personal relations we must act with the *intention* of creating a personal relation with others. If relationships are to move beyond the impersonal level then there will always be the need for the intending of a personal relationship. Macmurray does not wish to deny the fact that many human relations are impersonal but wants to stress that our attitude to others will either create the conditions where personal relations are possible or else where the other will be seen simply as an object.

“The personal attitude is the attitude we adopt when we enter into personal relations with others and treat them as persons...The impersonal attitude is the one in which we do not treat other people as persons in personal relation with ourselves, but as men, that is as members of a determinate class of objects in our environment whose presence and behaviour limits, and so helps or hinders the realisation of our own personal ends”.⁶¹

⁶¹ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p. 40.

In order to better determine the formal character of personal relations Macmurray invites us to reflect on the experience of relationship between mother and child, which is where all human experience begins⁶². It is his hope that in doing this we might discover the essential nature of human relations and of personal development. In using the analogy of the mother and child relation Macmurray does not limit his focus to the relationship between the child and the biological mother but rather any relationship between a child and the one who cares for the child.

The most significant fact of an infant's life is that he is utterly helpless and therefore dependent on others. This suggests that a newborn child is somehow made to be cared for. He is born into a relationship which is inherently personal. Without such personal care it is questionable whether the child will even be able to survive, never mind prosper. Since a child is utterly unable to do anything for himself, he is dependent on others for everything. Macmurray suggests that to describe the mother and child relationship simply in biological terms cannot do justice to the personal nature of the relationship. "The infant has a need which is not simply biological but personal, a need to be in touch with the mother, and in conscious perceptual relationship with her".⁶³

From the very beginning of life, therefore, a child cannot live an isolated existence. His own being is marked by the fact that he can only live and grow through other people, and is always in relationship with others. This

⁶²In his biography of Macmurray, John E. Costello claims that Macmurray's understanding of the mother/child relationship was largely influenced by a book written by Dr. Ian Suttie in 1936, entitled *The Origins of Love and Hate*. Cf. John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, p.279.

⁶³John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p. 49.

very obvious point is enough, as far as Macmurray is concerned, to show that the child is a person precisely through the experience of being in relation to others. Returning to the significant concept of intention, he states that even within the mother and child relationship there is need for the intending of a personal relationship. The life of the child, and his very survival, is dependent on the mother's intending of the well-being and care of the child.

Rather than taking an organic view of the human person which would suggest that the child is not yet a person till he acquires rationality, Macmurray sees the child as already a person who is in personal relation with his mother. As the child develops, he begins to show signs of intentional activity and awareness. He is able to act and to react, and the skills that the child learns are skills which are based on the fact that he is a member of a personal community. The skill which reveals this most clearly is the ability to speak and to communicate.

“In the human infant...the impulse to communication is his sole adaptation to the world into which he is born. Implicit and unconscious it may be, yet it is sufficient to constitute the mother-child relationship as the basic form of human existence, as a personal mutuality, as a ‘You and I’ with a common life. For this reason the infant is born a person and not an animal.”⁶⁴

Macmurray is adamant that by looking at the mother and child relationship one can come to a proper understanding of the nature of human being. What is revealed is that human experience is primarily a shared experience and that our human behaviour is marked by reference to other persons.

⁶⁴ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p. 60.

“All this may be summed up by saying that the unit of personal existence is not the individual, but two persons in personal relation; and that we are persons not by individual right but in virtue of our relation to one another. The personal is constituted by personal relatedness.”⁶⁵

Fear and Love

Macmurray now suggests that the behaviour of a child is marked by the germinal forms of fear and love, both qualities that will assume great importance in the life of every person. The cry of the child in discomfort is an implicit fear of isolation. The cry of delight which the child gives, in recognising the mother and in being cared for, is to be understood as being a germinal form of love. Fear and love, therefore, will be significant elements in all human lives, and will often reveal the nature of our relations with others. There will be a need to look more closely at the significance of fear and love in all human relations, but for now it is necessary to draw out the origins of fear and love in the life of the child.

For Macmurray, fear and love emerge in the life of the child as he learns to distinguish between the people to whom he is in relation. The child develops the ability to recognise the people who form a part of his life and he begins to understand that he belongs to a community of persons. The ability to distinguish between different members of the family, for example, is something that Macmurray believes happens early in the life of the child. Along with this ability, the child also learns that his relations with others are in each case unique and different. The child, in other words, begins to

⁶⁵ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p. 61.

discover his own personhood in the experience of relating to, and reacting to, others. While his relation to the mother remains the central relationship, the child discovers that other relationships are necessary too.

Fear and love emerge as realities in the life of the child first and foremost through his relation with his mother. Macmurray suggests that the ordinary acts of mothering; feeding, washing and caring for example, creates a rhythm of withdrawal and return within the relationship. Initially, at each moment of the mother's withdrawal there will be an experience of fear in the child. With the mother's return the child feels again secure in love. As the child grows in awareness he begins to understand the relationship with his mother precisely in terms of withdrawal and return. He comes to terms with the fact that his mother is not with him at every moment of the day, but that there are times when she withdraws and always returns. This process of withdrawal and return, while it may initially be frightening for the child, is necessary if the child is to learn to trust and to grow. Without such a process there can be no proper development in the life of the child.

The rhythm of withdrawal and return assists the child to discover that he is an individual and that others are individuals too. Through the experience of the mother's withdrawal he discovers that he cannot always have what he wants. The absence of the mother makes the child cry for attention. If there is no immediate response, the cries of fear soon become cries of anger. Macmurray sees this as the emergence of the will. The child experiences a conflict of will between himself and his mother and this conflict is again a necessary stage of development. "There is a point in personal development, which may vary considerably from child to child, at which the contrast

between Self and Other is finally established as a pervasive attitude in action and reflection.”⁶⁶

This clash of wills between mother and child is what enables the child to discover both his own individuality and the individuality of the mother. But what is even more significant about this clash of wills, for Macmurray, is that he sees it as the starting point of the moral life of the child.

“What we are here considering is the origin of the moral struggle, in a situation which is universal and necessary in human experience. This situation is the conflict of wills between mother and child. The moral struggle is primarily a struggle between persons. It is only secondarily, though also necessarily, a struggle within the individual.”⁶⁷

The rhythm of withdrawal and return therefore provides the context for the child to discover that there exists in all human relationships the possibility of a clash of wills. The child’s response to this conflict is of great significance. Macmurray views this experience in terms of reconciliation. How is the child to be reconciled with his mother? How is he to overcome his fear that his mother does not love him anymore? We might take the simple example of a child who has his shoelaces tied each morning by his mother. At a certain point, for the good of the child, she will refuse to tie his laces any more. This is something that he must now do for himself. Here is a small but, to the child at least, painful moment of conflict. Doesn’t his mother’s refusal mean that he is no longer loved?

⁶⁶ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p. 96.

⁶⁷ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p. 98.

It is likely that the child's initial response to his mother's refusal will be anger, stemming from fear and from the rejection of his will. Macmurray suggests that a positive reconciliation between mother and child is possible only when the child discovers that he was wrong in his view that his mother did not love him anymore. Although his mother did not do as he willed, the fact is that he is still loved and cared for. This positive response to conflict shows that the child is able to distinguish between appearance and reality. Although, in refusing to do what the child wills, it might appear at first that his mother no longer cares, the reality is that the mother wills the best for her child.

It is of course possible that the conflict between mother and child, over the tying of his shoelaces, is not resolved positively. Because he is so dependent on his mother for so much the child may accept the fact that he has to obey his mother's will. But this can be done without the conflict between mother and child being properly resolved. Macmurray suggests that, although the child might conform his behaviour to what is expected of him, he may still act from a purely egocentric perspective and thus be unable to recover communion with his mother.

"The child who has been forced back into cooperative activity without a resolution of the conflict has two courses open to him. He remains egocentric, and the objective of his behaviour is security through self-defence. What he cannot do, so long as his fear is not overcome and dissipated, is to give himself freely to his mother in the fellowship of mutual affection without constraint. The conflict remains."⁶⁸

⁶⁸ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p 103.

The child who has not achieved a restoration of proper communion with his mother can express the conflict in two ways. He may conform externally and obediently to whatever is demanded of him by his mother, but internally he will remain resentful that his own desires are not being fulfilled. Alternatively, the child can attempt to impose his desire on his mother through a rebellious attitude and through aggressive behaviour. Both approaches stem from an inability to overcome conflict in a healthy manner. It is Macmurray's view that either of these styles of dealing with the conflict of wills will tend to become a habitual form of behaviour, leading to an individual who is either characteristically submissive or aggressive in his relations with others.

Macmurray has used the mother/child relationship as an analogy of all human relations and he now wants to develop the notion that our behaviour towards others will be affected deeply by our way of dealing with conflict. Our actions will be significantly determined by whether our relations with others are based on either fear or love. He does not want to suggest that a person is somehow trapped by the way he responds to conflict in childhood, but rather that we can and indeed often do behave towards others in a way that cannot properly resolve situations of conflict of will. We might, in general, be submissive or aggressive towards others, and such an attitude would suggest that our relations with others are marked by fear. Both aggression and submissiveness are to be seen as essentially defensive qualities. They both imply a refusal to seek mutuality and fellowship with others, and make it difficult to achieve human relations which are positively motivated. Only in approaching others with a loving attitude can communion with others be made possible.

Returning to his understanding of the human person as an agent, Macmurray believes that, since we can only act within the context of other agents, the attitude we take to others will affect the morality of our behaviour towards them. The approach that we take to others, stemming either from love or from fear, will have serious moral implications. Given the inevitability of a conflict of wills in our relations with one another, our attitude to the other will reveal the morality of our actions.

“The moral rightness of an action therefore has its ground in the relation of persons. The moral problematic of all action- the possibility that any action may be morally right or wrong- arises from the conflict of wills, and morality...is the effort to resolve this conflict.”⁶⁹

If conflict between agents is to be properly resolved then it is necessary for us to have the right intention in our actions. If our understanding of others is basically positive and loving then we will intend communion with others. But if our concept of others is based on fear and negativity then it is likely that our actions will be defensive and egocentric. The intention will be not to create communion but to look after one's own interests. For Macmurray only an action which intends communion with the other is morally appropriate. “A morally right action is an action which intends community.”⁷⁰

As individual human beings we live with both freedom and responsibility. But true freedom emerges for us only when we are able to acknowledge that we are mutually responsible for one another. By recognising our need of

⁶⁹ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p. 116.

⁷⁰ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p. 119.

one another and our responsibility for one another we are able to see that our actions and attitudes towards others always carry an ethical dimension.

“Every individual agent is...responsible to all other agents for his actions. Whatever he does is morally right if the particular intention of his action is controlled by a general intention to maintain the community of agents and wrong if it is not so controlled.”⁷¹

In returning to his view that as human beings we can either approach others from the positive idea of love and communion or from the negative idea of either submission or aggression, Macmurray suggests that we can draw a distinction between three basic modes of morality.

Modes of Morality

The first mode of morality is based on a positive vision of the other, and is described as being the communal mode. The image that helps us to understand this idea is that of the child who manages to overcome the fear that he experiences when his will conflicts with that of his mother. He is able to overcome both the fear and the conflict by accepting the love that is at the heart of his relationship with his mother. What is central to this communal ethic is that each individual approaches others with the intention of being in a positive relation with them. The centre of reference for the individual agent is always the personal other, and to act rightly is to act for the sake of the other person and for the sake of communion. The objective behind a person's actions is to maintain positive relations with others through the intending of communion. Such a positive approach to the ethical life is only possible through the overcoming of fear. Macmurray

⁷¹ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p. 119.

identifies this positive mode of morality, at least within the Western tradition, as stemming from the Judaeo-Christian vision of the human person.

The two other modes of morality, as far as Macmurray is concerned, differ from the communal mode in that they are both egocentric and negative. Macmurray describes the first of these two negative expressions of morality as being the contemplative mode of morality. It is to be understood as being related to the image of the child who conforms to the wishes of his mother but remains resentful and in a state of conflict. In this contemplative mode of morality the agent is inclined to deny the reality of conflict with others and to be seen to conform to the values of the community or society in which she lives. Such a response however is basically negative and passive. One who lives in this way takes the attitude of a spectator and does not consciously intend communion with others. Rather, she prefers to live in a private world, conforming in practice to the values of the society in which she lives but finding happiness in the isolated world of her own thoughts and emotions.

The third mode of morality, according to Macmurray, is best described as the pragmatic mode. This mode is related to the notion of the child who rebels against the wishes of his mother and so is unable to overcome conflict through love. In the pragmatic mode of morality conflict is met by aggression and the goal of one's actions is the furthering of power. Rather than seeking communion with others through the intending of, and practice of, love, relations with others are marked by fear and threat. One is always competing with others for power. Aggression towards others becomes the norm of one's behaviour. Since humans are understood to be in a state of competition for power it is necessary to find ways of keeping such

competition under control. There is need therefore for the law to serve as a means of keeping the peace between people who are naturally hostile to one another. Macmurray suggests that the pragmatic mode of morality will properly express itself as obedience to the law.

At this point Macmurray has developed his original notion of the mother and child relationship into a way of understanding three different approaches to the question of morality. He has shown how the mother and child can only live in proper communion with one another when they are able to grow through experiences of conflict and still continue to intend love and communion with one another. By not dealing with the conflict in their relationship it is likely that fear and not love will be the determining quality of their relationship. If the child's relationship is marked by fear of his mother he will either conform to what is expected of him but remain resentful or else he will rebel against his mother. The presence of fear in the relationship makes it impossible to discover real communion and love. So too, with regards to morality, Macmurray believes that the positive approach to morality stems from the desire for communion and the overcoming of fear. But when our ethical vision is based on fear of the other then we are likely to either conform to the moral practices of the family or society in which we live while remaining somehow withdrawn, or else we might see morality simply in terms of the law which serves to keep each person's desire for power within acceptable constraints.

Macmurray now wants to develop the implications of his basic vision in terms of the distinction between community and society. It is his belief that, ideally at least, a human society is a unity of persons. He stresses that the unity of a society or any group of people is not to be taken as a matter of fact but must necessarily be intended. In saying this he denies that society

can be properly understood in biological or organic terms. In other words, a society is not to be seen as simply a natural phenomenon. He is equally adamant that society is not adequately understood when it is viewed as part of a greater evolutionary process, as if human beings have developed to the point where society is possible. It is intention that makes a common life possible.

“Any human society is a moral entity. Its basis is the universal and necessary intention to maintain the personal relation which makes the human individual a person, and his life a common life. It is an instantiation of the ‘I and You’ as the unit of the personal. It is constituted and maintained by loyalty and keeping faith.”⁷²

Society and Community

Macmurray now uses his basic distinction between relationships based on fear and those based on love to highlight the significant differences between society and community. He argues that most traditional philosophical analyses of society take the form of a philosophy of the State. This suggests that we tend to think of the State as providing us with a model of a complete and mature society. But is it accurate to understand the State in this way? By analysing the political philosophies of both Hobbes and Rousseau, Macmurray wants to reveal the flaws in their vision of society and then to put forward his own understanding.

⁷² John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p. 128.

The political theory expressed by Hobbes⁷³ is seen by Macmurray as being an excellent example of an analysis of society which is pragmatic. In his view Hobbes understands human beings to be living in a constant state of fear of one another. This means that their relations with one another will be both negative and aggressive. Each person is an isolated individual who seeks the power to do as she wills. But since humans are rational they realise that the best way to achieve their own will is to form societies where much of the fear of the other can be controlled. At the heart of Hobbes' vision of society is the idea of the social contract. Individuals form a society not out of a desire for love and communion but out of fear of others. The only way to safeguard one's life and interests is to make a contract with others which takes the form of law. Each person agrees to keep the laws of a given society on the understanding that all other members of the society will do the same. This is only possible when there is an external power, namely the State, which can compel each individual to keep the law or to punish those who disregard the law of the society. Hobbes therefore sees societies as being nothing other than pragmatic devices which are ultimately based on self-interest. There is no intending of communion but rather the controlling of fear through the guarantees of the law.

“The pragmatic mode of society then is society maintained by power, and it identifies society with the State, since the power of government is a necessary condition for the existence of such a society. It conceives the structure of society in terms of law- whether moral or civil law- and its

⁷³ Thomas Hobbes (1588 – 1679) is recognised as being an important philosopher who contributed much to both moral and political philosophy. He is often seen as being instrumental in promoting a social contract theory of political life. His most famous work is *Leviathan* (1651).

maintenance as achieved by power. This yields a mechanical concept of society.”⁷⁴

Macmurray believes that Hobbes’ understanding of society is basically flawed because it cannot see in human nature anything which can act as a bond of unity between human beings. To disprove Hobbes’ theory one only has to show that benevolence towards others is as natural to us as is self-interest. Macmurray suggests that rational self-interest could never by itself construct a society or State. Rather, there must be something in human nature which allows us to make the bonds necessary for a common life.

Turning now to the political philosophy of Rousseau⁷⁵, Macmurray sees him as being the antithesis of Hobbes, yet also flawed in his analysis of society. Liberal humanism and Romanticism are both indebted to Rousseau in that he provides an idealist theory of the State and of society. Taking a very different approach to human nature than Hobbes, Rousseau offers a more positive view of society. In Macmurray’s view, the philosophy of Rousseau invites us to allow the natural goodness of human beings to determine whatever form of society is most appropriate. Rousseau understands society in an organic fashion, that society is always in a state of evolutionary progress towards full maturity. The full expression of society lies at the end of a long process of development. Once we understand that we are constantly living in a state of progress, each person can take her part in society and accept our function within the process.

⁷⁴ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p. 136.

⁷⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778) is best known for his theories on social freedom and rights, which are based on the idea of a social contract. Among his major works are *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality among Mankind* (1755) and *The Social Contract or Principles of Political Right* (1762).

Given his organic view of the world, Rousseau urges us to accept that our true being is a social being, and that each individual is simply a part of something greater than herself. Macmurray suggests that Rousseau's vision is basically a contemplative view of the world and of society because the human person remains somehow an isolated and divided self. Each has a necessary social function which is part of the whole process of growth but each person experiences life as a spectator of something greater than her own limited experience of life. Each is asked to submit her own being to the general will of society which is determined by the process of development.

Macmurray's problem with Rousseau's understanding of society is that it leads to a form of dualism between the general will and the private life of each person. Since society is constantly in the process of moving towards the general will, each person is somehow withdrawn and yet caught up in a process over which he has no control. Thus, in Rousseau's society, just as in that of Hobbes, the bond between individuals is always an impersonal one, and therefore inadequate.

The inadequacies of Rousseau and Hobbes allow Macmurray to conclude that there is a serious distinction to be drawn between society and community, the main distinction being that relations between people in societies are always understood to be impersonal, whereas in community relations are always understood as being inherently personal.

"It may serve us well if we distinguish between society and community, reserving the term community for such personal unities of persons as are based on a positive personal motivation. The members of a community

are in communion with one another, and their association is a fellowship...Every community is therefore a society; but not every society is a community.”⁷⁶

Macmurray suggests that we should understand societies as being forms of human association where the bond of unity between individuals is impersonal and negative. Communities, on the other hand, are forms of human association where the bond between individuals is positive and personal. It is apparent therefore that the types of society suggested by Hobbes and Rousseau are not communities. Both suggest that society is negatively motivated, aiming simply at the protection of individuals against the threat and fear of other individuals.

It is Macmurray's understanding that the conception we have of our relation to others will largely determine those relations themselves. If we see other people as a threat to our well-being then we will relate to others in a constant atmosphere of fear and distrust. Societies, since they do not allow for the possibility of seeing people as other than a threat, cannot offer a vision of a life based on anything other than protection and security. Can the concept of community offer a more positive and meaningful vision of our life together? This is the question to which Macmurray now turns.

The major distinction between community and any other form of society, for Macmurray, is that community is grounded not in fear but rather in the intending of communion and friendship. “A community is for the sake of friendship and presupposes love. But it is only in friendship that persons

⁷⁶ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p. 146.

are free in relation; if the relation is based on fear we are constrained in it and not free.”⁷⁷

Just as earlier Macmurray used the mother and child relation to examine the distinction between relationships based on love and those based on fear, so now he turns to the image of the family as offering us an insight into the meaning of community. It is his view that the family serves as the original human community and as the basis of all subsequent communities. The family therefore acts as the norm of all community life.

“What is characteristic of the family is that it is neither established by force nor maintained by a sense of duty. It is established and maintained by natural affection; by a positive motive in its members. They care for one another sufficiently to have no need to fear one another.”⁷⁸

The relation between members of a society can at best be functional. A community however cannot be defined simply in terms of function or purpose. The members of a community are in communion with one another, joined by the bonds of friendship, and by the intention to approach others not with fear but with love.

It might well be argued that the bonds of family life, which Macmurray suggests can serve as a model of community life, are more taken for granted rather than intended. That is perhaps why he also uses the image of friendship to reveal more of what distinguishes community from society. The suggestion put forward by Macmurray is that since friendship is central to community one can discover more about the true nature of community

⁷⁷ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p. 151.

⁷⁸ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p. 156.

by examining the qualities of friendship. The relationship between friends is a positive one. Each remains a distinct individual but each realises herself through the other. It is a relationship of equality, an equality which is itself intentional. In friendship each person is able to experience real freedom. Since there is no fear of the other, each person can be freely herself.

Macmurray wants to suggest that the qualities to be found in friendships are the same qualities that one finds in community. Therefore, equality, freedom and a lack of fear should be distinguishing marks of any community. But the significant aspect of Macmurray's view is that, if the idea of community is to be properly effective in offering a better model of human relations than that offered by political philosophers like Hobbes and Rousseau, it must be in principle inclusive and without limits. Macmurray believes that it is possible for us to seek a universal community of persons, one in which each cares for all the others. The unity of all peoples becomes possible when we first imagine community as a matter of intention. It is possible for us to move beyond fear in our relations by intending friendship and communion with all others.

Macmurray was not unaware of the criticisms made of such a view. In an age where it is difficult to know even one's neighbours, never mind the people of other societies, the idea of a universal community can easily appear as, at best, naïve. With this in mind, Macmurray develops the distinction between direct and indirect relations. He acknowledges that community can be actual only where people are in direct relation to one another, where people know one another personally.

It is precisely because most of our relations are indirect that there is need of politics, law and nations or states. Politics is concerned with the improving

and adjusting of indirect relations with others. The state or the nation is the institutional expression of indirect relations, and the most important function of the nation is to maintain justice in indirect relations.

“The necessity for the State and for politics arises with the breakdown of the customary community of direct personal relations...It was this growth of a system of indirect personal relations, superimposed upon the direct relations within the separate communities, which made politics a necessity.”⁷⁹

In all human relations, direct or indirect, there is a need for justice. Because so many of our relations are indirect there is the need for a mechanism which will maintain those relations in peace. It is the law which serves as this mechanism. The role of the nation or the society is to act in service of the law, ensuring justice for all people. The significant thing for Macmurray is that the law is nothing other than a technological device to maintain indirect relations, and the state or the nation is primarily a technical device for the development and maintenance of law. This suggests that the State is simply a tool for creating and maintaining relations, and not the primary source of a person's identity.

“We should treat the law, and the State which is the creature of law, for no less but also for no more than it is – a necessary system of devices for achieving and maintaining justice. If we do this we will then realise that justice itself is not enough. For justice is only the negative aspect of morality, and itself is for the sake of friendship.”⁸⁰

⁷⁹ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, pp. 192-193.

⁸⁰ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p. 205.

Macmurray is able to acknowledge the existence of, and even the necessity for, states and nations but he is not prepared to admit that one can find the truth of one's identity in the negative ideas associated with societies and States. He suggests that we are able to imagine another form of community. In such a community each person acts out of the intention to make friendship the heart of all direct relations, and justice is understood as being simply the minimum requirement in all our human relations, direct or indirect.

It would appear that Macmurray, while acknowledging the difficulties of creating meaningful communities in a world in which it is virtually impossible to know many others personally, sees that in order to be fully ourselves we need to act with the intention of seeking friendship and communion with all those who come into our lives. Such a task necessarily involves a movement away from fear and a movement towards trust in others. How is such a difficult enterprise possible? "To create community is to make friendship the form of all personal relations. This is a religious task, which can only be performed through the transformation of the motives of our behaviour."⁸¹

Macmurray here seems to be hinting that there is an essentially religious, as well as ethical, dimension to our life. If we are most truly ourselves when we actively intend communion and friendship with others, then we are also most truly ourselves when we come to an appreciation of the fact that to be human is to be religious. We can therefore turn now to Macmurray's understanding of the religious aspect of human being.

⁸¹ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p. 198.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGION

Macmurray begins his reflection on the nature and significance of religion in *Persons in Relation* by claiming that religion cannot be adequately understood when looked at from the perspective of the isolated human agent but only from the idea of persons in relation.⁸² His concern is to discover the nature of religious experience as forming part of human experience and he is therefore not primarily interested in any specific faith expression or belief. Before offering his own views on the nature of all religious experience, Macmurray acknowledges that many thinkers, notably Freud and Marx, believe religious faith to be nothing other than fantasy and illusion. Rather than simply sidestep their criticisms of religion, he offers his own criticism of their views.

It is Marx's⁸³ view, according to Macmurray, that religion is nothing other than a device for taking people's minds off their struggles and miseries in life by promising them a better life in a better world. This hope in a better life hereafter serves only to reconcile people to the unjust structures of the world and thereby denies the proper dignity of the human person. Macmurray questions how Marx was able to come up with such a theory and suggests that, whatever else, it could not have emerged from a careful and objective study of the varieties of religious experience and belief. While

⁸² John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.151.

⁸³ Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) was a radical social and political theorist whose thought has been hugely influential in the political life of the 20th century. Along with Friedrich Engels he wrote *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and also wrote the three-volume *Capital*.

it may be true that some forms of religion are open to the very criticisms made by Marx, this would only suggest the need for a religious reform. It does not prove that religious experience is inherently illusory. The weakness of Marx's understanding of religion stems from the fact that he can produce no cogent argument to show that all religion is necessarily a form of escape from the concerns of this world and therefore an illusion.

In abstaining from a critical examination of the facts...such a theory of religion surely betrays its origins in a subjective and emotional reaction. Such atheism indeed strongly suggests the projection of a childish fantasy upon the universe.⁸⁴

In next turning to Freud⁸⁵, Macmurray suggests that the criticisms of religion offered by Freud deserve to be treated more seriously than those made by Marx. He is prepared to accept Freud's view that religion is a projection of the child's experience of family life, and sees that his own account of the mother and child relationship support Freud's claim. Where Freud is mistaken, however, is in his conclusion that religion is therefore illusory, which Macmurray suggests is a complete non sequitur. While it may be true that there is plenty of illusory religion to be found this does not

⁸⁴ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.154.

⁸⁵ Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) is generally recognised as being the founder of psychoanalysis. He mistrusted religion as a form of neurosis and argued that all religion takes its origin from a primitive but historical father complex in which the Father figure was killed and eaten. Views such as this are to be found in many of Freud's writings, including *Totem and Taboo* (1912), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939).

prove that all religion is illusory. In order for Freud to successfully prove that all religion is illusory he must be able to show that religion as such is the product of fantasy. This he fails to do. Rather, the image of the child's dependence on a personal other offers us a way of beginning to understand the nature of religion.

We have seen that the form of the child's experience is dependence on a personal Other; and that this form of experience is never outgrown, but provides the ground plan of all personal experience which is constituted from start to finish by relation to the Other and communication with the Other. It is this form which finds expression in religion, no doubt; but there is nothing illusory about this.⁸⁶

The Inclusive Nature of Religion

Having dealt with the criticisms made of religion by both Marx and Freud, Macmurray now reveals his own understanding of the nature of religion. He begins by calling attention to what he considers important facts about religion, facts which, if not taken seriously, would inevitably lead to an impoverished and inadequate conception of the significance of religion. The first fact to be noted is the universality of religion in human society. This suggests to Macmurray that the source of religion lies in some characteristic of human experience which must be both common and universal. Secondly, no concept of religion is to be found in even the highest forms of animal life. This fact serves as an indication that the universal experience of religion in human experience must be a personal experience. Macmurray thirdly argues that it is a matter of historical fact that all the various aspects of culture and civilisation find their roots in the

⁸⁶ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.154.

foundational experience of religion. The final fact which is claimed by Macmurray is that religion is always, in intention at least, inclusive of all members of a given society; and that religion depends on the active cooperation of the members of a given society if it is to fulfil its proper function.

As if to highlight his dissatisfaction with the views of Freud and Marx, Macmurray claims that any theory of religion that fails to take into account these four characteristics of religion will be at best inadequate, if not simply erroneous. More positively, he argues that these four characteristics at least hint at something of far greater significance. Religion is about the community of persons.

In order to test this hypothesis, Macmurray asks that we consider what he calls 'a primitive tribal religion'. The advantage of using such an example is that allows us to see more clearly the precise function of religion in community. In Macmurray's view a primitive tribe is made up of a group of people who live a common life. The unity of the group is not to be taken as simply a matter of fact but, as was noted earlier, a matter of intention. Such intending of communion with others must therefore be a conscious act. "In any actual community of persons...there is not merely a common life, but also a consciousness of the common life, and it is this consciousness which constitutes the association a personal association or community".⁸⁷

This consciousness, which is necessary if a community is to be built on the positive intention of its members, also involves the realisation that community life is fragile. There is always the possibility that hostility might

⁸⁷ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.161.

take the place of fellowship and that the unity of a group might be fragmented. This will happen if the motive behind personal relations is negative, or if fear of the others replaces the love that should unite the members. One of the primary functions of religion therefore is to help the members of a given community to maintain its consciousness of the necessity of intending communion.

Religion is the form of reflection which relates to the problematic of community...Religion, we shall say, is the reflective activity which expresses the consciousness of community; or more tersely, religion is the celebration of communion.⁸⁸

Macmurray suggests that to celebrate anything is in fact to do something which acts as a symbolic expression of our consciousness of the thing to be celebrated. The celebration of communion or fellowship should therefore properly involve a communal reflection in which all the members of the community participate. The celebration of communion with others cannot be a solitary or private affair. It must be a common activity, and such activity must have a symbolic character with a reference beyond itself. The activity itself, whatever it might be, should be undertaken not for its own sake but rather for the sake of what the activity represents or signifies.

Returning to the idea of primitive communities, Macmurray believes that the members of such communities do not simply live a common life. They also perform certain ritual activities together, which is an expression of the fact that each member is conscious of the common life and finds meaning in it.

⁸⁸ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.162.

This celebration of their fellowship is their religious activity; and since it symbolises or expresses their common consciousness of the community life, such activity is an activity of reflection.⁸⁹

The religious activity, which is an expression of a group's consciousness of community, takes place amid the awareness that community life is itself some kind of achievement. There always remains the possibility that the fellowship of a group might break down and be replaced by hostility and enmity. Moreover, community life is always less than perfect and there is always evidence of failure to be found in any group of people. The awareness of the fragility of community life points to another aspect of religion. It serves as a means of strengthening the members, that they might have the appropriate intention regarding their life together.

Religion is itself intentional. Its celebration of communion is also a means of strengthening the will to community. The function of religion is then to mobilise and strengthen the positive elements in the motivation of its members, to overcome the negative modes where they exist, to prevent the outbreak of enmity and strife, to dominate the fear of the other...⁹⁰

Macmurray acknowledges that society has developed beyond the small, 'primitive' family or kinship groups to nations and states which are much larger and more impersonal. This however does not mean that religion can no longer fulfil the function it has served in smaller groups. Indeed, if religion were able to fulfil its function properly, it would greatly assist in creating a universal community of persons. Such a universal community

⁸⁹ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.162.

⁹⁰ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.162.

would be based on freedom and equality, and would be one where each person would have the positive intention of creating communion with others. Many would perhaps argue that such a universal community is beyond imagining; that it is nothing other than a utopian fantasy. But, for Macmurray, such a universal community “would be the full self-realisation of the personal”.⁹¹

He goes on to suggest that if the religious ritual, in which the members of a community participate, is to have any real significance, then each member of the community must be personally aware of the meaning of the ritual practiced by the community. The symbolism of religious ritual must be such that it has significance for each member, and if the symbolism is to be valid it ought to be one which expresses the unity of all the members. Can such a symbol be found? Macmurray believes so.

How can a universal mutuality of intentional and active relationship be represented symbolically? Only through the idea of a personal Other who stands in the same mutual relation to every member of the community. Without the idea of such a universal and personal Other it is impossible to represent the unity of a community of persons, each in personal fellowship with all the others.⁹²

The Universal Other

Macmurray suggests that such a universal Other must be understood as being a universal Agent, whose actions serve to unite the actions of all the members of the community. The need for such a universal Agent partly

⁹¹ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.163.

⁹² John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.164.

stems from the need for any community to have a person who is seen as its head as the uniting inspiration of the whole group. It is Macmurray's view that the ritual head of an existing group or community, such as the chief of the tribe, cannot adequately represent the universal Other, because he acts only as the temporary representative of the community. Rather, what is needed is an Other who can appropriately represent the unity of the community, and who stands as the centre of a given community, so that all the members might be able to relate personally to what is perceived as being the heart of the community. It is Macmurray's belief that, when fully developed, "the idea of a universal personal Other is the idea of God".⁹³

The idea of God which Macmurray here refers to is one which understands God in personal terms. God is to be seen as being the personal author of the community and of the world itself. Since God is at the heart of all that is, the life of the community involves not only fellowship with the other members of the community, but also a fellowship with all of nature. God is to be found in all things, and creates community with all that is.

It remains true that the creating of community is dependent on the overcoming of hostility and fear. It is only when all hostility between people is overcome that we will be able to encounter the true face of religion. Until then, religion acts as an inspiration for all those who intend communion with others and with the world.

If this basic problem of personal life could be resolved; if the negative mode could finally and completely be subordinated to the positive in all personal activity, the redemptive function of religion would be complete; and only its central activity would remain. Religion would then be simply

⁹³ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.164.

the celebration of communion - of the fellowship of all things in God. Meanwhile, it sustains the intention to achieve this fellowship.⁹⁴

Real and Unreal Religion

It is clear that Macmurray has made some strong claims here and that there is a need for him to justify those claims in the light of our actual experience of religion. This leads us to the point where Macmurray attempts to draw a distinction between what he terms 'real' and 'unreal' religion. In order to do this he returns again to the idea of action. It is action which determines the future. Linked to this is the notion of freedom, which Macmurray describes as the capacity to act and so the capacity to determine the future. Freedom can be understood as having two significant dimensions: we are able to move and we are able to know. Both of these dimensions refer to the existence of others. To move is to modify the other; to know is to apprehend the other. Given that this is the case, to act means to modify the other by intention.

However, the freedom of any particular agent to act will be dependent on the accuracy of her knowledge of the other. And, as Macmurray has previously shown, knowledge of the other is always somehow problematic. To the extent that knowledge of another is erroneous, one's capacity for action will be limited and frustrated. One's intention will not properly be realised. Action therefore, if it is to achieve its intention, must also involve reflection too. Such reflection is concerned with achieving true knowledge, and with overcoming error. The more we can come to true knowledge of the other the more we are able to create the conditions of freedom.

⁹⁴ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.165.

Without such freedom we will be unable to act in such a way that we can determine the future intentionally.

Since it is precisely the capacity to act rationally that makes us persons, the forms of reflection we use will be different modes of rationality. Macmurray suggests that there are three traditional modes of reflection, religion, art and science. It is his view, however, that religion serves as the primary mode of reflective rationality. It can be understood as being primary because it is the first form of reflection to express itself in human development and because both art and science are historically derived from religion.

As a particular mode of reflection, religion is concerned with true knowledge of a personal Other. The data that we bring to this religious reflection are our own experiences of personal relationship with others. Since it is the case that many of our experiences of relationships with others are problematic, religious reflection will inevitably be concerned with achieving true knowledge of the Other and so overcoming the problems of personal relationships. It is Macmurray's understanding that the value of religious reflection is that it universalises the problem of personal relations through the idea of a universal Person, to whom all human agents stand in an identical relation. This universal Person can be described as God. And since religious knowledge is the knowledge of God, such knowledge can be applied to all personal relationships.

Macmurray now returns to the human experience of being in personal relations with others. What does it mean to know another person? What form does such knowledge take? In the first place, real knowledge of another cannot be purely objective or scientific.

A purely objective attitude to another person precludes a personal knowledge, because it excludes direct personal relationship. We can know a great deal about other people, both in particular and in general, without knowing them. The reason for this is simply the mutuality of the personal...If you do not know me, then necessarily I do not know you. To know another person we must be in communication with him, and communication is a two-way process.⁹⁵

It follows from the above that all knowledge of persons comes from the revelation of the other. Our knowledge of others, if it is to be real knowledge, can only emerge to the extent that another reveals herself to us. As long as another person pretends to be what she is not then there is no possibility of us being able to acquire true knowledge of her. Clearly too, we ourselves can only be known insofar as we are prepared to reveal the truth of ourselves. The corollary of this idea of knowledge of another stemming from self-revelation is also significant. A person can know herself only as she reveals herself to another. In this way, self-revelation also acts as self-discovery.

Macmurray now suggests that in fact it is all too easy for us to have an illusory knowledge of one another. While it is true that we can only know another to the extent that the person reveals herself to us, our knowledge is also largely dependent on the emotional disposition that we bring to that person. A negative attitude to another makes knowledge of the other, and indeed of oneself, impossible. Mutual hatred, suspicion or dislike inevitably hinders any prospect of self-revelation. Without a desire to truly know another, and the openness to love, whatever idea we may have of another person will be an illusion.

⁹⁵ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.169.

My knowledge of another person is a function of my love for him; and in proportion as my knowledge is a function of my fear of him, it is illusory or unreal. The problematic of our knowledge of persons is in terms of the distinction between reality and illusion, between real and unreal.⁹⁶

Just as our human relations can be illusory and unreal, so too with religion. It is Macmurray's view that religion can be either real or unreal, and that the distinction between the two rests on the motivation behind religious belief and practice. If the motivation behind religion is negative then the religious activity and the religious knowledge that informs it will be unreal. Insofar as the motivation behind religion is positive then it will be real. One of the signs of unreal or illusory religion is that it will tend to be egocentric and defensive. It will be egocentric in that it is accepted for the sake only of oneself. It will be defensive in that it is rooted in a fear of life. Real religion on the other hand is what Macmurray calls 'heterocentric' in that it is lived for the sake of others. While it may be true that all religion, both real and unreal, are concerned at least in part with the overcoming of fear, one can distinguish real religion from the unreal by their different ways of dealing with the problem of fear.

The maxim of illusory religion runs: 'Fear not, trust in God and He will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you'; that of real religion, on the contrary, is 'Fear not, the things that you are afraid of are quite likely to happen to you, but they are nothing to be afraid of'.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.170.

⁹⁷ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.171.

It is clear from what Macmurray has been saying that it is all too easy for an individual to have a religious faith which is fundamentally unreal. Now he wants to go further and to suggest that the religion of whole faith communities and of whole societies can also be unreal. In his view, religion within a particular society is an expression of its consciousness of community. But if the understanding of community within a society is an inappropriate one then its religion will also be unreal. Macmurray argues that the unreal character of some religions can be seen in their fundamental outlook. Those religions which are either fundamentally pragmatic or fundamentally contemplative are to be understood as being unreal.

A religion which is pragmatic will take the form of some kind of spiritual technology. It will contain a whole set of devices to control the forces that make life either a success or failure. It will have a number of rituals which are intended to placate the hostility or beg the favour of God. A religion which is basically contemplative in outlook, on the other hand, will tend to be idealist in nature. It will also be otherworldly, and will focus on an ideal community which is hoped for and imagined, but one which is not possible in the world that we live in. Such contemplative religions encourage a withdrawal from the world and an escape into fantasy. The symbols which they use refer not to the world that we live in but to the desire for another world, which somehow compensates for the unsatisfactory nature of life as we experience it here on earth. Contemplative religions, like any other form of idealism, tend to invert the distinction between appearance and reality. They make the spiritual world real and present the material world in which we live as being unreal and illusory.

It is Macmurray's view that the basic problem of religion lies in terms of the distinction between reality and unreality in personal relations. But how is

one to be able to overcome this problem? He suggests that what is needed is personal integrity.

The primary demand of religion is for a personal integrity. Integrity here is not a general term for moral goodness: it means specifically a way of life which is integral. In particular, an integration of the inner life with the outer, a unity of reflection and action, a coincidence of motive and intention. If this were complied with, the result would be action which is at once moral and spontaneous, and consequently, free.⁹⁸

Without a life of integrity we are likely to fall into the trap of dualism, which for Macmurray involves the inability to distinguish between the real and the unreal. Religion, if it is to be real, cannot acquiesce in any form of dualism. It may be accepted that religion is a form of reflection and also a search for knowledge. This allows us to ask whether a religion, or a religious belief, is true. It also allows us to question the spiritual and moral value of a particular religion or religious belief. But, since religion is also about the distinction between what is real and unreal, it is always necessary to ask questions about the reality of a religion too.

This is a question which includes the other two questions and demands their unification. If it is true but unsatisfactory, or is satisfactory but untrue, it is unreal. Now truth is judged; satisfaction is felt: consequently the reflection which is concerned with the problematic of truth is an intellectual reflection, while the reflection that is concerned with satisfactoriness is emotional. The first is concerned with matter of fact; the second with matter of intention, that is to say, with value. Both, as representational, refer to action and have their verification in action.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.172.

⁹⁹ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.173.

In a somewhat complex argument, Macmurray moves on to suggest that the knowledge which is involved in action has two major aspects which correspond to the reflective distinction between means and ends. A knowledge of means is always a matter of facts. What in fact is the best means to a given end? A knowledge of ends, on the contrary, is always a matter of value rather than a matter of facts. What do I want to do with my life? Action is understood by Macmurray to involve an integration of these two types of knowledge. To act is nothing other than to choose to realise a particular objective or end by an effective means. However, in the process of reflection the question of means and ends are necessarily separated, because they require two different modes of reflection if they are to provide an adequate solution. The problematic questions of religion, which requires the integration of both means and ends, can only be properly solved in action and not in reflection. This point of view has serious implications for all religions in terms of both doctrine and practice.

The validity of a theological doctrine, for instance, cannot be determined merely by asking whether it is true. For this is only one aspect of its reality. Its validity depends also upon the valuation with which it is integrated in action. It is characteristic of theological doctrines that they are ambivalent in this respect.¹⁰⁰

It appears to Macmurray therefore that religion has two aspects, ritual and doctrine. Of these two aspects, the ritual is the primary and positive one because it is concerned with value and with the intention of action. Doctrine, on the other hand, is always secondary because it is a means to an end, and the means presupposes the end. Ritual and doctrine, as different

¹⁰⁰ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, pp. 173-174.

aspects of religion, complement one another in that they both seek integration in action. Both refer in different ways to the unity of action which is what constitutes reality; the one referring to fact and the other to value. Together, ritual and doctrine create the conditions for action which is both true and good.

In their togetherness they symbolise the unity of Truth and Goodness. But this unity is realised only in action; so that reality is symbolised as the one action which intends the unity of Truth and Goodness, and which achieves its end with absolute efficiency.¹⁰¹

There remains however the constant risk that religion may become unreal, and this is likely to occur whenever the motive behind religion itself becomes negative. At an earlier point of *Persons in Relation*, Macmurray had suggested that a child who fails to find proper communion with the mother figure in his life, whose relationship with his mother is therefore unreal, will tend to conform but to behave in either an aggressive or a submissive manner.¹⁰² He now suggests that those same qualities of aggression and submission are to be found in any manifestation of unreal religion.

In that case, the religion may either become aggressive – seeking to achieve community by force and achieving, at most a pragmatic society; or it may become submissive, contemplative and idealistic, referring its reflective symbolism to another world; to a community which is expected but not intended.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p. 174.

¹⁰² John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, pp.103-5

¹⁰³ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.175.

A Personal God

In the concluding chapter of *Persons in Relation*, which relates to the conclusions he drew in the Gifford Lectures of 1953-54, Macmurray is clearly intent on bringing together his views on both the nature of the human person and the nature of religion. He makes reference to the questions which are set for all those who are invited to give the prestigious Gifford Lectures: 'What contribution does this philosophical study make to the problem of the validity of religious belief? Are there, or are there not, rational grounds for a belief in God?'¹⁰⁴

His first significant point is that the traditional philosophical arguments to prove the existence of God are, at the very least, inadequate. The main problem with the traditional proofs, as seen for example in Descartes' attempt to prove the existence of God, is that they tend to lead to some form of dualism. This Macmurray perceives as being unacceptable.

Any dualistic mode of thinking is incompatible with religion. For the root of dualism is the intentional dissociation of thought and action; while religion, when it is full-grown, demands their integration. From the point of view of any dualist thought, whether in its pragmatic or its contemplative mode, whether from an idealist or a realist attitude, religion cannot even be rightly conceived; and the traditional proofs, even if they were logically unassailable, could only conclude to some infinite or absolute being which lacks any quality deserving of reverence or worship. The God of the traditional proofs is not the God of religion.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.206.

¹⁰⁵ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, pp.206-7.

Macmurray argues that all the traditional proofs for the existence of God, such as the argument from design or the argument from causes, fall within the context of a philosophy which starts from the point of view of the thinker rather than the agent, and that this inevitably commits one to a dualist position. The knower, or thinker, becomes a pure subject, an observer, one who is isolated in his own thoughts. It may be possible as a thinker to reach out to other ideas, but it is not possible to reach anything that actually exists. It is Macmurray's view that existence can never be proved.

For such reasons we found ourselves compelled to abandon the theoretical attitude and to start not from the 'I think', but from the 'I do'; to adopt the standpoint not of the observer but of the participant; not of the thinker but of the agent. When we did this, we found that we were dealing not with the isolated self, excluded from existence, but with persons in dynamic relation, each an existing part of an existing world. From this standpoint existence – both of the knower and of the world he knows – is given, and given as a togetherness of self and other.¹⁰⁶

Macmurray is prepared to acknowledge that even though the fact of agency is our primary certainty and the certainty of existence, the nature of oneself and of others remains problematic. But he sees this problem as being more of a practical problem than a philosophical one. We must act in terms of a basic distinction between right and wrong. This means that we have to choose what to do, and inherent in the choice is the possibility of doing the wrong thing. When we act wrongly our freedom as agents, which is the capacity to determine the future in accordance with our intentions, cannot be fully realised. To act freely and appropriately is to choose an end which

¹⁰⁶ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.209.

is good, and to use the means that are most effective to achieve that end. However, our freedom to act is never unlimited. We live and act in a world made up of other agents. This fact is of the greatest significance for Macmurray. We most properly express our freedom to act in the mutuality of persons.

We need one another to be ourselves. This complete and unlimited dependence of each of us upon the others is the central and crucial fact of personal existence. Individual independence is an illusion; and the independent individual, the isolated self, is a nonentity...It is only in relation to others that we exist as persons; we are invested with significance by others who have need of us; and borrow our reality from those who care for us. We live and move and have our being not in ourselves but in one another; and what rights or powers or freedom we possess are ours by the grace and favour of our fellows. Here is the basic fact of our human condition.¹⁰⁷

It is Macmurray's understanding that the mutuality of personal relations provides the primary context in which we can express our freedom through action. Insofar as freedom may be a problem to us, that problem can be overcome through knowledge of one another. This knowledge can only come about through a mutual self-revelation, and this is only possible when we act out of love rather than from fear of others. Knowledge of others therefore will be at the heart of all knowledge and all action. For Macmurray, this knowledge takes a religious form.

Since our knowledge of one another conditions all our activities, both practical and reflective, we find here the ultimate condition of all our knowing and all our action. This is the field of religion; and in this field

¹⁰⁷ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.211.

the conditions of interpersonal knowledge have to be created by the overcoming of fear, and so by the transformation of motives.¹⁰⁸

At this point Macmurray acknowledges that there is something missing from his attempt to elucidate the nature of religion and of personal communion. We can only be in relation with others in the world that we live in. How then are we to understand our relation to the world?

According to Macmurray, the traditional way of dealing with this question has been to represent the human person as consisting of an immortal soul in a mortal body. The body is seen to be material, like the world in which it moves and lives. The soul, however, is understood as being immaterial, a spiritual entity which has no counterpart in the natural world. This approach is deemed by Macmurray to be inadequate because, once more, it leads us to a dualist position. He suggests that a more appropriate understanding of our relation to the world can be found by following what he considers to be the implications of human agency.

We know that we are agents; and any theory which explicitly or implicitly denies this is necessarily in error. We have tried to follow, step by step, the implications of this starting-point. It has led us to the community of persons in relation, realising their unity as the condition of freedom for every agent. But this community can act only through the Other, which is both its support and its resistance; and this Other is the world of which the community of agents is only a part, in dynamic relation with the other parts. How are we to represent to ourselves this universe of existence, and our relation to it as the common world of which we form part?¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.212.

¹⁰⁹ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.214.

Macmurray's answer to this question is that to conceive the world as a personal universe is to understand our relation with the world in religious terms. For Macmurray it is much better to ask if the world is a personal world than to ask whether God exists. To ask whether God exists is to imply once again the primacy of the theoretical, because the question of God's existence presupposes an idea of God which arises independently of any knowledge of the existence of God. A more adequate theological question is therefore to ask whether or not our world is a personal world. The question of the nature of the world, personal or impersonal, can be properly answered only through the idea of action.

This is a real question only if it has a reference to action. If it made no difference to action it would be meaningless – a merely speculative metaphysical conundrum. It would be incapable of any verification. But clearly we can live in the world in a fashion that is grounded either in a belief that the world is personal or that it is impersonal; and that these two ways of life will be different. Consequently, the verification of the belief in God must lie in their difference; and in particular in the difference between the realisation of freedom in the one and in the other.¹¹⁰

Macmurray suggests that the difference between a personal and an impersonal conception of the world is a matter of what he calls 'apperception'. The two major ways of understanding the world are those of science and religion. In examining these two outlooks more closely we can see how they are likely to affect our understanding of our relation with the world.

¹¹⁰ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.215.

Religion apperceives the world personally; science impersonally. This implies two different conceptions of the relation between man and the world. For science this relation is an impersonal one; for religion it is personal. The scientific apperception is pragmatic. The world is material for our use, and science seeks to develop that knowledge of the world through which we can use it as the instrument of our intentions. The religious apperception is communal. The relation of man to the world is his relation to God; and we relate ourselves rightly to the world by entering into communion with God, and seeking to understand and to fulfil his intention.¹¹¹

Macmurray is anxious to show that, while the distinction between seeing the world from a religious or scientific point of view is of the greatest importance, it is not true that religion and science are inherently incompatible. Rather, he perceives that religion is the expression of an adequate and complete apperception of our relation to the world while science is the expression of a necessarily limited, partial and therefore inadequate apperception.

In order to suggest the strength of his view, Macmurray now offers a number of reasons why an impersonal conception of the world is inadequate. The first point he makes is that the world is precisely one in which we live and to which we belong. As human beings we are elements of the world and our actions are part of the activity of the world. That is enough to suggest that the world is personal. Next, a strictly scientific or impersonal view of the world cannot account for human activity. The scientific understanding of the world accepts the physical nature of life, and sees the world as consisting of events which occur in accordance with

¹¹¹ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.217.

unchanging natural laws. All changes in this world are seen as being determinate. Such a view allows no room for human freedom and action. Thirdly, Macmurray argues that it is through action that we know both our own existence and the existence of others. But if we perceive the world impersonally we commit ourselves to the notion that everything that happens in the world is simply the effect of prior causes. There can be no accounting for acting with intention in a strictly scientific perspective.

Since the scientific understanding of the world, as Macmurray presents it, can only offer a severely impoverished and unpalatable understanding of the nature of reality, he suggests that we ought therefore to understand our relation to the world in personal and religious terms. Thus, we are not only in personal relation to the world but also in a personal relationship with God.

To conceive the world thus is to conceive it as the act of God, the Creator of the world, and ourselves as created agents, with a limited and dependent freedom to determine the future, which can be realised only on the condition that our intentions are in harmony with His intention, and which must frustrate itself if they are not.¹¹²

As he draws his Gifford Lectures to a close, Macmurray is anxious that his conclusions about human nature, the nature of the world and the nature of God should not be misunderstood. He therefore stresses, in the first place, that the conception of God which he has arrived at is not a pantheistic one. He believes that pantheism results from the attempt to put a religious perspective on an essentially organic conception of the world. Only a personal conception of the world can be fully theistic and fully religious.

¹¹² John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.222.

We should therefore perceive God as ‘the infinite Agent who is immanent in the world which is his act, but transcendent of it’.¹¹³

Next, Macmurray makes the point that, although he has offered a sustained argument to show that God is in personal relationship with human beings and with the world, this does not mean that he is arguing for the truth of any particular system of religious belief. It is his view that religious doctrines are problematic in much the same way as scientific theories are problematic, and that religious doctrines stand in need of constant revision and a continual verification in action. He suggests that religious doctrines can only be properly verified by those who are prepared to intentionally commit themselves to the way of life which their faith demands of them.

Finally, Macmurray expresses the hope that his analysis of the nature of the human person and the world as personal might assist in helping philosophy to recover its true voice. While lamenting the situation where philosophy has, in his view, reduced itself to the clarification of language through a logical and formal analysis, he believes that philosophy can yet re-discover its kinship with theology.

By shifting our standpoint from the ‘I think’ to the ‘I do’, we have restored the reference of thought to action, and in the result have found that we are driven to conceive a personal universe in which God is the ultimate reality. This transformation restores its whole substance to philosophy, which again becomes the intellectual aspect of the search for the real. The problematic of philosophy lies then in the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’. Now this, we have seen, is the problematic of religious reflection; and philosophy, if it is concerned with the intellectual

¹¹³ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.223.

aspect of this problematic, must be identical with theology, with an undogmatic theology which, like science, has abandoned certainty, and which has recognised that religious doctrines too are all hypothetical. Philosophy, we must conclude, is theology which has abandoned dogmatism, and has become in a new and wider sense a Natural Theology.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.224.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS

Towards the end of his life Macmurray was to write to a friend that his philosophical ideas found their fullest expression in the Gifford Lectures that we have just examined. While such a view cannot be argued with, what was not fully developed in his Gifford Lectures was his own understanding of the person of Jesus, and the significance of Jesus in revealing the true nature of human beings. Throughout his life Macmurray wrote and thought and spoke about both the philosophical and religious importance of Jesus. Without an attempt to articulate these personal beliefs of Macmurray we will fail to properly situate his Gifford Lectures, and fail to understand why Jesus and Christianity are absolutely central to Macmurray's whole enterprise. To this task, therefore, we turn.

The Ambiguity of Christianity

In 1938, just as the world was about to be engulfed by the horrors of a second world war that would call into question the values of the world and the very meaning of human life, Macmurray published a book entitled *The Clue to History*. In this work he expressed more clearly than anywhere else in his writings how he understood the person of Jesus, and what difference he felt an appropriate understanding of Jesus would make to our personal lives and to the world in which we live. A close examination of the views that Macmurray expresses in *The Clue to History* will reveal that his own

understanding of the person of Jesus was not only religiously profound but was also in harmony with his wider philosophical concerns.

In his opening chapter, entitled *The Ambiguity of Christianity*, Macmurray argues that the meaning of the term Christianity is not as simple or clear as we would imagine. This is largely due to the fact that the word refers not simply to a set of particular beliefs and practices but also to a great number of Churches and groups that describe themselves as Christian. There is too the fact that Christianity cannot but be linked to the historical events of the life and teaching of Jesus. The first task then in coming to a proper understanding of the meaning of Christianity is to define it in such a way that the life and message of Jesus is treated within its proper historical context. The reason why this is so crucial is that the Christian churches, though obviously coming into existence because of the life and teachings of Jesus, do not necessarily maintain the teachings of Jesus in their own teaching and practices.

The historical development of Churches or other institutions in no way guarantees that the original teaching of their founder, or even the original purpose of their foundation is retained. Historical continuity is no guarantee of spiritual continuity.¹¹⁵

Macmurray argues that much of the confusion over the meaning of Christianity arises from this lack of clarity as to what is meant by the use of the word itself. What does it mean for one to describe oneself as a Christian? Is a person a Christian because she accepts and believes in the teachings of Jesus? Or is someone a Christian because she participates in the religious activities which have some historical continuity with the

¹¹⁵ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, SCM Press, London, 1938, p. 3.

foundational Christian community of Jesus and his disciples? While acknowledging that there have long been theological differences as to which view is right, differences that have indeed contributed to the ambiguity of the term Christianity, Macmurray's own approach in *The Clue to History* is unambiguous.

It seems to me that historical continuity must take precedence in this debate. For religion is concerned with the reality of life, and not with ideas, except insofar as they embody themselves in life. And the reality of human life is history. It is what Jesus did to human history by his life and death rather than what he said about it that matters when we come to define Christianity. His work consists not in what he told men they ought to do but in what he did to men. Christianity is primarily the movement which Jesus founded rather than the doctrines that he taught.¹¹⁶

Having said that, Macmurray is anxious to show that the continuity of the teaching of Jesus is also important. In his view, a claim to historical continuity with the life and actions of Jesus would necessarily involve a claim to historical continuity with the ideas and teachings of Jesus too. Indeed, the real value of the teaching of Jesus lies not so much in the particular message that he expounds but rather that in his teaching Jesus reveals his own purposes and intention for the world.

If then we are properly to discover whether an individual or an institution or a way of life can legitimately be described as Christian, we have to decide whether they are part of the historic continuity of purpose and intention first expressed in the life of Jesus and first defined by him in his teaching. The teaching of Jesus is important because it defines a purpose,

¹¹⁶ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.4.

not because it defines a set of ideas about the world, and not because it defines a way of life that men might live or 'ought' to live.¹¹⁷

Just as Macmurray was to argue later that seeing the human person from the perspective of agency would provide us with an adequate understanding of the nature of human being, so here he suggests that by examining the actions of Jesus we can come to a proper appreciation of the intentions of Jesus. In so doing we are then enabled to capture the precise meaning of Christianity. For Macmurray, one thing is absolutely clear. To be a Christian, and for a Church to be properly Christian, is to have some real share in the historical intention underlying the actions and the teachings of Jesus.

To define Christianity, then, is to define the historic continuity of an intention. The reason why our efforts to define it set us in conflict is that we habitually separate the two elements which are united in an intention – the element of thought, or the mental element; and the material element, the element of physical activity. There arises in this way a dualism of theory and practice. Neither of these two elements can provide, by itself, a criterion of Christianity.¹¹⁸

Having set himself the task of clarifying the historical intentions of Jesus, both in his actions and in his teachings, Macmurray now attempts to provide the context in which Jesus lived and came to the decisions he made about his own intentions. His view is that the intention that Jesus brought to his life and his actions finds its source in the experience of the life of the Jewish people of the Old Testament times. Although most people have no

¹¹⁷ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.5.

¹¹⁸ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, pp.9-10.

difficulty in acknowledging that Christianity therefore finds its historical roots in Judaism, little is made of the religious significance of that fact.

The Importance of Judaism for Christianity

The religious significance of the fact that Christianity finds its roots in the Jewish tradition lies, for Macmurray, in his view that the Jewish culture and tradition is the only one in history that can be described as maintaining unsullied a religious form and outlook. By contrast, the other great traditions which have influenced Western society, those of the Greek and Roman world, while being originally religious in outlook as were all societies, gradually moved away from a strictly religious outlook and consciousness.

Primitive society is religious in form precisely because the elements of culture which represent the origins of art, science, morality, law and politics, have no autonomy. They are contained in religion and remain aspects of it. The break with the religious form of consciousness, which is almost universal, occurs when these aspects of social life, or some of them, assert their autonomy, so that religion itself becomes one aspect of culture which is contrasted with others. What is characteristic of the Hebrew people is that it achieved a development to a high level of civilization without this breaking up of the aspects of social life into autonomous, contrasted and competing fields of interest and effort.¹¹⁹

Thus, the real significance of the history of Jewish society and culture lies in the fact that religion never became simply another sphere of human activity, but rather that everything within the Jewish world was imbued with a religious understanding. Within the Jewish tradition, as far as Macmurray

¹¹⁹ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.28.

understands it, there could be no split between the secular and the religious aspects of life. The great value in the religious outlook of Judaism is that it manages to avoid the dualism that inevitably follows from the split between religion and all the other activities of life. Judaism, in maintaining the religious consciousness which was to be found in all primitive societies, was thus able to avoid the dualistic notions which are to be found in all other cultures, expressed in issues such as the contrast between this world and another world, and between the spiritual and the material.

The history of the Jewish people, as described in the Old Testament, is for Macmurray, the story of the ongoing struggle to overcome the tendency to fall into a dualistic view of life and of the world. Because at heart it is a religious community, Judaism was able to avoid dividing their society into different social classes. The teaching of the Law and the practice of things like the Jubilee Year ensured that no aristocracy of the rich and the powerful was able to arise. So too, the fact that in Jewish tradition it was the prophet rather than the priest who was the main source of religious inspiration and revelation means that Judaism managed to avoid the dualism of having a hierarchy of religious classes too.

Macmurray argues that there is always a close connection between the way that we conceive God and the way that we conceive our human life. Our understanding of the relationship between God and humanity will largely determine our understanding of how human beings are to relate to one another. Here too, we have much to learn from the way that Judaism has understood the true nature of the relationship between God and human beings and between human beings themselves.

The Jewish Law is summed up, not by Jesus but by the Jewish lawyer quoting from the Old Testament, in the two commandments, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God" and "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself"...This dictates a society which is equalitarian and democratic,...which determines human relations in terms of the inner democracy and equality of friendship, not as an ideal but as a practice of social relation which is totally incompatible with class-distinction, either on an economic or on a caste basis.¹²⁰

The Jewish society, like all other societies, had of course to recognize that the vision of the harmonious life of friendship, pictured in the two great commandments, was easier to imagine than to see in actual practice. How is one able to maintain a fully religious outlook on life if there is so much evil in the world? How is one to explain the fact that the relations between God and human beings, and between fellow human beings, are not as harmonious and united as they ought to be?

It is at this point that dualism seems inevitable, as a distinction between an ideal world of what ought to be and a real and evil world of what is. If the religious consciousness is to be maintained through the process of development, the problem of evil must be solved in a practical fashion, which will allow the idea and the actuality to remain as parts of one world.¹²¹

Macmurray suggests that it was the doctrine of the Fall, and with it the promise of salvation, that enabled the Jewish religion to avoid falling into dualism here. The beauty of the doctrine of the fall from grace of Adam and Eve, and of all human beings, is that it permits us to understand the

¹²⁰ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.34.

¹²¹ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.35

problem of evil without needing to create an ideal world where evil would no longer be an issue. This world is the only world we have, and the task of human beings in this world is to be reconciled to God and to our fellow human beings through repentance and forgiveness. Such a view keeps intact the primary understanding of the Jewish faith that this world, despite the evils to be found in it, is essentially good because created by Yahweh. The goodness of Yahweh is itself seen most clearly in the fact that redemption and reconciliation is possible for human beings as soon as they recognize that they themselves are responsible for the evil and sin of the world. Evil, in other words, cannot ultimately defeat the acts of God.

Hence the Fall of man merely describes the conditions under which God now works for the redemption of the world...The Fall of man becomes itself part of the process of the creation of the world, and history the process by which the intention of God for human life is being carried out. Where God is conceived as Agent the world is conceived as his act, and in that case the criterion of reality must be the continuity of intention. And this intention becomes, with the Fall, the intention of reconciliation, and therefore can only be achieved through an operation on the will of man. By thus doing justice both to the existence of evil and to the goodness of God and his creation, the Hebrew consciousness escapes from dualism and retains an integral consciousness of the world.¹²²

The major value in the Jewish religious understanding, as far as Macmurray is concerned, lies not simply in that it manages to avoid any form of dualism, but also that it clearly perceives that religion is concerned with this world, and that history is nothing other than the act of God. What we see

¹²² John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.38.

therefore in the Jewish tradition, as distinct from the Greek and Roman cultures, is a clear view of the meaning of religion.

Negatively, we see that the religious mode reveals itself in the absence of dualism. Positively, it reveals itself in the integration of action and reflection. The conception of God is also the conception of the nature of society, and the experience of society is itself the act of God. In this way, religious reflection becomes a continuous interpretation of history, and historic experience becomes a progressive revelation of the nature and purpose of God.¹²³

It is of the greatest importance for Macmurray that it was within the Jewish religious understanding and context that Jesus came, lived and died. He argues that it was in the person of Jesus that the religious and cultural outlook of Judaism was completed, and that it was through Jesus that the religious understanding of the Jewish people became a universal value in history. It is the figure of Jesus who therefore stands as the culmination of the prophets of the Old Testament and the source of Christianity, which makes universal the religious understanding of Judaism.

By completing the process of the prophetic development, Jesus released it from the limitations of its national reference and made it a movement for the salvation, not of the Jews, but of the world through the Jews. For this reason it is essential to insist again that Christianity is Jewish and that Jesus was a Jew.¹²⁴

The importance of this fact lies not so much in that it reveals the cultural and religious background to the life of Jesus, but in the fact that Jesus stands

¹²³ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, pp.39-40.

¹²⁴ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.42.

as the mature and final expression of the Jewish consciousness. As Macmurray has suggested earlier, the crucial aspect of what he calls the Jewish consciousness is that it manages to overcome dualism, and therefore sees no split between faith and life, between the religious and the social elements of human life.

For the religious consciousness a statement about society is a religious statement and a statement about God has an immediate and direct reference to society. This is the clue to any understanding of Jesus. He is not an idealist – for the same reason that he is not a materialist – because the distinction between the ideal and the material does not arise for him.¹²⁵

According to Macmurray, the work of Jesus began as a prophet, in the judgement that the Jewish people have turned away from the purpose of God, and in a call for repentance. It is a religious criticism of the social life of the Jews, one made in the light of a religious interpretation of their history. The particular historical context in which Jesus lived was, of course, one where the Jewish people had been conquered by the Romans and lived under their control. Although the Roman Empire could scarcely be considered by the Jews as anything like the Kingdom of God, Jesus never spoke of the need to overthrow the yoke of political slavery in order to bring in the reign of the Kingdom of God. Instead, he called the Jewish people to repentance and to turn back to the ways of God. Macmurray suggests that, within the historical context in which he lived, Jesus made a fundamental decision that his task was to bring the Jewish people back to an appropriate understanding of their call: to be a religious people.

¹²⁵ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.44.

The character of this decision is seen in the fact that it defines Jesus' mission as a mission to his own people. His task is defined by this decision. He must lead his people to a fulfillment of their destiny by a return to the religious principles of national action which their historical experience has revealed and clarified, and so establish the conditions necessary for the fulfillment of the divine purpose through them.¹²⁶

The Teaching of Jesus

Turning to the question of the teaching of Jesus, Macmurray argues that two elements are normally distinguished. There is first the exposition of Jesus' understanding of the nature of human life in the world, an understanding set within the context of the whole Jewish tradition. A second element is apocalyptic and more concerned with the future. Macmurray suggests that most Christians are happy to reflect on the first of these elements, one which focuses on the moral and spiritual values of Jesus, but are much less comfortable with the apocalyptic element. The difficulties that we have in marrying these two aspects of the teaching of Jesus are a sign that we too have been tainted by dualist notions.

The fact that we find it difficult to relate the two aspects reveals the dualistic and non-religious character of our own minds. These two aspects are fundamentally one; and to understand Jesus, or indeed the religious mode of consciousness of which he is the supreme expression, is to realize their essential and necessary unity.¹²⁷

What is clear for Macmurray is that the teaching of Jesus is directly related to the notion that the purpose of God is at work in the history of the Jewish

¹²⁶ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, pp. 48-49.

¹²⁷ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.49.

people who are God's chosen ones. It is only when we accept that God is at work in the world and that God's intentions will be realized that we will learn to find happiness in working too for God's intention. Only then will we be able to avoid falling into the trap of a dualistic understanding of God, the world and ourselves. The significance of the apocalyptic element in Jesus' teaching is that it is based on the belief that God will succeed in bringing about his intention, in history.

The apocalyptic element in the teaching of Jesus is, indeed, the major premiss upon which the whole teaching of Jesus rests, and if this is not grasped then the teaching itself cannot be understood. In other words, the teaching of Jesus is his answer to the question, "How is the kingdom of God to be established in the world?" That it will be established is the primary postulate. To deny it would be to deny the existence of God. A creator who cannot achieve the intention of his creation is a contradiction in terms.¹²⁸

Once the apocalyptic element in Jesus' teaching, that God's intentions for the world and for human beings will be realized in time, has been properly understood, then it becomes easier to understand the role of the Jewish people in salvation history and to perceive that Jesus reveals to us our essential nature.

Thus Jesus marks the point in history at which it becomes possible for man to adopt consciously as his own purpose the purpose which is already inherent in his own nature. The mission of Jesus to his own people is to reveal to them what has been implicit in their cultural history

¹²⁸ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.54.

from the beginning, to declare to them what they are called to do and to demand their acceptance of the task and its conditions.¹²⁹

The primary revelation that Jesus brings to the Jewish people of his time is concerned with the nature of human being; that human life is by its very nature, a personal life. This teaching, while it might appear more than obvious, needs, in Macmurray's view, to be reinforced in the contemporary world, which is marked by organic and scientific notions of being.

To say that human life is personal is primarily to deny that human life is organic, or that it can be treated as differing from animal life only in degree and not in kind. It is to assert that the essence of human life is radically different from the essence of organic life, and that the relations which constitute the totality of human life are radically different from those which make a unity of the organic world. It is this essential character of human life, the thing that constitutes its humanness, that Jesus discovered. And what he discovered was already implicit in the Old Testament and had been coming nearer and nearer the threshold of consciousness throughout the process of Jewish development.¹³⁰

The teaching of Jesus about the nature of the human person serves not only as a contribution to human knowledge but, more importantly for Macmurray, it also brings about a transformation of history. The effect of the teaching of Jesus is that it allows us to come to a fuller self-realisation, and in so doing it invites us to be transformed too. The message that Jesus teaches is one that allows us to discover the truth of our own nature, and to be able to act according to who we truly are. Part of the realisation of who

¹²⁹ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.55.

¹³⁰ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.56.

we are will be that we recognize that there is a purpose in life, that to be human is to participate in the purposes and intentions of God.

Now it is the fundamental postulate of religious rationality that the purpose of God must inevitably be achieved. Thus, the discovery of the essence of humanity is the discovery, not merely of what human life ought to be, but of what human life will be when the work of God in history is complete. It is the discovery of what God is working at and will achieve in human history. It explains past history and it defines the end to which present history is in fact moving. Thus, by discovering, at the point where the development of Hebrew reflection completes itself, his own essence as a human being, Jesus discovered the intention of God for man, which is the end of the process of history, the kingdom of heaven which is to be established on earth.¹³¹

Macmurray next turns to a closer examination of the way in which Jesus, through both his teaching and his actions, defines and expresses his fundamental insight into human nature. He suggests that Jesus defines the nature of human life both positively and negatively. From the negative perspective, Jesus reveals the true meaning of human nature by denying the truth of any expression of human nature which is not personal. So, we find that Jesus denies that human community can be based simply on organic models, or even on ties of family and blood. More concretely, this involves the denial that human relationships can properly be based on family, nation or race. When Jesus stated that whoever does the will of the Father is his mother and father, he was denying that family alone could afford us an appropriate idea of human relations. The parable of the Good Samaritan, which is a response to the question as to who counts as a neighbour, reveals that human communities can only be brought about when we actually

¹³¹ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.58.

intend communion with others. Community, therefore, is not a matter of fact but a matter of intention.

The difference that is brought out in this way between the organic relations and the personal relations is that the first are matters of fact, while the second are matters of intention. The reason why the animal ties of blood-relation cannot form the basis of human community is that human community is a community of persons, and the unity of human persons depends on human purposes determining human behaviour. Blood relations are mere matters of fact which have no relation to that freedom of choice which is the defining characteristic of human life.¹³²

In Macmurray's view, Jesus also offers positive views about the proper nature of human being through his attempts to define the kind of structures of relationship that would be found in a real community of persons. These structures are exemplified in the great teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus presents his listeners with a profound lesson on the real demands of love. Turning away from the notion that it is enough to love those who have some special place in our lives through family ties or through other social structures, Jesus insists that we are capable of intending love with all others, even those whom we might consider to be enemies. The demand of such a task lies precisely in the fact that "it lifts human behaviour from the level of natural impulse to the level of deliberate intention".¹³³ It is the intending of communion with others that permits us to deepen the bonds of love and fellowship with others. Love, in Jesus' understanding, is not an emotion but rather a decision and an intention.

¹³² John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.64.

¹³³ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.66.

The basis of a free human community must be the intention to enter into community with others. It is in this way that love, which is in fact always the basis of whatever human community there is, is raised in Jesus to the level of intention, so that it becomes the motive force behind the intention to create the kingdom of heaven, the community of mankind.¹³⁴

Macmurray is anxious to make clear that the teaching of Jesus on the need for love if we are to create communion is not some idealistic notion but is intensely practical. The call of Jesus to love our enemies presupposes that true community does not yet exist and offers a practical suggestion as to what is needed if indeed we desire community and fellowship. Since real community is marked by the mutual love and affection of its members, any attempt to create community must begin with the intention of overcoming hostility, so that love is created where it previously did not exist.

The guiding principles that would constitute any real community based on the intending of love and fellowship would be equality and freedom. But Macmurray again wants to state that these two principles are not simply political slogans but that they are given a particular focus through the teaching of Jesus. Freedom is the absence of restraint, and freedom therefore means that we ought to be able to achieve our intentions. In order for human beings to be properly free, they have to be able to act with the intention of being true to their essential nature. To look for any other kind of freedom can only end in self-frustration. We are only free insofar as we live according to our own reality.

Freedom, in its full sense, can only be achieved when our intention is in harmony with the nature of the reality of which we form a part; that is to

¹³⁴ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.67.

say, when our will and God's will coincide...The primary condition which must be fulfilled if we are not to be frustrated, is that the relations which bind us together into community, and which form the basis of the possibility of human cooperation, should be right. Thus the root of frustration and unfreedom in human life is the existence of enmity and estrangement between us. If the relations between individuals in any community are not harmonious then its members must be frustrated. They cannot realize their intentions. They cannot be free.¹³⁵

Turning to the idea of equality, Macmurray again suggests that the vision of Jesus offers us a particular understanding of equality which is markedly different from that offered by others. This notion of equality is based on the fundamental principle that human life is personal, and therefore we can only achieve proper equality once we acknowledge that fact. Equality is not some kind of mathematical notion but is again the truth of our nature as human beings.

It is neither a material nor an ideal equality that is properly referred to, but a personal equality which combines both. In particular, it is not the negation of difference. It is precisely the recognition of difference and variety among individuals that gives meaning to the assertion of equality. The statement that all men are equal means that any claim that one man or one class or type of man is superior or inferior to another is, as a matter of fact, quite untrue. The reason why it is untrue is that it makes a human relationship impossible.¹³⁶

Having shown that what is often termed as the ethical teaching of Jesus is nothing other than an examination of our real human nature and the setting out of the principles that accord with that nature, Macmurray next turns his

¹³⁵ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.72.

¹³⁶ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.74.

attention to the fact that we tend to create a dualism between Jesus' ethical teaching and his apocalyptic teaching. As we have already seen, Macmurray finds such a division between the ethical and the apocalyptic problematic because in reality, there is no such division.

What then is the basis of this distinction between "ethic" and "apocalyptic"? It is quite clearly the dualism between the spiritual and the material, which is the basic form of any non-religious mode of apprehension. The "ethic" is spiritual. It sets before us an ideal of human conduct. It reveals how we ought to behave. It provides us with a theory of the good life. The "apocalyptic" on the other hand, is about this world and what will happen to it in the end.¹³⁷

What is needed, therefore, if we are to succeed in coming to a correct understanding of the teaching of Jesus, is to move away from the distortions that a dualist approach inevitably brings, and to see that the teaching of Jesus cannot be divided according to dualist premisses. Macmurray believes that what is normally described as the ethical teaching of Jesus is in fact an expression of Jesus' anthropology, one that expresses the principles that govern the personal life. Likewise, what is often termed as the apocalyptic teaching of Jesus is nothing other than the prediction about the future of the personal life in the world which follows from those same principles. Only when we are able to bring the various aspects of Jesus' teaching together can we be sure that we properly understand his teaching.

If then we are to understand the teaching of Jesus we must rid our minds of the habit of dualism, and learn to think the world, as he thought it, religiously; as an integral whole in which the contrast of spirit and matter, and all the contrasts to which this gives rise, are overcome. The proof of

¹³⁷ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.84.

our success will be that both ethic and apocalyptic will disappear, and in their place we shall find a single unity of religious understanding with a prediction of the future course of history as an inherent and necessary part of it. We shall discover, as in all real understanding, an insight which is also foresight.¹³⁸

One of the results of looking at the world from a properly religious perspective, for Macmurray, is that one is thus enabled to come to a realisation that God's action did not end with the creation, but that "history is the continued act of God, and it is in his working in history that God is known."¹³⁹ Since real action involves the realisation of an intention, one can then see that history as the action of God and the realisation of the intention of God. Further, if God is the Absolute, it would be absurd to imagine that God's intention in history will not be realised. Such an idea, however, might well appear to be problematic. While it may be true that history can be seen as being the action of God in our world, history is also about the actions of human beings in the world. What then, if any, is the connection between the actions of God in history and our human actions? How can the manifold intentions of human actions be linked to the intention which directs God's action in the world? What are we to make of the fact that often our human intentions may be in opposition to God's intention or will? In Macmurray's view, Jesus was able to offer real answers to these kinds of questions. According to the teaching of Jesus, a fundamental truth is that if our human intentions are opposed to the intention of God then they will not be finally achieved, and our intentions will be frustrated. To be in opposition to the will of God is to be in opposition to our own reality as

¹³⁸ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.92.

¹³⁹ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.93.

human beings. To be a person is to be God's act, and therefore God's intentions are embodied in our own human nature.

This then is the principle by which Jesus understands the nature of human freedom and its relation to the intention of God in history, which is the nature of reality. God acts in history as Creator of Man. The intention of this creation is known – a universal community of persons, with freedom and equality as its structural principles of relationship. Clearly such a relation is not possible unless Man wills it, because the structure of human relationship is the expression of human intentions. If God is to create a free and equal humanity, then Man must intend a free and equal humanity. God's action in history must then be the creation in Man of the effective intention to realise universal freedom and equality; and since God cannot fail to realise his own intention, this will to community is necessitated.¹⁴⁰

The question immediately arises, however, as to the nature of human freedom. If we are free to will freedom are we not also free to reject freedom? In what way can it be necessary for us to accept freedom and equality and yet remain free? Macmurray argues that the answer that is found in the teaching of Jesus is very clear. To reject our human freedom is necessarily self-frustrating. To reject freedom is to reject our own nature and to fall into dualism, which leads to a perpetual war within oneself and within societies.

Since God continues to act in history, and since God's will cannot be ultimately frustrated, we are able to see in the events of history that God continually calls human beings back to the realisation of their true nature. It is within this context that we are able to perceive the history of salvation.

¹⁴⁰ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.100.

The whole world is offered the gift of redemption through the history of God's action for the Jewish people. The history of the Old Testament, therefore, is nothing other than the revelation of God's intention for humanity, and with it, the call for the Jewish people to accept God's will as their will, so that they might be the light that lightens the nations. One of the tasks given to the Jewish people as the Chosen People is to bring about the restoration of the idea that we are called to share our common humanity. Macmurray sees the story of the tower of Babel as one which reveals this task. The story takes for granted the notion that there was a primordial unity among all peoples and so needs to explain the fact of diversity and division, highlighted by the existence of many different languages. The explanation for this diversity is viewed in terms of our rebellion against God. The diversity and lack of unity among peoples is therefore understood to be a punishment for sin, and the implication of such a view is that the redemption from this sin will bring about a restoration of communion between all peoples. A significant part of Jesus' teaching, therefore, is to remind his fellow Jews of their task of restoring the unity that has been lost through sin.

Jesus' proclamation of the community of mankind is primarily a call to his own people to accept as their mission, for which in the purpose of God their whole history has been a preparation, the task of breaking down the exclusive nationalism and racialism of the world, and becoming the means of the unification of mankind.¹⁴¹

According to Macmurray, Jesus stands as the complete expression of the developing Jewish insight that human history is the act of God. With the

¹⁴¹ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.108.

coming of Jesus we are able to recognise the real intention of God in history.

Jesus has discovered the structural law of the action of reality in human experience. He has brought into human consciousness, in the form of rational knowledge, the real nature of human life, and the law of its relation to the nature of reality as a whole. The result of this is that it is now possible for men to adopt as their own intention, universally, the intention of God for man, and to seek to realise it. Further, since the intention of God for man is necessarily man's real intention, its acceptance unifies human action and integrates human nature. Its rejection, on the other hand, sets man in opposition to himself and leads to self-destruction.¹⁴²

The Failure of Christianity

Having attempted to understand the life and teaching of Jesus from within the context of the history of the Jewish people, Macmurray next turns his attention more specifically to the history of the Christian Church, a Church which claims to be continuing to proclaim the message of Jesus. The first point he makes is that Christianity in practice bears little resemblance to Macmurray's own picture of the nature of Christianity.

There is clearly a very great difference between Christianity as we have now defined it, and Christianity as exemplified by the various Christian Churches of Europe – at least since Christianity was adopted as the official religion of the Roman Empire. If our interpretation of the mind

¹⁴² John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, pp. 116-7.

and intention of Jesus is correct, even in general principle, then European religion has transformed Christianity into something very unlike itself.¹⁴³

It is by again looking at history that we can find an explanation for this failure of the Christian Churches to remain faithful to the intention of God which is expressed in the person of Jesus. The first disciples of Jesus were themselves Jewish, and they proceeded to carry out the intention of God through their efforts to make the message of Jesus known beyond the confines of the Jewish nation. Within a relatively short period of time most of those who belonged to the Christian community were not Jewish. Macmurray believes that the failure of the Jewish people to accept the insights of Jesus involved them in a rejection of their own true nature, so that “the Christian community is the result of the acceptance by Gentiles of the inner significance of the Hebrew culture, and the Jewish community is the result of its rejection by the Hebrews themselves.”¹⁴⁴

The early Christian communities emerged and grew, both in terms of numbers and of influence, within the political setting of the Roman Empire. For long periods the Roman authorities, previously noted for their general tolerance for all religions, persecuted those who followed the teachings of Jesus. This is a sign that the Romans were well aware of the revolutionary nature of the Christian message, and of the threat that it posed for the Empire. However, the Christian community succumbed to the temptation to form a strategic alliance with the Roman authorities and, in so doing, lost sight of their own vocation in the world, to create a universal community.

¹⁴³ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.121.

¹⁴⁴ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.124.

This alliance involved the acceptance by the organized Church of the practical dualism which Jesus had repudiated, and Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. This premature political triumph of Christianity did not mean the acceptance of the intention of Christianity by the Roman Empire, but the maintenance of the Roman power against the threat to its continued existence which Christianity contained within it. Consequently, from the side of the Church, it meant the achievement of a continuity of institutional development at the expense of negating its own significance. The Church denied the Christian intention by yielding to the will to power.¹⁴⁵

Macmurray suggests that the history of medieval Europe reveals the final result of the partnership between the Christian Church and the Roman Empire. The unity of medieval Europe, such as it was, had been built by the Christian Church from the ruins of the earlier Roman Empire. The levels of freedom and equality that human beings experienced in medieval times was much greater than that available to citizens of the Roman Empire. In medieval Christendom we are able recognise a human society which was largely based on the religious belief in the shared humanity of all peoples. This is undoubtedly a great achievement. But, we ought not to close our eyes to the failures of medieval Christianity.

We are seeking to...maintain the religious attitude, which can see every stage of historical progress as at once the triumph of the purpose of God and the manifestation of human self-frustration. What we have to notice is first that the measure of conscious human cooperation with the purpose of God which the medieval world contains is the measure of its progress beyond the stage of history represented by the Roman Empire;

¹⁴⁵ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, pp.130-1.

and secondly, that the measure of its failure is the extent to which the will to power remains dominant within it.¹⁴⁶

The failure of the medieval Church to be faithful to the message of Jesus is to be seen most clearly in the dualist structures of Church and State. Macmurray suggests that both Church and State in the medieval context were involved in a battle for power. Whatever might be said about the Church wielding the sword of spiritual power and the State wielding the sword of temporal power, in fact the Church, precisely in its quest for power, inevitably turned away from the vision of communion and love that was the keynote of Jesus' life and teaching.

The pressure of the Hebrew tradition in Christianity is towards the unification of theory and practice, of spiritual and material, in order to create a community on a basis of freedom and equality. Theoretically, the Church exists to further this purpose. Practically, it exists – as the religion of Christendom – to sustain the dualistic structure of medieval society. These two purposes negate one another, and produce a dualism and a tension in the body of the Church itself.¹⁴⁷

Turning next to a reflection on the history of the modern world, Macmurray argues that the dualism inherent in medieval Christianity remains problematic in the modern era too. This is so despite the fact that the State has now become the secular instrument of government. While most of the Christian Churches have been happy to accept the priority of the State in economic and social matters, they have still acquiesced in supporting a dualist understanding of life. The main difference between society in medieval times and in modern times is a structural one. Both Church and

¹⁴⁶ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.146.

¹⁴⁷ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.156.

State have broken up and been fragmented, as can be observed by noting the great number of both Christian Churches and States that have arisen in the modern period. Each of these Churches and States has tended to insist on their own autonomy and this has increased the difficulty of moving towards the life of unity that Jesus called for.

The other huge change that occurs in the transition from the medieval to the modern period is the rise of the concept of the individual, with its demands for personal freedom and personal rights. According to Macmurray, the form of the modern consciousness is inherently individualist. This change, one to be found both in modern notions of the State and of the Church, is itself problematic because it prevents human beings from recognising their own true nature.

Individual self-realisation is an impossibility. Selfhood is inherently mutual, and it is only in relationship with others that the self has any reality or can express it. Individualism, in which the individual self becomes its own end, is incompatible with the nature of action, in which the end must lie outside the self. The impulse to self-realisation is an impulse to spontaneous action. But the concentration upon the self negates the basis of action. Thus the modern world is in contradiction with itself, and the dualism which results between theory and practice has a new and intimate character.¹⁴⁸

The contradiction of the modern world manifests itself most clearly in the tension between the individual and the State, but this in turn signifies that there is a similar tension between each individual person and all the others. Once we focus wrongly on our own individual rights then we necessarily see

¹⁴⁸ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, pp.172-3.

other individuals as obstacles to our personal freedom. The relations between human beings, rather than being properly marked by mutual love and respect, tend to become competitive and hateful. The focus in the modern world on the rights of the individual, no matter how much support it carries, is bound to fail because, whether we accept it or not, to be a human being is to be a social being. In Macmurray's view, the modern understanding of the self, though different than that of the ancient and medieval periods, will through its contradictions also lead to self-frustration. "Individualism is self-contradictory and self-frustrating. Its intention is one which cannot be realised...Freedom and equality cannot be achieved by self-isolation. Real community is the condition of real freedom."¹⁴⁹

Despite the very serious criticisms that Macmurray makes about the failure of the Christian Churches to remain true to the fundamental insights of Jesus in regard to the nature of reality and the nature of human being, his conclusions remain optimistic. In drawing his book to a close he remains convinced that the intention of Jesus, because it is the reality of our life, will be achieved. So too, the intention of Jesus for the Church he established will finally bear fruit in a world of love and unity.

The leavening of Europe by Christianity has gone so far that unless progress can be stopped altogether the next step must be the adoption of the Christian intention not merely in idea but in practice. And this would be the disappearance of dualism and the end of class society, and the beginning of a planned and practical progress towards the achievement of a universal community of humanity on the only basis on which in fact it can be realised – the Christian basis of freedom and equality.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, pp.217-8.

¹⁵⁰ John Macmurray, *The Clue to History*, p.220.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF UNITY FOR THE CHURCHES AND FOR THE WORLD

Although in *The Clue to History* we are offered a deeper insight into Macmurray's understanding of the significance of Jesus and of the task of Christians to continue the action of God in history, one might argue that it does not reveal much about the nature of this personal relationship with God which Macmurray so adamantly calls for. It may be that his desire to remain always philosophically coherent somehow inhibited him from expressing more personally his own religious faith and relationship with Jesus. What is clear from Macmurray's life, however, is that his personal relationship with Jesus marked all of his intellectual concerns, and that his own relationship with God also gave a focus to his understanding of Christianity and his criticisms of the Churches. While Macmurray rarely wrote at an autobiographical level, we are offered an insight into his own faith journey in a book that he wrote in 1965, entitled *Search for Reality in Religion*, which was the published version of the Swarthmore Lecture he gave to a largely Quaker audience. This text, along with the newly published biography of Macmurray by John E. Costello, allows us to see more clearly that the question of the nature of the human person and the religious significance of life was more than an academic interest for him. It was his own love for Jesus that gave depth and power to his call for the Churches to be more faithful to the fundamental insights of Jesus. A brief examination of *Search for Reality in Religion*, along with a look at some of the key moments in his religious development, will therefore enable us to draw closer to the heart of Macmurray's concerns.

Macmurray's Faith Experience

There is a marked difference in style between Macmurray's earlier writings and that to be found in *Search for Reality in Religion*, one that is noted by Macmurray himself.

In this lecture I intend to speak not as a philosopher but as a person to persons, as a Christian to Christians, and, so far as my ignorance permits, as a Quaker to Quakers. I do not wish to start an argument but to find my way to an expression of personal belief. I shall not stay to prove what might be proved, since I am not concerned with philosophy now but with religion; not with conclusions of reason but with a confession of faith. I should like, for this purpose, to escape from the limits of mere intellectual formulation, and to speak from the whole of my experience.¹⁵¹

In the first section of the book Macmurray offers an autobiographical account of his own religious journey. He was born, in 1891, into a deeply religious family in Scotland and his earliest religious experiences took place within the Calvinist tradition of the Scottish Presbyterian Church. His parents, however, were much influenced by the missionary work of the American evangelists Moody and Sankey. It had been his father's intention to become a missionary to China but this plan had fallen away as a result of the Boxer Rebellion there. Macmurray himself felt a similar desire to become a missionary and went to university with that intention in mind, though he never actually brought that particular dream to fulfilment.

During his years as a student at Glasgow University he was greatly influenced by the Student Christian Movement. His membership of that

¹⁵¹ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, Quaker Home Service, 1965, pp.3-4.

Movement encouraged him in the desire to search for religious unity and in his belief that Christianity needs to work for the salvation of the life of the world. Another significant factor in his religious development during this time was his interest in matters scientific, an interest that was to remain with him throughout his academic career.

It was also during his student years that Macmurray had an experience which was to have a profound effect on his own religious understanding and which might be said to have initiated his lifelong search for the true meaning of religion. He was asked to lead a Bible study group for young men at the Glasgow Mission Hall, and he decided to take as his text the letter of St. Paul to the Romans. The reason for his choice was because he had been taught that the main aspects of Christian theology and doctrine were to be found there. Macmurray's approach however was to concentrate on a scientific analysis of the text as if it were entirely unknown to him. The results of his analysis came as a shock to him. He discovered that the great central Christian dogmas were not to be found in Paul's letter to the Romans after all. Rather than an exposition of doctrine, what was to be found was an invitation to experience the freedom from the law which comes through the person of Christ. This experience had an immediate effect on Macmurray's approach to theology and religion.

Two things were...decisive about it. The first was that the theology in which I had been trained could not stand up to a scientific scrutiny of the scriptural text from which it claimed to be derived. This did not result in a rejection of theology, far less of religion itself. But it made theology questionable and so destroyed its dogmatic claims. I did reject dogma, in the belief that theology required critical analysis and reconstruction. The

second decisive result came from the consciousness that I was using scientific tools to test the validity of my religious beliefs.¹⁵²

Macmurray's experience was to dramatically change his outlook on the whole question of religion. He was to subsequently maintain a great interest in the question of the relationship between science and religion, and was to focus much on the need for theology to be tested scientifically if it is not itself to fall prey to error. But there were changes of a more personal nature too.

I had reached the notion of a theology developing by self-criticism. It remained, however, little more than an idea. I had hardly begun to apply it. But I should never again fall into the gross mistake of identifying religion with theology or with any system of beliefs. To this I would add that religion remained for me missionary in outlook and function, and that it became more and more definitely non-sectarian and interdenominational. Before my student days were over my personal outlook in religion was fully and finally ecumenical.¹⁵³

Just at this time there was another great event waiting to take place, one that would be perhaps even more significant in the development of Macmurray's thought: The First World War. At the outbreak of hostilities, Macmurray seriously considered the possibility of being a pacifist but he finally decided to serve in the Medical Corps. In 1916, believing that serving on the medical corps was just as much taking part in the conflict as were the soldiers fighting in the trenches, he joined the Cameron Highlanders and served as a soldier until the end of the war.

¹⁵² John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.14.

¹⁵³ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, pp.15-16.

In terms of his religious development, Macmurray suggests that the horrors of the war had two main effects. The first was that the experience of so much suffering and death left him without any fear of death and allowed him to focus on reality.

The fear of death is the symbol in us of all fear; and fear is destructive of reality...Life is precious because it is short; and because it may end at any moment we must live so that every day would be a good day to die in, if death should come. Without this knowledge of death, I came to believe, there can be no real knowledge of life and so no discovery of the reality of religion.¹⁵⁴

The second significant effect on Macmurray's war experience was that he grew increasingly disillusioned by the kind of society that was prepared to accept the death of so many millions of people in war. He was also deeply upset by the hatred that he felt among the civilians he encountered while on home leave. This hatred he encountered most strongly when he was invited to preach at a Church in North London.

I took the opportunity to advise the church and the Christians in it, to guard against this war-mentality; and to keep themselves, so far as possible, aloof from the quarrel, so that they would be in a position – and of a temper – to undertake their proper task as Christians when the war was over, of reconciliation. The congregation took it badly; I could feel a cold hostility menacing me; and no one spoke to me when the service was over. It was after this service that I decided, on Christian grounds, that I should never, when the war was over, remain or become a member of any Christian Church.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.18.

¹⁵⁵ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.21.

This is as far as Macmurray goes in his description of his own personal faith. However, the fact that Macmurray did indeed refuse to join any of the Christian Churches until he became a Quaker, along with his wife, in 1959, should not lead us to the idea that during those 40 years between the end of the First World War and his joining the Quakers he was in some kind of religious wilderness. He believed that this refusal to join any religious organisation was an act of Christian protest against the spurious Christianity that he saw all around him. On a personal level, he remained a convinced Christian and he decided to devote his career to the issue that he considered the most important of all, the question of the reality of religion. He brought to this search a profound scepticism about all the traditional expressions of religion, but his desire was to discover the validity of all religion and of Christianity in particular.

Before looking more closely at the views expressed by Macmurray in *Search for Reality in Religion*, we can be helped to situate those views properly by looking at the way in which his own faith developed, particularly during the years in which he refused to join any of the Christian Churches. What will become clear is that it was through his own human experiences, and through reflection on the troubled historical period in which he lived, that he grew in his understanding of the nature of Jesus and the Church.

In his biography of Macmurray, John E. Costello makes much use of a private journal that Macmurray kept from the years 1908 to 1913, a time when he was a student at the University of Glasgow. The value of this journal is that it helps to suggest something of the dramatic and overwhelming nature of his turn away from a very traditional understanding of God and the Church towards a wider and more personal faith in the person of Jesus. It also shows that the development of his religious

understanding had already begun before the pivotal war experiences that Macmurray makes mention of in *Search for Reality in Religion*. During those years Macmurray experienced the exhilaration of discovering that the more personal his relationship with God became the more he grew in a sense of his own value and freedom. But he also experienced the painful struggle of having to let go of the doctrinal certainties he had previously believed and the loneliness that comes with the refusal to simply accept what others hold to be true. In a journal entry made in 1912 he wrote:

Everything has hitherto been believed on the authority of others and of their experience. Now I refuse, and must refuse, to build my hopes for all that is highest and best upon an untested authority – however high – or to wrestle through the struggle we call life in contest for the truth of another's experience.¹⁵⁶

The decision to search for a religious faith that was authentically his own brought Macmurray into conflict with his parents who felt that his time at university had succeeded only in turning him away from the faith he had been brought up to hold most dear.

Father and mother have spoken what I felt all along they had been thinking. They see the change in me, and are alarmed. They believe that it is all wrong, all sin, and the penalty for neglecting the Word of God and prayer...that my difficulties and struggles are nothing else than a darkness which I have brought upon myself.¹⁵⁷

But these years of personal struggle in the life of the young Macmurray were also leading to insights that were to give direction to his whole life, insights

¹⁵⁶ John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, p.50.

¹⁵⁷ John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, p.52

that he was never to disown throughout either his academic or personal journey. We find a foretaste of Macmurray's mature thought in a journal entry from 1912:

When we cease to believe, we cease to live – either to man or to God. Unbelief is spiritual death and intellectual death. It abolishes Love and enthrones suspicion – paralyses governments, religions, friendships, all societies of men. We must believe or die...thus faith is possible or life is impossible. It is my duty to find the faith which satisfies the need. To fail in this quest is to perish utterly: and can only arise from insincerity or lack of earnestness in the searching.¹⁵⁸

In these years Macmurray was growing in the realisation that it is love that is the most significant aspect of our human identity, and that this love is what enables us to perceive the true nature of a God who is nothing other than Love. Falling in love with the woman who was to be his wife for almost 60 years was for Macmurray a deeply spiritual happening too, one that deepened his religious and his philosophical convictions.

There seems to be no distinction left between winning her and winning heaven. Nor is this a mere sick lover's exaggeration: it is a spiritual insight which has come of knowing that for a man to have learned to love fully and perfectly the woman of his choice is to have attained to the fullness of the measure of the stature of Christ. My love has grown to mean this by small degrees, and will spread out in greener, stronger life in the years ahead...I have not attained. Rather, I have caught an amazing view of the immensity of the height to be attained.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, p.51.

¹⁵⁹ John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, p.55.

Macmurray's courageous refusal to take for granted the teachings of the faith that he had grown up in, and his desire to come to know God at a personal level, were already bearing significant fruit. He was learning that there is an essential unity to life, one which would in later years provoke his fury and dismay at any dualist understanding of life, faith or God. In one of the last of his journal entries, as he reflects on his time as a university student, he recognises that the essential unity of life is God's gift to the world.

My knowledge has increased in large measure: especially my knowledge of life. Gaps have been filled up, the whole more closely assimilated, the borders widened. The unity of all knowledge and the higher unity of all life have revealed themselves; so that goodness and truth and beauty have each claimed and been granted an essential place in every scheme of things. Poetry, philosophy, human affection, music, art and many other things; all the range of human knowledge indeed has been admitted to association with the spiritual ideal. I long for the spiritual to penetrate all these and make them part of a single life, with its face towards God, and the coming of His Kingdom in its view.¹⁶⁰

By the year 1913, therefore, when Macmurray was only twenty-two years old, we are already able to see in embryo, the future shape of his philosophical and religious concerns. In his biography, Costello points out the wonder of such an intellectual and religious vision:

One marvels at the degree to which this paragraph in the youthful journal expresses in marvellous compactness the landscape of the entire philosophical project of the mature thinker. It is as though everything from this point on is a search mainly for the means of expression, for the

¹⁶⁰ John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, pp.56-7.

appropriate categories and language for that expression, not for the essential goal, direction or substance of his conviction.¹⁶¹

Clearly, as can be seen in the autobiographical section of *Search for Reality in Religion*, these early insights of Macmurray were greatly reinforced by the horrors of the First World War, and added to his sense that if Christianity is real then it must have something constructive to say to a world torn apart by war and hatred. In the years after the war, as Macmurray set out on his academic career, lecturing first at Manchester University from 1919 to 1921, followed by two years lecturing in philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, he continued to reflect on what he perceived as the failures of philosophy and Christianity to provide a meaningful vision of the dignity of the human person.

In 1922 he wrote a letter to a friend and expressed the general direction that his philosophical and religious beliefs were taking him.

If there is to be knowledge of God, it must be positive knowledge of character. Now we can only know persons by acquaintance or, if you like, by friendship, sympathy, love. And my conclusion is therefore that until we can be acquainted with a particular person, and say of him that his personality is the revelation of God's personality: positing necessarily a relation of identity between the two, then we can have no knowledge of God, and therefore no knowledge at all which is well grounded.¹⁶²

At the end of 1922 Macmurray returned to England to take up a post at Balliol College, Oxford, and was immediately caught up in the effort to

¹⁶¹ John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, p.57.

¹⁶² John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, p.139.

make his views known, not simply through his lectures but also in the many talks and seminars he gave to many different Christian student groups, particularly the Christian Student Movement. All this time he was making the personal nature of religion more and more explicit. In his writings we see emerging a distinct voice, calling for a new understanding of philosophy, religion and human nature based on his own personalist approach. In an article written for university students entitled *What I Live By*, we catch a glimpse of the unity of this vision:

Philosophically, a belief in God is necessary, since the character of the world's unity can only be personal. Only an absolute personality can be the ground of the existence of finite persons...A knowledge of God, however simple, as distinct from the bare belief that God exists, can only come to us from our experience of human persons and our estimation of their worth...I am convinced that if we are to have any knowledge of God which is real knowledge and not beautiful nonsense, it can only be through knowing a human person who is himself the image of the divine personality and who reveals God by revealing himself...Either Christ is the man whom the knowledge of God demands, or there is none.¹⁶³

It is, of course, important to remember that Macmurray was not the only person who was attempting to examine Christianity and to find new ways of expressing the truth of God's love in a broken world. The rise of the ecumenical movement in the early years of the twentieth century can also in large part be attributed to the failures of Christianity to avoid the destruction of human values in war. Despite the fact that Macmurray was not a member of any Church, he was often invited to participate in discussions and meetings connected with the ecumenical movement. He used these

¹⁶³ John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, p.146.

opportunities to develop his own thought and to offer practical steps forward for the Churches. In 1929, for example, he was invited to give the keynote address at the Student Christian Movement's conference in Liverpool. The theme of the conference was "The Purpose of God in the Life of the World". Macmurray's own address was entitled "Ye are my Friends", and in it we find him offering a new vision to his listeners. At a time when the ecumenical movement was much divided as to whether unity between the Churches should best be brought about through doctrinal agreements or through common service to the world, Macmurray suggests that, for Jesus, friendship is what unites.

The world revolution of the Christians came when Jesus discovered the true centre of human life. "Not servants but friends" is the proclamation of the revolution. The keyword of the Christian Gospel is not service but friendship. Of late, I believe, we have been thinking too much in terms of service – service of God and the world. There is nothing distinctively Christian about that. "But surely", you will say, "we are called as Christians to serve Christ and the world". No, we are called to be the friends of Christ and the friends of men. That is not at all the same thing.¹⁶⁴

Macmurray was doubtless aware that the call to friendship might easily appear to be interpreted as a simplistic response to the needs of the world, but he went on to state clearly that the friendship to which Jesus calls us to and to which our own nature calls us, is far from easy. Real friendship will cost us not less than everything!

Do you think that this is too simple and easy? Simple it is, perhaps, but not easy. There is nothing we fear more than friendship, nothing that

¹⁶⁴ John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, p.162.

strikes more terror into us than freedom...To be a friend is to be yourself for another person. It means committing yourself completely and revealing yourself completely without reserve...What men need from us is love, not moving acts: friendship, not friendly services...Friendship means losing ourselves, and that is apt to be a terrifying experience.¹⁶⁵

As a result of hearing Macmurray's address at the Student Christian Movement conference, Archbishop Temple of York¹⁶⁶ invited him to prepare a memorandum for another conference in the same year, one concerned with preparation for Church ministry. Macmurray used this opportunity to present a twenty-page article, in which he challenged the Churches to overcome what he perceived to be an overtly sentimental approach to faith. He suggests that the Churches should enter into dialogue with others who, without being necessarily Christian, share the same understanding of the absolute value of the human person. He concludes his memorandum with an urgent call to the Churches to seek unity, so that they might offer a truer vision of the message of Jesus and give hope to the young. In his understanding, such a unity would not require the abandonment of different traditions in the Churches, but would be based on a united faith in the saving presence of Jesus in the world.

Throughout this period Macmurray was moving closer and closer to the notion, which he was never to subsequently let go of, that the love of God is always personal, and that therefore if we are to love God we must first recognise that we are called to enter into relationships with others through

¹⁶⁵ John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, p.163.

¹⁶⁶ William Temple (1881 – 1944) was a noted theologian who was also Archbishop of York from 1929 to 1942. Two years before his death he was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury.

love and not fear. We can see the strength of his belief in this idea in a letter written to a friend in November 1930:

What is God if I am to love him? If the answer is 'Jesus' then the question means: 'What is Jesus?' And my question then becomes: 'What did Jesus feel to be holy and sacred and inviolable?' Only when I answer that question does my own position emerge clearly. I shall treat personality and the relation of persons in love as sacred and to be revered, and nothing else. Whatever is impersonal must not be revered or treated as sacred – on penalty of losing our soul. To do so is to be idolatrous; to worship as God what is not God. And to treat what is personal impersonally is to pollute a holy thing.¹⁶⁷

Throughout the 1930's Macmurray continued to engage both philosophically and religiously with what he considered to be the dangers of Nationalism, Fascism and Communism. While openly sympathetic to much of what Marx had to say about alienation and the need to come to a deeper understanding of society, he felt that Marx himself failed to understand the true meaning of human nature. In 1933 he wrote a book entitled *The Philosophy of Communism* and two years later followed it up with another entitled *Creative Society: A Study of the Relation of Christianity to Communism*, a work which shares Marx's intolerance of idealism. In Macmurray's view, the reason why Marx rejected religion was because he saw it as a form of idealism. While accepting, with Marx, that idealism is an illusion which needs to be rejected, Macmurray argues that idealism and religion are also incompatible. A religion that is idealist is an unreal religion. Macmurray goes on to criticise Marx not for his rejection of religion but "on his refusal

¹⁶⁷ John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, pp.176-7.

to place the self-transcending nature of personal relating in this world at the heart of his anthropology”.¹⁶⁸

The Second World War, begun in 1939, once again led the world to horrors beyond imagining, and, if anything, made Macmurray more convinced than ever that the philosophical and religious ideas which governed societies were both morally bankrupt and incapable of revealing the truth about human nature and of how human beings are called to communion. Throughout the period of the war, while continuing to lecture in philosophy, he felt the need to call the Churches to rediscover the essence of Jesus’ teaching and to put it into practice. In 1940 he produced a booklet called *Challenge to the Churches*, in which he argued that most societies were built on fear and therefore could never become communities gathered in love. The task of the Churches in a time of such great social upheaval as the present was to proclaim that only love can set human beings free. If the Churches could only take the message of Jesus to heart then they would see that what is needed is to believe in and to work towards a universal community.

At the end of 1944, as the war was drawing to its horrific close, Macmurray accepted a post as Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, a post he held until his retirement in 1958. It was during this period that his philosophical understanding of the nature of the human person was most completely expressed in the Gifford Lectures. As the time of his retirement drew near he grew increasingly disappointed at the direction philosophy was taking within the British academic world, so that he felt he no longer belonged among colleagues whose main interests, such as linguistic and analytic philosophy, seemed far removed from his concerns.

¹⁶⁸ John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, p.233.

In 1959 Macmurray, along with his wife, joined the Society of Friends, or Quakers, thereby bringing to an end his self-imposed exile from any particular Christian community. He informed a friend that his reason for joining the Quakers was because, although he felt the need to belong to a faith community, “there was no need to sign on the bottom line to a statement of which there is no meaning; that is, there was no need to declare his stance on dogmas”.¹⁶⁹ This was the religious community to which Macmurray remained faithful till his death in 1976, and it clearly provided him with the warmth of belonging to a community which, to his mind at least, offered a close approximation of the vision he himself had argued for throughout his life.

In the late years of his life Macmurray continued to deepen his own search for the personal God whom he loved so much, and continued his unstinting call to the Churches to return to the vision of Jesus so that, with a proper self-understanding, we can live out the communion to which we are called. He bears witness to his own personal search for God in a moving letter that he wrote to his mother in 1969, on the occasion of her 102nd birthday:

What I owe you most of all is that I have always been a Christian, and always shall be. For this my gratitude to you is very deep and very constant. I am not sure how religious I am, but I am sure that my first loyalty is and always has been to the Lord Jesus. What I mean by a Christian has changed as I have studied him, and now I mean simply that I am one of his disciples. And because I am a philosopher by trade I cannot take that discipleship for granted, nor can I accept any interpretation of its meaning because it is ancient or familiar. I must search and go on searching for the truth of it and, of course, with His

¹⁶⁹ John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, p. 342.

help. So pray for me that I shall be guided aright and kept free of self-assertion or self-will.¹⁷⁰

In returning to the text of *Search for Reality in Religion* we are also enabled to capture Macmurray's mature thought on the urgent task of the Churches to live out their Gospel call to be good news for the world. Having offered in the opening chapter a brief description of his own spiritual journey, Macmurray now wants to share with his listeners and readers the conclusions he has come to as a result of his own search for the true meaning of religion and of Christianity. In the remainder of his book, therefore, he looks in turn at the meaning of religion, the meaning of Christianity and the future of the Church. While we have already seen many of these ideas expressed in *The Clue to History* and in *Persons in Relation*, there is value in summarising the overall vision of *Search for Reality in Religion* because it offers us an opportunity to understand the continuity in Macmurray's thought and also to see the way that he synthesises his philosophical and religious views.

The True Value of Christianity

In his chapter entitled *The Meaning of Religion* Macmurray covers much of the same ground as in *Persons in Relation*. He begins by asserting that the capacity for reflection is what makes us human beings. While it might be said that philosophy, science, art and religion are all different expressions of our reflective capacity, it is religion which is the first and the primary form of human reflection. This can be seen by the fact that all communities, even the most primitive, have been bound together by religion which serves to

¹⁷⁰ John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, p. 363.

sanctify their community life and to offer it appropriate meaning and purpose. The common rituals and religious ceremonies which are to be found in all primitive communities have served to unite the members in a common activity which has also highlighted their kinship with those who have died and with those yet to be born. What emerges from even the most cursory of glances at the place of religion in human life is that it has always been about community. It is religion which has helped most profoundly to develop the idea of communion, not only between human beings, but also communion with the natural world. Religion, of course, has always been about the experience of communion with God too.

I should like to add one thing more to the analysis, which might possibly explain why this religious structure takes the form it does. My conjecture is that it is governed by the sense of an unseen presence, of something more in our experience which is somehow personal, which transcends our familiar experience of life in common, and yet which faces us when we reflect deeply upon our everyday activities. In our own terms it is the experience of the presence of God.¹⁷¹

Macmurray points out that as religion develops to maturity certain difficulties emerge. The most significant of these is that, through social progress, a divide opens up between the religious dimension of people's lives and that of politics. This brings about an inevitable struggle between religious and political authority, which can be seen in the enduring historical struggle between Church and State. The result of this struggle has been to provoke a form of dualism which limits religion to the spiritual field and politics to the material. It is Macmurray's suggestion that the only society that in its progression to maturity has been able to avoid the rupture

¹⁷¹ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.34.

between religion and every other aspect of human life has been the Hebrew society. It is this view that allows him to see the Jewish people as the uniquely religious people of history.

A second distinction between primitive religions and those which are on the way to maturity concerns the question of inclusiveness. One of the marks of primitive religions is that is always the religion of a limited group. The gods of primitive religion are the gods of a particular tribe or community. The mark of mature religion, on the other hand, is that it tends to be universal in its outlook. Religion is for all peoples and its god is the one true God. Mature religion therefore is monotheistic and universal.

This concept of the universality of religion, however appealing it may sound, is not one that is easily brought about. A universal religion demands a universal community. We should no longer find our fundamental identity in a tribe or nation, but rather in our communion with all others. Yet in practice it is difficult to find any way to experience a universal fellowship. Our experience of the world is that it remains fundamentally divided according to groups and nations. For Macmurray this is the fundamental problem for all the major world religions.

The fact that generates the recognised universality of religion is a fact about the character of human society. It is the fact that it is not a biological unity, not based on a blood-relation, but a personal unity...But this fact implies also that there is an inherent impulse in human nature to break through its organic limitations and realise itself as a great society to which all men belong. If the corollary of any religion is a community then the corollary of a universal religion is a universal community. With the appearance of the universal religions, the disunity of mankind.

becomes a failure, a tragedy, an evil to be deplored and a sin to be confessed. Mankind ought to be a single community.¹⁷²

One way of trying to overcome the problem of division among peoples and nations is to attempt to unify the world by force. Indeed many of the nations of the world have come about precisely through a forced union with others. It is Macmurray's belief however that even though force may produce political and economic unity it can never produce a truly religious union. Communion with others can only come about through love and people cannot be forced to love one another.

Another way of dealing with the problem of universality is what Macmurray describes as the idealist way, which he suggests can be seen in its clearest and most unadulterated form in Buddhism. An idealist approach would be one in which all conflict and division disappear through a denial of the reality of the world as we experience it. If only the ideal is real then all struggle and disunity would be nothing more than another illusion. Idealism involves a necessary withdrawal from the world, and this invites us to solve the problem of disunity simply by denying it.

Since neither of these ways of dealing with the problem of finding a meaningful universalism is acceptable we must confront the problem more practically. One way of doing so is to take a closer look at that religion which claims to be most universal: Christianity. What is the Christian response to the problem of the universality of religion? The answer to that question will reveal much about the proper meaning of Christianity itself, and it is to this question that Macmurray turns his attention in his chapter

¹⁷² John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.38.

entitled *The Meaning of Christianity*. In his attempt to come to a real understanding of Christianity, Macmurray starts with a closer look at the religion of the Jewish people. In his view Judaism began as a tribal religion, worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In its earliest stages of growth it had to face the struggle against the temptation to worship other gods, a temptation that is acknowledged in the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods to rival me" (Exodus 20, 3). Through the teachings of the prophets the Jewish people were led to a proper monotheism, that their God was the one true God.

It is Macmurray's view that the Jewish faith also had to battle against the perennial risk of slipping into dualism, and this in two particular ways. The first risk was to fall into the trap of a dualism of class, where the poor would become subservient to the rich. In such a situation the bonds of real community would be broken and it would no longer be possible to maintain any real religious unity. This risk was overcome through the Jewish institution of the year of Jubilee, where all those in debt would be set free from the burden of repayment. A second danger was the rise of a dominant priestly caste, but Macmurray suggests that this risk was also overcome, this time through the distinction between priest and prophet. The fact that the prophet was called not according to caste but according to the will of God meant that the priesthood remained limited in power and influence and did not therefore cause division among the Jewish people.

A further problem also attached itself to the Jewish understanding of religious faith. Given their absolute commitment to monotheism, did this not also commit them to the idea that God is the Creator of all that is, and therefore the Father of all peoples? While acknowledging that his presentation of the Jewish tradition is nothing more than a bare outline,

Macmurray believes that the faith of the Jews was indeed such that God was seen as the original, unlimited and universal agent. Human beings, precisely because they are made in the image and likeness of God, are also to be understood as being free and creative agents. But this freedom, which constitutes an essential element of our human being, can be used wisely or foolishly. Since all people are the children of God they are therefore members of one family. Human freedom however means that we are able to turn away from the creative plan of God and to turn away from the communion that God wills for all peoples.

Man, made in the image of God, has the freedom to create and seek to realise his own intentions. These intentions may be incompatible with the divine intention in his creation. Evil then is sin and sin is a personal conflict of wills. Since religion is about community, a clash of wills between men and God must express itself in the breaking of community - as a clash of wills between man and man.¹⁷³

If sin and alienation from God and from one another were to be the last word on our lives then one would have to suggest that God's creation had been a failure. This however is not the case. God's will was that the Jewish people would continue to deepen their commitment to the equality and communion between all peoples that is necessary if religion is to be what it is called to be. Their task, as the chosen people, was not to perpetuate the sin of division but to create the religious and social conditions where communion between all peoples would again be possible. The history of the Old Testament is a history of the Jewish response to their call by God to act as initiators of a universal fellowship. It is a history made up of both successes and failures. And it is a history which led to the hope of the

¹⁷³ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.45.

coming of a Messiah who would break down all division and restore all peoples to proper communion and love.

In acknowledging that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah, Macmurray limits his reflections on the person of Jesus only to those aspects of his ministry which manifest his desire to bring about real communion and fellowship. Jesus understood his vocation to be one of bringing about the Kingdom of God through a call to repentance. His ministry took place within a particular historical and religious context; one where the Jewish people were a part of the Roman Empire. While it is possible to argue that the Roman Empire brought about a certain peace and stability throughout the known world, this peace should not be seen as being a sign of real communion.

The Roman Empire, though it has established peace and united the nations, cannot be the promised Kingdom...The reason is that it is not a true community. It has been created by military conquest and it is maintained by self-interest and, in the last analysis, by compulsion. Its basis therefore is fear. But the Kingdom of Heaven cannot be created by force. It must be freely chosen. It cannot be maintained by self-interest but only by self-sacrifice and, in the end, by attraction. For its basis cannot be fear; it can only be love.¹⁷⁴

How were Jesus and the Jewish people, those called to bring about the realisation of a universal human community, to respond to their subjugation by the Romans? While many were drawn to the idea that the Messiah would be the one to bring about political liberation through a violent struggle against the Romans, this would be no nearer the vision of communion than

¹⁷⁴ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.49.

that offered by the Roman Empire. The only possible alternative, in Macmurray's view, was to transform the Roman Empire from within. This could only come about through calling the Jewish people to repentance and through the intending of communion with all others. The Jewish people largely rejected the call to repentance and communion and Jesus could see that his own mission would end in seeming defeat and death. As a result, he focussed his attention on the small group of his disciples, preparing them to continue his task of announcing the kingdom of God. This group of disciples, despite their own failures, would in due course be responsible for the spreading of the message of Jesus and the beginning of the Christian community. The teaching of Jesus, as preserved in the Gospels, should be understood as a very practical call to action, to bring about that communion that is the sign of God's kingdom.

His teaching looks always to the task to be accomplished and the means for its accomplishing. He is concerned, that is to say, to make clear to his disciples in particular the character of the Christian community which he will leave behind him to carry on his work, and the conditions which it must fulfil if it is to do so. When he says, for example, 'Love your enemies', this is the statement of a necessary condition for replacing enmity by affection and so achieving reconciliation. It is a pragmatic rule for the work of the Church in extending the Kingdom of Heaven in the world.¹⁷⁵

Macmurray acknowledges that the history of the Christian community since the day of Pentecost has been a mixed one. There have been successes, but there have been more failures in remaining faithful to the call of Jesus. The

¹⁷⁵ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.54.

need for the Church of today therefore is to find a way of responding positively to the Gospel demand for communion and reconciliation.

Our need is to rediscover, under contemporary conditions, what sort of community we ought to be in the world, and to become that kind of community. It is to rediscover and to fulfil the conditions which are requisite for accomplishing the task committed to us.¹⁷⁶

In order to come to a real appreciation of the vocation of the Christian, however, it is first necessary to examine what have been and still are the major failings of the Church. The first and most persistent error in the Church, as far as Macmurray is concerned, is that of dualism. The roots of dualism can be traced back to the influence of Greek philosophy in the early Church, and it has had the effect in Christian thought of shifting the emphasis from action to reflection or from practice to theory. This shift in emphasis has had seriously negative repercussions for the whole Christian tradition.

Faith, which originally meant trust and confidence, came to mean a set of beliefs. Christians came to be people who professed certain beliefs. Christianity, aiming at the philosophic ideal, sought to become an organised system of doctrine. This assimilation of Christianity to Greek philosophy not only created theology. It created heresy.¹⁷⁷

It is Macmurray's understanding that the division among the Christian Churches can be traced, at least in part, to the difficulties that inevitably arise when the emphasis on the Christian life is on dogma and doctrine

¹⁷⁶ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.55.

¹⁷⁷ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.57.

rather than on practice. Christianity should be judged on the fruits it produces in a person's life rather than on how faithful a person is to a particular set of beliefs.

A second effect of the dualism that marks Christianity as we experience it today is that it tends to promote idealism. The idealist philosophy of Plato and the Neoplatonists was absorbed by the early Christians and affected its whole self-understanding.

The essential thing about dualism, as we have seen, is that it contrasts the material with the spiritual in such a way as to bring them into opposition. This opposition forces us to choose between them, and the idealist choice is for the reality, and so the importance, of the spiritual. An idealist religion, then, is concerned with the spiritual life and not with the material, and the life of the spirit can be achieved only at the expense of the material life.¹⁷⁸

This idealist approach has had significant repercussions for Christian belief and practice. It has led to a view that the human body is somehow always sinful and in need of constant mortification. It has also led to the view that the highest form of religious experience is contemplative or mystical. Any religion which is based on idealism will tend to be otherworldly. It will focus on a spirituality which seeks to escape from the world rather than on a spirituality that embraces the world. It is Macmurray's belief that idealism is fundamentally incompatible with religion. Any religion which claims to be real must be concerned with action and with community. Idealism, however, seeks to move from action to reflection and from the struggle to create community to the solitary life of the thinker. A Christianity which is

¹⁷⁸ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.58.

idealist in outlook actually betrays the vision that is offered us by Jesus. He came to proclaim the coming of God's kingdom among us and to bring salvation to the world. The influence of idealism in Christianity has tended however to create the situation where spirituality is focussed on the idea of flight from the world rather than involvement in it, something which would appear to be contrary to the life and the teaching of Jesus.

The Future of the Church

In the final chapter of *Search for Reality in Religion* Macmurray looks at the future of the Christian Church and at what changes are needed if Christianity is to offer a more faithful vision of the life that we are called to in Christ. In this chapter he wishes to speak more directly as a member of the Society of Friends¹⁷⁹ and to situate the Friends within the context of the Christian faith. Given all that he has previously said on the dangers of idealism and dualism, he now wants to suggest that another danger for Christians is to see their faith in simply private terms. Many people believe that religion is for the benefit of the believer. Faith is too often seen as being something which provides comfort, encouragement and hope for the individual in her struggle to make sense of life. But Macmurray now argues that there is a much more appropriate way to understand the nature of Christianity.

¹⁷⁹ The Society of Friends, or Quakers, is a religious movement founded in England by George Fox (1624 – 1691). Common to their beliefs is the notion that, since God's spirit dwells within all human beings, each person is of inherent worth. The fact that the Society of Friends does not demand of its members belief in any credal statement, along with its commitment to world peace and mutual tolerance, made it a natural religious home for Macmurray.

Christianity is not for the sake of the Christians but for the sake of the world. The Christian Church exists not for the spiritual benefit of its members but for the salvation of the world outside it. This is the task assigned to it by Jesus, and it is the continuance of his work after his death. In the light of this we may venture a functional definition of the Church. "The Church", we may say, "is the community of the disciples of Jesus working, in cooperation with God and under the guidance of His Spirit, to establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth."¹⁸⁰

The problem with a religion that is concerned only with things spiritual is that it can offer no practical reference to the spiritual life. Macmurray suggests that to understand Christianity in practical terms means that we are able to overcome the problems of dualism and idealism. To define Christianity in this way does not mean that the spiritual is excluded, but rather that the spiritual is included along with the practical reference that gives it its true meaning. It is involvement in the world, rather than flight from the dangers of the world, which is the true task of each individual Christian and the whole Christian community.

For the Christian, the meaning and the purpose of his religion lies outside himself and not within him. He is a person "for others", as Jesus was; a person dedicated to the salvation of the world. This also means however that he is a member of a Christian community in the world, which is itself dedicated to the salvation of the world, and which can only achieve this by exhibiting, in its own action in the world, the image of the Kingdom of Heaven.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.64.

¹⁸¹ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.65.

If Christians are to come to a proper understanding of their vocation in and for the world then there will need to be a vast transformation which will affect every branch and area of Christian life. Indeed, Macmurray goes so far as to declare that there is need for another reformation and a new beginning for all the Christian Churches. Religion is always about community, and Christianity must now commit itself wholeheartedly to the creation of true community which alone can overcome the enmity and division which is so much part of our lives.

Macmurray is able to discern signs of hope in the change that he sees already taking place within the different Christian Churches. The desire for unity, expressed through the ecumenical movement, is a clear manifestation that the Spirit of God is still at work. The creation of the World Council of Churches is another sign that Christians are prepared to acknowledge that division among Christians is nothing other than scandalous. As long as the various Christian communities remain divided it becomes almost impossible for the Churches to actively contribute to the peace and reconciliation which the world so desperately needs.

The question of how to achieve unity between the various Christian communities is therefore of vital importance. Macmurray is uncomfortable with the notion that unity can be best brought about by attempting to overcome doctrinal differences. Indeed, one of the reasons why he chose to become a member of the Society of Friends is precisely that it objects to any attempt to define Christianity simply in doctrinal terms. Christianity should rather be seen as a practical way of life that is compatible with a wide divergence of beliefs and doctrines. He argues that the approach of the Society of Friends can in this way make an important contribution to the success of the ecumenical movement. Since Christianity cannot be

definitively expressed through particular doctrines and dogmas, then unity between the Churches does not have to depend on a prior agreement about dogmatic issues. All that is needed to provide a basis for unity is the mutual recognition of the Churches as being Christian. In Macmurray's view, if this approach, suggested by the Society of Friends, were to be taken up by the other Christian Churches then it would make the unity of Christians something that could be achieved immediately. Unity should therefore be understood not as calling us to uniformity in doctrine but rather as inviting all Christians to offer their lives for the good of the world. The vision that guides the Society of Friends is one that can help all the Christian Churches to overcome the distortions that inevitably follow from idealism and dualism. This vision is one that also enables us to recover the notion of the primacy of action in the Christian life.

The effect is to shift the expression of Christianity from theory to practice. "By their fruits you shall know them" becomes the accepted rule. Faith no longer means the acceptance of an established creed or the assent to an authoritative system of doctrine. It recovers its original meaning of trust and fearless confidence; and this spirit of faith is expressed in a way of living which cares for one another and for the needs of all men. Our Christianity is a practical discipleship of Jesus in all the relationships of daily life.¹⁸²

While acknowledging that the Quaker's tradition of not defining faith in doctrinal terms is of the greatest importance, Macmurray feels that the Society of Friends still needs to find an appropriate and adequate theoretical articulation of their Christian discipleship. He suggests that it is possible to create a theology that is not dogmatic but that is able to face the challenges

¹⁸² John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, pp.70-1.

of a changing world and social context. Through a radical critique of what he terms traditional theology it is likely that a variety of theological standpoints would emerge. The task of the Society of Friends would then be to hold these differing viewpoints together in a unity of love.

Another aspect of Quaker tradition to be examined by Macmurray is that of the place of ritual. While it is often suggested that the Society of Friends reject all forms of ritual, he argues that all activities of communal prayer and worship are an expression of ritual. Although it may be true that the worship of the Society of Friends is marked by a particularly simple expression of faith, gathering together for silent prayer, it remains nonetheless a form of ritual. Since, therefore, it is not the case that Quakerism rejects all forms of ritual, it is clear that the Society of Friends could express their worship through a richer symbolic ritual, like the celebration of Holy Communion, without changing the essentials of their Christian witness.

Turning again to the wider context of all the Christian Churches, Macmurray offers a summary of his understanding of the role of the Churches in the modern world. Once again his desire is that the Churches become symbols of communion in a world scarred by war and violence.

The task of the church today, I believe, is what it has always been – to cooperate with God under the guidance of the Spirit of Christ in establishing on earth the Kingdom of Heaven. The means for accomplishing this task is the means that Jesus taught to his first disciples. The Church must be a real community on earth which exhibits to the world, in its life and in the relations of its members, the image of the

Kingdom of Heaven, and which acts, in relation to the world outside, in the spirit of that Kingdom, by the way of the Cross.¹⁸³

Macmurray concludes his work with a very brief examination of two issues where he believes the Churches can show that they are serious in their intention to put on the mind and heart of Christ. The first issue concerns the question of power. The Christian approach to power ought to be essentially different than that which can be seen in much of politics and business. We are to find our response to matters of influence and power in the example of Jesus. What can be seen in the life of Jesus is that he never gives in to the temptation to power. In his actions and words he reveals that the way to true freedom and love is through service of others and not through the seeking of position or influence. The Churches therefore must also avoid the temptation to seek influence and power in the world, so that they may be free to lead people to the real values of life.

The kingdoms of this world rest upon the appeal to fear, because they must take people as they are. But the Church of Christ, if it is to save the world, must not take men and women as they are; it must transform them, by using the only motive that can overcome fear, the power of love. And if it is to do this it must itself already have been transformed by love.¹⁸⁴

Connected to the question of power is the matter of the proper relations that should exist between Church and State. It is Macmurray's belief that, generally speaking, States are able to maintain the common life of a society only through the idea of fear and punishment. The Christian Churches,

¹⁸³ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.76.

¹⁸⁴ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.77.

because they are proclaiming very different values, need to develop true community not through fear but through love. And the task of the Churches is to bring about the Kingdom of God not through political means but through faithfulness to Gospel values. Since the values of the world are so different than the values of those who are seeking God, it is inappropriate for the Churches to be too closely linked to the powers of the State.

If then we are to understand what it means for the Church to be a community in the world and in the world to create the community of mankind, then we must disabuse our minds of all notion of a partnership between Church and State; of the age-old influence of the doctrine of the two swords – the spiritual wielded by the Church and the material sword wielded by the State. The Church has nothing to do with any sword, spiritual or material, nor has it any authority save the authority of love.¹⁸⁵

The second practical issue which the Churches need to address if they are to take their calling seriously is the question of economics. The economic vision that marks our contemporary world is one which is based on greed, competition and selfishness. In an economic environment that is based on the survival of the fittest, there is a real need for the Churches to offer an alternative vision, one where each person is valued because she is a person. We ought to have a practical commitment to economic justice and to helping those in need.

If the Church is to be a real community in the world; if its Christianity is not to be defined in doctrines but expressed in action; and if its task is to manifest to the world the image of the Kingdom of Heaven, then surely the manner and spirit in which its members provide for one another's

¹⁸⁵ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.78.

material needs must stand in strong and visible contrast with the attitudes and habits of the world around us.¹⁸⁶

As far as Macmurray is concerned, Christians who think that economic and social issues have nothing to do with religious faith are in grave error. The disparity of wealth and resources between rich and poor makes community and fellowship practically impossible. To assert that such disparity does not affect or concern a religious community is to fall into the idealism that mars so much of Christianity even today.

It is quite clear in Macmurray's mind that the Christian Churches have not, as yet, truly absorbed the fundamental vision of Jesus and the Kingdom he came to proclaim. This, however, does not mean that we should despair. The task is clear, and if Christians were to be more faithful to the example of Jesus then the world in which we live might yet become a world of communion and peace.

The Church must remain fully in the world at its most contemporary...But our main task is to become a real community in the world, and any effort to achieve this must aim from the beginning to be inclusive, to be both international and interdenominational. Its intention must be to unite all Christians throughout the world in a single brotherhood in which each cares for all in all their needs. This is a religious, not a political task, based not on self-interest or legal compulsion, but on love working in freedom.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.79.

¹⁸⁷ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, pp.80-1.

CHAPTER SIX

A SIGN OF HOPE: THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

There can be no doubting the seriousness of Macmurray's call to the Churches that they must seek unity, a call which is based both on his philosophical understanding of human nature and on his religious understanding of the person of Jesus and of the nature of Christian discipleship. What also cannot be doubted is the controversial nature of his views on how unity is to be achieved, and in particular his view that Church unity ought not to be a question of doctrinal agreement. One of the ways that we might test the validity of Macmurray's view that dogma and doctrine are not essential for unity would be to take a necessarily brief look at some of the most significant events in the history and documents of the ecumenical movement and to examine whether Macmurray can claim support from others who share his desire for the unification of all Christians. However, before turning to the broader canvas of the history of the ecumenical movement as such, it may be helpful to outline the basic suggestions regarding Church unity that Macmurray offers in *Search for Reality in Religion*.

Unity Through Service

It is clear that Macmurray himself felt that the efforts of the World Council of Churches to achieve Christian unity offered a sign of hope to the world.

The ecumenical movement is itself a deep change in the outlook of Christians everywhere. We are reaching out to one another, recognising

our brotherhood in Christ and seeking to find an expression for it that will make us, and manifest that we are, one Church of Christ. The old antagonisms and enmities between sects are dying out. Friendship, sympathy and cooperation are increasing. This is the ecumenical movement. Can any Christian fail to realise in it the work of the divine Spirit in his Church?¹⁸⁸

Yet one major difficulty Macmurray had with the direction of the ecumenical movement was that he felt the majority of the Christian churches were seeking unity through declarations of doctrinal belief. It was for this reason, he argued, that the Quakers, who have no real sympathy with such an approach, were a necessary and prophetic voice in the search for Christian unity. Precisely through their abhorrence of doctrine, the Quakers could help to ensure that the ecumenical movement would remain focussed on practical unity. In so doing they can also ensure that the ecumenical movement does not fall into the same dualist approach that has hindered Christianity from being what it is called to be in the world.

The central conviction which distinguishes the Society of Friends is that Christianity cannot be defined in terms of doctrinal beliefs; that what makes us Christians is an attitude of mind and a way of life; and that these are compatible with wide variations and with changes in beliefs and opinions.¹⁸⁹

Since it is the case, for Macmurray, that Christianity cannot be defined in terms of doctrines, then it follows that doctrine is not the appropriate way to come to the unity that so many desire. All that would be needed to bring about unity would be the mutual recognition of the Churches as Christian.

¹⁸⁸ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.67.

¹⁸⁹ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.70.

Indeed, such an approach as that taken by the Quakers would bring about unity more quickly than we can imagine!

If this Quaker standpoint were accepted by the other Christian bodies, reunion could take place tomorrow. I doubt whether it can be effectively achieved on other terms. Indeed I doubt whether uniformity in Christian belief or practice is itself desirable.¹⁹⁰

Having argued that doctrinal agreement cannot lead to proper unity, Macmurray wants to suggest that there is still a need for some reflection regarding the Christian faith, though one that does not produce doctrine. Rather, Christian reflection should lead to a form of undogmatic theology, one which remains always hypothetical and temporary in nature.

It should be empirical in temper, checking theory against contemporary experience, religious and scientific. It should be freely critical of the past, recognising that in this field of knowledge as in others, antiquity is no indication of validity. It should recognise that it is impossible to believe what one does not understand, and undesirable to profess to believe what one cannot believe effectively. It should be concerned to reject openly and explicitly what it can no longer accept, and it should not expect nor too eagerly desire unanimity...Divergent views and doctrines could be held within a unity of love, and would avoid any tendency to produced final and definitive doctrines which could become binding as an orthodoxy.¹⁹¹

In place of doctrinal agreements, Macmurray suggests that the ecumenical movement should be particularly marked by practical efforts to overcome

¹⁹⁰ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.70.

¹⁹¹ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.73.

the division of the world. He offers two immediate suggestions that will, if acted upon, show that the ecumenical movement is intent on bringing God's unity to the world. The first is that the Churches should avoid any kind of partnership with political States. The reason for this is that States are, at best, held together through law and justice whereas the Churches are calling people to discover their true nature in seeking communion with one another. The second suggestion made by Macmurray is that the Churches need to deal with what he calls "the economics of the Kingdom of Heaven". He states that the economic systems of the contemporary world 'are incompatible with the kind of vision of love and communion given by Jesus. An ecumenism that takes the life and the teaching of Jesus seriously will find that its main task is not to come to doctrinal agreement but to find appropriate ways of practically creating the communion that restores human dignity to all.

A community which is merely spiritual is imaginary. The Church may deceive itself about this, but the world will not. Here then, rather than in the field of doctrine or of ritual or of Church government, lies the major problem of the ecumenical movement...Our main task is to become a real community in the world, and any effort to achieve this must aim from the beginning to be inclusive, to be both international and interdenominational.¹⁹²

In turning now to some of the key moments in the history of the ecumenical movement, one can only presume that all of those who have been part of the whole historical process of seeking unity among the Christian Churches have shared Macmurray's view that the lack of unity was a serious obstacle to the task of offering witness to the vision of community

¹⁹² John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, pp.80-1.

that Jesus offers. But it will be seen that there has also been a wide divergence of views as to how best bring about the unity that is called for. Ever since the Churches have been divided, of course, there have been many Christians who argued that such division was sinful but for our present purposes we will restrict our examination of the ecumenical movement to the events of the 20th century and, more particularly, to the various assemblies of the World Council of Churches that took place within Macmurray's lifetime.

The Ecumenical Movement

It is generally agreed that the ecumenical movement as such was given new impetus through the World Missionary Conference, which took place in Edinburgh in 1910. It was here that the protestant Churches came together and realised that their missionary endeavours were being adversely affected by the fact that although they were all proclaiming the Lordship of Jesus, their own division made such claims somehow questionable. While it had not been the intention of the delegates at the Conference to set up an ecumenical movement as such, one of the results of the Edinburgh Conference was the creation of the International Missionary Council in 1921, and this ensured that the Churches involved moved away from a competitive missionary drive in order to work together for the sake of the world. Perhaps even more significantly, the World Missionary Conference of 1910 concluded with a proposal to hold a World Conference on Faith and Order. It was envisaged that such a Conference should invite participants not only from the protestant Churches but also from the Roman Catholic and Orthodox communities too.

The first World Conference on Faith and Order took place in Lausanne in 1927, with most of the mainline Christian Churches, excluding the Roman Catholic Church, being represented. While it may be true that the Conference was much weakened through a lack of clarity regarding the precise aims of the meeting, its real significance lay in the fact that Christians of different traditions were able to listen to one another and to recognise not only their differences but also the fact that they had much in common too. To that extent, therefore, the Conference increased the desire for further and deeper cooperation among the Churches.

The second World Conference on Faith and Order took place in Edinburgh in 1937, with Archbishop William Temple presiding. In his opening address Temple made clear that it was not the task of the participants to simply focus on understanding the traditions and practices of the different Christian Churches. Rather, it was essential to recognise that the lack of unity among Christians presented a serious obstacle to the proclamation of the Gospel.

How can it call men to worship of the one God if it is calling to rival shrines? How can it claim to bridge the divisions in human society...if when men are drawn into it they find another division has been added to the old ones – a division of Catholic from Evangelical, or Episcopalian from Presbyterian and Independent? A Church divided in its manifestation to the world cannot render its due service to God or to man, and for the impotence which our sin has brought upon the Church through divisions in its outward aspect we should be covered with shame and driven to repentance.¹⁹³

¹⁹³*The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, edited by Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1997, p.18.

The key text to emerge from the Conference was the Affirmation, a document that largely accepts Temple's analysis of the sinfulness of division and calls for an ongoing search for what unity in Christ means in practical terms. "We are convinced that our unity of spirit and aim must be embodied in a way that will make it manifest to the world, though we do not yet clearly see what outward form it should take."¹⁹⁴

Along with the Conference on Faith and Order, which allowed Christians of many denominations to gather and to reflect on the theological issues that both united and divided them, it is possible to see another strand of growing ecumenical concern, one more focussed on social issues. Many Christians shared Macmurray's desire to find some meaningful response to the horrors of war and to the fact that the world, despite the influence of Christianity, remained divided and unjust. In 1920, at a meeting in Geneva, the Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work was established. In its early years the Conference on Life and Work saw itself as being more concerned with the Churches' response to the social problems of the day than with the attempt to come to doctrinal agreement. Many of those who participated in the efforts of the Life and Work movement supported the phrase that "doctrine divides but service unites", and felt that unity could best be achieved through a common witness in social action. A second Conference on Life and Work was held in Stockholm in 1925. Under the leadership of Bishop Nathan Söderblom of Uppsala, the Conference dealt with such issues as economic, social and moral problems as well as with the question of international relations. The Conference concluded with a message which, while acknowledging the ecumenical progress being made through the Faith and Order movement, saw the need for Christians to engage directly with

¹⁹⁴ *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology*, p.85.

the social concerns of the world and to find practical means to express the unity of the Churches.

The sins and sorrows, the struggles and losses of the Great War and since, have compelled the Christian Churches to recognise, humbly and with shame that 'the world is too strong for a divided Church'. Leaving for the time our differences in Faith and Order, our aim has been to secure united practical action in Christian Life and Work. The Conference itself is a conspicuous fact. But it is only a beginning.¹⁹⁵

It is probably safe to conjecture that, given his views on the appropriate manner for the Churches to seek unity, Macmurray would have been more comfortable with the efforts of the Life and Work movement than with those of Faith and Order. However, it is clear that even within the Life and Work movement there was considerable tension as to the relationship between Christian dogma and Christian practice. In his analysis of the history of the Life and Work Movement between 1925 and 1948, Nils Ehrenström argues that although the desire to work together on social issues was seen as central, there also developed an appreciation of the fact that there was need for theological reflection on social action too.

Under the impulse of its own initial convictions, and of keen criticism from some of its own supporters, Life and Work increasingly recognised the importance of theological factors, and thus steered a course which gradually brought it into convergence with Faith and Order.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology*, p.265.

¹⁹⁶ *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948*, edited by Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, SPCK, 1967, p.573.

A further Conference on Life and Work took place in Oxford in 1937. Faced with the reality of the rise of both Communism and Fascism in the world and the threat to world peace, the Conference was determined to find a prophetic voice with which to call for a unity that transcends race, nationality or political outlook. The final document of the Conference stated that “ the first duty of the Church, and its greatest service to the world, is that it be in very deed the Church.”¹⁹⁷ However, despite the good will of those participating, no clear vision emerged as to what exactly was envisaged by the slogan “Let the Church be the Church!”. Perhaps as a result of this lack of clarity, and of the growing realisation that social issues need also to be understood from a theological perspective, the Conference also suggested that the Faith and Order movement should unite with the Faith and Life movement in order to form a World Council of Churches. Both movements accepted this suggestion but, due to the turmoil of the Second World War, the first gathering of the World Council of Churches took place in Amsterdam only in 1948.

Although the Roman Catholic Church was not officially represented at the first assembly of the World Council of Churches, a total of 147 Christian Churches were represented, and it was seen by all as a gift that many of the ‘younger’ Churches from Africa, Asia and the Americas sent participants. The official message of the Assembly managed to show that the ecumenical project, to which the World Council of Churches committed itself, involved some fundamental doctrinal agreement as well as a call to offer united Christian witness in the world. In so doing, it seems to infer that there is no fundamental split between doctrine and service. In terms of doctrine, the

¹⁹⁷ *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948*, p.591.

fact that the World Council of Churches had gathered in the name of Jesus presumes at the very least agreement on the Lordship of Christ.

We bless God our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ who gathers together in one the children of God that are scattered abroad. He has brought us here together at Amsterdam. We are one in acknowledging Him as our God and Saviour. We are divided from one another not only in matters of faith, order and tradition, but also by pride of nation, class and race. But Christ has made us His own and He is not divided. In seeking Him we find one another...We intend to stay together.¹⁹⁸

Along with this admittedly basic doctrinal statement we find too a call to a mutual sharing of the task of proclaiming Gospel values to the world.

Our coming together to form a World Council will be in vain unless Christians and Christian congregations everywhere commit themselves to the Lord of the Church in a new effort to seek together, where they live, to be His witnesses and servants among their neighbours...We have to learn afresh together to speak boldly in Christ's name both to those in power and to the people, to oppose terror, cruelty and race discrimination, to stand by the outcast, the prisoner and the refugee. We have to make of the Church in every place a voice for those who have no voice, and a home where every man will be at home.¹⁹⁹

One of the ways in which we can clearly see that matters doctrinal and social were both of concern to the World Council of Churches is simply to look at the themes that have been covered during the World Council of Churches assemblies. The first assembly, that of Amsterdam in 1948, took as its main

¹⁹⁸ *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology*, p.21.


¹⁹⁹ *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology*, p.22.

theme “ Man’s Disorder and God’s Design”. The theme was discussed from four different perspectives; that of the universal Church in God’s design, the Church’s witness to God’s design, the Church and the disorder of society, and the Church and the international order. The Amsterdam assembly showed that it was unafraid to face controversial issues by committing itself to two important declarations, the first being that war is contrary to the will of God, and the second, that Christianity ought not to be equated with any particular political system. These clearly practical declarations are a sign that the World Council of Churches from the beginning took social concerns seriously, but did so within the context of some overall theological understanding of God’s design for the world and for humanity.

The second assembly of the World Council of Churches took place in 1954, in Evanston, U.S.A. The theme chosen for the assembly was “ Christ – the Hope of the World”. Once again the main theme was addressed according to various aspects. The sub-themes were as follows: Our oneness in Christ and our disunity as Churches, the mission of the Church to those outside her life, the responsible society in a world perspective, Christians in the struggle for world community, the Churches amid racial and ethnic tensions, and lastly, the laity: the Christian in his vocation. The fact that at this assembly the World Council of Churches again faced the social problems affecting the world in issues like racism and economic injustice reveals that the ecumenical movement was anxious to make a practical difference in terms of human relations in the world. But it is also significant that when the delegates came to discuss the real meaning of Christian hope there was a divide between those, mainly from the European Churches, who favoured an eschatological understanding of hope, and those who argued that Christian hope is for the world here and now. It would appear then that

although the assembly was clear in its intention to offer a message of hope to the world, the question of how to bring that message of hope across was largely dependent on a theological and doctrinal understanding of what exactly constitutes Christian hope.

The next assembly of the World Council of Churches took place at New Delhi in 1961. The general theme of the assembly was “Jesus Christ – the Light of the World”, and the main focus of the meeting was on the issues of witness, service and unity. While the focus on service and unity was clearly intended to bear practical fruit, the main focus of the Conference proved to be that of unity. The final document of the assembly produced a famous statement on the meaning of unity, one which again reveals that there are both doctrinal and practical aspects of the call to Christian unity.

 We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptised into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such a wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people.²⁰⁰

What is most significant in this view of Christian unity is that, without losing sight of the need for practical witness and service in the name of the Gospel, it shows that for such witness and service to be Christian in nature

²⁰⁰ *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology*, p.88.

it necessarily demands a share in at least a minimal doctrinal and theological agreement about the nature of Jesus and the nature of the Church. In other words, the call to serve the world and to witness to the hope that Jesus brings is based on a prior understanding of Jesus and the Church that is inherently theological and doctrinal.

The fourth assembly of the World Council of Churches took place in 1968 at Uppsala, in Sweden. The theme of the assembly was "Behold, I make all things new". With more than 700 delegates present, representing 235 Churches, it has been said that the Uppsala assembly was the most widely representative gathering of Christian Churches ever to be held. Also new at this assembly was the presence of the Roman Catholic Church, newly open to ecumenical dialogue as a result of the Second Vatican Council.

The sub-themes of the assembly were again concerned with both the quest to offer proper witness to a rapidly changing world and with doctrinal issues. They were as follows: The Holy Spirit and the catholicity of the Church, renewal in mission, world economics and social development, towards justice and peace in international affairs, worship, and the call to move towards new styles of living.

The final document of the Uppsala assembly made no effort to hide the fact that the question of Church unity involves a real tension as to how best bring about the unity that is desired, nor did it avoid the difficulties in deciding whether unity should be focussed more on service to the world or on doctrinal agreements about the meaning of the Church and its place in the world.

We are confronted with the fact that the basis of our endeavour for unity is being widely questioned. It seems to many, inside and outside the Church, that the struggle for Christian unity in its present form is irrelevant to the immediate crisis of our times. The Church, they say, should seek its unity through solidarity with those forces in modern life, such as the struggle for social equality, and should give up its concern with patching up its own internal disputes.²⁰¹

Such a paragraph might have been written with Macmurray's ecumenical concerns in mind, but the response of the final document is to acknowledge that the whole ecumenical enterprise is being conducted within the context of God who acts in history. In terms that, paradoxically, could have come from Macmurray's *The Clue to History* it states that:

In the agonising arena of contemporary history...we see the work of demonic forces that battle against the rights and liberties of man, but we also see the activity of the life-giving Spirit of God. We have come to view this world of men as the place where God is already at work to make all things new, and where he summons us to work with him.²⁰²

Again, the final document seems to argue that although there may be disagreement as to how best create the unity of the Churches for the good of the world, such unity involves at least some level of doctrinal agreement. "The purpose of Christ is to bring people of all times, of all races, of all places, of all conditions, into an organic and living unity in Christ by the Holy Spirit under the universal fatherhood of God".²⁰³ Such a Trinitarian

²⁰¹ *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1948-1968: The Ecumenical Advance*, edited by Harold E. Fey, SPCK, London, 1970, p.421.

²⁰² *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1948-1968: The Ecumenical Advance*, p.421.

²⁰³ *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1948-1968: The Ecumenical Advance*, p.421.

statement, with its declaration as to what the purpose of Jesus is, could only be based on some shared doctrinal agreement among those who call themselves Christian as to the nature and purpose of Jesus and to the communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The last of the assemblies of the World Council of Churches to take place in Macmurray's lifetime was that of 1975, which took place in Nairobi. Without failing to examine the need for the Churches to seek practical expressions of unity and for the Churches to work with all those who uphold the dignity of human being, the focus at the assembly was again, predictably, turned to the question of unity, and to what God's intention for unity was demanding of the Churches. While all continued to share in a desire for unity, there emerged a growing appreciation of the fact that the kind of unity the World Council of Churches was seeking was not in any sense uniformity, but rather unity expressed through diversity. The Nairobi assembly built on the idea of the New Delhi assembly, that the Churches were being called to an organic unity, by adding that, while this remains the goal of the World Council of Churches, the organic unity of the Churches can still be expressed through the diversity of styles of worship and lifestyle to be found within the Churches. It further suggested that the Churches ought to work towards 'conciliar fellowship', whereby the Churches could welcome their diversity within a context of deeper unity, best expressed in meetings like those of the assemblies of the World Council of Churches. However, the richness of diversity was still to be seen within the framework of a general doctrinal agreement about the fundamental aspects of Christian beliefs.

Though different members in each local community, and different local communities, do and should manifest a rich diversity, and develop their

own proper personality, nevertheless no cultural, sociological, psychological, political or historical difference can alter the integrity of the one apostolic faith. By the working of the Holy Spirit, the One Living Word and Son of God is incarnate in the One Church, the One Body of which Christ is the Head and the true worshippers of the Father the members. They commune with him who said: 'I am the truth'. This Living Truth is the goal towards which all churches who seek for unity tend together.²⁰⁴

Unity Through Doctrine and Service

The history of the ecumenical movement and of the World Council of Churches subsequent to Macmurray's death in 1976 need not concern us here, but it is clear that the desire for unity among the Churches continues to be expressed through countless gatherings, large and small, of those who share his fundamental belief that the Church needs to be united if it is to be true to God's word and to its own nature. The tension between seeking doctrinal agreement and seeking united action for the sake of the world continues to engage many of those involved in ecumenism, and perhaps inevitably so.

In terms of our admittedly brief glance at some of the major developments in the history of the ecumenical movement, we have seen that there has been no single vision of unity at work. Rather, there has always been both a doctrinal and a social element to the call to unity. Indeed, the call to Christians to be a practical sign of unity in the world depends largely on some basic doctrinal agreement as to what constitutes a Christian, even if such agreement is limited to the confession that Christ is Lord. We can find

²⁰⁴ *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology*, p.111.

evidence for this even in Macmurray's writing itself. In *Search for Reality in Religion*, before making his appeal to the Churches to focus on a unity which is practical rather than doctrinal, Macmurray himself has to provide his readers with a functional definition of the Church. "The Church is the community of the disciples of Jesus working, in cooperation with God and under the guidance of His Spirit, to establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth".²⁰⁵ Any attempt to interpret such a definition of Christianity, or indeed any other, must surely stem from a doctrinal perspective. In the light of the history of the ecumenical movement, Macmurray's assertion, in *Search for Reality in Religion*, that if the Churches avoided seeking doctrinal unity they could achieve practical union tomorrow seems therefore, if not naïve, then at least overly optimistic!

What also emerges is the fact that it can be, if anything, more difficult for Christians to come to agreement on very practical issues such as those of how to create peace, justice and equality in the world than it is to find doctrinal agreement about the nature of God and the vocation of the Churches. This is a point well made by Jürgen Moltmann, a theologian who has been much involved in the whole ecumenical project. Writing a reflection paper on the first fifty years of the Faith and Order movement in 1977, he states that:

Fifty years ago in the early days of ecumenical rapprochement it was said that "Doctrine divides – service unites"...Today the situation is almost completely reversed. Now, after many years of patient, painstaking work it would be true to say "Theology unites – praxis divides". Controversy in the ecumenical movement no longer centres on the Filioque, but concerns instead the Programme to Combat Racism. The problem now

²⁰⁵ John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion*, p.64.

is not the theological understanding of the Eucharist and of ministry, but the practical recognition of ministries and common celebration. After fifty years of concerted theological effort we now have to say quite openly to Christians and church authorities that there are no longer any doctrinal differences which justify the divisions of our Churches.²⁰⁶

One final point with regards to the history of the ecumenical movement needs to be made. This is the fact that, in gathering together with the intention of seeking the unity that God demands and in trying to find practical means to express that unity, the very experience of sharing dialogue has been itself an act of communion. Konrad Raiser, a former deputy general secretary of the World Council of Churches, quotes the theologian J. Brosseder who states that:

The attempt of the churches to proceed via “dialogue” to “consensus” as a result of dialogue, so as then to be able to restore communion between the churches, is contrived and remote from life, in that communion does not come into being and is not experienced at all in that way. In these successive stages – first, dialogue; then consensus; and then finally, communion – what is overlooked is that dialogue is living communion. Communion, fellowship, without dialogue is dead. Dialogue is not a means to an end: it is rather living communion itself.²⁰⁷

This insight can be said to reveal another weakness in Macmurray’s well-intended call for unity through practical action. The weakness of his view is that it fails to recognise that the simple experience of dialoguing with others is more than just a time spent in preparation for action. To enter into dialogue with others, even if the goal of such dialogue is to work towards

²⁰⁶ *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology*, p.210.

²⁰⁷ Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1991, p.106.

practical action, is itself an experience of communion and fellowship. Indeed, it is precisely at ecumenical gatherings that many people have come to experience the unity and love they are most ardently seeking.

We are now in a position, I believe, to state that while the history of the ecumenical movement does not necessarily prove that Macmurray's approach to the question of Church unity is wrong, it does suggest that he failed both to appreciate the complexity of the ecumenical task and to recognise that it is not possible to be united in Christ without some doctrinal agreement as to the meaning of Jesus. All of the evidence available to us through the history of the ecumenical movement and through the many documents of the Faith and Order movement, the Life and Work movement and the World Council of Churches, suggests indeed that the closer the Churches come to doctrinal agreement on such issues as the nature of Jesus, baptism, Eucharist and ministry, the easier it is for the Churches to act in the world and for the world with one voice.

There is however another, perhaps more serious, criticism to be made of Macmurray's refusal to accept the need for doctrinal agreement amongst the Churches. This criticism is based, not on the history of the ecumenical movement, but on Macmurray's own philosophical analysis of the nature of the human person and on his notion that thinking itself is a reflective activity, and done for the sake of action. In order to make this criticism more explicit it is necessary to return again to some of the philosophical arguments that Macmurray presents in both *The Self as Agent* and *Persons in Relation*.

We are already familiar with Macmurray's view, shared by many contemporary philosophers, that Descartes' attempt to find epistemological

certainly left us with a greatly impoverished understanding of human nature. In reducing the person to the concept of a thinker, Descartes could give no plausible account of human activity. Nor could he explain the existence of other human beings. Macmurray believed that most philosophy since Descartes' Cogito was inevitably headed in the wrong direction and attempted in his own philosophical endeavours to find a more appropriate way to understand human nature. His way of doing so was to take as a starting point the human person as an agent rather than as a thinker. In this manner, one would be able to account for thinking without losing the concept that it is agency that marks human being. In *The Self as Agent* Macmurray suggested that the human person is a being who both thinks and acts. Indeed, thinking and action can be seen as being nothing other than contrasted modes of activity. The distinction between the two is simply that action may be seen as always primary, while thinking can be seen as secondary and derivative, always done for the sake of action.

Macmurray developed this view further by focussing on the centrality of intention in human actions. He was anxious that we avoid a teleological understanding of human action because, in his view, such an understanding makes the whole concept of human freedom problematic. If human beings are by nature aimed at some purpose or intention then no human action is properly free, nor are their actions properly human actions. What makes human action different in kind from any other animal behaviour or activity is precisely that human beings generally act with some intention in mind. Human action is only proper human action when there is an intention to act in a particular fashion. But our actions can only be properly intentional when we have taken the time to adequately think and reflect.

In terms of Macmurray's philosophical concept of personhood, therefore, reflection is normally constituted by a withdrawal from action but is done for the sake of further action. This experience is marked by what Macmurray calls the rhythm of withdrawal and return. In taking time to reflect on our past activities we withdraw from direct attention. Doing so allows us to not only judge the relative success or failure of our past actions, but to clarify our intentions so that our future actions might be in harmony with the intention that directs our activity. Each human life is marked by this continuous rhythm of withdrawal and return, but what is crucial, in terms of Macmurray's philosophical argument, is that proper human action depends on acting with the right intention, and one can only be sure of acting with the right intention if one withdraws from action so as to reflect. In other words, although reflection is always secondary and done for the sake of action, reflection itself is a form of activity. It is what gives shape and purpose to all our human activities.

Throughout his writings Macmurray frequently makes mention of what he considers to be the three basic modes of reflection in human life. These are science, art and religion. Originally, in what are termed primitive societies, religion was the only real mode of reflection, but as people gradually lost sight of the religious nature of their life and world, art and science came to be seen as alternative, if not opposing, modes of reflection. In Macmurray's view, it is only through rediscovering the primacy of religious reflection that we will be enabled to act with the intentions that are appropriate to our own nature.

Given the fact that we think and reflect for the sake of action, what is the precise purpose of religious reflection and thinking? Macmurray's answer to this is related to his other major philosophical argument that human action,

when conducted with the right intention, always aims at creating communion and friendship with other human agents. The real value of religious reflection lies, therefore, in that “religion...is the reflective activity which expresses the consciousness of community; or more tersely, religion is the celebration of communion”.²⁰⁸ It is through religious reflection that we can come to a true knowledge of ourselves, of other agents, and the God who is also personal. With the knowledge that to be human is to intend communion with God and with others, a knowledge that comes to us through religious reflection, we are thus enabled to act in such a way that all that we do is done with the intention of creating communion and overcoming division.

This, in brief, is Macmurray’s philosophical view of human nature, one best summed up in his own words: “The simplest expression that I can find for the thesis I have tried to maintain is this: All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship”.²⁰⁹

Turning again to Macmurray’s claim that unity between the Churches cannot be achieved through doctrinal reflection and agreement but only through action, it is my argument that Macmurray’s view is logically inconsistent with his philosophical understanding of the importance of reflection.

There can surely be little doubt that the intention of all those who have participated in the ecumenical efforts of the 20th century has been to create the communion and fellowship that Macmurray spent his whole life trying to achieve. Nor can it be seriously doubted that the intention of the

²⁰⁸ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, p.162.

²⁰⁹ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p.15.

ecumenical movement has been practical, something which is clearly revealed in the fact that the Churches have played a significant role in the effort to overcome social evils such as racism and sexism.

The various gatherings of the ecumenical movement through the years have been precisely what Macmurray suggests is appropriate; namely, they have been moments of withdrawal but moments spent always with the intention of returning to make a practical difference in the creation of a world built on mutual respect and communion. Up to this point, therefore, we might say that the assemblies of the World Council of Churches, for example, reveal Macmurray's philosophical notion of action to be not only theoretically plausible, but also practically possible.

Where then can we see evidence of the logical inconsistency in Macmurray's refusal to accept that doctrinal matters can be a source of unity too? The evidence, I believe, stems from his notion that thinking and reflection is not only done for the sake of action, but is itself a form of activity. If that is the case, then surely it cannot be denied that religious reflection, and with it doctrinal reflection, is also a form of activity? Even if, as Macmurray states, reflection is always a secondary form of activity, it remains an activity nonetheless. Again, given the case that thinking or reflecting and action are simply contrasted modes of activity, then one can see that the World Council of Churches' dual approach to the question of unity, through doctrinal agreement and through practical social action, are not as irreconcilable as Macmurray believes. Rather, they both constitute modes of action, conducted with the intention of creating that communion in which we can move away from fear to a real love for one another.

It may be that Macmurray's aversion to the attempt of the Churches to come to doctrinal agreement on the nature of God and the Christian vocation is no more than a desire that such reflection should be seen in its proper context, that even doctrinal agreement is to be understood as secondary, and for the sake of proper action in the world. But by stating that, in our Christian task to help create the unity that is God's will for humanity, there is no place for doctrinal reflection and agreement, Macmurray fails to be consistent with his own view that reflection is in itself an activity. This lack of consistency shows that Macmurray's failure lay in the fact that he was unable to see that the activities of the ecumenical movement could provide the world with a very clear living example of what he had spent his whole life trying to proclaim.

The sad truth is that Macmurray, through his abhorrence of doctrine, was blinded to the fact that the whole ecumenical enterprise can be seen as a living image of the very thesis that he wanted to maintain. To paraphrase Macmurray's own expression of his thesis, we can conclude with the view that all meaningful knowledge, including doctrinal knowledge, is for the sake of action. And all meaningful action, including both the reflective activity of working towards doctrinal agreement and the practical action of creating communion among the Churches and beyond, is for the sake of friendship.

CONCLUSION

In the Introduction to this dissertation I made the suggestion that Macmurray never succeeded in feeling entirely at home within the philosophical and religious environment of his time. This was largely because his interest in coming to a fuller understanding of what it means to be person took him along roads no longer traversed by many of his fellow philosophers and Christians. Yet, even in his own lifetime, there were some who believed that Macmurray had something significant to say to a world searching for hope in the midst of so much turmoil and horror. Among those who valued the contribution of Macmurray was Thomas F. Torrance²¹⁰, a professor of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh. In a letter written in 1975 Torrance stated that:

John Macmurray is the quiet giant of modern philosophy, the most original and creative of savants and social thinkers in the English-speaking world. If his thought is revolutionary, as it certainly is, the kind of revolution he has in view is not revolt but the reconstruction of the foundations of life and knowledge with a view to a genuinely open and creative society of the future...In what he has done through his teaching and writing there is a longer period between germination and harvest, for his thought penetrates deeply and pervasively into the foundations of

²¹⁰ Thomas F. Torrance (b. 1913) wrote his doctorate at the University of Basel under the supervision of Karl Barth. He was professor of Christian Dogmatics at the University of Edinburgh from 1952 to 1979. From 1976 to 1977 he served as the Moderator of the Church of Scotland. Among his many publications are *God and Rationality* (1971) and *Theology in Reconstruction* (1965).

human existence; if, then, he has not been yet appreciated as he ought to be, it is because he is something like fifty years ahead of the rest of us.²¹¹

Torrance was not the only person to recognise that Macmurray, in his belief that human beings are most fully themselves when they seek communion with others, had something significant to say to the contemporary world. Dame Cicely Saunders, for example, who founded the St. Christopher's Hospice in 1967, claimed that the inspiration for her notion that the dying should be treated with the utmost respect and dignity came from her reading of Macmurray's view of the human person. Similarly, the famous psychiatrist R.D.Laing was only one of many psychiatrists who studied the works of Macmurray because of his view that personal reality is deeply marked by relationships.²¹²

Again, the contemporary American philosopher, Walter G. Jeffko who wrote his doctoral thesis on Macmurray's ethical vision, has recently published a book dealing with a variety of ethical issues from a personalist standpoint. In his book, *Contemporary Ethical Issues: A Personalistic Perspective*²¹³, Jeffko clearly states that without agreeing with everything that Macmurray says, and while dealing with moral issues not specifically dealt with by Macmurray himself, his ideas are heavily influenced by Macmurray's view of the nature of the human person.

Macmurray's views about society and community have also had some influence in the political world, most notably in the thought of the present

²¹¹ John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, p.422.

²¹² cf. John E. Costello, *John Macmurray: A Biography*, p 352.

²¹³ Walter G. Jeffko, *Contemporary Ethical Issues: A Personalistic Perspective*, Humanity Books, New York, 1999.

Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Tony Blair. In a Foreword that he wrote for John Conford's selection of Macmurray's writings, Blair states that:

John Macmurray is not one of the twentieth century's most famous philosophers. This is surprising. Actually his work is more accessible, better written and above all far more relevant than most of what I and many others studied as hallowed texts at university...Macmurray offers two insights. First, he places the individual firmly within a social setting – we are what we are, in part, because of the other, the 'You and I'. We cannot ignore our obligations to others as well as ourselves. This is where modern political notions of community begin. Secondly, by rooting his vision in the personal world and in intention, he rejects simple determinism. The personal is not submerged in the social or organic. In religious terms, also, it is easy to see his influence in a whole generation of Christian philosophers. For him, spirituality was based in this world; it was not an abstraction from it...For philosophy to be at all relevant, it must either increase an understanding of the world or our ability to change it. At best it can do both. This is a test John Macmurray passes with flying colours. I hope more people discover him.²¹⁴

Without wishing to express any opinion on the nature of Blair's own political values, I would endorse his desire that more people come to discover the richness and challenge of Macmurray's thought. In particular I would hope that those who share Macmurray's concern for unity among the Christian Churches might find in his belief that to be human is to be essentially communitarian a valuable philosophical basis for the whole ecumenical project.

²¹⁴ John Conford, *The Personal World: John Macmurray on Self and Society*, Floris Books, Edinburgh, 1996, pp.9-10.

Although in my thesis I have tried to assert that Macmurray's failure to give any place to the need for doctrinal agreement among the Churches marks a logical inconsistency in terms of his own philosophical understanding of the nature of action and of thought as a form of reflective activity, this ought not to blind us to the positive contribution that Macmurray can make to the ongoing search for real unity among Christians.

While it may be true that ecumenism is primarily a theological concern, it is my opinion that the efforts of the ecumenical movement can be greatly enhanced by being properly grounded in a philosophically sustainable understanding of human nature. By cogently arguing that to be a person is to live with the intention of creating communion with others, Macmurray is able to show that ecumenism is not simply desirable for pastoral reasons or even for the sake of the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Rather, in expressing our desire for unity among Christians, and indeed with all peoples, we are expressing the truth of our being and our nature.

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