Foreword

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I

Of all the twentieth-century philosophers whom we call Existentialists, Miguel de Unamuno wears best, speaks most powerfully to us today.[1] This great Spanish thinker (1864–1936) was an extraordinarily gifted man of letters. He was a philosopher, linguist, poet, novelist, short story writer, essayist, playwright, professor, university administrator, and Spanish public intellectual. He had great intellectual integrity and moral courage.

His *magnum opus*, *The Tragic Sense of Life* (1913),[2] constitutes the summation of his philosophy. In that book, we encounter an author who was struggling with God, reason, doubt, faith, and immortality. These, indeed, were almost the only philosophical issues that Unamuno wanted to write about. Abstruse questions in metaphysics, epistemology, logic, or even ethical theory had little interest for him. He was heir to the rich Spanish Roman Catholic religious and intellectual tradition, but he lived in tension with it for virtually all of his adult life.[3] Two of his books were placed on the Index of Forbidden Books by the Spanish religious hierarchy, yet he was a deeply religious (and arguably even Christian) man.

Unamuno is not an easy philosopher to read. He loved paradoxes and even (at times) contradictions. Various interpreters have called him an atheist, a skeptic, a Protestant, a panentheist, a Catholic modernist, and a good

1. Well, possibly Camus is the one exception.

2. Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J. E. Crawford Flitch (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2006).

3. See, for example, his *The Agony of Christianity*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1960).

Catholic. Passages can be found in his writings that can be taken to support all of these interpretations. In the present book, Jan E. Evans does an incisive and thorough job of sorting through the Unamuno corpus and arriving at a definitive interpretation of his views. One great asset of Evans' work is the insight she gains by comparing Unamuno's works with the philosophers whom he admired most and considered his fellow travelers in the tragic sense of life. They would be Pascal, William James, and especially Kierkegaard.

II

My own love of Unamuno began in college when *The Tragic Sense of Life* was recommended to me by one of my professors. I did not (and do not) share many of Unamuno's religious doubts. But I was captivated by the eloquence of his prose (even in translation), the depth of his knowledge of philosophy, theology, and literature, his insistence that philosophy must be relevant to real life, and his obviously sincere interest in helping his reader ("the man of flesh and bone") by his philosophy. But two other points stand out as well: first, I felt that here was a man who genuinely understood human nature and the human situation. Second, and most of all, I was struck by the passion and intellectual integrity with which he approached issues of faith, doubt, and God.

Unamuno was deeply interested in, indeed almost obsessed by, the topic of personal immortality. Thus he tells us that "as a youth, and even as a child, I remained unmoved when shown the most moving pictures of hell, for even then nothing appeared to me quite so horrible as nothingness itself."[4] Indeed, he allowed as how he could not understand those folks who claimed not to be disquieted by the thought of their eventual annihilation.[5] Moreover, he believed that apart from immortality or resurrection, life here and now has no meaning.

But he was convinced that the only sensible basis for belief in life after death was God. And here we see the central problem of Unamuno's philosophy: reason, he believed, cannot show that God exists or that the soul is immortal. Unamuno was convinced that the classic "proofs" of the existence of God are all fallacious, and in any case that the "God" they try to prove is not the Christian God. The God that emerges from the proofs,

4. Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, 8; cf. also 39.
5. Ibid., 106.

he says, is "nothing but an idea of God, a dead thing."[6] He believed further that reason actually shows the impossibility of individual consciousnesses persisting after bodily death.[7] Unamuno's philosophy amounted to an unrelenting tug of war between reason's doubts about God and immortality and the heart's desire for God and for life beyond death.

We cannot miss an interesting comparison between Unamuno, the religious doubter, and today's atheists (as exemplified by the "New Atheists" such as Dawkins, Hitchens, Dennett, et al.). They dismiss religion as frivolous nonsense; Unamuno took it with utmost seriousness and struggled with it. I myself have often wondered why the New Atheists are not more *puzzled by* religion, at the very least puzzled by the question of why so many intelligent people are religious. Nor do they seriously study (or even mention!) today's most gifted defenders of religion. Unamuno had no problem sympathetically understanding the faith of Spain's simple Catholics (although he could not share their faith); the New Atheists just cannot understand why anybody but a fool would embrace religion.

But Unamuno strongly wanted to believe; he took comfort from the story of the worried father in the Gospel of Mark who said to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:14–29). And Unamuno tried to conduct his life *as if God existed*, i.e., he wanted to live, as much as possible, as Christians are commanded to live, especially through love and suffering. Thus he wrote, "To believe in God is to long for His existence and, further, it is to act as if He existed; it is to live by this longing and to make it the inner spring of our action. This longing or hunger for divinity begets hope, hope begets faith, and faith and hope beget charity."[8]

And as Evans does (see her concluding chapter), I deeply appreciate the way that Unamuno tried to live as a Christian in the public sphere. I am thinking especially of his words and deeds on behalf of freedom of thought and freedom of religion, as well as his opposition to all forms of political authoritarianism. Such opinions, courageously expressed by Unamuno, cost him dearly. In my view, he succeeded in acting as if God existed.

6. Ibid., 141.
7. Ibid., 92.
8. Ibid., 163.

III

It might help to clarify Unamuno's religious stance if we were to imagine different levels of religious belief and unbelief. I will describe five of them.

1. Total skepticism;
2. Honest doubt with no desire to believe;
3. Honest doubt plus a sincere desire to believe;
4. Belief informed by reason and doubt;
5. Simple faith.

The first, total skepticism is the position represented by the New Atheists, as well as many others today. Religious belief is dismissed as irrational and religious practice is considered a pointless waste of time. The second is the location of many people whom I know; they respect religious folk, have no desire to ridicule them, but for various reasons are unable to believe and have no desire to do so. The third is, I think, the position of Unamuno and, I am sure, a few others whom I have known. Intellectual scruples prevent them from believing, but they find something deeply attractive in religion and have a kind of nostalgia for belief and the life of faith. Maybe, like Unamuno, they even try to live as much as possible "as if God existed." The fourth, so far as I know myself, would be my own stance. I am a Christian believer but I certainly experience doubt and, as a philosopher of religion, I am acutely aware of the problems and objections that religion faces, most notably the problem of evil. And the fifth is the location of Unamuno's famous figure, the *carbonero*, the coal delivery man. Presumably Unamuno had in mind people of little education and maybe intelligence; the *carbonero* believes exactly what Holy Mother Church says, without doubt, scruple, or question.

Those, like me, who admire Unamuno might be tempted at this point to ask: of these five, which stances are religiously sufficient? Specifically, does Unamuno's position of honest doubt with a sincere desire to believe pass muster? But these questions are vague to the point of incoherence: sufficient for what? We might say: *sufficient to be acceptable to God*. That is, can a person who honestly doubts, sincerely wants to believe, and tries to live christianly inherit the kingdom of God? But of course that question is a non-starter. It is not given to human beings to know who will be part of the blessed and who part of the reprobate. That is up to God. Well, then we might say: *sufficient to be a Christian*. But then what is a Christian? There

appear to be about as many ways of understanding the word "Christian" as there are people who ask the question. Think of the different answers that might be given by Fundamentalists, Pentecostals, Evangelicals, conservative Catholics, progressive Catholics, Eastern Orthodox believers, or members of mainstream Protestant denominations.

Moreover, even if we could find a satisfactorily precise question, answers to our sufficiency question would vary greatly depending on one's point of view. Obviously, pre-Vatican II Spanish Catholics of the early 1900s would be inclined toward a very different sort of answer than contemporary Catholics. This is not even to mention thousands of other possible views, including my own as an early twenty-first century Presbyterian. Despite my deep religious and philosophical respect for Unamuno, I can give no definite answer, even as a private opinion, on the question of whether Unamuno's religious stance passes muster. There is no clear question in the neighborhood and, even if there were, I do not know the mind of God.

Why then have I bothered to raise this point? Because it seems to me that *this is Unamuno's deepest issue*. Indeed, it is his most anguished worry. I am not aware of anywhere in his writings (much of which I have not read) where he asks the precise question whether he has done enough to merit or inherit eternal life. Nevertheless, I believe that this is his own most worrying question. And, finding no answer, he describes his position as tragic.

IV

As noted, Unamuno was convinced that life has no meaning apart from immortality, and that the hunger for life after death is the basis of all philosophy. Indeed, he held that if our individual consciousnesses do not survive death, "then is our labored human lineage no more than a fateful procession of ghosts, going from nothingness to nothingness and humanitarianism the most inhuman thing that is known."[9]

Accordingly, it might be interesting to ask what is so frightening about death. Why do people fear death? Why did Unamuno shrink from it? It appears that there are lots of reasons to fear death:

- Fear of dying painfully;
- Fear of hell or of some kind of painful existence in the afterlife;

9. Ibid., 38. Flitch's translation of this passage is problematic. The translation of the Spanish quoted here is from Jan Evans.

- Fear of the unknown (we have no clear idea of the afterlife);
- Fear of absolute solitude, isolation from others (if we could all hold hands and leap together into the void, perhaps death would not be so frightening);
- Fear of separation from my loved ones;
- Fear about the earthly fate of my loved ones after I die;
- Fear that my hopes, goals, and aspirations will be unfulfilled;
- Fear of being forgotten;
- Fear of non-being, of my total annihilation as a person.

Naturally, different people will rank these fears differently. But it is perfectly clear that it is the last fear listed that most deeply bothered Unamuno. He knew that Christianity teaches the general resurrection—that we will be bodily raised in the afterlife to be in the presence of Christ. But his doubts prevented him from rationally embracing the doctrine.

Yet Unamuno was convinced that out of the tragic sense of life—the despair and pain that unfulfilled religious longing entails—emerges heroics deeds, hope, and love. Thus he wants his reader to see "how out of this abyss of despair hope may arise, and how this critical position may be the well-spring of human, profoundly human, action and effort, and of solidarity and even of progress. He will see its pragmatic justification."[10] Reason separates us from God, Unamuno held, but we come to God by way of love and suffering. The knowledge of God, which is not rational, proceeds from the love of God.[11]

And there is even a kind of belief here. Unamuno's novella, *Saint Manuel Bueno, Martyr*, is clearly in part an *apologia* for Unamuno's own religious stance. It is the story of a saintly but unbelieving Spanish country priest who conceals his skepticism about God and the afterlife from all but two of the villagers. One of them is Ángela Carballino, the imagined narrator of Unamuno's tale, and the other is her brother Lázaro, who shares Father Manuel's unbelief. Some time after the death of both Father Manuel and Lázaro, Ángela writes, "Now, as I write this memoir, this confession of my experience with saintliness, with a saint, I am of the opinion that Don Manuel the Good, my Don Manuel, and my brother, too, died, believing they did not believe, but that, without believing in their belief, they actually

10. Ibid., 113–14.
11. Ibid., 148.

believed, in active, resigned desolation."[12] Or, as Unamuno says elsewhere, "faith continues to live on doubt."[13]

V

There are very many things that I deeply appreciate in Unamuno's philosophy. I will mention two such points.

First, his insistence that philosophy must be relevant to real life is one that I resonate with. Philosophy begins, and in my view must end, as an attempt to answer real questions asked by real people. This of course includes the questions that Unamuno asked, like, "Does God exist?" and "Will I live on after my death?" But it also includes such questions as, "How do I know what is morally right and morally wrong?" "What is the best form of government?" "Are human beings free in their decisions and actions?" "Are human beings physical bodies and nothing else?" "What is knowledge and how does it differ from other cognitive states?" and hundreds of others. Thus Unamuno wrote, "Philosophy is a product of the humanity of each philosopher, and each philosopher is a man of flesh and bone who addresses himself to other men of flesh and bone like himself. And, let him do what he will, he philosophizes not with the reason only, but with the will, with the feelings, with the flesh and with the bones, with the whole soul and the whole body. It is the man that philosophizes."[14]

Second, I agree that doubt is an important component of a mature faith. People who are raised in religious families and cultures sometimes go through a time of religious crisis, often during their teen-age years. Usually the problem is religious doubt. Some, of course, give up religion permanently. But others, largely by working with their doubts, emerge with a stronger faith, a faith that is no longer their parents' faith but is now uniquely theirs. Doubts are, or at least can be, good things. Although Unamuno was quite prepared to doubt reason, it worries me that it never seemed to occur to him to doubt his doubts.

But the paradox for me is that I am greatly attracted to Unamuno at the same time that I am repelled. I do not see reason as the enemy of faith; I do

12. Miguel de Unamuno, *Ficciones: Four Stories and a Play*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan, Selected Works of Miguel de Unamuno 7 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) 176–77.

13. Unamuno, *Agony of Christianity*, 44.

14. Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, 25.

not hold that faith in God and the resurrection is irrational; I do not accept the idea that the classical scholastic picture of God is self-contradictory; and I do not agree that the "God" that emerges from the theistic proofs is only an idea of God.

If Unamuno were alive today, he would be 148 years old. It is absurd to imagine him living that long and I suppose it is equally absurd to wonder how a human being who lived in one place and time would react to events occurring at another place and time. Despite the absurdity, I cannot help wondering how Unamuno would react if he knew of the revival of philosophy of religion and even of Christian philosophy among both Catholics and Protestants that began in the late 1970's and continues through today.

It is perfectly possible that he would be horrified by this movement. (Some people today react in such a way.) But I just wonder whether his religious doubts might have been assuaged at least to a certain extent if he were able to reads works of people like Alvin Plantinga, John Hick, Richard Swinburne, William Alston, Eleonore Stump, and a host of others. Obviously, there is no answer to such a question.

Be that as it may, I commend *Miguel de Unamuno's Quest for Faith* to the scholarly world. The book is clearly written, careful in its argumentation, and wonderfully perceptive. One of Evans' insights in chapter 5 caused me to see Unamuno in a new way. She claims—and I accept the point—that Unamuno was unhappy with God because God remains hidden, especially from reason. He was offended that the only avenue toward knowledge of God that God leaves open is revelation, which he could not accept.

Miguel de Unamuno, one of the great geniuses of twentieth century philosophy and Spanish literature, comes alive for us in this book. My fervent hope is that *Miguel de Unamuno's Quest for Faith* convinces the scholarly and philosophical world to start reading Unamuno again.