Foreword

I am happy to commend to John Staten's readers this work entitled Conscience and the Reality of God. This undertaking sets for itself a limited task—one that it completely fulfills.

The task is limited in at least two senses. Although it offers a positive, "constructive", contribution to the exploration of language on the subject of God, to the signification of the term "God", this effort is situated on the level of a prolegomenon to theology. Staten thus speaks of "the corroborative, hermeneutical assistance of a specific, modern philosophical perspective" (pp. 47, 97–98). In other words, he is seeking a locus from which the discourse on God could be heard at a time—our own—marked by the theoretical and practical irrelevance of language concerning God. In this respect, the modesty proclaimed by Staten is by no means a rhetorical device; it is solely a question of identifying the locus where human experience as such can be opened to language, to a word-event, whose specific and specifically Christian structure is not itself the object of this study. The task is limited in another sense as well: a single experience is examined, that of Gewissen which we translate by conscience. The author does not claim that conscience is the only experience in which a breach onto the Open, as Rilke would have called it, is revealed within the heart of the person. Certainly, conscience does have, as I shall underscore in a moment, weighty credentials to allow it to occupy a privileged place in these anthropological prolegomena to theology, but there is no assertion that, in our present cultural situation, the only access to a reasoned discourse on God is by way of conscience. If it be privileged, the access by way of conscience is not the sole path open to us.

A limited task, I said, but one that is completely fulfilled—fulfilled in a number of respects, which I would like to enumerate.

First of all, Staten had the wisdom to take as his guide two contemporary authors, a philosopher and a theologian: Heidegger and Ebeling, who are pioneers in this matter. In this respect, Staten's work can be read as an introduction to a parallel reading of Heidegger and Ebeling, in whom the central position of the phenomenon of conscience is evident, in contrast to readings which stress solely in the first, Being-towards-death and in the second, the Christological character of the word-event.

However, there is a more important respect in which this work is to be recommended: it is not restricted to juxtaposing a monograph devoted to conscience in Heidegger and another dealing with conscience in Ebeling. It proposes an interpretation of Ebeling's texts in light of Heidegger's texts. In this way it increases the intelligibility and the force of many terse or cryptic
expressions in Ebeling, by restoring their Heideggerian background. In particular, the essay in *Wort und Glaube* devoted precisely to the phenomenon of conscience, is made somehow greater by this exegesis, which I would term an amplifying interpretation, while its place at the end of the work is shown to be entirely justified by an analysis which shows it to be the culmination of the collection of essays. By the same token, the Heideggerian reading of Ebeling opens a difficult problem of interpretation, namely that of the double allegiance of the Zürich theologian to Luther and to Heidegger. A recent article by Ebeling, which due to its date of publication Staten could not have known (*Das Gewissen in Luthers Verständnis*, in *Lutherstudien*, Bd. III, Tübingen: Mohr, 1985, pp. 108-125), confirms my feeling that his allegiance to Heidegger, which is well documented by Staten, renders Ebeling's position all the more enigmatic, as it is just as intimately bound up with the Lutheran thesis that conscience possesses from the very outset a theological dimension. For myself, I am tempted to consider this double allegiance which Staten helps to uncover to be the source of a creative tension at the very heart of Ebeling's analyses. Some of the measured criticisms that Staten formulates at the end of his study, after having given full credit to Ebeling, seem to me less to denounce weaknesses in the synthesis that Ebeling is held to have made between his two mentors, than to point towards the place where the two allegiances reinforce each other instead of undercutting one another.

However, it is the personal contribution of Staten's study that seems to me most fully to justify his assertion that he has fulfilled the contract signed at the start of his work: "I shall develop the primary thesis that in the experience given to man as 'conscience' we have a qualitatively unique ontological grounding for understanding the reality deemed 'God'" (p. 23; cf. also pp. 81f., 111f.). Everything revolves around the preposition *in*: "in the experience given to man as conscience". I should like to underscore what this preposition of *place*, already employed in my Foreward, specifically implies when it is used in reference, precisely, to conscience. It does not designate in a general way the coincidence of immanence and transcendance. It designates conscience itself as being a "place". If one may say, in an epistemological sense, that conscience is the "meaningful experiential *locus* for the knowledge of God" (or again: "the more fundamental hermeneutical *locus* concerning God"), this is because conscience is already, in an ontological sense, a *place*, as is signaled by the Latin preposition *coram*, "before": *coram seipso, coram Deo*, "before oneself, before God". As in all living metaphors, *coram* expresses something essential, namely that with conscience the question *who?* (who am I?) is made explicit by the question *where?* (where are you Adam?). In this way the ontological sense of place—the mathematical point where all the horizontal and vertical dimensions of experience converge—governs the epistemological sense of place as the starting point of the investigation. Con-
science: "the radical place where it is decided what man truly is...where man belongs, where he is and where he has his abode".

A topology such as this undoubtedly originates in Augustine, who designates the heart (cordia) and the entrails (pericordia) as places which are at once organic and spiritual, with all the attendant dimensions, directions, orientations. John Staten's thesis, as it is completely developed, consists in placing the topology of conscience at the starting point, that is at the heart of his "prolegomenous theological anthropology". From this undertaking, two results are awaited. First, Staten foresees the resolution of the tension between a purely anthropological thesis, like that of Heidegger, for whom conscience has no theological dimension inasmuch as it is but the silent call that authentic Dasein addresses to "fallen" Dasein, delivered over to the inauthenticity of the "they"—and a strictly theological thesis, like that of Luther, according to which coram Deo arises in profane experience as the effect of the word of Salvation, as Gospel and not as the Law. According to Staten a coherent anthropology of conscience implies a reference to God, but as preceding any theological context, preceding Christian tidings in the Gospel. In this way the author believes he can place himself beyond the choice, Luther or Heidegger.

On the other hand, the author expects that his investigation will resolve the tensions within Ebeling's thought, which, according to Staten, oscillates between the clear affirmation of the coincidence of coram seipso and coram Deo, at the heart of profane experience, and the quasi-Lutheran recourse to the word-event of Scripture to awaken conscience to its transcendent dimension. Staten hopes to attain this twofold critical result, required by his "constructive" thesis, by pushing even further than his own mentors the exegesis of conscience interpreted as "joint-cognizance". Conscience is held to be at one and the same time the revelation of man's non-identity with himself—and hence his powerlessness to remove himself by his own means from his state of fallenness in the "they"—and the call to responsibility, by which man is summoned to unite himself in decision. It is this conjunction between the "disclosure of non-mastery" and the call to respond in a decisive manner, which would permit giving to Ebeling's word-event a pre-Christian, even a pre-theological, sense as demanded by the present state of our culture, where what is in question is the very relevance of the word "God".

The reader permitting, I should like to stress the importance of John Staten's contribution to a debate situated on the border between philosophical anthropology and theology, in a place somewhere between natural theology and revealed theology.

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