
God and the crisis of modernity

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1

Rodger Beehler's response to my *God, Scepticism and Modernity* takes a sensitive Wittgensteinian turn.¹ I welcome this principally because it does not see religion as essentially a theory but as a set of practices to which the religious believer (where the belief is authentic) is passionately committed in her not infrequently failing struggle to make sense of her life.² No doubt that Wittgensteinian conception reflects a regimented and partially stipulative conception of a believer and of religion as well. There are believers and believers and conceptions of religion and conceptions of religion. But Wittgenstein, like Kierkegaard, was perfectly aware of that. He had the highest respect for some believers but he turned away from others with disdain. What Beehler talks about is the kind of believer which should be of interest to people who are reflective about religion. My disagreement with Beehler is over his characterization of the believer's situation, his characterization of the nature of religious belief and his conception of religion and how it stands in relation to the rest of culture.

- 1 Rodger Beehler, "Religion versus Militant Atheism," Canadian Philosophical Association, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC (May 26, 1990). This was part of a symposium on my *God, Scepticism and Modernity* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1989). I do not mean to suggest that only believers sometimes fail to make sense of their lives.
- 2 For good examples of a scientific way of viewing religion see the essays by J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig in J. P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen, *Does God Exist?* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990). For a more religiously sensitive and utterly non-scientific defense of Christian belief against criticisms of the sort that I raise, see Hendrik Hart's contributions in Hendrik Hart and Kai Nielsen, *Search for Community in a Withering Tradition* (Toronto: Lanham University Press of America, 1990).

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To try, as an initial gesture, to give something of what I have in mind and to show why I argue as I do in *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, I shall begin by commenting on the passage from Wittgenstein that Beehler approvingly cites right at the end of his essay: "An honest religious thinker [by which I take Wittgenstein to mean a believer who does not actively seek to annul his or her intelligence] is like a tightrope walker. He looks almost as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it."³ Beehler correctly, right at the beginning of his essay, articulates the underlying thesis of my book. I would like to re-express it in terms of the above citation from Wittgenstein and in doing so make evident where and in some measure why I take a different road from Beehler. In arguing about what I take to be the irrationality of having religious beliefs for certain people—I think for an increasingly large number of people—in the 20th century situated in certain intellectually and often materially fortunate circumstances, I had in mind Wittgenstein's "honest religious thinker": a thinker who will not and indeed cannot crucify his intellect. Wittgenstein is exactly right in describing him as a tightrope walker. His support is the slenderest possible. What I seek to show is that in the case of the religious believer the rope will not in fact support him where he is clear-headed and non-evasive. If we remember our Pascal and Kierkegaard, and as well Beehler's argumentation about practices and making sense of our lives, we will understand that reflective people, deeply caring about life, can come to feel, as Wittgenstein did, that there is a profound compelling point to our lives and that religion is essential here.

What I shall try to make persuasive is that that point is not really the deep and compelling one they take it to be both because (1) there are adequate purely secular sources that yield sense to life and (2) that the religious beliefs together with their practices—belief-in being dependent on belief-that—cannot sustain the tightrope walker for these beliefs are in reality without the requisite propositional content. It is over this latter point where arguments for incoherence crucially enter. I am well aware that it is, as a matter of psychological fact, possible for such people to walk that tightrope. Both Beehler and I once did such tightrope walking ourselves. But I am, beyond any socio-psychological generalization, making the critical and normative comment that if people, situated as we are, think hard and can, as well, find the psychological resources within themselves to be non-evasive, they will, if the standard atheological arguments as well as my conceptual arguments for incoherence are roughly on the mark, come to find it irrational to believe in God. They will take it to be irrational to continue

3 Rodger Beehler, "Religion." Further citations from Beehler will be given in the text. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 73.

to accept those central religious beliefs. I am not saying that there are not, and in the predictable future will not be, some philosophers who will remain religious believers even in the face of such incoherencies. What I am saying is that it is irrational for them to do so or that at least in doing so they are operating with an irrational belief. But one should not forget here what I stressed in my book. Perfectly reasonable people can have some irrational beliefs. Indeed in certain circumstances it may even be desirable to have irrational beliefs. I went out of my way to stress that I was not claiming religious believers were less rational than atheists or other religious sceptics but that belief in God for people so situated is irrational if the conditions I described, and Beehler repeats without critique, are satisfied.

That such tightrope walking *should* no longer be possible is something I argue. I do not just assert it. However, even if my arguments are sound—something which in the case of philosophy is always problematic—I make no predictions about their success with believers. Beehler may be right in saying that they are not “likely to make much headway among those who are passionately claimed and *sustained* by their religious way of making sense of and *facing* life.” What I am prepared to argue, and do argue, is that, if my arguments are sound, that they *should* make such headway. We not only should want to be people who live and relate to each other in certain ways and can find a sense in our lives but we should not want to annul our intelligence either. If my arguments are right, Kierkegaard is right, we cannot, standing where we are, have theistic commitments without annulling our intelligence (crucifying our intellects).

2

Beehler argues that I am mistaken in believing it is irrational for such 20th-century people to believe in God principally because I am mistaken in my understanding of what it is to believe in God, though I also, he would have it, have a mistaken conception of rationality and its import in such domains. Moreover, these two mistakes are linked, as Beehler puts it, “if we make a mistake in understanding what it is to believe in God, we must make a mistake in judging whether it is rational for the person just described to continue to believe in God.” Beehler, like various Wittgensteinian fideists, thinks I have an overly intellectualist conception of what belief comes to in religion and what it is to be a religious believer. My central difficulties, he would have it, stem from my mistaken conception of what it is to believe in God.

Let us start with belief. Believers distinguish, Beehler maintains, in a way that I fail to note, between belief in God and other beliefs. After giving us an interesting little narrative to which I shall return, Beehler asks why, even if all the theoretical difficulties I allege obtain, cannot belief in God make sense to the believer in spite of all that? After all “living according to this be-

lief enables him or her to cope with living, even if he or she cannot explain *how* living, according to this belief, 'blesses' the one who does so.' That being so, why cannot belief in God make sense to the believer? The believer does not understand how his conception of God makes sense—how he can speak of or conceptualize an infinite individual who is also a person, albeit a bodiless person, transcendent to the world yet acting in the world, an individual, without body, yet everywhere. Such talk utterly baffles him; he understandably can make no sense of it, yet he also knows that it is part of his practice of believing in God and that this practice has transformed his life. In spite of the intellectual impediments, he comes back to his recognition of how this belief, at least seemingly incoherent, enables him to cope with living. He can, on Beehler's account, make neither head nor tail of this strange God-talk about an infinite bodiless person transcendent to the universe, but he holds fast nonetheless to something that he does understand, namely, that the practices that go with his sincerely avowing his belief in God sustain him in his entangled life. He knows that in engaging in these practices that he says certain things in the context of acting in certain ways that he does not understand. Verbal formulae go with his acts of contrition, prayers, marrying, confirming, behaviour at funerals and the like. They are human practices replete with various speech acts. He uses terms expressive of concepts carrying background beliefs some of which he does not understand. What he knows—and Beehler seems to take this as sufficient for his belief not to be irrational—is that in understanding and meeting his life in this religious way, he "finds sense and beauty, and some inexplicable denoted 'grace,' in the midst of what otherwise can very easily seem . . . an endlessly vulnerable, often ugly, deeply discouraging, and ultimately senseless human condition." In spite of all his intellectual difficulties with the very idea of God, his belief in God all the same makes sense of his entangled life.

Beehler then asks: "if a practice does make sense in this way to those who live by it, cannot this be a rational ground for keeping to it, even in the face of no coherent theoretical explanation of how the practice is efficacious?" Moreover, to realize how central such way-of-living considerations are to understanding what belief in God comes to, we need to recognize how very distinctive the conception of belief is when applied to theistic belief. Belief *in* God is central. "Belief" here is not employed as it is usually employed. Belief, in "belief in God," is not "acquired on the basis of evidence, and it is not continued on the basis of evidence." It is not the belief that God exists and has such and such attributes. Belief in God is trust in God, keeping faith with God, even in the face of not having anything that could be objectively called evidence for God's existence. Believing in God is closely linked to faith and it is not unlike believing in a human being. Suppose, to illustrate, you have a very close friend. You will believe in that friend, that is, trust him. If he does things that appear to be contrary to what friendship requires, you will, at least

initially, discount them, give them a reading that does not conflict with the trust that obtains between friends. Say, to translate into the concrete, you hear that your friend has been badmouthing you, acting with disregard for you, breaking faith with you. In believing in him, that is, in trusting him, you will discount those things, seek a different construal of them, sometimes “despite overwhelming evidence and accusations that the person is not as he or she claims to be.” This is what believing in him comes to. Without behaviour like that there is no believing-in. Believing in God is like that, only rather pushed to the limit—some might say “beyond the limit.” It is this feature, Beehler maintains, of “belief-in” that accounts for the *unshakeableness* of the believer’s belief.

Beehler cites Wittgenstein twice to capture what he takes to be the proper sense of belief here but he could as well have been citing Kierkegaard, their thought here is so close. The believer’s belief, Wittgenstein tells us, shows itself in the way he lives his life and “not by reasoning or appeal to *ordinary* grounds for belief, but rather by *regulating for* [everything] in all his life.”⁴ Or again, Wittgenstein tells us “that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it is *belief* it’s really *a way of living*, or a way of assessing life. It’s passionately seizing hold of this interpretation.”⁵

This is a rather poetic articulation of something that is close to the truth and an important truth-claim to make. I agree, that is, with Beehler that that is roughly what belief-*in* consists in when it is belief-in *God* and, while more accentuated, it plainly is in a family resemblance to “belief-in” as applied to friends, comrades, partners and the like. But what Beehler utterly neglects (and this is philosophically crucial) is that “belief-in” is logically dependent on “belief-that.”⁶ There can be no believing-in with friends, God, partners or what not without believing-that. There can be believing-that without believing-in but not the reverse. Suppose I believe in Gorbachev. That presupposes that I believe that Gorbachev exists—that I believe there is such a person and that he has certain attributes. I could not believe in Gorbachev without believing that Gorbachev exists and, for the latter, things such as evidence are relevant. “Belief,” in this latter use, functions as “belief” functions in my remark “I believe that Port Angeles lies across the strait from Victoria.” Similarly there could be no believing in God without believing that God exists: that there is such a reality.

If believing that God exists is a very problematic conception through the groundlessness of our believing or through the incoherence of our

4 Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 54.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

6 I. M. Crombie, “The Possibility of Theological Statements,” in Basil Mitchell, ed., *Faith and Logic* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957), p. 31-48.

conception of God, then that problematicity transfers to our believing-in. If believing that God exists is incoherent, as Norman Malcolm, for example, believes, then believing in God is also incoherent.⁷

Beehler might respond that whatever we should say about "belief-in"/"belief-that," it is the deed, action, life-orientation that sorts out religious believers from non-religious believers. Whether someone believes in God shows itself in what she does, not in what she says or what she thinks can be coherently claimed about what there is. Some will go on and believe in spite of all the incoherences (if incoherencies they be). They can be intellectually utterly at sea but believe all the same.

That I never denied. My inquiry is whether this is something that, everything considered, is the right thing for a person to do, is what a person should do, if she would keep faith with herself. My argument was that it is not. My argument, it should be noted, is actually a cumulative one and does not, *pace* Beehler, put all its eggs in one basket, though in *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, Beehler is certainly right in stressing, the emphasis was on incoherence. But this stress was against the following background, to wit, what we might call lessons learned from the Enlightenment and its aftermath with what Max Weber called the relentless disenchantment of the world. We have learned, if we are keyed into such a background, that there can be no direct awareness of God, that putative revelations are many and often conflicting, that there is no sound argument for the existence of God and that there is nothing that would count as a good evidential appeal for theistic beliefs. Moreover, the problem of evil is intractable, there is no grounding morality in the natural law (at least where this is understood theistically) or in the morality of Divine Commands.⁸ But that is not a tragedy for there are numerous purely secular sources in virtue of which we can make sense of the moral life and our own lives more generally. Wittgenstein thought this Russell-like reaction was superficial but he did nothing at all to show that that was so. If God is dead it is simply false

7 Norman Malcolm argues that belief *that* God exists is radically problematic but that believe *in* God is not and that in this case belief-in does not, as is usually thought, presuppose belief-that (Norman Malcolm, "Is it a Religious Belief that God Exists?," in John Hick, ed., *Faith and the Philosophers* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1962], p. 167-96). I argue against this in my "On Believing that God Exists," *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 5 (Fall 1967): 31-42.

8 Of course from the Enlightenment on, arguments for this have been myriad. I have tried, as part of my cumulative argument, to argue for such considerations in my *Reason and Practice* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), my *Ethics Without God* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), my *God and the Grounding of Morality* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1991) and my "The Meaning of Life," in E. D. Klemke, ed., *The Meaning of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). For more general remarks about the context of modernity and the crisis that goes with it, see my "Peirce, Pragmatism and the Challenge of Post-Modernity," *Transactions of the Peirce Society*, 49 (1993): 513-60.

that nothing matters or nothing matters as deeply and profoundly as it does in a God-endowed world. Moreover, this is not at all undermined by immortality being all illusion, perhaps something that is as incoherent as I take the concept of God to be.⁹

We need to have an historical and cultural sense of what has at least arguably been established here or at the very least made persuasive, and to avoid re-inventing the wheel as philosophers often do, culturally speaking, when they try to start from scratch. We need to see what difference the Enlightenment has made. Some Enlightenment thinkers principally gave us a new *Weltbild* but others, Hume and Kant paradigmatically, for example, did much more than that. Hume and Kant, with their devastating critiques of the proofs and evidences for the existence of God, and Hume with his powerful dissection of the problem of evil and of talk of miracles, dealt natural theology a mortal blow and made very problematical what had hitherto been standard defences of religion. Fideistic responses, of course, arose. Kant himself, we should remember, was a pietistic Christian. But culturally speaking we have moved farther down the road of disenchantment. We came to be more fully aware of the diversity of conflicting faiths and we came to see that morality did not require religion and that religion was not necessary to give sense to our lives. Religion became a more vulnerable thing and a more optional thing and secular ways of looking at the world gained a stronger footing.

Of course, as a kind of rear-guard action, there continue to be arguments purporting to prove or provide evidence for the existence of God, arguments that are ever more arcane and ever more concessive.¹⁰ But these essentially defensive arguments fail to convince; there is rather extensive agreement that Hume and Kant did the essential work here and what has been going on since then is a mopping-up operation, correcting here, refining there, meeting objections someplace else. I tried to do a bit of that in my *Reason and Practice* and it has been done brilliantly and extensively by J. L. Mackie in his *The Miracle of Theism*.

Two problems remained outstanding, set in large measure by reflective and sophisticated versions of fideism, including Wittgensteinian fideism. First, there is the old claim, made even by some atheists, that life—the fullness of the moral life, a deep attuning to the world and a making sense of our lives—requires, as Wittgenstein thought, a religious orientation to be really adequate. Secondly, there is the claim that God-talk could be very

9 Kai Nielsen, "The Faces of Immortality," in Stephen T. Davis, ed., *Death and Afterlife* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 1-30.

10 See, for example, Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), and William L. Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument* (New York: Macmillan, 1979). For a critique of such efforts see Keith Parsons, *God and the Burden of Proof* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1989).

obscure, full of paradox and what appear to be incoherencies and yet in some mysterious way might still make sense. God-talk is distinctive, perhaps even *sui generis*, and necessarily mysterious. But when engaged in by the person who would enter into those language-games and forms of life in the right spirit, such illusive talk still makes rough sense in spite of the complete lack of evidence for the existence of God or even something like an even remotely plausible natural theology defence. This leaves, or seems to leave, conceptual space for the religious believer as well as for the sceptic, the former being completely invulnerable to the critiques of "empiricist or naturalistic philosophers" who do not really understand how religious language-games are played or what religious forms of life are like.¹¹

Sometimes to this line of argument there is added the historicist thesis that what we have here is a clash between a secular orientation (with or without a philosophical articulation) and a religious one. But this is not a clash that can be reasoned out, the argument goes, for it is a conflict of unargued and indeed unarguable *Weltbildern* that deeply, and in different ways, inform lives, but nothing non-question begging can be said for one over the other.

God, Scepticism and Modernity, as well as other writings of mine, have been primarily directed at that very modern defence of religion. I have attacked the very idea of there being deep conflicting incommensurable framework beliefs that can only be subscribed to. Part, but only part, of my argument here has been the incoherence argument. If religious sentences of a crucial sort, e.g., "God created the heavens and the earth," really are incoherent then there can only be the illusion of believing them, i.e., believing that they are true, for what is incoherent cannot be true and cannot be believed for there is literally nothing to be believed or anything with propositional content that can intelligibly be accepted. We can believe, perhaps mistakenly, that "Mulroney talks faster than Clark" but not that "Mulroney sleeps faster than Clark" any more than we can believe that procrastination drinks melancholy. Beehler fails to note this because he speaks in the religious case only of believing-in and neglects believing-that and thus fails to see that there can be no believing-in here unless there is a believing-that. But he also neglects the cumulative nature of my argument. Perhaps if alleged revelations were not so many and so conflicting and if we could not make adequate sense of life without religion, we could set aside the problems of incoherence as technical philosophical problems that we could hope to resolve sometime while continuing to be believers, remaining steadfast in our belief, because of the overwhelming need for God to ground morality and make sense of life. But if books such as Richard Robinson's *An Atheist's Values* or

11 D. Z. Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1986).

my *Ethics Without God* have shown that such fideism is mistaken, then the core of the argument shifts to the part about incoherence.

I stressed the issue of incoherence in *God, Scepticism and Modernity* in the belief that culturally and philosophically speaking that is where we are in the state of play of reflectively coming to terms with religion. It was the part of the cumulative argument that needed stressing given our situation. But there is a logically independent point I also made and that needs remarking here. It is linked with the above-mentioned historicist defence of fideism. Even if my arguments about incoherence are fatally flawed and Wittgensteinian fideist claims are well taken and we only have in such domains conflicting incommensurable, unarguable framework-beliefs and systems of action welling up from differing forms of life, this still would be devastating for Christianity, though less so for the Enlightenment which could perhaps survive an historicist turn, for it is Christianity that proclaims Christ as the Truth and the Way. (Her sister religions would be in similar trouble.)

So my arguments for incoherence belong to a larger scheme of argumentative strategy or (put less scientifically) reflective examination of religion. They are not meant to have the decisive role that Beehler thinks I am claiming for them. They are, or so I would claim, at best a reasonably distinctive wave, in a large swelling sea of the understanding and critique of religion, growing out of the Enlightenment and slowly, I would argue, undermining religious belief or at least the belief-systems and related ways of life of the traditional religions. The Enlightenment case—its considerations and arguments—is cumulative and incoherence arguments of the type I make have a small but I believe tolerably important place in the whole. Indeed, even if they are mistaken, as such fellow atheists as J. L. Mackie and Wallace Matson believe, the Enlightenment case could be made from the evidential side and from the critique of revelation and morals side, showing, as Mackie would put it, that theism is indeed a miracle. I persist in my way of putting things not because I am hubretic or foolish enough to think the Enlightenment case rests on it but because I believe that what I claim is a reasonable approximation of the truth: that is to say, because I really do think such religious beliefs are incoherent and that it is important to see that they are. Thus, even if it is correct that arguments about incoherence are the weakest kind of arguments in such discussions, this is of no considerable moment for they are not being offered, as Beehler believes, as a conclusive argument concerning the rationality of belief but only as part of a larger web of argument which *together* counts, and I believe reasonably decisively, against sticking with a religious orientation. Indeed, this cumulative argument makes an even stronger claim, namely, the claim that belief in God is irrational for intellectuals placed as we are placed.

Beehler thinks it is very likely people so situated will not be able to keep religious belief alive. I think that claim is probably right, particularly if the

people in question are secure and reasonably affluent. (Look, for example, at the ways the Scandinavian societies have gone and are going.) But I am concerned to argue, whether or not that factual claim is true, that this is the way that it is reasonable for them to go and the way that, everything considered, it is desirable for them to go. I am not principally concerned with educated guesses about how the *Weltgeist* will shift given affluence and security. My concern is through and through normative.

3

I want to turn now to Beehler's little story for it seems to me that when thought through it has implications quite different from those Beehler notes: implications which in fact (or so it seems to me) support my own arguments. Beehler deploys his narrative in an attempt to support his argument against my claim that religious believers of the non-simple sort I discuss live according to concepts that do not make sense. Beehler says that here I overlook the fact "that there are two different ways in which belief in God might make sense. It might make, or fail to make, coherent sense conceptually: it might invoke kinds of being and processes or relations that cannot be rendered intelligible or coherent with one another by appeal to empirically familiar and well-established phenomena. Or, belief in God might make sense in a different way: *it might prove to be effective practice.*" Beehler argues that a believer would *not* be irrational, indeed would be behaving quite reasonably, if, while acknowledging the incoherence of his belief in God, he continued to believe because he realized that that belief yielded an effective practice. Beehler's narrative is designed to make this surprising claim persuasive.

He imagines a primitive society which, without realizing what they are doing, fertilize their fields effectively by strewing over their fields some part of their harvest each fall which they dig into their fields with the next planting. However, they do this without realizing that they are fertilizing and for quite different reasons than we would have for doing such a thing. They believe that the earth is their mother and they "acknowledge this by offering up some part of what the earth yields them to the earth herself." But in fact what they do, though without that intention, sustains the land. Beehler remarks that as long as this fertilization technique works it is rational for them to engage in this practice though they follow it for the wrong reasons. He then makes the obvious analogy with religious belief.

So far Beehler has not managed to disagree with me for I argue that *sometimes* it is reasonable and desirable to act on an irrational belief. But I do argue as well that belief in God is irrational for people culturally located as we are and that, generally speaking, for people situated as we are situated now there is no need to believe in God. It may sometimes be the case, à la Kierkegaard, that a person can succeed in crucifying his intellect

and believe what he knows to be absurd, even incoherent. And he may be able to carry out actions—live in a certain way—beneficial to himself, and perhaps to humanity, acting on those incoherent beliefs. It is at least *arguable* that in doing so he does something which is, everything considered, desirable. Similarly Beehler's hypothetical tribe has an incoherent belief in believing the earth is their mother. And at a certain stage in their enlightenment they would come to realize that belief is incoherent. But it still would be rational for them to continue to fertilize. But their belief that the earth was their mother would still be an irrational belief. When they, realizing the senselessness of their belief that the earth is their mother, cease composting they make, however understandable, a mistake. And if they do stop fertilizing it is rational for them, when they see the effect, to return to composting *without* the originating belief. That incoherent belief does no work. We are to suppose that they still do not know *why* what we call composting is so effective. But experience has taught them *that* it is effective. They now spread some of the harvest and dig it in knowing that this is effective—crop yields increase—without their knowing why. So proceeding is perfectly rational.

It is, however, a mistake to describe what goes on through these changes, as Beehler does, as the same practice. First there was the ritual practice of making offerings to mother earth. Later, when they see it is incoherent to believe the earth is their mother, they abandon their ritual practice. Still later, after some years of declining crops, they return to a practice related to the old practice but still distinct in no longer being a ritual practice, namely, to the practice of plowing part of their harvest back into the earth each year *because it increases crop yield*. That is their quite distinct reason for doing it—a reason completely different from the old ritual reason. Note that with this changed rationale the practice has changed. It is no longer a ritual practice. The change is similar to a change where people who first will not eat pork because in some holy writ it is forbidden later come not to eat pork simply because they see that eating it is somewhat dangerous if not cooked properly, though still not knowing why it is dangerous. Not knowing the causal mechanisms that make it dangerous, they simply know that not infrequently people get sick when they eat pork. But their practice of not eating pork is no longer a ritual practice but a purely secular one with an utterly different rationale. But the Christian practice related to belief in God cannot similarly dispense with belief-in God and remain that Christian practice, though surely that practice is not just the holding of certain beliefs, among them the belief that God exists and has certain characteristics. Still, that at least putatively cognitive belief is nonetheless an essential part of the practice. In the pork case and the fertilizing case, the incoherent belief is dropped and a different practice develops, though historically related to the old practice. There is with those new practices (field composting and the non-eating of pork) no requirement

to crucify your intellect and believe something incoherent, but in the Christian practice the incoherent belief is essentially tied to the practice. There is no persisting in the Christian practice without the incoherent belief.

There then arises a standard problem of whether, given a clear recognition of the incoherence of a belief central to the practice—to wit that God actually exists—whether the practice could in fact continue to be effective. And secondly, even if it could, would it, everything considered, continue to be desirable to persist in the practice, given that it requires one to believe in that which one knows to be incoherent. We, as Beehler stresses Wittgenstein stresses, do not want to crucify our intellects either. So we do not have a case like the pork case or the fertilizing case where we without incoherent beliefs operate with a practice which we see achieves our ends without our knowing why. Such a practice is a practice that is quite reasonable to follow. But to continue to follow a practice with incoherent beliefs is an altogether different matter. It is continuing such a practice that is irrational for a person to do if she understands what she is doing. Still, Beehler might reply, is there not this much left in common between his primitives' practice and the Christian practice, namely, that in each case the practice enables them to cope with living?

It is here where the cumulative nature of my argument becomes important. The argument for incoherence, as we have seen, does not stand by itself in my argumentative strategy. The believer says "My belief is incoherent but it enables me to cope." I reply—and here the analogy is carried out with the composting people—"But you can cope without your religious beliefs and distinctively religious practices and just as well and indeed perhaps even better without the need to crucify your intellect." If that claim is well taken, the persuasiveness of the believer's needing to cope argument has been undermined for he is no longer in the desperate Kierkegaardian predicament of needing to choose between crucifying his intellect and suffering sickness unto death. To persist in the religious practices, if they really are incoherent, when there are equally adequate purely secular practices for coping, is not a rational way of living.

4

Beehler makes an independent argument against incoherence arguments that clearly merits discussion. Beehler maintains "arguments from incoherence are among the weakest kind of argument, since they rest on what is presently judged to be known (and so regarded as possible) by human beings, and hence are always subject to being overturned by increased knowledge." The history of science, he goes on to remark, is littered with claims that once were confidently claimed to be incoherent but now are parts of established science. Beehler's examples are: matter is energy, space is curved, time is relative, matter is opposed by anti-matter, conti-

nents move and there are black holes in space. At one time anyone who claimed that continents move or space is curved, or indeed any of these claims, would have been taken to be saying something incoherent. Yet today we have very good reasons to believe such claims are at least approximately true. The believer seeing the fragility of these incoherence claims has good reason, Beehler maintains, not to be very disturbed by charges that certain of her central claims are incoherent.

Beehler's argument has the merit of in effect stressing that we should not just look at sentences by themselves but at sentences as they are embedded in practices and in language-games and that we should keep firmly in mind the time and contexts in which these utterances were uttered. What is nonsense standing alone or without a context or sometimes without a new properly specifiable context is sometimes at least intelligible when so embedded. If in 1825 Simone, while living in Montreal, said that she talked to Nadine last night in Paris, she would have rightly been deemed to be saying something incoherent—and to be plainly mad—but given the establishment of modern telecommunications such a remark is perfectly intelligible and thoroughly routine. There is a background that once supplied makes a remark that is incoherent without that background perfectly coherent. In the science cases Beehler mentions such a background has been supplied at least for knowledgeable people. It is perhaps easiest to see with "continents move." With the scantiest understanding of modern geology there will be a rough understanding of what is claimed and what counts for or against its truth. For someone with a considerable knowledge of modern physics the same thing is true for the other examples. Similar things should be said for claims that there are unconscious thoughts. What without Freud, and his context-embedded examples and elucidations, sounds like a contradiction in terms is plainly not such a contradiction when we read them with even some rather minimal understanding of Freud. What in one context is incoherent can, not infrequently in a rather verificationist way, be given a context in which it becomes intelligible.

What I claim and argue in some detail in *God, Scepticism and Modernity* and elsewhere is that in the very context of the cosmological-belief-embedded religious practices of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, certain cosmological beliefs crucial to these practices can be shown to be incoherent. We do not need to take them out of context and should not do so. In their standard contexts they can be seen to be incoherent. This is not the case with Beehler's scientific examples. Moreover, I look in some considerable detail in my examination of positivist (Hare and Braithwaite) and various Wittgensteinian and other revisionist (Penelhum, Hick, Crombie) attempts to supply a new or partially new context for such religious or theological beliefs. Sometimes these revisionists, like Beehler, just avoid entanglement with arcane religious beliefs—the cosmological claims of reli-

gion—treating religious practices in effect positivistically as if they could exist without such beliefs or (more typically) as if such beliefs were inessential to them. At other times (D. Z. Phillips is a good example) they are in effect so reductionist about such beliefs that they are transformed into religiose-sounding secular beliefs (religion becoming morality touched with emotion) or else (and more rarely) the beliefs are let to stand but the new background account does not succeed in rendering them coherent.

For these contentions of mine to be convincing we must case by case look at the detail of the particular accounts, something I do in *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, and, as well, carefully inspect the quality of my arguments concerning those accounts. But if my arguments are near to the mark (something Beehler does not challenge) then the at least *prima facie* incoherent religious beliefs have not been shown, as similar beliefs in the case of science have been shown, to be coherent by being placed in carefully articulated and broadly testable theories with their appropriate practices. If, in what Beehler calls the wilder areas of scientific cosmology, such conditions have not been met, it is perhaps wiser, à la Susan Stebbing and Stephen Toulmin, to remain sceptical about the coherence of such accounts. As Max Black argued years ago, “science” is sometimes a contested honorific label. Not everything that gets labelled as science should be taken as such. Those philosophers given to metaphysical speculation are prone to be rather gullible here. (Wittgenstein had a good nose for that and debunked such “scientific mythology” very well.)

5

Belief-in, as we have seen, presupposes belief-that. Religious belief cannot *just* consist in beliefs-in. It must as well consist in some believings-that. Both, as Beehler claims, following Wittgenstein, may be unshakeable beliefs. Beliefs-that, where centrally embedded, should, for good Quinean reasons, be *relatively* unshakeable. All sorts of things on the periphery should give way first. Similar things should be said for siimilarly situated beliefs-in and in addition a conceptual-cum-moral dimension enters for them. Beliefs-in involve trust and commitment and, being what they are, will not, and should not, easily be abandoned.

All that is unexceptionable and shows what centrally placed believings-in and believings-that should be. But if the beliefs—the believings-in and/or the believings-that—are taken to be so unshakeable that they will be held no matter what—against any evidence, any considerations of coherence or consistency, against any other considerations at all, including moral considerations—then they are *ideological* beliefs and being such they are beliefs which ought not to be held.¹² They are irrational beliefs for contemporary

12 Kai Nielsen, “On Speaking of God,” *Theoria*, 28 (1962): 110-37.

people fortunately placed with a good scientific and philosophical education. If his religious beliefs or key religious beliefs give him a passionately held system of reference regulating everything in his life such that he really has no non-religious beliefs since he, to use Beehler's phrasing, "regards God as the *ground* of all being and knowing, and interprets everything he or she experiences or encounters according to this grounding belief," then, if his beliefs so encompass everything and stand no matter what, they are ideological beliefs to be set aside by reflective, knowledgeable persons.¹³ They are in a pejorative sense both ideological and metaphysical.

Following Wittgenstein, and against epistemological scepticism, Beehler is right in rejecting universal or global scepticism. Something must at a given time stand fast for doubt to be even possible. But he misses the Peircean fallibilist rendering of essentially the same point, namely, that this does not at all mean or establish that anything—any one thing—can, let alone must, stand unshakeably fast. Anything, Peirce tells us, can be doubted but not everything can be doubted at once. Moreover, doubts should have the real context of taking place where there is actually a blockage to inquiry. They should not be merely unreal methodological doubts; that is, not really doubts at all. But this does not at all mean that there are some unshakeable beliefs but only that in any given context some beliefs will stand fast though a new context can arise where those beliefs will in turn be questioned and so on *ad infinitum* for any belief you please. No single belief or set of beliefs need always stand fast, though some, of course, may, *as a matter of contingent fact*, always stand fast. This is fallibilism. It incorporates Beehler's sound conceptual point within the reasonability of fallibilism, where there are no unshakeable beliefs that must stand unshakeably fast for us no matter what, though there are plenty of beliefs that we have no reason at all to doubt and that we have no reason to trouble our heads to try to doubt.

Beehler has a religious believer being a believer who believes that "God constitutes *the ground* from which everything else that is known is engaged and interpreted." If we take this at face value, many people, particularly in our times, taken to be religious believers and indeed sometimes serious religious believers, are not, on that way of looking at things, religious believers at all, for they will compartmentalize their beliefs, including their religious beliefs. They may be physicists or biologists or logicians—think of Alonzo Church or Saul Kripke—who take their beliefs in physics, biology or logic to be quite autonomous and apart from their religious beliefs. But, be that as it may, suppose religious believers are such pervasivists with such unshakeable beliefs. They are, that is, as Beehler supposes them to be, persons whose "impassioned commitment . . .

13 Kai Nielsen, "Religion and Rationality," in Mostafa Faghfoury, ed., *Analytical Philosophy of Religion in Canada* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), p. 71-124.

disposes [them] to interpret whatever appears recalcitrant to belief in God according to what is warranted by this grounding belief itself," but then they are persons in the grip of an ideology, and their beliefs are irrational beliefs to boot. To stick with them diminishes their reasonability. It is not, *pace* Beehler, rational for a person so situated to continue to believe.

6

Contemporary religious believers do not live, as Max Weber powerfully stressed, any more than the rest of us do, in hermetically sealed off religious communities free from what James Joyce called the wolves of disbelief. Our *Weltbild* is, as Beehler remarks, one increasingly claimed by the Enlightenment commitment to live according to empirically established truth and evidence. We, even when we are religious, do not live in communities of shared religious belief but live "more and more within a community of inquiry and critical judgment. . . ." When I talk about standing where we are standing in the 20th century, I mean we are in such a situation: the situation of the increasing disenchantment of the world. Beehler grants that for people in such situations it is much more difficult to keep religious belief alive in themselves. Kierkegaard, agreeing, tries to make things even more difficult for the believer, for he thinks that only a religious belief that could stand such trial by fire would be worth much. But this leads him to extravagant Tertullian paradoxes. I argue that for persons so placed that they will have sound reasons for taking key religious beliefs to be incoherent and, given this belief, in turn dwelt on and taken to heart, and, set in the cultural, including the scientific and philosophical understandings of our time, they should (a) reject religious beliefs as irrational and (b) come to see that they need not do a Kierkegaard or Hamann and stick with them steadfastly all the same, for they do not really need them in facing life. We do not need them to make sense of our lives. We need more Russell and Feuerbach and less Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard here. To claim that in that way lies superficiality is just *parti pris*.

Belief in God indeed involves what cognitive psychology labels "hot contexts" but some religious believers, as well as some religious sceptics (including some atheists), have been able to take, in a cool hour, a more dispassionate point of view, which indeed is linked with reasonability as the long drawn out dialogue between belief and unbelief attests. Religion is indeed a way of living and responding to the world, so it certainly is not just a theory, but religious practices, in a way Beehler, like the Wittgensteinian fideists, mistakenly neglects, involve cosmological beliefs as well which try to assert truth-claims. There dispassionate investigation and logical analysis are essential and cannot be set aside and it is there where religious beliefs seem at least to be deeply vulnerable. So vulnerable, I argue, that they ought to be rejected.