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1 Introduction

I

Many contemporary critiques of religion, and some counter-critiques as well, assume, as Feuerbach, Marx and Freud do, that the materialists and sceptics of the eighteenth century had successfully made out the intellectual case against religion. That religious belief persists in spite of this, they argue, is due to profound human needs rooted in the social and/or psychological conditions of human living (1).

I think these critics of religion are right. But whether I am right or wrong in such an assessment, to start by taking it as an assumption is surely a mistake in a fundamental critique of religion, for there are many able and sophisticated members of the intellectual community who do not believe that religion or even Christianity or Judaism is palpably false, unintelligible or incoherent. Rather they believe that belief has an intellectual ground to stand on – though indeed not only an intellectual ground – and that the standard critiques of religion inherited from the Enlightenment are themselves full of unjustified and indeed unjustifiable assumptions which can at least as rightly be claimed to be mythological as the claims of religion. It is to this prior intellectual issue that I shall turn. Indeed, such arguments in one form or another have gone on for centuries, though, as we shall see, there are some distinctive contemporary forms. But it is with such considerations that one should start (a) to have a meaningful dialogue between belief and unbelief, and (b) to start with what is conceptually fundamental.

If the critical case against religion can be sustained, then the kind of considerations raised by Feuerbach, Freud and Marx become very significant, as do the normative and psychologistic arguments – serving as religious counter-claims – about the need to believe. In such a situation, Pascalian or Jungian claims about the meaninglessness of life without God become significant, but without a prior agreement about the

incoherence, or at least the utterly problematic quality, of belief in God, stress on such considerations cannot but seem to be a failure to go to the heart of the matter (2). So I shall try to get to what even a tolerably orthodox Jew or Christian or a man perplexed about the concept of God, e.g. 'Is belief in God really altogether "beyond belief"?', would take to be the heart of matter.

In discussing critiques of religion I shall limit myself to the fundamental religious conceptions of the Jewish-Christian-Islamic forms of life. It is not that I believe that these religions are superior to other religions, for in general I do not. I impose these limitations on myself simply because these are the religious forms of life that engage us and call forth our commitment or rejection. Our Western perplexity about, commitment to, or rejection of religion at least starts – and usually ends as well – with these religions. Sophisticated members of Jewish, Christian or Islamic confessional groups do not take religion to be a set of explanatory hypotheses. Their God is not a God of the gaps. Within such groups, to be religious is to have a consciousness of God and to make a resolute attempt to live on the basis of that consciousness. Integral to these traditions is the belief that 'God is real and that the whole universe is ultimately under the sovereignty and within the providence of divine love' (3).

It is here, however, where puzzlement about the very concept of God is acute. 'Providence', the benevolent guidance of God, no longer means for sophisticated believers that some supernatural reality, some creative source of all reality other than itself, is directing the scene so that we can discover in the ways things go the loving 'hand of God'. Natural disasters or moral calamities are no longer thought to call *Divine Providence* into question. No matter how things go or even conceivably could go, the non-Neanderthal Jewish or Christian believer is prepared to affirm the reality of God. But where the believer so uses 'God', conceptual perplexity arises. Suppose such a man says in anguish, 'O God, help me in my need'. There we are given to understand that he believes in God. But then his very discourse commits him to the belief that there are true and false statements concerning divinity, for, as Bernard Williams aptly puts it, 'to believe is

to believe *something*, and if there is anything that one believes, one ought to be able to say in some way – if not in the very narrow terms of sense-experience – what the difference is between what one believes being true and what one believes not being true’ (4). Note that I have not in such a claim committed myself to verificationism but only to the common-sense point made by Wittgenstein in his ‘Tractatus’ that ‘to understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true’ (5). And to have such knowledge it is necessary but not sufficient to understand the meanings of the constituent terms of the sentence expressive of the proposition. But, to take an example relevant to our purposes, to understand the word ‘God’ as it is used in Jewish and Christian discourse, we must also understand what it would be like for ‘God created man in his image and likeness’ or ‘In God alone man is sustained’ to be true.

The catch is, however, that believers and non-believers alike, once they give up an anthropomorphic conception of divinity, do not understand – or so it would seem – what it would be like for such utterances to express true statements, or for that matter false statements. But in that case the very discourse of the believer lacks the kind of intelligibility requisite for Christian or Jewish religious belief.

Put just like that, such a claim has a dogmatic sound. Something more needs to be said about such a philosophical claim in order to make it quite evident *that* it is so and *how* it is so. Indeed, our central question is *whether* it is so. Where ‘God’ is taken to stand for a kind of mysterious cosmic superman who orders things one way rather than another, we have some rough idea what it would be like for it to be true or false that there is such a God. However, by now such religious belief has become idolatry. Such a God is (a) not adequate to the demands of the religious life, and (b) recognisably mythical. That is, we know that there is no such God.

However, such an utterly anthropomorphic Big-Daddy-in-the-Sky is plainly not the God of sophisticated theism; or at least it is not the image of God that asserts itself when such theists are thinking about the concept of God. Furthermore, while sophisticated believers agree with non-believers that there is no such cosmic superman, they do confess to

God and claim in all honesty to believe in a God which is not a Divine Object or Power transcendent to the world but is somehow either the mysterious ground of being and meaning or some necessary existent upon which everything else depends. But now we move from an intelligible but unacceptable concept of God to one which is at the very least problematical. A modern atheist takes such concepts of God to be so problematical as to be incoherent and unacceptable; a modern agnostic wonders if they have sufficient coherence to be, after all, just barely believable; and a sophisticated contemporary Jew or Christian believes these admittedly problematical and mysterious concepts to have enough intelligibility and coherence to provide the underpinning for a distinctive confessional group which is worthy of one's allegiance. To have established his case, a critic of religion must show that this last claim is not justified.

I shall attempt here to explicate and assess some of the major arguments directed towards that end; that is to say, I shall be concerned with a statement and assessment of some of the major arguments for sceptical postures towards the Judaeo-Christian tradition or towards any belief in God which bears a reasonably close family resemblance to a belief in the God of that tradition. I shall both critically examine the sceptical arguments of others and try to advance sceptical arguments of my own. It will be my aim, by taking certain responses of belief to unbelief, to create what in effect is a dialogue between believers and sceptics. There are indeed many critiques of religion and many defensive moves against these critiques. There is profundity as well as superficiality and clever silliness on both sides. (In a conceptual inquiry such as philosophy, both the clever silly and the man devoid of a sense of reality flourish. Sceptics and believers both have their share of each and sometimes an individual has both vices.)

I shall not attempt to catalogue all the different forms of belief and unbelief. Instead, I shall be concerned to examine what I take to be the most important critiques and responses to those critiques and then, as I remarked, to carry forth on my own in the context of this dialogue a critique of religion and theology. There are some evident and standing difficulties in such an approach. In my very selection of positions

and arguments for consideration there will be value judgements about which positions are most significant. To the extent that my value judgements here are idiosyncratic and arbitrary, such a selective approach will indeed suffer. Only if they are founded on an adequate judgement about what is central will such a selective approach be justified as anything more than a pragmatic measure to keep a slender volume from being a boring catalogue of names and digests of arguments. I have, of course, striven to make sensible and I hope perceptive value judgements here, but perceptive or not such a selective approach is necessary in a book of these dimensions.

When reflecting on such methodological considerations, we must not lose sight of the fact that when the contemporary religious scene is surveyed, it becomes readily apparent that what is religious belief for one man is idolatry for another, and sometimes for another no religious belief at all but a form of atheism or agnosticism or simply a metaphysical confusion. Radically different things on the contemporary scene pass for 'true belief' or 'true Christian faith' and the like. One man's belief is another man's atheism. What to take as 'true religion' or genuine Christian or Jewish belief is not evident. Often it is said that if religion is what a given critique of religion alleges it to be, then indeed that critique is a warranted critique of religion, but that all the same this critique is in reality trivial, for what has been criticised as religious belief is not a genuine or at least not a profound religious belief at all. It has been argued, for example, that Hume has convincingly shown that anthropomorphic conceptions of religion are unacceptable but that this is in reality a purifying aid to genuine religious belief, since such religious belief cannot treat God as an existent — even the superlatively best — among existents (6). What Hume intended — so the claim goes — as a devastating critique of religion actually serves to purify it by decisively refuting anthropomorphism.

It is difficult for a man who believes there is no such animal as 'true religion' to know what to do in such a circumstance, for no matter what views he criticises he can easily be accused of wasting his critical fire on some form of idolatrous belief and missing what is really essential to Christianity and Judaism. What are often called reductionist

analyses of religious belief seem more intellectually palatable to me than the more traditional analyses, but at the same time I share the traditionalist's conviction that these reductionist analyses in effect radically transform Christian and Jewish belief while purporting to be merely explicating it and that in this transformation much that has been traditionally taken as central has been abandoned (7). My strategy here will be to stick with what has traditionally been taken as doctrinally central in these religious traditions and to examine the case made against this traditional central core. There are able philosophers – masters of the most sophisticated analytical techniques – who think that the extant critiques of such traditional religious beliefs fail. Their rather massive cultural acceptance by the intelligentsia, such philosophers believe, attests to the fact that sceptics have their mythologies too, and that sometimes these gain intellectual currency. That this is often so is no doubt true, but I shall try to show that there are crucial contemporary critiques of religion which rest on no mythology.

II

In Chapters 2-4 I shall examine what I call empiricist critiques of religion – critiques stemming from the work of the logical empiricists – and the attempts to meet this challenge. In Chapter 5 I shall consider a very fundamental critique of religion at least seemingly inherent in the conceptual relativism of Wittgenstein and – though in a different way – of Quine. I shall attempt to show, contrary to those Wittgensteinian philosophers I have elsewhere characterised as Wittgensteinian fideists, that its implications in reality undermine Christian and Jewish belief (8). If conceptual relativism is true, religion should totter. Finally, in Chapter 6 I shall inquire, independently of a general theory or criterion of meaning or significance, whether the concept of God can be shown to be incoherent and thus an unacceptable concept. That is to say, I shall consider whether an examination of the very logic of 'God' in its non-anthropomorphic employments reveals that it has devastating conceptual incoherences.

There remain, before we turn to an examination of empiricist critiques of religion, several additional preliminaries that need attention.

1. The very title of this book, as well as my above remarks, will seem to some to betoken a confusion concerning what philosophy can legitimately do. Faithfully following Wittgenstein's methodological reminders and sharing his philosophical postures, D. Z. Phillips has — to take a striking example of this — contended that 'the whole conception of religion standing in need of justification is confused' (9). 'Philosophy', he continues, 'is neither for nor against religion, "it leaves everything as it is"'. This fact distinguishes philosophy from apologetics . . . It is a philosophical blunder of the first order to think that religion as such is some kind of mistake' (10).

Phillips is surely correct in maintaining that philosophy should not be — as sometimes it has been — a biased partisan advocacy either for or against religious belief. That is indeed a perversion of both philosophy and rationality. We have no need of that in philosophy. But at least the central portions of the work of Augustine and Aquinas, Spinoza and Hume and even the quite different work of Kierkegaard and Feuerbach cannot be justly accused of such biased advocacy. Yet Augustine's, Aquinas's and Kierkegaard's arguments serve to support Christianity and Spinoza's, Hume's and Feuerbach's to undermine it. Moreover, the central core of their arguments for belief or unbelief were indeed reasoned philosophical arguments and not propaganda or unphilosophical advocacy. That this is so surely shows that Phillips's remarks, if taken at their face value, are unjustified.

However, Phillips, or at least many Wittgensteinians, would reply that in speaking of 'philosophy' in such a context, they are referring to what we now recognise to be the proper office of philosophy since philosophy has taken a linguistic and analytical turn. I think we should be very cautious about that editorial 'we'. I like to think of myself as an analytical philosopher, but I would make no such claim concerning what philosophy can and cannot properly do and this would hold for many others as well. But orthodox Wittgensteinians regard anything other than description as an impurity in philosophy. Such a methodological stance is indeed under-

standable. It also combines easily with Barth's theological approach.

Barth has taught theologians to be sceptical about the claims of philosophy vis-à-vis Christianity. Christianity has little to do, where it is genuine, with philosophical activity and does not need the philosophers' imprimatur. Siding with this, James Cameron — also a philosopher of a Wittgensteinian persuasion — seeks, as does Phillips, to give this Barthian stance a philosophical rationale. Cameron remarks that 'most' "Western" philosophers would deny that it is their proper occupation to teach wisdom that could in any way be thought to rival Christianity. Very bold philosophers may be found to comment on the grammar (in Wittgenstein's sense) of theological statements, but that is all' (11).

However, the part about teaching wisdom aside, Cameron's statement is surely false, even for analytic philosophers, if taken for what it purports to be, namely a descriptive statement of fact. Surely Ronald Hepburn's 'Christianity and Paradox', C.B. Martin's 'Religious Belief', Antony Flew's 'God and Philosophy', and W.I. Matson's 'The Existence of God' are not, anthropologically speaking, philosophical freaks and they clearly are all squarely in the analytic tradition. Yet they do not only comment on the grammar of 'God' but also make forceful criticisms of religious conceptions. That their arguments may contain grave errors is entirely irrelevant to the present point. Terence Penelhum is far more accurate than Cameron or Phillips when he remarks of such a typical collection of analytical essays in philosophical theology as those in 'New Essays in Philosophical Theology' 'that the description of the religious use of words is not carried on without judgement of its legitimacy' (12).

I believe that Cameron would, if pressed, amend his remark by saying that it is not to be interpreted descriptively but to be taken as a remark about how philosophy, properly aware of its limitations and its distinctive rôle, should proceed. Taken in this way, Cameron's remark does characterise the work of some philosophers and does catch the methodological stance of many more.

Such an utterly neutralist approach I take to be mistaken, and fundamentally so, and yet it is a position which a

conscientious philosopher could easily be led to espouse. To begin to see why it is mistaken, it would be well to start with some remarks of D.Z. Phillips. There is, of course, irony in this, for, as we have seen, he argues for a neutralist position, but all the same he sometimes makes perceptive remarks which in reality help undermine his own professed position. He points out that where 'moral and religious beliefs are concentered', one cannot correctly say 'that whatever answers are given in philosophy, the role which moral and religious beliefs play in people's lives goes on regardless' (13). Religion as we have it now is hardly philosophically innocent. People who have read any philosophy may, vis-à-vis religion, already have been indirectly affected by philosophy. Bad philosophy, Phillips argues, can give us a mistaken understanding of our beliefs, religious and otherwise, leading to 'the loss or an obscuring of religious understanding which might have been possible otherwise' (14). Phillips takes as an example 'the philosophical equation of immortality and survival, eternity and duration' (15). Many people give an account of their belief in the immortality of the soul in terms of 'survival after death'. If they come to learn something of philosophy and come to see that philosophy shows such account of immortality to be mistaken, they may come to believe that their 'faith has been shown to be mistaken too, whereas that is not the case' (16). It is also the case that there are people who, as a result of bad philosophy, 'only give an account of the immortality of the soul in terms of survival after death' and come to believe this so thoroughly that this is what their faith has come to be. What started out as an *account* of a belief became *the belief* and 'philosophy has contributed to the creation of illusions, dreams, which can never be realised, and hopes which can never be fulfilled — hopes of surviving death, of meeting loved ones again, of inheriting a better life beyond the grave where the misfortunes and deprivations one has suffered in this life are compensated in full' (17). Philosophy, he points out, can surely effect belief by showing that one cannot speak in a certain way, e.g. that it is senseless to speak of the survival of bodily death. But philosophy may also help us to come 'to see the possibility of speaking in another way' (18).

It is here that Phillips makes an important remark vis-à-vis

the alleged higher-order neutrality of philosophy. 'Now, here,' he asks, 'when one speaks of "coming to understand", "coming to see it as a possibility", "coming to see the point of it", is it easy to draw a sharp distinction between giving an account of the immortality of the soul, and believing in the immortality of the soul?' (19). He answers rightly that it is not and goes on to assert that sometimes 'in an individual's experience, coming to see the point of religious beliefs is at the same time the increase or dawning of philosophical and religious understanding. What I mean is that philosophical and religious understanding go together here. The deepening of philosophical understanding may at the same time be the deepening of religious understanding' (20). But then clearly philosophy – and good philosophy, too – can help justify religious belief, and if it can help justify religious belief it can also criticise it. A logical ban on one is also a logical ban on the other. And since they are complementary, one of the activities cannot be legitimate without the other being legitimate as well. If there is no ban for one there can be no ban for its complement either. Moreover, in lieu of a very extensive justification, it is the grossest form of biased advocacy to assert that 'good philosophy' justifies belief by deepening our understanding of how it must be a true account of the ultimate nature of things while 'bad philosophy' criticises religious belief.

2. In raising fundamental questions about the intelligibility and/or rationality of the alleged truth-claims of religion, there is no claim on the part of these critics of religion that religious discourse is flatly meaningless. 'God', 'redemption', 'sin', 'creation' and the like have a use in the language and there are deviant and non-deviant religious utterances that fluent speakers of the language, believers and non-believers alike, readily recognise. 'God is a good chair' is deviant; 'God is our loving Father' is not. Whatever trouble we may have concerning the latter's truth-value, we would not balk at it, though we would balk at 'God sleeps faster than Neptune' or 'Is loving God not Father a is'. Someone correcting proofs would under normal circumstances halt at the latter two but would go on without any hesitation at all with 'God is our loving Father'. Such considerations make it evident enough that we have some understanding of that discourse. It isn't

flatly meaningless.

However, the philosophically interesting question concerning its intelligibility turns around whether utterances such as 'God created the heavens and the earth' or 'Man is utterly dependent on God' actually are, as they purport to be and appear to be, genuine truth-claims. Is there something we can say about God which is factually informative and literally true? True in the same way or at least in a very similar way that statements about the external world are true? (21) Some may feel that this request is too strong. Perhaps what is literal and non-literal or even cognitive and non-cognitive cannot be so neatly divided (22). But what, at the very least, we do want to know is whether there can be any true religious beliefs, which in any reasonable sense are objectively justified. (I have in mind, of course, fundamental religious beliefs such as 'God created the heavens and the earth' and not beliefs such as 'Jesus was born in Bethlehem'.) The Christian faith, by contrast, has — as N.G.H. Robinson has maintained — always 'made a claim to finality, believing that it is the will of God that men believe on Him whom He hath sent and finding in Christ *the way, the truth, and the life*' (23). Judaism and Islam have made similar ultimate truth-claims (putative truth-claims). Our fundamental question is: Have the contemporary critiques of religion utterly undermined such religious claims or do they yet remain viable for a man who would, while remaining non-evasive, make sense of his ensnarled life?

3. As I remarked earlier, my approach is of necessity selective. Much that is ignored here can be justifiably ignored because it is either peripheral or deals with the *logically* secondary, though still central, question: Must man believe in what is a scandal to the intellect in order to make sense of his life? (I have tried to face this question — more accurately, cluster of questions — in my 'Ethics Without God' and 'The Quest for God'.) But there are also two questions which are indeed central to a fundamental consideration of religion which I do ignore, namely the problem of evil and the paradoxes of omnipotence. My reasons for ignoring them are (a) that I am less convinced than are many sceptics of the failure of the subtler attempts by such believers as Hick, Plantinga and Phillips to rebut sceptical challenges centring

around these problems, and (b) that whether they are or are not successful, if the kind of critique explained and defended in this essay is essentially sound, all discussion of theodicy or the paradoxes of omnipotence will be quite unnecessary (24).