
Christian Empiricism

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. . . The transcendent God is bound always to be an idle element in our religious life. [R. M. HARE]

PROLEGOMENA

Philosophers rather easily fall into perplexity. They tend to have a cultivated incapacity to understand, even in those situations where in reality there may be no genuine perplexity. Sometimes even those perplexities—artificial as they are—still have a point, for, in some instances, even a partial sorting out of such perplexities will help us to better understand concepts which play central parts in our lives. Perplexities about religion sometimes have this aspect. They can, of course, be specimens of classical metaphysical worries. But they are seldom just that. I am inclined even to say that by definition, where the religious worry is genuine, they cannot just be that. Religious perplexities and an orientation toward or away from religion are intimately bound up with our conceptions of ourselves and of our life and our conception of how we should live our lives, and what attitudes we should take toward death, and how we should relate to our fellows. Religion is bound up, either negatively or positively, with our ultimate commitments. (This is not to say “God is what we are ultimately committed to.”)¹ Our doubts and perplexities here are not just philosophers’ perplexities but the doubts and perplexities of many who are struggling to make sense of their lives. God may be, in principle, an unobservable metaphysical reality, but God is not just a metaphysical reality.

It is hardly news that core religious conceptions—including core Jewish and Christian conceptions—are a scandal to the intellect. We are not only perplexed about whether we can know or reasonably believe that God exists, we are perplexed about the very coherence of

¹Kai Nielsen, “Is God So Powerful That He Doesn’t Even Have to Exist?” in *Religious Experience and Truth*, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1961).

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God-talk.² Empiricism—in some form or other—is deeply embedded in our culture. It enters into the underlying, sometimes unwitting, assumptions of more and more people in our culture. While it plainly has its philosophical difficulties, there are parts of it that are very persuasive indeed and would seem to have become a part of critical and reflective common sense.³ Indeed, in that very broad sense, it might very well even be a part of the framework of those contemporary philosophers who, under Chomsky's influence, think of themselves as rationalists. Yet it is that very general empiricist framework which has been one of the central sources of perplexities about religion and has engendered in many skepticism about religion.

What is striking, and what I want to examine here, is the claim made by Braithwaite and Hare, both analytical philosophers who accept a tolerably determinate empiricist framework, that religion can be made sense of and Christianity can be consistently, coherently and, indeed, reasonably adhered to or adopted even by someone who accepts a through and through empiricist orientation. Part I will be devoted to articulating the rationale of Braithwaite's classic case for such a "Godless Christianity." Part II will first consider Hare's much less familiar but more ramified and self-conscious development of Braithwaite's case, and second it will raise, against the background of Hare's self-conscious reactions, what I, at least, take to be a cluster of critical questions and objections which remain, even after such a Christian empiricism has been given a sympathetic hearing.

"GODLESS CHRISTIANITY" IN THE ANALYTICAL MODE, I

A.

The kind of Christian empiricism developed by R. B. Braithwaite and R. M. Hare I shall call, perhaps tendentiously, Godless Christianity.⁴

²I have tried to exhibit some of the reasons for this in my *Scepticism* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1973), and in my *Contemporary Critiques of Religion* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1971). I have more bluntly argued for it in my two essays reprinted in M. O. Schedler, ed., *Philosophy of Religion: Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1974)—"In Defense of Atheism" and "Religion and Commitment." In my "Can Faith Validate God-Talk" (*Theology Today* 20, no. 2 [July 1963]:158-73) and in my "Religious Perplexity and Faith" (*Crane Review* 8, no. 1 [Fall 1965]:1-17) I have argued that such problems cannot be avoided by an appeal to faith. There is no such short way with dissentors.

³I have tried to state what that core empiricism is and distinguish it from logical empiricism in my "Is Empiricism an Ideology?" *Meta-Philosophy* 3, no. 4 (October 1972):265-73.

⁴All page numbers cited in part I refer to Richard B. Braithwaite ("An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief," in *The Logic of God*, ed. Malcolm L. Diamond and Thomas V. Litzburg, Jr. [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1975]). Page numbers cited in part II refer

This view seems outrageous to many and this includes both believers and nonbelievers alike. Yet it is clear enough that both Braithwaite and Hare view themselves as sincere Christians trying to preserve what they take to be essential to Christianity, in particular, and religion, in general, in the face of what they regard as devastating logical objections to traditional cosmological views of the world. They are also, as I remarked in the prolegomena, solidly in the broadly empiricist and analytical framework inherited from Hume. If that framework is taken as normative for matters epistemological and methodological, and the concept of reasonableness is defined in the terms utilized by this framework, then it may well be necessary—if we are to make anything of religion at all—to characterize religion at least roughly in the way Braithwaite and Hare do. Key religious utterances, ordinarily taken to be factual assertions, cannot be such assertions or be coherently treated as factual assertions. However, it is not unnatural to believe that, if such an approach is necessary to make sense of religion, this constitutes a *reductio* of such an empiricist approach. Religion cannot be understood in those terms and still be seriously entertained.⁵

There is a steadfast resistance on Braithwaite's and Hare's part to such an attempted *reductio*. Braithwaite, whose general position I shall now lay out, has argued that there are "three classes of statement whose method of truth-value testing is in general outline clear. . . ." (p. 129). They are (1) statements about particular matters of empirical fact, for example, "The coffee is cold"; (2) scientific hypothesis and other general empirical statements, for example, "Robins usually arrive in Ontario before they do in Nova Scotia"; and (3) logically necessary propositions of logic and mathematics, for example, " $7 + 5 = 12$."

to R. M. Hare ("The Simple Believer" in *Religion and Morality*, ed. Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr. [Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1973]). Much earlier (1955), when the theology and falsification issue was first broached, Hare made a brief Braithwaite sally into the debate. But he has come, and rightly, to regard that essay as confused. See A. Flew and A. MacIntyre, eds. (*New Essays in Philosophical Theology* [New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1955], pp. 99–103); see also in this vein R. M. Hare ("Religion and Morals" in *Faith and Logic*, ed. Basil Mitchell [London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957]). T. R. Miles and Paul van Buren have also developed arguments similar to those of Braithwaite's and Hare's. See T. R. Miles (*Religion and the Scientific Outlook* [London: Allen & Unwin, 1959]; and "On Excluding the Supernatural," *Religious Studies* 1 [1966]: 141–50); and Paul van Buren (*The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* [New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1963]; *Theological Explorations* [New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1968]; and *The Edges of Language* [New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1972]).

⁵Terrence Penelhum's reaction here is typical (see Terrence Penelhum, *Religion and Rationality* [New York: Random House, 1971], pp. 126–36).

Unfortunately, certain key religious propositions—that which is expressed by a religious utterance—do not fit into any of those three classifications. Yet, at least on a naive view, we are inclined to believe that religious utterances in the declarative mood are either true or false. But if, as Braithwaite believes, the above is so, certain of them can be neither true nor false. Furthermore, if we agree that is so, are we then to conclude that they are meaningless and that religion rests on a mistake? But, if taken without qualification, that claim is itself—to put the matter rather minimally—paradoxical.

Braithwaite argues that this is not the conclusion we should draw. He points out that there are other types of utterance, which do not express verifiable propositions, but which are still plainly meaningful. His examples are moral utterances, for example, “You should show her more concern” or “She is too rigidly righteous.” Such utterances are not statements of any of the above types, do not even appear to be empirically verifiable, and are used to guide conduct rather than, Braithwaite maintains, to describe conduct or merely to predict that so and so will be done. They are plainly meaningful, yet they do not fit the above paradigms of meaningful utterances. They are not, that is, verifiable and perhaps are not even truth bearing, yet they are plainly meaningful.

Braithwaite believes that the spirit of empiricism can still be maintained even though we must give up the verification principle as a general criterion of meaning. We can, while keeping in the spirit of empiricism, substitute for the verification principle the use principle, that is, the principle that “the meaning of any statement is given by the way in which it is used” (p. 133). Indeed the verification principle is just a specific and specialized application of the use principle. When we examine the actual use of factual statements, we find, Braithwaite claims, that they are all verifiable. Indeed on reflection and by an examination of their actual use, it should be evident that anything which would plainly and unequivocally count as a factual statement must have this property.

B.

Religious utterances do indeed plainly have a use in the language. The central philosophical task, as Braithwaite sees it vis-à-vis religion, is to explain and elucidate how religious propositions are used by people to express their religious convictions (p. 133). Their use is that of “being primarily declarations of adherence to a policy of action, declarations of commitment to a way of life” (p. 136). In this way they are modeled after a certain understanding of how moral utterances

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function, namely a theory which views them in a conative way, that is, as “expressing the intention of the asserter to act in a particular sort of way specified in the assertion” (p. 134). To find out the meaning of a religious utterance, Braithwaite claims, is to find out the intentions to act in a certain way which are embodied in them. Indeed, as Braithwaite puts it, “the primary use of religious assertions is to announce allegiance to a set of moral principles: without such allegiance there is no ‘true religion’” (p. 138).

C.

It is important for Braithwaite to be able (*a*) to distinguish religious sentences from sentences which are merely moral, and (*b*) to distinguish between the religious claims of different religions. The most central difference, according to Braithwaite, between purely moral utterances and religious ones is that religion concerns essentially not only external but also internal behaviour. “Christianity requires not only that you should behave towards your neighbour as if you loved him as yourself,” it requires, as well, that you love him as yourself; the “conversion involved in accepting a religion is a conversion, not only of the will, but of the heart” (p. 139). In a religious system, as distinct from a purely moral one, there is reference to a story as well as to a cluster of intentions.

It is important to recognize that the story or parable may or may not be believed by the believer to be true as a matter of empirical fact. He recognizes that the stories are composed of empirical statements, but, while the believer alludes to them and entertains them, he need not believe in their truth. The essential thing is that he has the story before him in the making of his commitments to act in one way or another. “To assert the whole set of assertions of the Christian religion is both to tell the Christian doctrine story and to confess allegiance to the Christian way of life” (p. 141). That he believes that the Christian stories are true is not, according to Braithwaite, the proper test for being a sound believing Christian. The proper test, rather, is whether he “proposes to live according to Christian moral principles and associates his intention with thinking of Christian stories” which he may or may not believe to be true, that is, believe to correspond to empirical fact.

D.

The above characterization sets out the core of Braithwaite’s account of religion. There are, as commentators were quick to note, all sorts of tolerably evident objections, but, before we turn to some of them, let

us consider a general objection that Braithwaite himself states and faces at the end of his essay.⁶ It is the very natural objection which contends that he has eviscerated religion of the claim to that objective content which is essential to give it point.

If a man's religion is all a matter of following the way of life he sets before himself and of strengthening his determination to follow it by imagining exemplary fairy-tales, it is purely subjective: his religion is all in terms of his own private ideals and of his own private imaginations. How can he even try to convert others to his religion if there is nothing objective to convert them to? How can he argue in its defense if there is no religious proposition which he believes, nothing which he takes to be the fundamental truth about the universe? And is it of any public interest what mental techniques he uses to bolster up his will? Discussion about religion must be more than the exchange of autobiographies. [P. 146]

Braithwaite responds by remarking that being social animals we often do share convictions, but he also admits—what is also surely so—that sometimes these convictions are very dissimilar. He then asks whether there can be any reasonable interchange and argument pro and con between their advocates when they so differ. Like Hare, Braithwaite believes that decision—plain human commitment—is finally determinative here.⁷ We finally cannot establish or prove a set of moral principles. Instead we finally must—logically must—simply subscribe to them or adopt them by a decision of principle. But this does not, he points out, rule out the relevance of ordinary empirical beliefs to those decisions. Though “an intention . . . cannot be logically based upon anything except another intention,” it does not follow from that that our decisions, giving expression to our intentions, cannot be made in the light of a reflection on, and taking to heart of, everything we know. In that way they can be reflective and amenable to reason.⁸ To call such intentions subjective or arbitrary is to misdescribe their character. Religion can be a matter of following a way of

⁶Keith Yandel, in his “Empiricism and Theism,” expertly marshals the standard objections to Braithwaite's account. But see, as well, his subsequent exchange with me. These essays are reprinted in *Philosophy and Religion*, ed. Keith E. Yandel (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1972).

⁷R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), pp. 68–71. For some of the raw edges of this see my “Morality and Commitment,” *Idealistic Studies* 7, no. 1 (January 1977); 94–108.

⁸W. D. Falk, “Moral Perplexity,” in *Understanding Moral Philosophy*, ed. James Rachels (Encino, Calif.: Dickenson Publishing Co., 1976).

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life, rooted ultimately in a personal decision of principle, and still be nonarbitrary and nonsubjective for all of that.⁹

“GODLESS CHRISTIANITY” IN THE ANALYTICAL MODE, II

A.

R. M. Hare, nearly twenty years after Braithwaite’s lecture and the initial stirrings of the theology and falsification dispute, returns in an interesting and distinctive way to that dispute. He has a view of Braithwaite’s essay shared by almost no one else. He heard the lecture in 1955 and believed then, as he still believes, that it is “by far the best thing on this subject [he] had ever heard or read” (p. 407). In view of what have widely been held to be devastating objections to Braithwaite’s account (*a*) what is it that Hare finds so right about this approach and (*b*) how does he attempt to overcome those objections?

Generally, Hare thinks that many of the criticisms directed against religion are well taken and that religious belief, to remain a viable option for reflective and informed contemporary people, must be considerably reduced. The core of Christian belief, that which is really crucial to preserve, has very little to do, on Hare’s view, with the cosmological claims which have seemed so baffling and unbelievable to so many people. There are, indeed, “lumps of orthodoxy that stick in the throats” of Braithwaite and Hare and—though they respond to them differently and more evasively—they stick in the throats of Tillich and the Bishop of Woolwich as well. It is these lumps, Hare argues, which need to be put aside as not essential to religion.

Hare tries to address himself, as he believes Braithwaite addressed himself, to “the quite genuine perplexities of those who want to call themselves Christians, and yet cannot bring themselves to believe what Christians are supposed to have to believe” (p. 393). He wants to articulate a conception of faith “which is defensible against the attacks of the philosophically well-armed atheist” (p. 394). Hare develops what he calls a version of Christian empiricism (p. 394). He believes that once the issues in the debate between belief and unbelief are seen clearly that “nobody with any claim to rationality is going to say that he is a Christian,” if to be a Christian is to “believe all the things that the orthodox say they believe and believe them literally . . .” (p. 395). The thing, Hare would have it, for a rational person to do is to articulate, or come to accept on someone else’s articulation, a

⁹See my essay referred to in n. 7 and see W. K. Frankena, “Is Morality a Purely Personal Matter?” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 3 (1978): 122–32.

demythologized version of Christianity or Judaism rooted in an empiricist view of the world. Neither orthodox theologians nor atheists will like such a posing of the issues, but such a posing, Hare would have it, is the only nonevasive way to face the issues for a contemporary person who wants to make sense of his or her faith. He remarks that “Theologians have produced a succession of devices for concealing from Christians the starkness of the choice which, if the orthodox and the atheists are right, they have to make. Even the orthodox will often make use of these evasions if hard pressed. The reason why the vast majority of educated Christians are people who have evaded the issue is that those educated people who have not evaded it have ceased to be Christians. If there is no third alternative besides orthodoxy, strictly and clearly interpreted, and atheism, it is likely that most thinking people will choose the latter” (p. 395).

Hare is aware that there are pitfalls for the demythologizers: the determined and thorough Christian empiricists. The worry—indeed a very persistent worry—is that a form of Christianity or Judaism which squares with that account will be so eviscerated that we will come to have something which is, in substance, an atheism graced by a Christian or Jewish vocabulary.

Such a predicament—such an evisceration from “simple belief” to a kind of “sophisticated belief” through death by a thousand qualifications—raises, through the theology and falsification issue, what has come to be called Flew’s challenge or, more appropriately, the empiricists’ challenge.¹⁰ It comes to this. For what is expressed by an utterance to constitute a genuine assertion which succeeds in making a real factual claim about the world—that is, an utterance that characterizes how the world is—something must count for its truth, and something must count against it. If an utterance denies nothing, if not even a possible state of affairs counts against it, then it also asserts nothing, that is, it makes no factual claim. This being so, perhaps the simplest way to find out whether an utterance actually succeeds in making a factual assertion is to find out whether it could be falsified or disconfirmed, whether any conceivable set of circumstances could show it to be false or probably false. With this test in mind, if we put the key religious utterances of contemporary religious people to such a test, they do not pass it. “An omnipotent and loving God exists,” is so used by such people that it denies nothing and thus asserts nothing because whatever happens, or even conceivably could

¹⁰See Flew and MacIntyre, eds.; and Diamond and Litzenburg, eds.

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happen in any possible world, the believer will not give it up. No event or cluster of events which occurs or could occur will be accepted by him as something which would be evidence sufficient to make him give up his belief that there is such a God. His mind is firmly fixed. To test this, Flew's remarks take the form of a challenge to the believer: "What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or the existence of God?"¹¹ If this question cannot be answered—the challenge runs—then we must conclude that the *prima facie* status of such religious utterances is not their actual status and that, in reality, they are not what they purport to be: namely grand cosmological (metaphysical), but still putatively factual, claims which are, in fact, true and thus are capable of being true or false. It is against the background of this challenge that we should understand Hare's dialectic and his remarks about the "simple believer." (It is important that the qualifier "putative" before "cosmological factual claims" be duly noted. The underlying assumption in such an empiricist challenge—an assumption which Braithwaite and Hare accept and an assumption which has been vigorously defended by empiricists—is that "an empirical factual statement" is a pleonasm. "Empirical" adds nothing to "factual." Where cosmological claims about "ultimate reality" do not meet that constraint, no clear contrasting conception can be given. But that is exactly what Flew's challenge was designed to smoke out. Throughout this essay, "cosmology" is used in its most typical sense, namely to refer to metaphysical claims about what has been called "ultimate reality.")

B.

Hare's "simple believer," after a series of encounters with atheists and "sophisticated believers," finds himself in the following bind. On the one hand, he does understand the old, literal ideas about God, where God is construed as an anthropomorphic being, but he has come to believe them to be false and, indeed, often fantastic. He understands them all right, or at the very least he has some inkling of what they are about, but they also seem to him to be falsifiable and, indeed, patently false claims. On the other hand, the ideas of the "sophisticated believer" seem to him so strange that it is hard to figure out what they mean and they seem, as well, far removed from "the God he used to worship" (p. 401). They seem, if we view them as some

¹¹A. Flew, "Theology and Falsification," in Flew and MacIntyre, eds., p. 99.

mysterious kind of allegedly factual beliefs, to be unfalsifiable or at least anomalous with respect to their falsification, but (and perhaps because of this) utterly problematic—anomalous with respect to their meaning. The suspicion thrust on him by a reflection on the empiricists' challenge is the suspicion that with sophisticated religious belief there really is not anything left which could be believed. The suspicion runs deep within him that, as a result of the "sophisticated believer's" qualifications, Christian and Jewish faith, so qualified, has become so insubstantial that it is hard to see what one is supposed to be defending (p. 402). The key religious utterances of sophisticated belief try to make genuine assertions concerning the nature of "ultimate reality," but fail. They do not succeed in asserting anything. Hare believes, in effect, to put the above point in a somewhat different way, that on his own grounds Flew has won out, but Hare also believes that there is something important in the faith of the "simple believer"—something he in part shares with such a believer—and he wants to strengthen that belief by freeing it from its philosophical muddles and by demythologizing it (p. 403).

It is Hare's conviction (a conviction he shares with Braithwaite) that it is not the holding of a set of factual or cosmological beliefs—being committed to a set of assertions in the narrow sense of that term—which centrally distinguishes a believer from a nonbeliever. Hare claims that, whatever putative assertions of such an order some believers might be committed to, they could be abandoned without their losing what is crucial to their faith. He stresses, in what by now is a well-known and nearly universally accepted move against positivistically oriented analyses, that there are many different kinds of intelligible utterance. Those used to make factual assertions are just one type of utterance among a myriad of very diverse types. Among the most important for the philosophy of religion are those expressive of "beliefs which are not beliefs in the truth of assertions, in the narrow sense, and which are fundamental to our whole life in this world, and still more in our doing anything like science" (p. 404).¹² Hare's nonreligious example is the belief that, for whatever happens, there is some causal law to be discovered which would explain happenings of that sort. There is, he claims, no falsifying

¹²Compare here what Malcolm says about framework-beliefs and what Wittgenstein says about beliefs of the *Weltbild* (Normal Malcolm, *Thought and Knowledge* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977], pp. 193–216; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969], translated by Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe). I have discussed this in my "On the Rationality of Groundless Believing," *Idealistic Studies*, in press.

that claim. Yet it is a claim dear to the hearts of many scientists. Hare argues that it can meet the empiricists' challenge no more than many religious utterances. To believe it, to accept it, and to act in accordance with it is not, according to Hare, to believe in the truth of a factual assertion, yet it is to believe both groundlessly and reasonably. If we apply the empiricists' challenge and ask just what would have to happen to entitle the scientist to stop believing in that claim, the answer is, as in the case of sophisticated belief, nothing. Nothing would, or even could, falsify it.¹³

I do not think this example of Hare's really shows what he wants it to. I shall briefly indicate why I think this, but I do not want to lay much stress on this for (a) what I say here is too problematic to be so curtly argued; and (b) Hare could, perhaps, choose a happier example and convincingly support his general crucial point about the existence of special foundational beliefs or framework beliefs. I shall, that is, briefly state my objections. But, after I have done that, I shall ignore them in order to continue the discussion along what I take to be more fruitful paths. In doing this, I shall treat Hare's case as if he had established what he had set out to establish.

As far as natural science is concerned, a central task, if not the central task, is to look for causes. So the scientist, as long as he keeps at his task, will continue to look for causes; but from this it does not follow that he believes, let alone that he must believe, that he will always find them, or that they always will be found if only the search is diligent enough and sufficiently protracted. He probably does believe that, but the crucial thing to see is that such a belief need not be part of what it is to believe in science or to be a scientist. Moreover and second, though he need not and probably does not hold that belief tentatively as a hypothesis and does not look to falsify it, yet it does not follow that it is not an empirical belief testable (weakly confirmable or infirmable at least in principle).¹⁴

C

It is not, however, implausible to argue that there are some beliefs, beliefs of a diverse sort, which have the status Hare characterizes.

¹³It is surely understandable that people would so argue and this is perhaps the standard view, but for some considerations that would question whether it could meet the empiricists' challenge, see my "Is to Abandon Determinism to Withdraw from the Enterprise of Science?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 28, no. 1 (September 1967): 117-21.

¹⁴See here Basil Mitchell's criticisms of Malcolm. Basil Mitchell, "Remarks," in *Reason and Religion*, ed. Stuart C. Brown (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977).

Indeed Wittgenstein, in *On Certainty*, and derivatively Malcolm have powerfully argued for just this. Hare mentions fundamental moral beliefs—beliefs of particular importance for his analysis of religious belief—as a further example. In a comment which reveals at least a partial rejection of scientism, Hare remarks that there “are whole fields of human conduct outside the laboratory where scientific belief does not give us the answers to the questions we are (or ought to be) asking. It does not give us answers, not because it is wrong, but because it does not apply in those fields” (p. 406). In a reaction which is just the opposite of Dewey’s, Hare contends that morality is just such a field. “We cannot decide by experimental methods or by observation what we ought to do. That I ought to do this or that is another of those beliefs which I have to accept or reject (for what I do depends on this decision) . . .” (p. 406). Hare’s decisionalism has been thoroughly criticized, but, for all of that, it is true that with respect to their truth capacity fundamental moral beliefs are very anomalous indeed.¹⁵ It is not clear what their logical status is, but it is very questionable that they should be taken to be factual assertions true or false in the relatively unproblematic way in which such assertions are true or false.

However, while he thinks there is something to be salvaged in the faith of the “simple believer,” Hare also believes much must be jettisoned as well. Indeed Hare rejects the very category of the supernatural as something beyond the possibility of rational belief for present-day educated people. He believes “that it is as impossible that a fully educated population should believe in the God of the orthodox as it is that the present day population of England or New England, should believe in witchcraft” (p. 422). Like Braithwaite and Miles, Hare asks, and answers in the affirmative, the question of whether religion can do without the supernatural (p. 416). Christianity involves a commitment to a distinctive way of life, but does it also involve, and inexpugnably, a belief in the supernatural? Hare denies that it does. In asking whether belief in the supernatural is essential to Christianity, Hare claims that the key question is whether faith in the supernatural makes the Christian different, or whether this difference in behaviour and orientation to life is some-

¹⁵Hector-Neri Castañeda, “Imperatives, Decisions and ‘Oughts’: A Logico-Metaphysical Investigation,” in *Morality and the Language of Conduct*, ed. Hector-Neri Castañeda and George Nakhnikian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963). Less decisive but more readable criticisms occur in Philippa Foot (*Virtues and Vices* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978]) and G. Warnock (*Contemporary Moral Philosophy* [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1967]).

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thing that could be had by someone who did not believe in the supernatural? Hare thinks that it could be had by someone utterly without such cosmological beliefs. Thus, he claims, we can have a viable Christianity without any commitment to or belief in the supernatural.

D.

Hare sets out, in a candid and disarming way, an expansion of Braithwaite's account which he hopes will make such a Godless Christianity—to not mince words—a viable option for Christian believers (p. 414). In doing this, Hare develops what he calls a "minimum Braithwaitian position" and, after making certain clarifications and remarks designed to overcome certain predictable and natural misunderstandings, he considers how such a position "might meet the objections to it that would be made by an old-fashioned Christian believer, whether simple or sophisticated" (p. 408).

I shall first turn to some of the clarifications. It might be thought at first that Braithwaite and Hare are simply giving us to understand "that religious belief is a kind of moral belief or attitude" (p. 406). In religion one has "morals helped out by mythology" (p. 408). "A man", as Braithwaite tells us, "is not . . . a professing Christian unless he both proposes to live according to Christian moral principles, and associates his intention with thinking of Christian stories; but he need not believe that the empirical propositions presented by the stories correspond to empirical fact" (p. 408). Hare, as we noted, is much enamored of this account, but still he will not accept it just as it stands. The category "moral principles," particularly when identified with duties, is too narrow a category to play appropriately the role Braithwaite assigns to it. In the above quotation from Braithwaite, "way of life" should replace "moral principle." Moreover, and more important, "religion cannot be reduced to morality, even in an extended sense, unless we include also the faith that saves moral endeavour from futility" (p. 414).

This is a very important point for Hare, and it needs to be carefully explained and probed. Hare sees readily enough that we cannot reduce religion to agapeistic behavior ritualistically decked out. Christianity involves love of neighbour, but it is not simply that. Among other things, we have the very central task on such an account of coming to understand what, with a rejection of the supernatural, love of God could come to. And to do that "we shall first have to explain in what sense, for Braithwaite, God can exist to be the object of love" (p. 409). After all, given its rejection of the super-

natural, its nonreliance on anything like a Tillichian category of being, and given an emotive neutralization of "Godless," it is natural to call this Christian empiricism a Godless Christianity. Braithwaite and Hare do not call their Christian empiricism a Godless Christianity, but I am inclined to say that a rose by any other name would have as sweet a smell; for, after all, Hare does say that "the transcendent God is bound always to be an idle element in our religious life" (p. 424). So it seems evident that this is a Godless Christianity. Yet Hare does raise this question about God (p. 409). In trying to understand what could possibly be meant, on such an account, by the reality of God, it is crucial, he believes, to consider that in morality, besides duties and obligations, we have moral ideals. When we consider them and consider as well what it is to believe that what these ideals prescribe or proclaim will someday be achieved, we will come to understand, on Braithwaite's and Hare's account, what it is to believe in the existence of God. But this still seems to me to be an evasion, or at least misapprehension, involving a stipulative redefinition of "God."

However, before proceeding to assess this claim, we should develop Hare's account a bit. Not only "our moral attitudes" are involved in such a conception, "but all our wants, aspirations and ideals." Such things make up our total attitude toward life. It is such an attitude which Braithwaite and Hare denominate as religious belief (p. 409). What is being done, in an attempt in some way to obviate the empiricists' challenge, is to assimilate "statements of religious belief to a class of utterances which can be unfalsifiable without lacking content" (p. 410). This Hare and Braithwaite do by denying "that religious statements are any kind of factual assertion" (p. 410). Thus, even "There is a God" or "God exists" must not be construed as grand cosmological but still factual claims, but as expressions of certain, in a broad sense, moral ideals plus an expression of a conviction—in the form of an empirical belief—that they will be sustained (p. 410).

E.

There is a very natural objection to this that the orthodox Christian, but not only the orthodox Christian, will make. Hare is very aware of it and states it and tries to meet it. I shall first restate it and then consider the adequacy of Hare's response.

Surely (the response goes) religious assertions must be factual, for the Christian does not merely follow a way of life; he has, as well, the hope that this way of life is not vain or pointless. But such a hope

would be pointless and futile if the world were not ordered in a certain way. The crucial thing, if we are to explicate Christian belief and not reduce it to something else, is to see that to be a Christian is not merely to be disposed to follow a certain way of life, it is also, and centrally, to believe that God is there to sustain one in this way of life (p. 410).

Hare recognizes that this is a powerful and a natural objection but believes that he and Braithwaite “can go a long way to meet it.” We need to recognize that Christians are “committed to certain factual assertions about the world, but that these are all empirical ones,” open to the usual empirical tests. Christians will, for example, believe that it is reasonable to hope that the central aspirations, ideals, and wants, which in part constitute their religion, can be fulfilled. And this is an empirical belief which is weakly testable and is not devoid of content. It is very natural, for example, for Christians to believe “that the inanimate world is so ordered as not to make his endeavours pointless” (p. 411).

It is also important to stress that the key empirical beliefs that the Christian is committed to are typically “sufficiently indeterminate to escape refutation by single or even by quite numerous counter-instances” (p. 411). They are beliefs which contain “enough *ceteris-paribus* clauses to look after the counter-instances in all of which it will be claimed that other things were not, after all equal” (p. 411). Such beliefs—and parallel things operate in science—are not given up because of a few bits of *prima facie* disconfirming evidence. Such evidence is treated as an anomaly.

The Christian’s belief that moral endeavour and commitment is not pointless is not testable in an ordinary way, yet it still is about the world and is therefore factual and weakly confirmable and infirmable. We do not rule out the search for evidence concerning such a belief; we can specify something of what would count as evidence for or against such a belief. However, we do not expect this belief actually to be established by empirical investigation. Faith is required for the belief that moral endeavor is not futile as well as for the belief that all occurrences admit of a scientific explanation. But these beliefs are, nonetheless, both factual and weakly confirmable or infirmable (pp. 412–13). However, we should note that an abandonment of such beliefs would be very crucial for our beliefs about life, for the “abandonment of it would entail a radical change in our view about what the world is like” (p. 413).

Does this response actually meet the really crucial core of the orthodox Christian objection Hare considered? I am ambivalent about this, but I am inclined at least to believe that it does not. The

about this, but I am inclined at least to believe that it does not. The conviction remains that in spite of what Hare has said about factual beliefs—and even factual beliefs of a rather extraordinary sort—he is still leaving out, and has no way to accommodate, given his epistemological beliefs and conceptions about meaning, what is most crucial to the Christian or Jew, namely, belief in God. Belief in God is not just the having of certain moral ideals or life ideals which are associated with stories (parables) and factual assertions of the sort Hare considers. Christianity or Judaism without God is a very strange thing indeed and—or so it seems—a pointless thing. But is it utterly pointless? There seems still to be room for what Hare calls “divine providence,” namely the faith (trust) that it is possible that the ends of morality will be realized, that events will not massively and repeatedly frustrate the ends of morality. Faith in divine providence, on this account, is the trust that we can find moral policies—a set of moral prescriptions concerning how we are to live—which will not be futile. A moral man will want the ends of morality to be achieved; a Christian will trust that they will be achieved; that, most centrally, is what his faith consists in. But still, why talk of divine providence here? There seems to be no way of bringing God in on the Braithwaite-Hare account—no matter how minimal that account of God is kept. And yet a conception of God is at the heart of Christian and Jewish belief. Or is the belief that all is well and the thankfulness that that is so just what belief in God comes to? But then the secular humanist can be led gently into belief. Conversion is achieved by linguistic stipulation. Our conception of God is now so minimal that we have no conception of God at all.

Hare responds—rather weakly I believe—by saying that this “objection cannot be made clear until we have discovered what it would be like to bring God in” (p. 414). He takes this to mean the bringing in of the category of the supernatural, and this in turn he construes, not implausibly, to mean belief in the contranatural and/or transcendental; and he rejects both of these categories of belief. To commit oneself to either conception is, Hare continues, to commit oneself to what contemporary people with a reasonable scientific and philosophical education regard as absurdities. To have a reasonable, morally and humanly acceptable Christianity or Judaism, we must have a Christianity or Judaism without the supernatural. And—though Hare does not say this—this means, unless God is given a quite new sense, a Christianity or Judaism without God.

In effect, at the beginning of Braithwaite’s essay, and explicitly in the last part of Hare’s, arguments are given for rejecting the super-

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natural (pp. 414–27). They are reasonable arguments but not terribly developed or original. However, in recent times they have been considerably developed by Martin, Hepburn, Flew, Matson, Scriven and myself.¹⁶ If our arguments are for the most part sound, then belief in God – as belief in the supernatural – is untenable.

Hare and Braithwaite (and Miles and van Buren as well) accept the central core of these arguments, yet they wish all the same to remain Christians. Their argument for sticking with a Godless Christianity is that (a) without it we either have absurd Christian belief or no Christian belief at all and (b) that a nonabsurd but Godless Christianity can still be maintained without departing too much in essentials from what Christians have always been centrally committed to. Can it?

F.

Can or should we have a Christianity or a Judaism without God? Hare sees the crux of this problem as being whether it is a belief in God which makes the believer different from other people (p. 417). He argues that it is not. It is not, he claims, over this problem that the really crucial differences emerge, though he does concede what should be evident, “that in abandoning the supernatural we should have to abandon some things which have been thought to be very central to traditional Christianity” (p. 417).

However, even if it is not belief in God which marks the most essential difference between the lives of Christians and skeptics, I am not at all sure that this is the relevant question to go with in asking whether Christianity or Judaism can or should get along without a belief in God. Suppose, ritualistic and purely verbal

¹⁶C. B. Martin (*Religious Belief* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1959]); Ronald Hepburn (*Christianity and Paradox* [London: C. A. Watts & Co., 1958]); Antony Flew (*God and Philosophy* [London: Hutchinson & Co., 1966] and *The Presumption of Atheism* [New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1976]); Wallace Matson (*The Existence of God* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1965]); and Michael Scriven (*Primary Philosophy* [New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1966]). See the references to me in n. 2. Three further atheist or agnostic accounts that should be noted here are Sidney Hook (*The Quest for Being* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961]); Paul Edwards (“Difficulties in the Idea of God,” in *The Idea of God*, ed. Edward H. Madden et al. [Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1968]); and Walter Kaufmann (*Critique of Religion and Philosophy* [New York: Harper & Row, 1958] and *The Faith of a Heretic* [Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1963]). The anthology *The Logic of God* cited in n. 4 reprints some of the key skeptical essays, including some of mine not previously published in book form. Together these references set out, among the writings in English, the case made for unbelief by contemporary Anglo-American philosophers. That the argument has an important nineteenth-century ancestry can be seen from my “Agnosticism” in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968) vol. 1.

behaviour apart, that the most distinctive characteristic distinguishing a Christian from a religious skeptic (an atheist or an agnostic) is a pervasive love for humankind and a trust that in the deepest way nothing can harm him and that all is well no matter what happens. If this is the dividing line, it still is reasonable to respond that the only reasonable ground or rationale for such attitudes and such a conviction is a belief in God: A belief, whatever else it is, which either presupposes a cosmological belief or is itself a cosmological belief, namely, a belief that God exists. With that belief, such emotions and such convictions have a rationale, are intelligible; but without it they seem at least to be groundless and arbitrary. Given a certain belief in ultimate reality there is a sense in which one can coherently believe that a good person cannot be harmed no matter what happens; but, given a conception of a Godless universe, where values are simply universalizable decisions in principle, such a belief seems foolish indeed. Without such a cosmological background belief, without such metaphysical background beliefs, it is an arbitrary attitudinal posturing.

Suppose a present-day Kierkegaard were to respond that we must not look for justification or even for rationales for such fundamental beliefs. We use them in justifying almost everything else we do, but do not and cannot justify them. They are our yardstick in such domains, and we do not in turn have a yardstick for our yardstick. But while justification, no doubt, must come to an end, it is not something that can simply come to an end at any point. The religious attitudes I characterized have a point—have at least something like a rationale—with a belief in God, and they seem at least to be patently pointless and perhaps even not altogether rational without such a belief. Differences which appear to mark deep differences between believer and skeptic make no reasonable or justifiable difference without belief in God, and this would seem to be a rather powerful argument for rejecting a Godless Christianity.

Hare might respond that, since contranatural and transcendent (transcendental) conceptions are not—for one reason or another—rationally believable, such a backing in mythology (God being for him a mythological concept) for such attitudes and convictions is not available, but that this does not matter for such attitudes are intrinsically desirable on their own or have their own sort of appeal.¹⁷ But while this may be true of a love of humankind, it is

¹⁷Given Hare's rejection of the philosophical category of intrinsic goodness, this is a rather unlikely turn for him to take. But, given readings such as those given by Georg von Wright or

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also true that love of humankind by itself does not distinguish the skeptic from the Christian. The more distinctive notions that nothing can harm him and that all is well no matter what can only make sense if taken against the background of a belief in God. Without that belief they are without a rationale and, on reflection and on balance, they are not intrinsically desirable. They might even be undesirable.

G.

Let us come at our problem of the desirability of a Godless Christianity from another direction. Hare characterizes a “transcendental being” as a being whose “existence or non-existence makes no difference to observable phenomena” (p. 415). Now even if such a God is, in reality—as Hare believes—actually an idling conception, it does not follow that believers and skeptics do not react very differently to talk of God. Even if there is, in reality, no difference between claiming that God listens to prayers and directs events accordingly, and claiming it is just the case that such events take place, the effect of these different modes of speech is very different on many people. In this—that is, in terms of their effects on them—the concept is not idling at all, though one can make the normative claim, against the believer, that it should be once he recognizes that such transcendental beliefs involving the utilization of such a conception can, if Hare is right, make no intelligible truth-claim.

It is no doubt correct and important to say with Hare “a lot has changed about the Christian religion in the course of the centuries” and that, with an ever increasingly large educated and sophisticated population, it will change at an accelerated rate (p. 420). But it does not follow that it can change so deeply as to become a “Godless religion” and retain enough of a difference from an atheistic humanism to give point to Christian affirmations. What really is the point, with such beliefs and under such circumstances, in calling oneself a Christian or engaging in Christian practices? If Hare is right, a recognition of the autonomy of morals makes it clear that, even if the God of the orthodox exists, we could not ground morality in God or use such a conception to provide a ground for the commitment to

C. I. Lewis to such a conception, it is not implausible to believe that Hare is confused about this and that such a response is available to him.

morality.¹⁸ But, more crucially for him, even if we could, there could not be such ground in or for morals because Hare defends a Christianity sans God. But what then is the point of such a Christian commitment?

Perhaps Hare could respond (in effect engaging in a replay of Kant) that even with such a Christianity, albeit Godless Christianity, we have the faith and, indeed, the reasonable hope that the ends of morality will not be frustrated, that our moral policies and moral practices will not be futile, that moral endeavour will not in the end be defeated, and that our “morality is not pointless” (p. 412). But, again, similar considerations such as those we have just considered hover into sight. Where our faith consisted, essentially but not exclusively, in the trust that there really is the transcendent God characterized in the Scriptures, such attitudes about the nonfrustration of the ends of morality have a plausibility. But with Hare’s version of Christian faith they have no such plausibility.

To this, as we have seen in another context, Hare might in turn reply that just what in essence it is to have faith—to be the kind of Christian he recommends—is to have that trust in the achievement of the ends of morality (pp. 413–14). Having faith, for Hare, is just trusting, without grounds for that trust, that this will be the case. But where it is made, as it appears to be with Hare, without any appeal to evidence or reasons at all and, perhaps as a belief too persisted in, in spite of the evidence, trust in reality becomes hope or, perhaps better, fervent wish and belief is not opinion but commitment. But to have such wishes, and to take this to be faith, leads us all, as C. B. Martin once put it, gently into belief.¹⁹ But now atheist and believer are no longer distinct and Christian belief has been thoroughly eviscerated.

¹⁸Hare means and I mean by the autonomy of morals that fundamental moral beliefs cannot be derived from factual beliefs or metaphysical beliefs. From the fact—if it is a fact—that God exists and that he commands certain things, nothing follows morally. It may well also be true, indeed it probably is, that to be moral one must, in some appropriate sense, be an autonomous person. But that plausible belief is not needed for the claim that one cannot ground morality in belief in God. Only the first, rather standard, claim about autonomy is required for that. I have argued the general claim about autonomy in my “Why There Is a Problem about Ethics” (*Danish Yearbook of Philosophy* 15 [1978]: 68–96) and in my “On Deriving an Ought from an Is” (*Review of Metaphysics* 32, no. 3 [March 1979]: 487–514). I speak specifically to the problem about God and the autonomy of morals in my “God and the Good: Does Morality Need Religion” (*Theology Today* 21 [April 1964]: 47–55) and in my *Ethics without God* (London: Pember-ton Books, 1973).

¹⁹C. B. Martin, chap. 2.

H.

Hare might still respond that a Christian will be distinct from an atheist in that he will act on his wishes and his hopes. But it is very unclear what acting on such wishes or hopes comes to. The person with these hopes or wishes need not be an optimistic person at all. He might be very pessimistic indeed about what he expects. People with all sorts of differences in what they expect of their fellow humans and of "the world" might, quite equally, have those hopes and wishes. But, with different empirical beliefs, they would often act differently. Since this is so, it is entirely unclear what acting on such wishes or hopes would come to. So, if this is all we have to go on, we do not appear to have grounds for distinguishing the Christian from the religious skeptic.

Love of humankind and a rational hope—as distinct from a mere wish—that some day human ideals and aspirations will be realized can sit at least as well in a Marxist framework, or even a secular humanist framework (such as Dewey's), as it does in a Christian framework. Indeed, on either of those purely secular frameworks, the rational and unequivocal commitment to such conceptions is clearer. Why then Christianity? That many people grew up in those practices and beliefs—that they grew into those frameworks—is not at all an adequate response in our circumstances. Nobody knows whether such human aspirations will in the long run, that is, within the life of humankind, prevail, but that does not at all lessen the desirability of tenacious and reflective efforts to bring about the conditions of their prevailing. But such commitments are logically and rationally independent of Christianity. Where there is a link it is purely historical and without logical or normative significance. There is no need here for Christianity, or for religion, or for anything like that. And to say that only that—that is, that particular set of normative commitments—is religion is to engage in an arbitrary and stipulative low redefinition and to convert the nonreligious into the religious by stipulative fiat. There may be certain prescriptive principles which are essential to Christianity, but the ones that Hare has trotted out—which are very attractive normative principles that we would not on reflection wish to abandon—are not unique to Christianity, and there seems no need at all to continue running them under a Christian or even a religious flag. Indeed, to do so is to court confusion and misunderstanding (p. 425). The abandonment of Christianity need not lead to their abandonment, and Christianity does not add any rational underpinning to these moral commitments and aspirations.

It is surely fair enough to wish to give a reading to Christianity in which it turns out nonabsurd, and it is cheating to accept only a reading which makes it absurd. But it is also cheating to so eviscerate it—in seeking to make it intellectually and humanly respectable—that it undermines that which is distinctive about it and which enables it to hold out a hope that no secular humanism can match (p. 427).