

COMMENTS ON EMPIRICISM AND THEISM

KAI NIELSEN*

Professor Yandell joins ranks with many others in maintaining that there are serious defects in Braithwaite's analysis of religious discourse.¹ Braithwaite purports to give us an analysis of the meaning of religious utterances, including religious utterances which are central to the Christian tradition, but he fails in this analysis for not all utterances integral to that tradition can be correctly analyzed either as empirical statements open to confirmation or infirmation or as sentences expressing an intention to follow a general behavioural policy to be associated with certain stories. "Jesus Christ was conceived of the Holy Spirit", "Jesus Christ is actually God and actually man", "God is love" or "There is a creator of the universe" are all of central importance in the Christian tradition. Yet they do not fit either of Braithwaite's models for intelligible religious expressions. They are not, at least as they are used in modern religious discourses, confirmable or infirmable even in principle, for both their affirmation and denial are equally compatible with any empirically identifiable state of affairs that might conceivably obtain. But since this is so the utterances in question fail to make empirical statements. But they are not expressions of intention either. Ask yourself what intentions do they express? If I say "I'll pay you tomorrow", or if two people say together to a third party, "We are going to get married", it is plain enough that these are the expressions of intention and that these utterances can be paraphrased as explicit intentional utterances. But this is hardly so for the sample religious utterances mentioned above. What intention does "Jesus Christ was conceived of the Holy Spirit" express? No even remotely plausible paraphrase suggests itself. Are

*Department of Philosophy, New York University, U.S.A. Read at the Sixty-sixth Annual Meeting of the Western Division of the American Philosophical Association at St. Louis, Missouri, May 3, 1968. Some of the crucial thinking in this paper has been much influenced by J. C. Thornton's brilliant "Religious Belief and 'Reductionism,'" *Sophia*, vol. V, No. 3 (October, 1966), and by his "Reductionism — A Reply to Dr. Mascal", *Sophia*, vol. VI, No. 2 (July, 1967).

¹J. A. Passmore, "Christianity and Positivism," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 35 (1957); F. C. Copleston, *Contemporary Philosophy* (London, 1956), Chap. VII; Terence Penelhum, "Faith, Fact and Philosophy," *Toronto Quarterly* (October, 1956); Kai Nielsen, "On Speaking of God," *Theoria*, vol. XXVIII, No. 2 (1962); F. L. Mascal, *Words and Images* (London, 1957); William Blackstone, *The Problem of Religious Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1963), Chap. VI; H. V. Blackburn, "Professor Braithwaite and Billy Brown," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 36 (November, 1958).

COMMENTS ON EMPIRICISM AND THEISM

we to say it means "Treat Jesus as being on a par with God", or "The concept of Jesus is to be taken as conceptually linked to the concept of God"? But surely such paraphrases are wildly implausible. One can say, for example, "Even though Jesus Christ was conceived of the Holy Spirit we should treat Him as being of equal importance to God". Yet if the above equivalences hold, such a remark would be pleonastic. But it plainly is not. Thus it cannot be the case that such equivalences hold. However, for Braithwaite's account to be correct some such paraphrase of the above utterance must be given.

Criticisms of this sort are familiar and Yandell, following this well-trodden path, does show that Braithwaite's account is defective, if taken as a complete account of the meaning of religious talk. Braithwaite, I agree, does not give an adequate account of such utterances as "Jesus Christ if perfect both in deity and humanness is actually God and actually man", or "Jesus Christ ascended into heaven from whence he shall judge the quick and the dead". Yet they are surely part of the corpus of Christian doctrine and people who can play this language-game indeed know how to operate with them. That is to say, Braithwaite does not give a plausible analysis of certain distinctive bits of religious discourse — bits of discourse which are taken as essential to Christianity by the vast majority of the members of its various confessional groups. It is surely a radical departure from the Christian tradition to try to construe "God exists" as nothing more than an expression on the part of the user of his intention to live agapeistically; and to add that such expressions of intention to be religious must be associated with certain stories which believers at least entertain, does not help matters materially.

However, I do not believe such criticisms cut deeply enough; I do not think they once and for all dispose of attempts such as Braithwaite's and I think there are some further things that someone taken by Braithwaite's position could say in reply.

First, it is worth noting for the historical record that in reply to some rather similar criticisms of his *An Empiricist's View of Religious Belief*, Braithwaite points out that he never thought of his account as a complete account of religious belief and utterance.² Rather, he deliberately intended it to be an account which would show how much of religious belief could be shown to be compatible with a moderate empiricism. In short, Braithwaite attempts to establish that much religious discourse, and particularly a good bit of religious utterance that plays an important part in the stream of religious life, can be understood and even accepted by a thorough-going modern empiricist. Nothing that Yandell or Braithwaite's other critics have said undermines this claim.

²R. B. Braithwaite, "Discussion" in I. T. Ramsey, ed., *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy* (London, 1966), p. 88.

Rather, his critics hark back to the point that there is something essential to Christianity that Braithwaite's account leaves out. If by "essential to Christianity" or even "essential to religion itself" is meant something that almost all those who call themselves "Christians" take to be essential, then Braithwaite's critics are no doubt right. There are utterances which are clearly central strands in the corpus of Christian discourse which are not analyzable according to Braithwaite's model for elucidating religious utterances. That is to say — and note this is an important qualification — they are not analyzable in a way which would be acceptable to an orthodox believer. But to claim that such bits of discourse are essential to Christianity, and to further conclude that it is essential to Christianity that they be taken as most Christians take them, is to beg some important questions. Indeed, they are taken by most Christians to be essential and they are thought of as utterances which are used to make some mysterious cosmological claims. Ramsey's reactions to Braithwaite's analysis illustrates this very well.³ However, Braithwaite points out how on Arnold's account such cosmological claims are peripheral. And in the same spirit, one could add that on Feuerbach's and Santayana's still deeper and more probing accounts they are even more peripheral. On such accounts the sentences which are normally taken to be vehicles for such putative cosmological claims are construed in a radically different manner. Admittedly this is not to view Christianity from the vantage point of most believers or from the vantage point of orthodox Christian theologians. But why should one so view it? Braithwaite is a philosopher with certain convictions about what it makes sense to say and at the same time he, as a human being, feels attracted to the Christian tradition. But he makes it clear in his reply to criticisms by Mackinnon and Ramsey that he cannot accept the whole Christian tradition when it is construed in the way most believers construe it. He remarks that as a "conscientious empiricist" he can only construe such utterances as "God created the heavens and the earth" or "Jesus was conceived by the Holy Ghost" in a *pictorial way*. He cannot take them at face value.⁴ Their *prima facie* logical status is that of some kind of statement of fact. But for very familiar reasons, he finds it impossible to take them in this way. Moreover, we should by now be wary of simply identifying the *prima facie* logical status of a sentence with its actual logical status, and we should not forget that Braithwaite is aware that his inability to accept these "claims" at face value does not square with the plain believer's beliefs *about* the meaning of such religious utterances or even with tolerably orthodox theological accounts of the meaning of such utterances. But why should these accounts — these bits of meta-theology — be normative or authorita-

³I. T. Ramsey. "Discussion" in I. T. Ramsey, ed., *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy* (London, 1966), pp. 84-88.

⁴R. B. Braithwaite, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

COMMENTS ON EMPIRICISM AND THEISM

tive for Braithwaite or even for Christianity or for religious believers generally? No good grounds have been given for saying that they should be normative.

Indeed, if we are to analyze the meaning of religious utterances, we must take as our given the first-order religious discourse of the various confessional groups. An account which does not give a perspicuous representation of such discourse is a defective account of religious discourse. But we by no means need take as our given or as something just to be accepted the received *beliefs about* that discourse. That Braithwaite's account does not square with certain theses in meta-theology does not *ipso facto* establish it as defective.

It will, however, be objected that Yandell's criticisms show that Braithwaite's account cannot give a perspicuous representation of *all* first-order Christian-talk. Braithwaite does not take account of the mysteries of Christian faith or of the profound, though unavoidably opaque, ontological statements which are integral to the Christian tradition. But this essentially reduces to the claim that he does not give an account of such discourses which will square with the *beliefs about* this discourse held by orthodox Christians. But why should Braithwaite's view square with such beliefs *about* religious discourse? Why is it not perfectly legitimate for him to say that on his empiricist principles such metaphysical religious utterances cannot be construed at face value, for while on the surface they appear to function as statements, their depth grammar is such that we do not know what it would be like for them to be even probably true or false? We can well enough understand "Orthodox Jews fast on the Day of Atonement", or "Nothing can be even red and green all over", and be puzzled about their proper analysis. But we have difficulty in even understanding, when we try to construe it literally, "There is a creator of the heavens and the earth". Moreover, it is at least questionable whether anyone has given a coherent account of what such utterances mean. Theologians speak of opacity or of mystery when what is actually involved is incoherence and obfuscation. Orthodox believers maintain that such utterances typically function as statements but they can give no account of what it would be like for them to be true or false or even probably true or false when used as believers now use them.

Braithwaite, by contrast, has an intelligible criterion of meaning, and sticking to that he can make literal sense out of much Christian belief. And he can take the other utterances in the Christian corpus, whose meaning is admittedly problematic, and deliberately re-interpret them so that they make sense on his criterion of meaning. Indeed, this is to *give* them new uses in virtue of which we can have some understanding of what we are saying when we utter them and in

virtue of which they can mesh with the unproblematic straightforwardly empirical or moral utterances in the stream of religious life. To do this would indeed be an arbitrary procedure — a kind of dogmatic holding on to a criterion of meaning at any price — if it were not for the fact that the very first-order bits of religious discourse in question, e.g., “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God”, are themselves sentences whose meaning is problematic.

To look at Christianity in this way is indeed to curtail Christian expectations. If people so construed Christianity, Christianity would become something different — though by no means *totally* different — from what it is now and has been in the past. Even believing in God would indeed be very different from what most people take it to be. But religions have always undergone change. Christianity has changed in the past and why should it not change again? Why is it not perfectly appropriate for Braithwaite to stick to his empiricist philosophical principles on the assumption that they are more likely to be in good logical order than some admittedly obscure metaphysical principles?

This I maintain is where the issue should be joined. When we consider the obscurity of alternative meta-theologies such as Ramsey's, Mascall's, or D. Z. Phillips', we (to put it conservatively) recognize that Braithwaite is on reasonably strong grounds.

It seems to me that for criticisms of such accounts as Braithwaite's to be really penetrating, they must take another tack. “God exists”, or “There is a God” could on his radical rational reconstruction have no literal, non-pictorial statemental function. This means that Orthodox Christian believers could not make the cosmological claims, obscure and perplexing as they are, that they feel driven to make even when they admittedly have very little understanding of the “claims” they are trying to make when they utter such utterances. There is in many human beings a nagging need, as Hägerström put it, to believe in some wholly other “objective power to which one can turn and from which one can draw strength to attain that which one strives after in one's innermost being, strength to resist temptations and a final hope of blessedness in a future life”.⁵ It is the religious and theological commitments serving this psychological need and not radical conceptual difficulties in Braithwaite's analysis that make many reject Braithwaite's account and turn to the varied obscurities of a Ramsey or Tillich, on the one hand, or a Phillips or Winch, on the other. Their accounts all accommodate obscurities, which if we can accept and legitimize them, gives us a rationale for accepting some very obscure first-order religious beliefs.

⁵ Axel Hägerström, “Lectures on So-Called Spiritual Religion,” *Theoria*, vol. XIV (Part I, 1948), pp. 34-35.

COMMENTS ON EMPIRICISM AND THEISM

Indeed, these metaphysical beliefs attempt to affirm the reality of one and only one Being who created the world out of nothing. And such beliefs are central to traditional Christianity and are held onto tenaciously by believers. Their scope purports to transcend "the empirical world" and Braithwaite's analysis cannot accommodate them where we take them at their face value. But this is only to say that one cannot be an orthodox Christian and accept Braithwaite's analysis. Still this is no criticism of his analysis, for Braithwaite did not set out to defend or even explicate orthodoxy but simply to show that an empiricist could find in a historic religion such as Christianity a coherent set of beliefs and principles — principles which he could subscribe to and act in accordance with. They do not include the whole of traditional Christian belief but they do include an important subset of these beliefs.

Once we allow for the special place afforded the distinctively Christian parables, it is evident that such a reconstructed representation of some features of Christian belief is identical with a certain kind of morally dedicated atheism. But to assert this is not to say or even to give one to understand that there is anything wrong with it. It just leaves out something that orthodox Christians yearn for.