

IS UNDERSTANDING RELIGION COMPATIBLE WITH BELIEVING?

BY

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BEGIN with an elementary puzzlement. In any discussion between sceptics and believers it is presupposed that, even for us to disagree, it is necessary to understand each other. Yet here at the outset the central problem arises. For usually (and the impulse to write 'always' is strong) two people could not be said to share a concept or to possess the same concept unless they agreed in at least some central applications of it. Two men may share a concept and yet disagree in some of the judgements they make in which they assert that objects fall under it. But two men who disagreed in *every* judgement which employed the concept — of them what could one say that they shared? For to possess a concept is to be able to use it correctly — although it does not preclude mishandling it sometimes. It follows that unless I can be said to share your judgements at least to some degree I cannot be said to share your concepts.

Yet sceptic and believer disagree *in toto* in their judgements on some religious matters; or so it seems. So how can they be in possession of the same concepts? If I am prepared to say *nothing* of what you will say about God or sin or salvation, how can my concepts of God, sin and salvation be the same as yours? And if they are not, how can we understand each other? There are parties to the discussion who would cut it short precisely at this point, both Protestants who believe that only saving grace can help us to understand the concepts of the Scriptures or the creeds, and sceptics who believe that religious utterances are

I owe a great deal in this paper to conversations with Professor Ernest Gellner and Mr. Peter Winch, neither of whom will agree with the use I have made of what I have learned from them.—A. M.

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flatly senseless. But each of these is presently convicted of paradox. For the Protestant will elsewhere deny what is entailed by his position, namely that nobody ever rejects Christianity (since anyone who thinks he has rejected it must have lacked saving grace and so did not understand Christianity and so in fact rejected something else); and the sceptic of this kind has to explain the meaning of religious utterances in order to reject them (that is, he never says — as he would have to if they were flatly senseless — ‘I can’t understand a word of it’). So it seems that we do want to say that a common understanding of religious concepts by sceptics and by believers is both necessary and impossible. This dilemma constitutes my problem.

Someone might argue that this dilemma is an entirely artificial construction on the grounds that the concepts used in religion are concepts also used outside religion and that sceptics and believers agree in the non-religious judgements which make use of such concepts. Since I have said that it is far from necessary for two men who share a concept to agree in every judgement which they make in which they make use of the concept, there can be no objection to saying that sceptics and believers share the same concept and, *a fortiori*, no difficulty in mutual understanding. But this objection rests upon two mistakes. First of all it ignores those specifically religious concepts which have no counterpart in non-religious contexts; and the concepts I have already cited such as those of God, sin and salvation belong to this class. Secondly, when secular predicates such as ‘powerful’ and ‘wise’ are transferred to a religious application, they undergo a change. Certainly they are used analogically; but just this is the point. A new element is introduced with the analogical adaptation of the concept. The transition from ‘powerful’ to ‘omnipotent’ is not merely quantitative. For the notion of ‘supreme in this or that class’ cannot easily be transferred to a being who does not belong to a class (as God does not).¹ And thus a new concept has been manufactured. But if the understanding of this new concept can lead theologians to make one set of

¹ *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Q. 3, Art. 5.

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judgements and the understanding of what is apparently the same concept can lead sceptics to make quite another set of judgements, then how can it be the same concept which is in question? The dilemma stands. If by any chance examples were to be produced from religions which turned out to use no specifically religious concepts, and only to use secular predicates, without change of meaning, then certainly we should have no problems of meaning with them. And with them for that very reason I am not concerned.

An indirect way of approaching this dilemma as it arises for the philosophy of religion would be to enquire whether the same dilemma arises in any other field; and at once it is clear that there is at least one field in which it *ought* to arise, namely the study of so-called primitive societies. For anthropologists and sociologists (I intend to use these terms interchangeably) claim to understand concepts which they do not share. They identify such concepts as *mana*, or *tabu*, without themselves using them — or so it seems. If we could discover what anthropological understanding consisted in therefore, we might be in a stronger position to restate the problem. And if, as I shall claim, we could also show that the variety of positions taken up by anthropologists reproduce a variety of positions already taken up in the philosophy of religion, the sense of relevance would be even stronger. I want to distinguish four different positions, each of which has defects.

(A) There is the now unfashionable view of Levy-Bruhl that primitive thought is pre-logical. When Australian aborigines asserted that the sun is a white cockatoo¹ Levy-Bruhl concluded that he was faced with a total indifference to inconsistency and contradiction. From the standpoint of rational discourse we can study primitive thought much as we study natural phenomena. It obeys laws as particles obey laws; but in speaking, primitives do not follow rules as we do. Therefore we cannot elucidate the rules that they use. In an important sense therefore, although we can describe what primitives say, we cannot grasp their concepts. For they do not possess concepts in the sense of recognizing

¹ *Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*, pp. 76 et seq.

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that some uses of expression conform to and others break with rules for the use of such expressions. It is of course consistent with this view that we might by a kind of empathy imagine ourselves to be primitives and in this sense 'understand'; but we might equally understand by imaginative sympathy what it is to be a bear or a squirrel.

The counterpart in philosophy of religion to Levy-Bruhl is the kind of position which wants to interpret religious language (or metaphysical language — see R. Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*) as expressive of attitudes rather than as affirming or denying that anything is the case. On this view religious language simply does not function as *language*; for it is used either causally to evoke or aesthetically to express feelings or attitudes, and Carnap thinks that language can do these things in precisely the same way in which 'movements' can. We can thus study religious language, as in Levy-Bruhl's writings, only as a natural phenomenon; we cannot grasp its concepts for they cannot, on this view, be conceptual. The problem for writers like Levy-Bruhl and Carnap is that they have to treat their own conclusions as palpably false in order to arrive at them. For unless Levy-Bruhl had grasped that 'white cockatoo' and 'sun' were being used with apparently normal referential intentions, he could not have diagnosed the oddity of asserting that the sun is a white cockatoo; and unless Carnap had grasped the assertive form of religious or metaphysical statement, he would not have had to argue that this language is not assertive but expressive. That is, in Levy-Bruhl and Carnap we find a tacit acknowledgement that primitive *language* and religious *language* are *language*. And that therefore something is there to be construed and not merely described or explained.

(B) At the opposite extreme from Levy-Bruhl is the practice of Professor E. E. Evans-Pritchard in his book *Nuer Religion*, which is of course offered as an explicit refutation of Levy-Bruhl. Like the Australian aborigines, the Sudanese Nuer appear to fly in the face of ordinary rules of consistency and contradiction. 'It seems odd, if not absurd, to a European when he is told that a twin is a bird as though

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it were an obvious fact, for Nuer are not saying that a twin is like a bird but that he is a bird.' ¹ Evans-Pritchard begins from the Nuer concept of the divine, *kwoth*. The difficulties in the notion of *kwoth* spring from the fact that *kwoth* is asserted both to be sharply contrasted with the material creation and to be widely present in it. It is both one and many: and the many, as aspects of *kwoth*, are one with each other. In order to tease out the notion Evans-Pritchard has to allow full weight to the social context of practice in which the assertions about *kwoth* are used. By doing this he is able to show that the utterances of the Nuer are rule-governed, and on this rests his claim to have refuted Levy-Bruhl. But Evans-Pritchard takes this to be the same as having made the utterances of the Nuer intelligible. Certainly he has shown us what the Nuer idea of intelligibility is. He has shown why the Nuer think their religion makes sense. But this is not to have shown that the Nuer are right. 'When a cucumber is used as a sacrificial victim Nuer speak of it as an ox. In doing so they are asserting something rather more than that it takes the place of an ox.' ² When we have grasped the whole of Nuer practice have we grasped what more this could be? Or is there anything left over that we have not understood? Evans-Pritchard would have to answer this last question by 'No'. In doing so he brings out the parallels between his position and the kind of Wittgensteinianism in philosophy of religion exemplified by Mr. Peter Winch.³

Winch argues that 'intelligibility takes many and varied forms'; that there is no 'norm for intelligibility in general'.⁴ He argues that 'criteria of logic are not a direct gift of God, but arise out of, and are only intelligible in the context of, ways of living or modes of social life as such. For instance, science is one such mode and religion is another; and each has criteria of intelligibility peculiar to itself. So within

¹ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), p. 131.

² Evans-Pritchard, *op. cit.* p. 128.

³ *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).

⁴ *Op. cit.* p. 102.

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science or religion actions can be logical or illogical; in science, for example, it would be illogical to refuse to be bound by the results of a properly carried out experiment; in religion it would be illogical to suppose that one could pit one's own strength against God's; and so on. But we cannot sensibly say that either the practice of science itself or that of religion is either illogical or logical; both are non-logical.¹ It follows from this that anything that counts as a 'way of living' or a 'mode of social life' can only be understood and criticized in its own terms. Winch indeed argues that so far as religion is concerned, a sociologist can only identify religious actions under their religious descriptions and if he answers any questions about them of the form 'Do these two acts belong to the same kind of activity?' the answer will have to be 'given according to criteria which are not taken from sociology, but from religion itself. But if the judgements of identity — and hence the generalizations — of the sociologist of religion rest on criteria taken from religion, then his relation to the performers of religious activity cannot be just that of observer to observed. It must rather be analogous to the participation of the natural scientist with fellow-workers in the activities of scientific investigation.'² That is, you can only understand it from the inside.

Winch therefore points to a theoretical justification for Evans-Pritchard's practice, and in so doing exposes its weakness. For there are not two alternatives: *either* embracing the metaphysical fiction of one over-all 'norm for intelligibility in general' *or* flying to total relativism. We can elicit the weakness of this position by considering the conceptual self-sufficiency claimed for 'ways of living' and 'modes of social life'. The examples given are 'religion' and 'science'. But at any given date in any given society the criteria in current use by religious believers or by scientists will differ from what they are at other times and places.³ Criteria have a history. This emerges strikingly

¹ *Op. cit.* pp. 100-101.

² *Op. cit.* pp. 87-88.

³ Consider Kepler using as a criterion in selecting from possible hypotheses what could be expected from a perfect God whose perfection included a preference for some types of geometrical figure as against others.

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if we ask how we are to think of magic on Winch's view. Is magic a 'mode of social life'? Or is it primitive religion? Or perhaps primitive science? For we do want to reject magic, and we want to reject it — in the terms which Winch has taken over for polemical purposes from Pareto — as illogical because it fails to come up to our criteria of rationality. An excellent case here is that of the witchcraft practised by the Azande.¹ The Azande believe that the performance of certain rites in due form affects their common welfare; this belief cannot in fact be refuted. For they also believe that if the rites are ineffective it is because someone present at them had evil thoughts. Since this is always possible, there is never a year when it is unavoidable for them to admit that the rites were duly performed, but that they did not thrive. Now the belief of the Azande is not unfalsifiable in principle (we know perfectly well what would falsify it — the conjunction of the rite, no evil thoughts and disasters). But in fact it cannot be falsified. Does this belief stand in need of rational criticism? And if so by what standards? It seems to me that one could only hold the belief of the Azande rationally *in the absence of* any practice of science and technology in which criteria of effectiveness, ineffectiveness and kindred notions had been built up. But to say this is to recognize the appropriateness of scientific criteria of judgement from our standpoint. The Azande do not intend their belief either as a piece of science or as a piece of non-science. They do not possess these categories. It is only *post eventum*, in the light of later and more sophisticated understanding that their belief and concepts can be classified and evaluated at all.

This suggests strongly that beliefs and concepts are not merely to be evaluated by the criteria implicit in the practice of those who hold and use them. This conviction is reinforced by other considerations. The criteria implicit in the practice of a society or of a mode of social life are not necessarily coherent; their application to problems set within that social mode does not always yield *one* clear and unambiguous answer. When this is the case people start

¹ E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*.

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questioning their own criteria. They try to criticise the standards of intelligibility and rationality which they have held hitherto. On Winch's view it is difficult to see what this could mean. This is to return to the point that criteria and concepts have a history; it is not just activities which have a history while the criteria which govern action are timeless.

What I am quarrelling with ultimately is the suggestion that agreement in following a rule is sufficient to guarantee making sense. We can discriminate different types of example here. There are the cases where the anthropologist, in order to interpret what people say, has to reconstruct imaginatively a possible past situation where expressions had a sense which they no longer bear. Consider theories about what taboo is. To call something taboo is to prohibit it, but it is not to say that it is prohibited. To say that something is taboo is to distinguish it from actions which are prohibited but are not taboo. We could say that it is to give a reason for a prohibition, except that it is unintelligible what reason can be intended. So some theorists have constructed ¹ from the uses of taboo a sense which it might once have had and a possible history of how this sense was lost. One cannot take the sense from the use, for the use affords no sense, although the temptation to tell anthropologists that taboo is the name of a non-natural quality would be very strong for any Polynesian who had read G. E. Moore.

In the case of 'taboo' we can imagine a lost sense for the expression. What about cases, however, where the sense is not lost, but is simply incoherent? According to Spencer and Gillen some aborigines carry about a stick or a stone which is treated *as if* it is or embodies the soul of the individual who carries it. If the stick or stone is lost, the individual anoints himself as the dead are anointed. Does the concept of 'carrying one's soul about with one' make sense? Of course we can re-describe what the aborigines are doing and transform it into sense, and perhaps Spencer and Gillen (and Durkheim who follows them) mis-describe what occurs.

¹ See F. Steiner, *Taboo*.

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But if their reports are not erroneous, we confront a blank wall here, so far as meaning is concerned, although it is easy to give the rules for the use of the concept.

What follows from this is quite simply that there are cases where we cannot rest content with describing the user's criteria for an expression, but we can criticise what he does. Indeed, unless we could do this we could not separate the case where there are no problems of meaning, the case where now there is no clear sense to an expression, but where once there may well have been one (as with 'taboo') and the case where there appears never to have been a clear and coherent sense available. What matters for our present purposes is that these examples suggest that sometimes to understand a concept involves not sharing it. In the case of 'taboo' we can only grasp what it is for something to be taboo if we extend our insight beyond the rules which govern the use of the expression to the point and purpose which these rules once had, but no longer have, and can no longer have in a different social context. We can only understand what it is to use a thoroughly incoherent concept, such as that of a soul in a stick, if we understand what has to be absent from the criteria of practice and of speech for this incoherence not to appear to the user of the concept. In other words we are beginning to notice requirements for the elucidation of concepts which are necessarily absent from the kind of account given by Evans-Pritchard or by Winch.

We have not only to give the rules for the use of the relevant expressions, but to show what the point could be of following such rules, and in bringing out this feature of the case one shows also whether the use of this concept is or is not a possible one for people who have the standards of intelligibility in speech and action which we have. But do we have to be thus self-centred in our application of criteria ? Can we, as it might appear from this, only understand what makes sense to us already ? Can we learn nothing from societies or modes of social life which we cannot understand within our present framework ? Why dismiss what does not fit easily into that framework ? Why not revise the framework ? To find a clue to the answering of these questions

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let us examine yet a third doctrine of intelligibility in anthropology.

(C) Dr. E. R. Leach¹ commits himself to a version of the philosophical theory that the meaning of an expression is nothing other than the way in which the expression is used. Myth is to be understood in terms of ritual, saying in terms of doing. To interpret any statement made by primitive people which appears unintelligible, ask what the people in question do. So Leach writes that 'myth regarded as a statement in words "says" the same thing as ritual regarded as a statement in action. To ask questions about the content of belief which are not contained in the content of ritual is nonsense.'² Leach, that is, adopts an opposite standpoint to Evans-Pritchard. Evans-Pritchard insists that the anthropologist has to allow the Nuer to make sense in the Nuer's own terms; Leach insists that his Burmese society must be made sense of in Leach's own terms. What is impressive here is that both Evans-Pritchard and Leach have written anthropological classics and this may be thought to be inconsistent with what I have just said. But the reason why we get insight both into Evans-Pritchard's *Nuer* and Leach's *Kachin* is that both are so explicit in presenting us both with their philosophical assumptions and with the field-material to which they apply those assumptions. Each furnishes us not merely with a finished interpretation but with a view of the task of interpretation while it is being carried out.

In Leach's case, although his attitude is the opposite of that of Evans-Pritchard, the results are oddly similar. In the case of the Nuer everything made sense, for the Nuer were judged on their own terms. In the case of the Kachin everything makes sense, for the rules of interpretation provide that every statement which appears not to make sense is to be translated into one that does. So Leach insists that metaphysical questions about the spirits in whom the Kachin believe (*nats*) are out of place. We cannot ask if *nats* eat or where they live for we are not to treat statements about *nats*

¹ *The Political Systems of Highland Burma*, Ball, London, 1954.

² *Op. cit.*

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as statements at all, but as ritual performances which can be performed properly or improperly, but which are scarcely true or false.

The counterpart to Leach in the philosophy of religion is perhaps Professor R. B. Braithwaite's reinterpretation of the meaning of religious utterances. Braithwaite sets out a classification of utterances derived from his philosophical empiricism and asks where religion can be fitted in.¹ The answer is that the room left for religion is in providing a specification and a backing for ways of life. I do not want to discuss Braithwaite's position in this paper. I only want to point out that Braithwaite's way of giving a sense to religious utterances distracts us from the question. What sense do these utterances have for those who make them? And because Braithwaite deprives us of this question, he makes it unintelligible that anyone should cease to believe, on the grounds that he can no longer find a sense in such utterances. So also it seems difficult to see what view Leach could take of a Kachin who was persuaded, for example by a Christian missionary, that his belief in *nats* was false and idolatrous.

It is therefore true that if the criteria of intelligibility with which we approach alien concepts are too narrow we may be liable not only to erroneously dismiss them as senseless but even more misleadingly we may try to force them to a sense which they do not possess. It must seem at this point that my attempt to illuminate the original dilemma has merely led to the formulation of the second one. For it seems that we cannot approach alien concepts except in terms of our own criteria, and that yet to do this is to be in danger of distortion. But in fact if we are careful we shall be able to set out some of the necessary prerequisites for an adequate understanding of beliefs and concepts without this inconsistency.

Against Winch and Evans-Pritchard I have argued that to make a belief and the concepts which it embodies intelligible I cannot avoid invoking my own criteria, or rather the established criteria of my own society. Against Braithwaite

¹ *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief.*

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and Leach I have argued that I cannot do this until I have already grasped the criteria governing belief and behaviour in the society which is the object of enquiry. And I only complete my task when I have filled in the social context so as to make the transition from one set of criteria to the other intelligible. These requirements can be set out more fully as follows :

(1) All interpretation has to begin with detecting the standards of intelligibility established in a society. As a matter of fact no one can avoid using clues drawn from their own society ; and as a matter of exposition analogies from the anthropologist's society will often be helpful. But we have to begin with the society's implicit forms of self-description. Malinowski is contemptuous of the account which, so he says, a Trobriander would give of his own society ; but Malinowski's own account of the Trobrianders is curiously like that which he puts in the mouth of his imagined Trobriand informant. And, had it not been, there would have been something radically wrong with it, since how a man describes himself is partially constitutive of what he is. It does not follow from this, as I have already suggested, that the descriptions used or the standards of intelligibility detected will always be internally coherent. And, if they are not, a key task will be to show how this incoherence does not appear as such to the members of the society or else does appear and is somehow made tolerable.

(2) But in detecting incoherence of this kind we have already invoked *our* standards. Since we cannot avoid doing this it is better to do it self-consciously. Otherwise we shall project on to our studies, as Frazer notoriously did, an image of our own social life. Moreover, if we are sufficiently sensitive we make it possible for us to partially escape from our own cultural limitations. For we shall have to ask not just how we see the Trobrianders or the Nuer, but how they do or would see us. And perhaps what hitherto looked intelligible and obviously so will then appear opaque and question-begging.

(3) We can now pass on to the stage at which the

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difficult and important question can be put. How is it that what appears intelligible in one social context can appear not to make sense in another? What has to be underlined is that answers to this question are not necessarily all going to be of the same form.

There is the type of case where a concept works very well, so long as certain questions are not asked about it, and it may be that for a long time in a given society there is no occasion for raising such questions. The concept of the divine right of kings will undergo a strain which reveals internal incoherences only when rival claimants to sovereignty appear, for it contains no answer to the question Which king has divine right? Then there is the type of case where incoherence and intelligibility are to some extent manifest to the users of the concept. But the use of the concept is so intimately bound up with forms of description which cannot be dispensed with if social and intellectual life is to continue that any device for putting up with the incoherence is more tolerable than dispensing with the concept. A third type of case is that in which the point of a concept or group of concepts lies in their bearing upon behaviour. But changed patterns of social behaviour deprive the concept of point. So that although there is no internal incoherence in the concept, the concept can no longer be embodied in life as it once was, and it is either put to new uses or it becomes redundant. An example of this would be the concept of honour detached from the institutions of chivalry. 'It is difficult', a British historian once wrote, 'to be chivalrous without a horse'. And the change in the importance of the horse in war can turn *Don Quixote* from a romance into a satire.

(D) I must seem to have come a very long way round. And it is therefore perhaps worth trying to meet the charge of irrelevance by saying what I hope the argument has achieved. I first posed the question: in what sense, if any, can sceptic and believer be said to share the same concepts, and so to understand one another? I then tried to show how the anthropologist might be said to grasp concepts which he does not share, in the sense that he does not make

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the same judgements employing them as do the people whom he studies. I now want to use my answer on this point to pose a new question which will begin the journey back to the original enquiry. This is still an anthropological question. Up to the seventeenth century we should in our society all have been believers and indeed there would be no question of our being anything else. We should not merely have believed that God existed and was revealed in Christ but we should have found it obvious and unquestionable that this was so. Since the seventeenth century, even for those who believe, the truth and intelligibility of their beliefs is not obvious in the same sense. What accounts for the fact that what was once obvious is now not so? What accounts for the fact that nobody now believes in God in the way that mediaeval men did, simply because men are aware of alternatives? And more importantly still, what makes some of the alternatives appear as obvious to modern sceptics as belief in God did for pre-seventeenth-century Christians?

I pose this question as a background to another. If we can understand why one group of men in the past found Christian beliefs obviously true and intelligible and another group now find them opaque, and we can locate the difference between these two groups, perhaps we shall also be able to locate the difference between contemporary believers and contemporary sceptics. And if we do this we shall have solved our original problem. This brief excursus may make clear the relevance of my apparently rambling procedure. So it becomes urgent to attempt an answer, at least an outline, to the anthropological question. And the form of this answer will be to ask which of the different types of answer to the question How is it that what appears intelligible in one social context can appear not to make sense in another? is applicable in the case of the transition from mediaeval belief to modern scepticism.

It is obvious that the internal incoherences in Christian concepts did not go unnoticed in the Middle Ages. The antinomies of benevolent omnipotence and evil, or of divine predestination and human freedom, were never more clearly

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and acutely discussed. But it is not the case in general that mediaeval thinkers who were dissatisfied with the solutions offered to these antinomies differed in their attitude to belief in God or belief in Christ from thinkers who believed that they or others had offered satisfactory solutions. So the problem becomes: why do the same intellectual difficulties at one time appear as difficulties but no more, an incentive to enquiry but not a ground for disbelief, while at another time they appear as a final and sufficient ground for scepticism and for the abandonment of Christianity? The answers to this question are surely of the second and third types which I outlined in the last section. That is, the apparent incoherence of Christian concepts was taken to be tolerable (and treated as apparent and not real) because the concepts were part of a set of concepts which were indispensable to the forms of description used in social and intellectual life. It is the secularization of our forms of description, constituting part of the secularization of our life, that has left the contradictions high and dry. To take an obvious example, Christianity does not and never has depended upon the truth of an Aristotelian physics in which the physical system requires a Prime Mover, and consequently many sceptics as well as many believers have treated the destruction of the Aristotelian argument in its Thomist form as something very little germane to the question of whether or not Christianity is true. But in fact the replacement of a physics which requires a Prime Mover by a physics which does not secularizes a whole area of enquiry. It weakens the hold of the concept of God on our intellectual life by showing that in this area we can dispense with descriptions which have any connection with the concept.

Some Christian theologians such as Paul Tillich have welcomed this process of secularization, describing it in Tillich's terms as a transition from heteronomous to autonomous reason. But the counterpart to secularization is that the specific character of religion becomes clearer at the cost of diminishing its content. Primitive religion is part of the whole form of human life. Durkheim in *The*

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Elementary Forms of the Religious Life tried to show, and had at least some success in showing, that the most primitive modes of our categorical grasp of the world are inextricably embedded in religion. Thus it is even difficult to talk of 'religion' in this context, as though one could identify a separate and distinct element. But it is just this distinctiveness which can be identified in our culture. Religious apologists, not sceptics, stress the uniqueness of religious utterance. The slogan 'Every kind of utterance has its own kind of logic' finds a ready response from theologians.

The counterpart to this is an easy toleration for contradiction and incoherence, through the use of such concepts as 'the absurd' (Kierkegaard), 'paradox' (Barth) or 'mystery' (Marcel). We can in fact reach a point at which religion is made logically invulnerable. The attempt in the controversy over the falsification of religious assertions to show that if religion were irrefutable religious utterances would be deprived of sense failed for the same reason that attacks on Azande witchcraft would fail. Religious believers do know what would have to occur for their beliefs to be falsified — they can specify some occurrences with which the existence of omnipotent benevolence is incompatible ('utterly pointless evil' is one commonly used example). But just as the Azande can state what would falsify their assertions about witchcraft — but we could never know that such an occurrence had taken place — so the Christian will leave us in the same difficulty. For the after-life, that which we do not see, may always lend point to otherwise pointless evil, or absurd happenings. This line of argument is certainly open to attack; but the invocation of concepts such as 'mystery' or 'paradox' is always there in the background. Thus the logical invulnerability of Christianity seems to me a position that can be maintained.¹ But only at a cost. The cost is emptiness.

I have already produced reasons to explain why incoherences which only presented problems to an Occam could present insuperable obstacles to a T. H. Huxley or a Russell.

¹ As I myself did maintain it in 'The Logical Status of Religious Beliefs' in *Metaphysical Beliefs*.

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But now I want to argue that the form of Christian apologetic on moral questions itself exhibits Christian concepts as irrelevant in the modern world in much the way in which the concepts of chivalry became irrelevant in the seventeenth century. For what Christian apologists try to show is that unless we live in a certain way certain ill consequences will follow (broken homes and delinquency, perhaps). But this turns Christianity into a testable nostrum. For we can always ask empirically: do particular religious practices in fact produce higher standards of behaviour? Again we return to the very simple point — are Christians in fact different from other people in our society, apart from their ritual practices? And if they are not what is the point of Christian belief, in so far as it issues an injunction? Now, whether Christians are different or not is an empirical question. Certainly empirical enquiry cannot tell us whether Christianity is true or not. But if Christian beliefs belong now to a social context in which their connection with behaviour has ceased to be clear (as it was clear in the Roman empire, say) the question of the truth of Christianity is put into a different perspective.

Christians here will perhaps want to point to the distinctively Christian forms of behaviour of the Confessional Church under Hitler, and this is certainly relevant. For the regressive primitivism of National Socialism with its idols provided a context sufficiently alike to that of early Christianity to make Christianity once more relevant. The Nazis desecularized society with a vengeance. But while to be asked to choose for Christ has a clear meaning when the practical choices are those of the Nazi society, does this injunction have a clear meaning also in our society? And if it had would we not in fact find Christians united on ways of behaving in a way that they are not?

From an historical point of view, of course, it is most unfair to present Christianity as only the victim of secularization. Christianity, especially Protestant Christianity, was itself a powerful secularizing agent, destroying in the name of God any attempt to deify nature, and so helping to rid the world of magic and making nature available for scientific

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enquiry. The kind of negative theology which refuses to identify any object with the divine (God is not this, not that) has its final fruit in the kind of atheism which Simone Weil and Tillich both see as a recognition of the fact that God cannot be identified with any particular existing object. But what is left to Simone Weil or Tillich is in fact a religious vocabulary without any remaining secular content. Hegel's irreligion consists in his insight into the possibility of extracting truth from its religious husks. Kierkegaard's answer to Hegel is the assertion of a religion defined entirely in its own religious terms, uncriticizable *ab externo*. Together Hegel and Kierkegaard reflect accurately the status of religion in a secularized environment.

(E) For a sceptic to grasp the point of religious belief, therefore, he has to supply a social context which is now lacking and abstract a social context which is now present, and he has to do this for the mediaeval Christian, just as the anthropologist has to do it for the Azande or the aborigines. But in dialogue with contemporary Christians the sceptic is forced to recognize that they see a point in what they say and do although they lack that context. And therefore either he or they are making a mistake, and not a mistake over God, but a mistake over criteria of intelligibility. What is at issue between sceptic and Christian is the character of the difference between belief and unbelief as well as the issue of belief itself. Thus the sceptic is committed to saying that he understands the Christian's use of concepts in a way that the Christian himself does not, and presumably *vice versa*. The discussion is therefore transferred to another level, and a Christian refutation of this paper would have to provide an alternative account of intelligibility. If I am right, understanding Christianity is incompatible with believing in it, not because Christianity is vulnerable to sceptical objections, but because its peculiar invulnerability belongs to it as a form of belief which has lost the social context which once made it comprehensible. It is now too late to be mediaeval and it is too empty and too easy to be Kierkegaardian. Thus sceptic and believer do not share a common grasp of the relevant concepts any

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more than anthropologist and Azande do. And if the believer wishes to he can always claim that we can only disagree with him because we do not understand him. But the implications of this defence of belief are more fatal to it than any attack could be.

IT IS COMPATIBLE!

BY

NORRIS CLARKE, S.J.

THERE is no doubt that Mr. MacIntyre has given us a very intelligent paper to discuss. It brings up a key problem of our contemporary pluralistic culture, that of mutual understanding between believers and non-believers in a living religion (specifically the Christian religion for our culture) and the possibility of intelligent discussion between them, and it presents a type of answer, clothed in sophisticated terms, which is not merely private to the author but perhaps the one most widely accepted or lived implicitly in our day by intelligent non-believers (or sceptics, as the author more accurately calls them, to distinguish them from simply disinterested agnostics). In my own comments I would like first to summarize briefly the essentials of the author's position taken in the paper and then assay the strength of its challenge to the reasonableness of Christian belief. I intend to do this by making fully explicit the hidden or not fully expressed premises of his argument from analogy, which I find both partially illumines and partially obscures the issue.

The problem is that of the difficulty of mutual understanding between sceptics and believers when, as is the case, they differ totally in their judgements about most, if not all, of the key concepts of the Christian religion, such as God, salvation, Providence, sin, etc. Now, total disagreement about a given concept is a pretty sure indication that the parties in disagreement do not really share in common the concept about which they are making judgements.

But unless they agree to some extent on the meaning of the concept under discussion it is impossible even to disagree meaningfully in judgements about it. The parties are not

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even talking the same language. Hence a common understanding of Christian religious concepts by both sceptics and believers seems at once necessary and impossible — surely a strange state of affairs. And it is clear that the onus of solving the problem falls principally on the sceptic, since it is hard to see how one can be a positive sceptic or disbeliever if one does not understand what it is that one disbelieves in. The case is not the same, we might add, for a pure agnostic.

After disposing — quite successfully to my mind — of certain over-facile ways of trying to escape the dilemma, the author proposes his own very ingenious and fruitful suggestion of a way out of this embarrassing *impasse*. It is to use as a model or analogy the manner in which the anthropologist goes about trying to understand the beliefs of a primitive culture which he himself does not share. For the anthropologist does claim to understand at least to some extent 'concepts' like *taboo*, *mana*, etc., which go to make up such beliefs. Otherwise he would soon be out of business.

The author's balanced and penetrating critical analysis of the different theories of what it means to understand a primitive culture lead him to the following conclusions :

(1) It is true that there is no single abstract norm of intelligibility in general transcending all social contexts, which can serve as an effective criterion for judging the presence or absence of intelligibility in all concrete cases. Hence to understand a given belief in a given culture we must first enter sympathetically into that culture or language-game within the culture to discover what are the criteria of intelligibility accepted within the culture at the time.

(2) On the other hand, the attempt to maintain a total relativism of intelligibility, or an extreme Wittgensteinian theory of language-games as totally self-contained, self-justifying, by their own unique internal criteria, and hence immune to evaluation from without, is also untenable and in fact impossible to follow out. I agree here with the author and I would add to his factual evidence the deeper reason, discoverable also in human experience, that, although there

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is no common expressible *formula* for intelligibility among all men, there is at least a common basic *exigency* of rationality in the wide sense, which resides like a hidden compass in the unity of the living consciousness of any person with the use of reason, no matter how varied the ways in which he expresses or lives it out. It is this which enables him to compare critically his own various language-games with each other or with other men's, discover inconsistencies or incoherences within any one, and amend or reject it. Certain concepts or modes of thinking may indeed be difficult or impossible to grasp in their full *positive* content without some kind of special corresponding experience. But at least certain basic *negative* criteria, by which we judge that a given belief is wanting in intelligibility, are by their nature more susceptible of universal application, given sufficient sensitivity to modes of thinking and speaking different from our own.

Mr. MacIntyre then works out some of the main criteria for validly passing such negative judgements. They can be reduced to three: (i) when a belief or concept is no longer relevant to the present social context; (ii) when it is not coherent and consistent both internally and with the facts known to the believer; (iii) when it can survive only in the absence of a wider knowledge of facts or a richer set of categories possessed by the evaluator, especially categories of effectiveness and ineffectiveness built up by the practice of science and technology.

Again I think we have to thank the author for a most helpful and fruitful analysis. It should be noted, however, that his set of criteria permit one only to make negative judgements on the belief being examined, in a word, to *disbelieve* it. They presuppose the positive understanding of its content and give no help for achieving this end. They also presuppose a richer intellectual equipment in the evaluator and disbeliever than in the believer. None the less, if these conditions are all verified, Mr. MacIntyre's set of criteria seems to me to be an excellent tool of analysis, especially for throwing light on the breakdown or decay of a given belief.

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My two serious criticisms arise, first, from the manner in which he applies his criteria to the beliefs of primitive cultures and, secondly, from the manner in which he applies them to Christian belief. With regard to primitive cultures, what worries me very much is that nowhere does the author speak of symbolic thinking (or of mythical thinking — I take the former as including but wider than the latter), let alone indicate that it is a mode of thought quite different from abstract thinking in the conceptual and analytic mode so dominant in western culture since the Greeks. Thus he speaks of the 'concepts' of taboo, mana, etc. But from what I understand of the studies made of mythical and symbolic thinking in recent years — and this is the kind of thinking involved in the religious beliefs of most primitive people — terms like mana, taboo, etc., do not stand for concepts in our sense at all. They function rather as 'symbolic formulae' within a holistic, indivisible unit of symbolic thinking. The aim of such thought and language is not to analyse, assert or explain anything in a literal way, but rather to express in a dramatic manner the speaker's existential communion with nature and the forces behind it. The concept seeks clarity by abstracting and dividing off something from the web of reality. The symbol remains deliberately vague, concrete and mysterious so as to be as all-inclusive as possible, to set up resonances on as many levels as possible, to express or stimulate existential participation, not analysis or explanation.

Thus when some Eskimos speak of the great woman who lives at the bottom of the sea and sends them up their food from her bounty, this is less a causal explanation of the source of their food supply than a dramatic restatement of the actual facts of their daily life understood as communion with nature. Hence if one were to ask them whether they really believed there was a real woman who actually lived at the bottom of the ocean and literally sent up seals and other food to them, one would really be forcing them out of the symbolic mode of thinking to which they were giving expression and demanding a literal transcription into our conceptual, analytic and explanatory mode. If they were

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sophisticated enough, or had had the good fortune to spend a few terms on scholarship at Oxford or Cambridge or Princeton, or the like, they would wisely refuse to answer or would protest against this 'category mistake'. If not, they might feel that they would have to answer 'yes', thus unwittingly betraying the authentic meaning they were trying to express. Similarly, when some primitive peoples say the sun is a white cockatoo, it is possible that such an expression cannot be analysed into three analytic concepts, *sun*, *white cockatoo*, and *is*, which are then synthesized into a judgement. Rather, 'The-sun-is-a-white-cockatoo' is a single symbolic expression in which all the elements are fused into a single new meaning somehow linked with, yet irreducible to, their ordinary meaning, as though transposed into a new key. In general this new meaning may be a way of expressing the lived intercommunion of all natural forces, or something of the sort.

Now I think it is clear enough that in the presence of such symbolic thinking the application of the norms of inconsistency or incoherence must be quite different from their application to our more literal analytical type of conceptual thinking, or even our self-conscious use of metaphor. The norm of literal verbal contradiction is quite irrelevant and it is no wonder that the primitives who use such a mode of thinking are not bothered at all by such 'contradictions' in their thought and language, even though they might be quite incapable of explaining why in conceptual terms. I suspect something similar might be said about the aborigines who carry around a stick as though it contained their soul. It is thus a very tricky business to apply the negative criteria of incoherence and inconsistency to such symbolic thinking, and I wish Mr. MacIntyre had given more evidence of taking this into account. It is quite true, of course, that a unit of symbolic thought can to a certain extent be transposed into the conceptual mode and its components partially analysed into concepts. But the translation can never be exhaustive; it must always leave behind, unanalysed, a certain irreducible living residue, a unifying existential attitude of communion which must be

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lived to be understood adequately and is denatured if analysed abstractly. It can, perhaps, be realized by sympathy or empathy from without even by those who do not share it, but it cannot be expressed in abstract, analytic language. This difficulty, of course, would not affect the effectiveness of his other two criteria: namely, relevance to present social context and ability to survive only in the absence of richer sets of categories.

It is important to add here that symbolic thinking by no means exists only in primitive societies, though it is certainly more predominant there. All living religions, it seems, use the symbolic mode of thought and ritual to express the believers' lived personal realization of their dependence on and communion with the divine. But when such a religion is imbedded in a culture which also possesses a highly developed conceptual and analytical mode of thinking, and especially when such a religion has made use of this instrument to elaborate a self-conscious conceptual theology, there is a special danger of overlooking the irreducible core of symbolic language and action which is the living heart of the religion and to attempt to understand and evaluate it purely as a set of concepts united in propositions, as though the belief were a belief primarily in a set of propositions held as true. This danger is still further increased when, as in the case of our contemporary Western culture or, in fact, of any industrialized society, the conceptual analytic mode of thinking has become so predominant that its members have almost lost the feel of the rich existential meaning and power of symbolic thought, language and action. This is the point of the return to Biblical and patristic theology and to the liturgy now in evidence all over the Christian West, namely, to restore to vitality once more the living core of the Christian religion and its symbolic expression as a form of God-directed life, too long overlaid and obscured by expression in the abstract conceptual mode of thought and language. I do not find any evidence of awareness of this fundamental character of religious thought and language in Mr. MacIntyre's paper, though it might possibly be only for reasons of lack of space.

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Let us now move on, in the light of the foregoing remarks, to the crucial point at issue, the application of the author's set of negative criteria to Christian belief in the contemporary world. Here I must frankly confess that, although Christians can learn a good deal from Mr. MacIntyre's implied criticism of Christianity as lived in the West, it seems to me that his analogy of the anthropologist obscures more than it illumines its referent.

In the first place, let me smoke out what seems to be an unexpressed implication of the analogy, though Mr. MacIntyre would not perhaps wish to push it this far. The anthropologist is dealing with a more primitive culture than his own, one that does not possess his own richer and more refined equipment of conceptual analysis. Now, for the parallel to be relevant, the modern sceptic should be applying his own presumably richer and more sophisticated intellectual resources to an earlier and less developed state of Christian culture, say the early, or mediaeval, or at least pre-scientific-revolution Church, in which Christians lacked his own superior vantage-point. But the trouble is that the setting to be explained is not some earlier phase of Christian belief, but the contemporary world in which sceptics and believers share the same culture and conceptual instruments. This world contains large numbers of Christians in many countries, including our own, who are quite at home in all the available modern techniques of scientific and analytic thinking in the major fields of thought, and yet consider this kind of critical thinking quite compatible with sincere Christian belief. These believers are just as capable of applying the test of relevance to present social context or inseparability from a past social context as are unbelievers, and it is noteworthy that they consider one of the outstanding characteristics of Christian belief to be its ability to transcend all social contexts and incarnate itself inexhaustibly in ever new cultures and periods of history.

Thus sceptics and believers are not divided into two cultures, one more developed than the other, but into two attitudes towards the same data among equals within the same culture — something relatively new in history, at

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least on a large scale. Thus for the analogy of the anthropologist to be at all relevant the author would at least have to present impressive evidence that Christians can live intellectually in the modern world and still maintain their Christian belief only at the expense of some sort of schizophrenic split in their consciousness, so that when they enter the latter domain of Christian belief and action they would have to close the door behind them on their habits of critical thinking and regress to an atmosphere inseparable from a more primitive social context and mode of thinking. Such a position would indeed be difficult to establish either on factual or *a priori* grounds, and certainly the author has not tried to do so.

Unfortunately, not a few Christians do seem to live with such a split consciousness. But this is to my mind a mark of the immaturity of their Christian belief and its lack of integration with the rest of their life. There is indeed always a tension between critical analytical thinking and lived Christian belief, just as there is in any man between his critical analytical faculties and his existentially-lived values, especially in the realm of intimate interpersonal relations. But this can and should be a vital and fruitful tension, stimulating the believer to a deeper appreciation of the precarious human condition, itself already illumined by his faith.

Let us now come to closer grips with the core of the author's challenge: namely, that the relevance of Christian belief is indeed tied inseparably to past social contexts and cannot survive their disappearance save as a kind of anachronism to which the believer can adhere only by living in the past. Again the author's general analysis of how concepts lose relevance when their original social contexts are changed seems to me both valid and fruitful. But again, too, the application to Christian belief seems to me to miss some of the latter's most distinctive characteristics. The criticism is indeed quite effective when applied to most primitive religions, and for a very good reason. The content of such religions usually expresses the believer's communion with nature according to the particular concrete mode of

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relation to material nature proper to this particular culture. In other words, the very content of the religion embodies to a large extent an expression of the concrete social context. Hence when that context or mode of relation to the material world is changed, the belief itself cannot long survive. Thus if the Eskimos mentioned earlier were to be suddenly transplanted to a place where most of their food came from supermarkets, their belief in the great woman under the sea who sends up their food could hardly remain relevant for long.

But one of the most fundamental characteristics of Christianity is that it is precisely not a religion expressing communion with material nature in its ever-recurring cyclic rhythms but a conversion to a spiritual God transcending all of nature, who calls the believer to a new personal *super-natural* relation with him. It implies a rupture with any kind of worship of nature or personified natural forces treated as gods. It is symbolized by the call to Abraham, father of the Chosen People, to rise up, leave his native land and go forth whither God should lead him; by Israel's exodus from Egypt and wandering in the desert; by Christ's call to leave all things and 'Come, follow Me'; and by Paul's exhortation in the same spirit to die to the world with Christ and live now, in the world but not of it, for God alone.

In other words, the content of Christian belief includes an explicit break with the old nature or cosmic religions, with their dependence on some concrete mode of relation to nature, and an explicit orientation towards a universality transcending all cultures: 'Go therefore and teach all nations . . .'; 'There is no longer Jew or Greek', but all are one in Christ, the one mediator for all men, etc. It is true that the Founder of Christianity in teaching its trans-cultural content used parables and examples drawn from his own social context of Palestine, and that as Christianity takes roots in different cultures or changing phases of the same culture it must incarnate itself creatively in ever new cultural symbols and modes of expression. But when such social contexts change radically or pass away, what is

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affected, if one has really grasped the authentic living core of Christian belief, is only the particular mode of expression or cultural impact, not the essential content of the belief itself. The discernment of one from the other is not always easy for those immersed in a given culture with little knowledge of any other, especially during a period of cultural revolution or decay. But it becomes clearer once the new incarnation has taken root. And it is much easier for us today to distinguish essential content from accidental and transient form in our more consciously pluralistic and easily intercommunicating world.

Hence I would say, contrary to the author, that, as Christian belief moves down through changing social contexts, its essential religious content does not steadily shrink towards a hypothetical vanishing-point, as is indeed the case with most primitive or nature religions, tied as they are to a particular cultural mode of communion with nature and with the divine immanent in it. I admit, however, that the author has here posed a very crucial and fruitful question that is an excellent topic for discussion. *Something* certainly diminishes in the relation of religion to life when social change occurs in a Christian culture. And this is especially true in the case of that particular type of change which the author stresses so justly: the progressive secularization of areas of human life once directly governed by religious belief. This is the most significant cultural phenomenon of modern times with respect to the place of religious belief in human life. What exactly diminishes here? Mr. MacIntyre would maintain it is the very content of the religious belief itself. I would maintain that the shrinkage occurs in two areas: first, in the direct and explicit *influence* of the belief in the particular areas of the culture, not in the essential content; secondly, in the literal, unconsciously culture-bound interpretation of the rich symbolic language of the primary sources of Christian revelation, the Bible (and analogously in the sacred books of any religion that can successfully survive profound social change).

But it is noteworthy that this kind of diminution in the direct application of religion to life is also accompanied in

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any vital Christian group by a compensating increase not only in the purity and depth of their comprehension of the content of their belief but also in a gradual positive unfolding or explication of previously unsuspected implications and meanings within this essential content itself. This is called by Catholics 'the development of dogma' and its closest analogue is perhaps the organic growth of a seed or embryo in the direction of fuller articulation of the dynamic 'form' already present within it from the beginning. Or perhaps a still better analogue is the growth of a person or social group in self-consciousness, or self-discovery, as they are forced to commit themselves and express themselves in clearly articulated ways of thinking and acting in response to the varied existential challenges of real life in process. This growth in depth, purity and articulateness of comprehension of the original content of a belief more than compensates, to my mind, for the loss of an earlier more direct, but often naively unreflective, conception of the influence of religion on life, as well as for an over naïve, literal and culture-bound mode of interpretation of the original sources of revelation. It is clear that a rigidly fundamentalist, letter-bound mode of religious belief cannot long survive profound social changes, especially among an uneducated population, but speaking for Catholicism (though something similar holds more and more for most other Christian denominations), it has never been rigidly fundamentalist in spirit and is becoming markedly less so at present as it grows in mature and explicit comprehension of the nature of divine revelation as mediated through human channels and of the laws of authentic development of dogma. In the light of the above remarks, the author's example of St. Thomas's Aristotelian-inspired proofs of God loses most of its force and relevance, it seems to me.

This brings us to our final and perhaps most crucial objection to Mr. MacIntyre's challenging analysis. He admits at the end of his paper that in fact Christians of our own day, living in the same culture as disbelievers and equipped with the same intellectual resources, still interpret the same data differently. Hence one of the two parties

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must be making a mistake or else both differ in their understanding of what Christian faith really means to a mature Christian.

This is indeed the nub of the whole question. And here we return to our first difficulty over Mr. MacIntyre's analysis, the overlooking of the distinctive nature of symbolic thinking and the interpretation of religious belief as essentially a set of concepts joined in propositions held as true. I admit that this is a point easy to miss in the case of Christianity and above all, I fear, in the case of the Roman Catholic Church with its outwardly so forbidding and — so it might seem — adequately conceptualized definitions and formulas of belief, proposed as infallible and immutable.

Yet the living core of Christian belief and the key to the existential process of conversion is not at all, as any competent Christian theologian will explicitly admit, intellectual acceptance of a set of propositions held as true on exclusively intellectual grounds. It is rather first and foremost an existential, global and unconditional commitment of loving trust to a person, that of Jesus of Nazareth, as witnessed to by his immediate disciples in the Gospels and renewed continually in the life of the Church. One first sizes up and accepts the person as manifesting the wisdom, power and love of God to us that we may 'have life and have it more abundantly'. Then the believer decides to 'follow Him', to take Him as the Way, the Truth and the Life in his own life.¹

This very following of Christ necessarily involves thinking, speaking and acting as far as we can, like Jesus: 'Go . . . and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you'; 'Do this in

¹ Thus Jesus constantly appeals to those whom he addresses to 'have faith in him'. An excellent and typical example of this process of faith may be found in the dialogue between Jesus and Martha before the tomb of Lazarus: 'Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and I am life. If a man has faith in me, even though he die, he shall come to life; and no one who is alive and has faith shall ever die. Do you believe this?" "Lord, I do," she answered; "I now believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who was to come into the world."' John 11: 25-27 (*The New English Bible*, 1962). Cf. Jean Mouroux, *I Believe: The Personal Structure of Faith*, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1959.

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commemoration of me', etc. This in turn necessarily involves within its total existential, personal commitment a whole set of truths to be intellectually assented to, which are partly explicit, partly implicit, in the teaching *and whole life* of Christ himself.

The Church in its official teaching, as well as theologians in their speculation, strives constantly to reflect on this rich existential treasure of the person, life and teachings of Christ and to unfold it in conceptual explication as far as it can. But the task is an endless one, as it is for anyone in love to spell out what he sees and loves in his beloved. And no amount of conceptual analysis and refined formulation will ever be able to grasp and express exhaustively the living core of existential communion with Christ, through him with his brethren, and through him and in him with the Father and the Holy Spirit. This is a *mode of existence*, of personal existence, and not *primarily* a set of propositions held to be true, though the latter point to and safeguard the former. That is why the ultimate mode of expression of Christian belief as lived, which functions as the point of departure and return of all conceptual and analytic modes, must be the richly concrete, at least partially symbolic language of Scripture and the liturgy, which draws those who hear it with faith into an existential attitude of communion with the divine through Christ, illumined from within by a kind of lived understanding irreducible to adequate expression in abstract concepts and propositions.

To sum it up very simply, the primary and most fundamental question in evaluating Christian belief is not 'What is the meaning and evidence for these propositions in the Creed or in further definitions of doctrine by the Church', but rather, 'What think you of Christ? Are you willing to trust and follow him, take him as the Way, the Truth, the Life for *you*, and as a consequence accept his teachings because you trust him and believe he is giving them to you as God's wisdom for your salvation?' It is this personal core, transcending all conceptual formulations, which makes possible both (1) the organic development of Christian belief from within by a process of explication that is more

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akin to growth in self-awareness than to logical entailment, and hence is never precisely predictable beforehand, though reasonable after the fact; and (2) the capacity to transcend all particular cultural contexts and culture-bound modes of explication. Perhaps this will serve as an embryonic sketch of an alternative account of the kind of intelligibility proper to Christian belief that Mr. MacIntyre quite legitimately asked for at the end of what I found a most stimulating and fruitful paper.

DISCUSSION

Norris Clarke, S.J.: A Further Critique of MacIntyre's Thesis

After the discussion following Mr. MacIntyre's paper, the nature of the fundamental issue he was raising became clearer to me, and I believe I am now in a position to sharpen up my own counter-challenge more effectively.

MacIntyre's fundamental reason why understanding Christian belief is incompatible with believing in it is that understanding it leads to the discovery that its specifically religious content is relevant only to certain cultural contexts now past. And since the permanently valid moral contributions of Christianity have now become assimilated by secular humanism, the remaining religious content which first gave birth to these moral attitudes has now become vacuous for our modern scientific-minded society.

Now, in making this charge, Mr. MacIntyre has committed himself, it seems to me, to a position that is very hard to defend. For, granted that a given cultural context can make it psychologically easier to believe in the truth of the Christian message, either as a reaction against the culture or as a reinforcement of it, it clearly does not follow that for this reason the message itself is not true but merely a subjective construction whose adequate cause is the pressure to satisfy needs peculiar to this culture. Nor, if a given social context makes it harder to believe, does it follow that the belief is therefore rendered objectively more valid. Otherwise the argument could all too easily be turned against its wielder: since the social context today makes it easier to be an atheist or agnostic, these convictions themselves could thereby be discredited as mere culture-bound attitudes which in turn will

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lose meaning and relevance as soon as the present social context changes. But this would obviously land us in a hopeless cultural relativism depriving all views of life equally of any truth-value at all. I feel sure Mr. MacIntyre does not intend to commit himself to any such position as this.

If not, then he must be doing one of two things. He might be merely making the quite sound sociological observation that it is harder to believe in Christianity today than in mediaeval or earlier times (though the latter might perhaps be questioned), for the reason that the efficacy of science and technology now makes it harder for many to see the relevance of Christianity to modern life. But such an assertion by no means entails that Christianity is not true or is merely the product of those social contexts more favourable to belief in it; hence such an assertion would be irrelevant to his claim that understanding Christianity is incompatible with believing it. What he must therefore be maintaining is that, in fact, belief in Christianity is a purely human construction resulting from social needs or pressures peculiar only to certain cultural contexts, and is therefore not at all what it claims to be — namely, a response to an objective divine revelation historically communicated to man in the person of Jesus Christ.

Now this charge that belief in Christianity is both culture-caused and culture-bound labours from the difficulty that through its two-thousand-year history Christianity has already survived the passing away of many social contexts and has taken vigorous roots in a wide variety of different cultural contexts, both simultaneous and successive, in Asia, Europe, the Americas, and Africa. Since this process is still operative today, the notion of 'culture-caused' and 'culture-bound' thus becomes so loose and indefinitely elastic as to be rendered worthless as an explanatory category. If the author wishes to hold, as I suspect he does, that the decisive difference between the present and *all* past cultural contexts is the presence of the scientific and technological spirit, and that it is primarily this that renders belief in Christianity no longer relevant to our modern society in scientifically mature nations, then he is forced into the paradoxical consequence of holding that the hundreds of thousands of converts to Christianity every year in such social contexts, including many scholars and scientists, are really the most misguided, self-deceived, intellectually blind, and least excusable of all the long parade of believers in Christianity down to the present day. This is indeed a large order to prove.

In view of all this, it would seem that, if MacIntyre wishes his position to be taken seriously, the responsibility lies upon

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him to present at least some sample analyses of basic Christian doctrines which are dependent for their intelligibility and relevance upon a social context that has now passed away. But in fact he has presented no such analyses, with the exception perhaps of one brief undeveloped suggestion to the effect that the meaning and relevance of the beatitudes and their opposites in the Sermon on the Mount ('Blessed are you poor . . .'¹ and 'Woe to you rich . . .',² etc.) are tied to a social context wherein blessing and cursing are taken seriously as social rituals.

It would not be fair, of course, to make too much of such a brief example. Yet the extreme narrowness and literal rigidity of such an interpretation of this famous text, plus the lack of any feeling for the living understanding of it throughout the long history of Christian tradition, offer, to my mind, modest but very damaging evidence that something is radically wrong with Mr. MacIntyre's own understanding of Christian belief and his manner of reading its primary written source, the New Testament.

To conclude, it seems to me that to bear out his charge that Christian belief is culture-caused and culture-bound MacIntyre is obliged by the nature of the case to present some sample analyses of basic Christian doctrines which fall under this charge, and that he clearly has failed to do so. Until he does this, it seems to me that he has done no more than reinforce what we already know, that *mis*understanding Christianity and believing in it are, or at least should be, incompatible!

As for MacIntyre's original question Is it possible both to understand Christian belief and yet to disbelieve it? it seems to me that it still remains wide open and begging for a solution. In the light of our discussions I would venture the following answer. Although it is not possible to achieve full understanding of Christian belief save through the illumination from within that comes from the existential commitment of faith to the personality of Christ, still a considerable degree of understanding can be achieved, at least enough for intelligent discussion. But the necessary condition is that 'understanding Christian belief' should not be taken as a direct conceptual comprehension, subject to precise and definitive conceptual analysis (i.e. delimitation) of the content of this belief, since it is part of Christian belief itself that its principal doctrines are 'mysteries' revealed as true by Christ but never philosophically explained or justified by internal evidence, nor even accessible to any adequate comprehension by the human mind in this life. Rather it should be taken as understanding how it is possible for a Christian to come reasonably to believe in what exceeds the direct grasp

¹ Luke, 6 : 20.

² Luke, 6 : 24.

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of his intelligence. And this requires an analysis of how one can reasonably make an act of total personal commitment to another person and then reasonably accept as true without further evidence that which the latter bears witness to as known by him to be true.

DISCUSSION

Richard Brandt: Critique of MacIntyre's Starting-Point

MacIntyre begins by saying that his problem is the dilemma, consisting in the fact that we 'do want to say that a common understanding of religious concepts by sceptics and by believers is both necessary and impossible'.¹ I believe, however, that MacIntyre's suggestion that there is such a dilemma rests on a mistaken assumption: he thinks that people don't share a concept unless they agree 'in at least some central applications of it'.²

It must be possible for sceptics and believers to share basic religious concepts, since obviously they often do. Some of the most ardent sceptics are sometime believers, even former students of theology whose mentors in that subject thought they grasped the concepts firmly. It would be absurd to claim that such sceptics do not understand, even quite well, the theological concepts of their former teachers. Of course, not every sceptic need understand the religious language of everyone who meets the loose standards for being a 'Christian' or even of every theologian; but I expect that many sceptics understand quite well what F. R. Tennant meant by 'God', or St. Thomas Aquinas, although they may perhaps be genuinely baffled by the statements of Paul Tillich.

In general, it seems to be a mistake to think that individuals share a concept only when they agree about at least some applications — if by 'application' we mean, as MacIntyre seems to, the predication of the term of some specific individual or situation. For instance, two persons can understand 'courageous' in exactly the same way but never agree about application of the term; for whether an act is to be adjudged courageous depends on how the situation is thought to have presented itself to the

¹ P. 116.

² P. 115.

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agent, what his values are thought to have been, and so on, and on these matters the speakers may always disagree. One might ask in what sense of 'same concept' two individuals might have the same religious concepts although the one questioned all the existential assertions containing theological terms made by the other. Part of the answer seems to be this. First, in the sense that both would agree about which religious propositions are analytic and which self-contradictory. ('If there is a God, he is omniscient and immaterial.') Next, just as a physicist may think of an electron as a tiny planet with a large electrical charge in comparison with its mass, but with some reservations such as its not being assignable simultaneously both a definite position and velocity, so both the sceptic and the believer may think of God in terms of a human mind with certain limitations removed. Again, the believer and sceptic may agree as to what kinds of fact about the experienced world would support the existence of such a being; for instance, they will think the existence of evil a serious difficulty.

It seems to me possible, then, for a sceptic and a believer to share the same religious concepts. It could be that they disagree only about the force of the supporting evidence or reasons.

It is consistent with this to say, however, as I should be inclined to do, that it is a distinctive feature of contemporary scepticism that there is dissatisfaction with religious language on the point of its meaningfulness. Sceptic and believer may share the same concepts, but the sceptic is apt to make an unfavourable appraisal of the meaningfulness of the language which in a sense he understands (as well as the believer). Because he does, the sceptic may be unhappy about the employment of religious language. Whereas the believer does not make such an unfavourable appraisal. But does this mean, as MacIntyre suggests at the end of the paper, that sceptic and believer necessarily clash over the 'criteria of intelligibility'? I fail to see that it does.

Let me first point out that sceptics about theology need not share the same set of 'criteria of intelligibility': for instance, A. J. Ayer and C. D. Broad. I should imagine the same is true for theologians or philosophers who are believers. There is the much larger question in what sense the general educated public might be said to have 'criteria of intelligibility', and what these are, if there are any. I shall not speculate on this, but rather confine myself to the question whether a person today could be a believer without surrendering the criteria of meaningfulness which a philosopher today must hold, if he is to be reasonable, in the light of the past thirty years. I am not quite sure that

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MacIntyre means to take a stand on this question, but I think he does and that his view is that this is *not* possible.

There would be no difficulty if religious language could be construed as purely performatory, ritualistic, etc. MacIntyre seems to me quite right in putting such a possibility aside as not being faithful as an account of the religious language of believers. I hope I am agreeing with him when I say that religious language has to be construed as primarily descriptive or explanatory, like the language of science: explanatory of the existence of a world, of its order, of historical events of large scale, or of significant events in the personal life of the believer. (This is not, of course, to deny that the purpose of making a religious statement in a particular context may be to complete a ritual, or to do any one of very many different things.) If so, our question is whether a believer must surrender the standards of meaningfulness of descriptive or explanatory terms that are reasonably held today.

What is MacIntyre's view about reasonable criteria of meaningfulness? Some of the things he says about 'rules of use' suggest a rather radical form of verifiability theory of meaning. However, I hope he would agree that only a quite tolerant form of verifiability theory is defensible today: something like the view that a statement is meaningful if, and only if, it is well-formed and its non-logical terms are either observation predicates or *predicates which have an essential role in an explanatory theory of the world of experience*. Now such a criterion has the consequence¹ that it is difficult to draw any sharp line between the meaningful and the meaningless, and that it is more useful to grade systems of concepts, as being more or less endowed with meaning, according to the explanatory and predictive power of the system, the clarity of the model and the sharpness of its connection with observation predicates, the rigour of the formulation, and so on.²

I see no reason why a contemporary believer need reject a form of meaning criterion roughly along the above lines.

Suppose the sceptic and the believer agreed on the criterion. Is there any way in which we could explain how the sceptic could rate the set of religious concepts low on meaningfulness, whereas the believer could rate them high? I think there is: for the scoring or grading of a system of concepts is not a mechanical matter, and there is room for debate about how well a given system does. I should imagine, for one thing, that there will

¹ See Hempel, 'The Concept of Cognitive Significance: A Reconsideration', in *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, July 1951.

² I do not mean to suggest that Hempel would agree with this, at least as stated.

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be differences about exactly what counts as an 'explanation'. Furthermore, and very important, sceptics and theologians can differ on how well a system *might* score, if only it were improved in ways in which excellent minds and time might enable it to be improved. The believer will be more optimistic, the sceptic more pessimistic, on this. For instance, St. Thomas seems to have been aware of the difficulties in the account he gives of analogical predication, but presumably he was able to tolerate it in the thought that future work could make the conception clearer. A candid theologian must admit that MacIntyre is right in thinking that it would have been reasonable to grade St. Thomas's system more highly, in point of meaningfulness, in his day than in our own. For the explanatory work done by his system in his day was greater than it can do today when, for instance, the theory of evolution does in a more detailed way some of the jobs which St. Thomas's fifth argument allocates to God. Moreover, systems of scientific concepts must rate very high in meaningfulness, so that the score of a theological system is now relatively lower, in comparison with large systems of other concepts with which everyone is familiar, than it was in the time of St. Thomas. Still, even if the contemporary believer must in candour rate religious concepts lower than, say, the atomic theory, in point of meaningfulness and lower than they would have reasonably been rated six hundred years ago, he might claim that they do not score too badly considering the problems, and he may construe his job to make the system clearer so that it scores better. If so, we needn't suppose that the sceptic and the theologian necessarily have different criteria of intelligibility, or that the contemporary believer is necessarily making some mistake about criteria of intelligibility.

Perhaps MacIntyre is taking for granted that, at the present day, no person in his senses would seriously regard any theological system as explanatory of anything. At any rate, whether he does or not it rather seems that some theologians would be willing, even eager, to grant this. If one does make this assumption, then I agree that one cannot both construe religious language as explanatory or descriptive language which is meaningful, and also adopt a theory of meaningfulness which is reasonable today. But, to make this dilemma stick, of course, one first has to show the futility of the enterprise of traditional philosophical theology. If one is convinced that traditional theology is futile in this sense, however, it is difficult to see — or at least it is difficult for me to see — what would be one's point in writing a systematic theology, or even in making religious statements.

DISCUSSION

William Alston: On Sharing Concepts

Mr. MacIntyre is concerned with failures of understanding in discussions between believers and sceptics. But instead of focusing on specific examples of such failures, he introduces the issue with the following statement of his 'central problem'. '... usually (and the impulse to write "always" is strong) two people could not be said to share a concept or to possess the same concept unless they agreed in at least some central applications of it.'¹ A few lines later he seems to have given in to the impulse, for he writes: 'But two men who disagreed in *every* judgement which employed the concept — of them what could one say that they shared? . . . It follows that unless I can be said to share your judgements at least to some degree I cannot be said to share your concepts.'²

If we include analytic statements, this thesis is undoubtedly true. For if we do not even agree, e.g., as to whether to be omnipotent is to be able to do anything whatsoever, then clearly we are not using 'omnipotent' to express the same concept. But if we restrict the judgements in question to those 'they make in which they assert that objects fall under it', as Mr. MacIntyre seems to want to do, then the thesis is certainly false. We can think of many cases in which two people do not agree in any applications of a term, but nevertheless obviously share the same concept (use the term in the same sense). On a simple level there is, e.g. the concept of a sea serpent. There may have been occasions on which I supposed that there were sea serpents in the vicinity, but you, who were present on the occasions, may deny that what I took to be sea serpents really were, and may furthermore deny that there are any such things; and yet, for all that, we may have exactly the same concept of a sea serpent. Perhaps a better analogy for the theological case is disagreement over high-level theories in science. Consider the concept of the ether as an elastic medium pervading space. I may postulate this, along with various other things, in an explanation of radiation of various kinds, whereas you reject this theory. In this case you do not 'apply' the term to anything, whereas I do, but it seems obvious that we might still have the same concept.

It may be that both of these cases seem unproblematic because of the fact that in each of them the person who doesn't apply the concept to anything can appreciate what it is that

¹ p. 115.

² p. 115.

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leads the other person to do so. That is, he has some idea of what basis the other person has for his application, what data the other person is trying to explain in terms of the concept. And Mr. MacIntyre might want to distinguish his case from these by claiming that nothing of this sort is present in the former. If so, his general principle would have to be severely qualified, and I fear that in evaluating this revised version we would be in danger of plunging into the bottomless abyss of difficulties with the verifiability criterion of meaningfulness.

It is noteworthy that in the body of the paper there seems to be little if any reliance on the principle that two people can share the same concept only if they agree in some applications of it. The problems which do receive an illuminating treatment, e.g., the relation of intelligibility to social context, are not explicitly connected with it. Therefore I suspect that Mr. MacIntyre could deal with his central concerns more effectively by not trying to force things into the impossibly narrow confines of that principle.

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