

MacIntyre's Analysis of Religion

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ALASTAIR MacIntyre, co-editor of *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York, 1955) with Anthony Flew, has been concerned with the meaningfulness or logical status of religious beliefs. In a more recent volume which he edited, *Metaphysical Beliefs* (London, 1957), MacIntyre attempts to make his own analysis of religion clear in his lengthy contribution, "The Logical Status of Religious Belief". In this article we will critically examine MacIntyre's position as found in this later volume. His principal theme, in line with the Wittgensteinian brand of analysis, is that religious discourse has its own "logic", that we should not attempt to fit religious and theological statements into some prearranged categories but rather examine and describe the "logic" of religious statements by examining and describing the uses of those statements in religious discourse. Let us see what kind of "logic" MacIntyre finds in religious discourse.

First of all, MacIntyre states, "The theologian would do well to abandon any suggestion that his assertions are in any sense connected with the way the world goes, as factual assertions are related to the evidence that is relevant to their verification or falsification."¹ In agreement with McPherson,² he notes that, although theologians often behave as if their philosophical allies were metaphysicians and their philosophical enemies positivists, nothing is further

from the truth. In fact the positivist does a great service to theology by showing "the impossibility of what the metaphysician seeks to do" and "in so doing he leaves open the possibility of exhibiting religious belief in its own terms."³ MacIntyre's long essay is in effect an attempt to do just that—exhibit religious belief in its own terms.

MacIntyre makes it clear that he will not accept the strictures placed on meaningfulness by the verification or falsification principle. Every type of discourse has its own logic. What we must do is examine the logic of religious language. In *partial* agreement with Braithwaite he points out that religious language is vocative and gerundive.⁴ Religious myths (MacIntyre stresses that his use of the word "myth" carries no implication as to truth-value) are concerned with the central situations in human life—birth, death, love and pain. "Any given myth incorporates an attitude to these themes and to accept a myth is to identify oneself with that attitude and so to make the myth directive of one's behavior. To accept a sufficiently comprehensive myth is to accept a whole way of living."⁵ MacIntyre, however, will not accept Braithwaite's *complete* reduction of religious myths to declared moral policies. "In worship we are concerned with praising God, not with describing him. But, of course, in worship some assertions are made about God."⁶ The religious believer in his use of myth commits himself to the view that those stories say something about God. The problem is how to characterize such assertions.

In characterizing assertions about God, MacIntyre is concerned with two

¹ Alastair MacIntyre, "The Logical Status of Religious Belief," in *Metaphysical Beliefs* (edited by Alastair MacIntyre), London, 1957, p. 182.

² See Thomas McPherson's "Religion as the Inexpressible" in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, edited by A. Flew and A. MacIntyre, New York, 1955.

³ MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

⁴ R. B. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief*, Cambridge, 1955.

⁵ MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

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logically distinct issues, (1) to show the meaningfulness of such assertions and (2) to show "what kind of justification of religious beliefs would be appropriate to their logical status." In order to accomplish this task he purports (which he takes to be the proper task of the philosopher of religion) "only to describe how religious language is in fact used."⁷ Such description, he presumes, illuminates both the meaning and the grounds of justification of religious beliefs. MacIntyre gives very little attention to (1) and a great deal to (2). Let us examine his remarks on (2).

The first point which MacIntyre makes is that religious beliefs are not explanatory hypotheses. If they were, there could be "no justification whatever for continuing to hold them."⁸ The attempts of Aquinas, Paley and Tennant fail, for all the reasons pointed out by Hume. To the extent that theism is set forth as a hypothesis, it is "either false or fantastic . . ."⁹ MacIntyre recognizes the double-edged challenge of the verificationists: Interpret religious claims as factual hypotheses, they turn out to be false; not so interpreted, they are factually meaningless. Referring specifically to Crombie's theory of eschatological verification as one attempt to treat religion as a hypothesis,¹⁰ MacIntyre remarks: "For it does not matter how much more of the picture there is to see."¹¹ Viewed as a factual hypothesis, the existence of a loving God is incompatible with the needless suffering that exists now, no matter what the future holds (a point made so clearly by Paul Edwards¹²). MacIntyre insists that religious beliefs

are not hypotheses at all and to treat them as such is "to falsify both the kind of belief they are and the way in which they are characteristically held."¹³ Provisional and tentative adherence is "completely uncharacteristic of religious belief. A God who could be believed in this way would not be the God of Christian theism. For part of the content of Christian belief is that decisive adherence has to be given to God."¹⁴ The essence of Christian belief is "decisive adherence" and "a free decision made in faith and love". Because of this "it is logically inappropriate to give reasons for a religious belief,"¹⁵ and "to ask for reasons for or a justification of religious belief is not to have understood what religious belief is."¹⁶ In fact, if proof or demonstration of religion could be provided, religion would be destroyed. "For all possibility of free choice would have been done away. Any objective justification of belief would have the same effect. . . . faith . . . would have been eliminated."¹⁷

How then are religious beliefs to be justified? MacIntyre's answer is that they are justified by reference to authority. Christians, for example, accept the authority of Jesus Christ. ". . . our grounds for accepting what he says is what the apostles say about him; our grounds for accepting the apostles? Here the argument ends or becomes circular; we either find an ultimate criterion of religious authority, or we refer to the content of what authority says."¹⁸ Each religion has its own authority and one simply accepts a given authority or rejects it. Admittedly, this is the logical correlative of Barthianism in theology and this means "that religion as a whole lacks any justification."¹⁹ MacIntyre hastens to add, however, that this does not reflect on the logical standing of religious

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

¹⁰ I. M. Crombie, "Theology and Falsification", in Flew and MacIntyre, editors, *op. cit.*, and "The Possibility of Theological Statements", in *Faith and Logic*, edited by Basil Mitchell, London, 1957.

¹¹ MacIntyre, *op. cit.*

¹² "Some Notes on Anthropomorphic Theology," in *Religious Experience and Truth* (edited by Sidney Hook), New York, 1961.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 196.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

beliefs for "every field is defined by reference to certain ultimate criteria."²⁰

MacIntyre here is making a point concerning the meaning of "justify". That point is that "every chain of reasons must have an ending" and in religion that "end" or "ultimate criterion" is some authority, and to ask for a justification of that authority is "to ask for a something more ultimate than a fundamental conviction. If religious belief were not fundamental, it would not be religion."²¹

Since, then, religious beliefs are justified by reference to authority, since belief in God is not so much believing *that* as "being engrossed by a passion," and since the essence of religion is a free decision made in faith and love, "we ought not . . . to be surprised that to accept religious belief is a matter not of argument but of conversion."²² The movement from unbelief to belief is not one involving a "logical transition" or "objective considerations" but is "in the person who comes to believe". If someone asks for a justification of a religious belief, all that can be done is to describe the contents of a particular theology or a frame work of authority and then wait for conversion.

Such is MacIntyre's description and defense (and it seems that "to defend for him is nothing other than "to describe") of religion. Several points must be made concerning it. First, MacIntyre explicitly agrees with the verificationist's analysis of religion, namely, that religious beliefs are unfalsifiable even in principle. The *truly* religious person can never allow anything to count against his beliefs. This includes historical evidence, for he explicitly says that "everything of importance to religious faith is outside the reach of historical investigation."²³ Although the belief in the Resurrection is a belief about history, the "belief in the Resurrection does not rest on historical grounds

. . . To believe in the Resurrection is to believe more than that Jesus walked out of the Tomb, but it is to believe at least this."²⁴ The grounds for the belief is authority, not historical data.

This thesis is indeed paradoxical, for clearly some religious beliefs are about history and theologians have been at pains to cite historical evidence in favor of religious beliefs. MacIntyre will grant that religious beliefs include reference to historical occurrences but he will not allow that references to such occurrences have any *logical bearing* on those beliefs. Such occurrences cannot be considered as evidence, for "to the references to an act of God historical inquiry is irrelevant."²⁵ Surely, however, Mitchell is correct, that if "the occurrence of certain historical events is a necessary condition of there having been a certain act of God (as the empty Tomb of the Resurrection) then historical investigation is certainly *relevant* to the question of the historical event."²⁶ This true, even if the religious belief involves more than the assertion of a historical occurrence. This fact is manifest in the attitude of religious believers, many of whom assert that if they could not believe the historical authenticity of the Gospel narrative, they would lose their faith. MacIntyre could respond by claiming that such individuals are not *truly* religious. But surely in this case he would be prescribing what religion ought to be, not describing what religion is. One gets the feeling that MacIntyre, in his essay, is doing more than merely analyzing and describing.

MacIntyre is led to the conclusion that religious beliefs are unfalsifiable and that it is "logically improper" to cite evidence in their behalf because he conceives of religion as involving "unconditional" belief and a free choice. To cite evidence is to treat religion as a hypothesis, not as "unconditional adherence". Again, one wonders if MacIntyre, in speaking of religious belief as unconditional, is describ-

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

ing or prescribing. At least some religious believers seem to hold their beliefs as hypotheses. Specifically some Christians attempt to cite evidence of various kinds and not merely appeal to authority. But more importantly, can we not distinguish between the logical status of beliefs and their psychological status (the attitude of individuals toward them). From the point of view of psychological status, religious beliefs might be "unconditional". An individual might be living and guiding his life according to such beliefs, and as such he may never question these beliefs or treat them as hypotheses. At the same time, however, the logical status of these beliefs might be provisional. Evidence might be relevant to their truth or falsity.

If this distinction is acceptable, one might agree with MacIntyre that religious beliefs are "unconditional", and yet reject his conclusion that it is "logically inappropriate" to cite justifying reasons for those beliefs. MacIntyre, I fear, will not accept this distinction. But is it not the case that his analysis, in which the notion of "unconditional belief" means that one must refuse in advance to reject a belief even if it is shown to be false, makes nonsense the notion of "belief".

As Mitchell puts it:

Where a man believes that *p*, it is a logical possibility to know that *p* or to doubt whether *p*; and all these 'propositional attitudes' presuppose that there are or could be considerations which justify them. There would be something very odd indeed about a man's saying 'I believe that *p*' and then denying that he had, or needed, any reasons at all for his belief. I am not sure whether we should regard his attitude as intelligible, but irrational, or simply as unintelligible; I think the latter.²⁷

MacIntyre's analysis does, of course, permit the giving of reasons in the sense of saying, "read the Bible", or in the sense of describing a theology or authority. But this is not to cite evidence but

only to refer one to authority. In fact MacIntyre's use of the notion of "belief" leads us back to the fundamental problem posed by the falsifiability challenge. Do religious beliefs assert anything? MacIntyre himself recognizes that the appeal to authority is of no help here. "... if someone asserts 'Twas brillig and the slithy toves did gyre' and when asked what this means replies that it must be accepted on authority, one of our difficulties have been removed."²⁸ This is precisely the problem in MacIntyre's position. His analysis does not remove any of the difficulties concerning the **factual meaningfulness** of religious beliefs. Even presuming that MacIntyre is correct in his account of the justification of religious beliefs (the logical inappropriateness of citing evidence, the appeal to authority, etc.) this is of no help in showing that such beliefs have factual content. He agrees with the positivist that religious beliefs are unfalsifiable but hides in the now popular claim that every type of discourse has its own logic, what Braithwaite calls the "use-principle." However, although Braithwaite maintains that religious discourse is meaningful because it has a use, he denies that it has factual content. It does not have a semantical use. MacIntyre clearly wants to maintain that religious beliefs have factual content. We worship God but we also talk about Him. However, other than his **description** of religious beliefs and their grounds (which we saw might be **prescriptive**) MacIntyre does nothing to show that religious beliefs are assertions.

We have seen that MacIntyre maintains that religious belief as a "free decision made in faith and love" is incompatible with treating religion as a hypothesis or citing reasons for one's belief. Now such "free" decision might be precluded in some sense if a thesis were **completely demonstrable**, although even here one may want to distinguish between the logical status of a belief as demonstrable and the attitude of persons toward it.

²⁷ Basil Mitchell, "The Justification of Religious Belief," *Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. II, no. 44, July, 1961, p. 219.

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 199.

But surely one can speak of deciding to accept a belief which has evidence in its favor but which isn't conclusively demonstrable. I fail to see any incompatibility in freely accepting such a belief and at the same time offering reasons for it. In fact, as Professor Root puts it, "we could scarcely use the word 'decision' at all if we were acting in the complete absence of any reasons. We might even want to say that we are only truly free to decide when we have fully understood the implications of rational argument on all sides."²⁹ The notion of freely accepting a belief which lacks any rational grounds is odd indeed, and Root finds in such a notion an "echo of popular existentialism", in which we are condemned to be free but in which all our choices are absurd.

In fairness to MacIntyre, however, it should be noted that his view of the inevitable absurdity of our belief-choices, if we may so characterize it, is tied to his analysis of the limits of reasoning. Every chain of reasons, he tells us, ends somewhere and where it ends we have "ultimate criteria," some authority for which we opt. If we are able to offer further reasons, then this simply indicates that we have not as yet reached "ultimate criteria." Specifically in regard to MacIntyre's appeal to the authority of Christ as "ultimate criteria," Mitchell suggests that we enlarge the circle a bit by including the content of what authority says. To the extent that this is done, rational argument (citing evidence) may be extended. ". . . you may find yourself attaching significance to the life and teaching of Christ as the expression of his divinity, to the re-animation of the apostles as evidence of the Resurrection, to the lives of the saints as manifesting the Holy Spirit."³⁰ Mitchell approvingly quotes Farrar on the importance of reason in religion:

"We should not find revelation intrinsically convincing, if everything else made nonsense of it, and it made nonsense of everything else."³¹ His emphasis here is upon cumulative evidence of different kinds as **grounds** for faith.

MacIntyre, of course, could grant Mitchell's point (the circle can be extended) and yet insist that somewhere along the line there is an ultimate appeal and an end to reasoning. The problem is which ultimate criteria we are to adopt. MacIntyre's point is one which has been recognized by a number of philosophers, Rudolf Carnap with his distinction between "internal" and "external" questions³² and Herbert Feigl with his distinction between validation and vindication.³³ MacIntyre's own ultimate criterion, the appeal to authority, and his denial of any need to cite empirical evidence for religious claims has what seems to me the undesirable consequence of making religion out to be **essentially** non-rational, precluding the possibility of (perhaps even making nonsense of) religious apologetic, insofar as apologetic takes the form of rational argument, and, of course, precluding the possibility of any rational grounds for choosing between religious beliefs. This I take to be a sound reason (in Feigl's words, a "vindicating" one) for rejecting MacIntyre's criteria.

Our more fundamental critical point concerning MacIntyre's position bears repeating: The fundamental challenge of contemporary philosophical analysis to religion, as MacIntyre himself recognizes, is the request that the religious or theological advocate show that his claims have factual content, a challenge even more fundamental than that of showing that such claims are justified or true. We

³¹ Austin Farrar, "Revelation", in *Faith and Logic* (edited by Basil Mitchell), London, 1957, p. 102; quoted by Mitchell, *op. cit.*

³² Rudolf Carnap, "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, vol. 4, 1950.

³³ Herbert Feigl, "De Principiis Non Disputandum . . .?", in *Philosophical Analysis*, edited by Max Black, Ithaca, 1950.

²⁹ Howard Root, "Metaphysics and Religious Beliefs," in *Prospect for Metaphysics* (edited by Ian T. Ramsey), New York, 1961, p. 76.

³⁰ Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

have seen that MacIntyre rejects the verification and falsification tests as means of ascertaining this. He explicitly agrees with the positivist that religious claims are unfalsifiable and yet he seems to want to maintain that these claims say something about the world. His thesis that every type of discourse has its own

logic, however, is of no help in showing that religious claims have content; for the "logic", use or function of statements in religious discourse could well be what the positivists called the "emotive" function. So far as I can tell MacIntyre does nothing to show that key religious claims about God have factual meaning.

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