Abraham & Holtzer, THE RATIONALITY OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF: ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF BASIL MITCHELL

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logical importance of the Incarnation debate as well as to reply to critics who have responded to themes in the earlier papers.

Hebblethwaite stands in a tradition of clear, concise and even inviting prose, a tradition long cultivated by numerous British theologians and even some British philosophers. He has provided a book which will help the beginner see certain important aspects of a central theological debate, and which may even assist the expert in appreciating the magnitude of what may be at stake. Despite its faults, it is a book well worth consulting.


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This *Festschrift* honors Basil Mitchell, for many years Oxford's Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion. The impressive list of contributors attests to the respect and esteem of Mitchell by his colleagues. Mitchell is impressive for the depth of his Christian convictions and for his independence of current intellectual fashion. The latter feature is conspicuous in the piece that was for many of us our first acquaintance with Basil Mitchell—his contribution to the famous and oft-anthologized "University discussion." There he responds to Flew's verificationist challenge, not by giving up or revising his Christian beliefs, nor by adopting a noncognitivist view of Christian belief, nor by proposing a new theory of belief, but by telling a parable, a very sensible and effective parable.

Oliver O'Donovan opens this volume with a warm appreciation of Mitchell as man, mentor, and philosopher, praising Mitchell for consistency of thought and character. O'Donovan describes him as "a philosopher who is a Christian" rather than as a Christian philosopher, the difference being that Mitchell accepts and works from what he regards as a philosopher's point of view, seeking to defend Christianity from that point of view, rather than trying to adopt a peculiarly Christian point of view and speak from it.

The papers that follow are by W. A. Abraham, Maurice Wiles, Gordon Kaufman, J. R. Lucas, Rom Harré, Janet Martin Soskice, Grace Jantzen, Richard Swinburne, I. M. Crombie, Steven Holtzer, David Brown, and Michael Dummett. This collection includes a number of very fine essays. For the most part, they either pick up problems and ideas from Mitchell, or they attempt to philosophize in the spirit of Mitchell. Nearly all deal with the rationality of religious belief. I will not try to consider them all here; instead, I will look at several that deal with the idea of a cumulative case for Christian
theism, and then turn to a selection of papers concerned with other aspects of the rationality of religious belief.

I.

Abraham’s essay highlights Mitchell’s questions about what sort of approach Christians will find most appropriate and most effective in defending their beliefs, exploring what Mitchell means by cumulative case arguments for theistic Christian belief. He contrasts Mitchell’s cumulative case argument with Hartshorne’s and Swinburne’s and defends it against objections. Hartshorne and Swinburne focus their arguments on a single belief, belief in God. Hartshorne’s argument is *a priori*, deductive, and modal; Swinburne’s style of argument is empirical, inductive, and contingent. Mitchell, however, does not focus on a single proposition; he cares far less about logical precision, emphasizing instead the element of personal judgment—the ability to weigh evidence without recourse to logical rules or some kind of calculus. This ability is in fact an unacknowledged ingredient in every philosophical view that has ever appeared; even though it proves to be a thoroughly elusive notion, it may not be quickly dismissed.

Grace Jantzen concerns herself with the evidential significance of the ordinary believer’s religious experience. She thinks this religious experience cuts across the traditional distinction between natural theology and revealed theology, and that it is typically ignored by philosophers of religion, who seem to assume that the existence of God is the most important issue. Jantzen makes a good case for regarding the experience of mystics such as St. Teresa of Avila as cases of heightened “ordinary” religious experiences rather than as special private visions and revelations. These religious experiences constitute an acquaintance with God that goes beyond the propositional knowledge of both natural and revealed theology. Teresa describes her experience as an experience of herself, an increase in self-knowledge, which leads to union with God. If Teresa is correct, it becomes important to a cumulative case for religious belief that “deeply integrated people of conspicuous sanctity bear testimony to this experience of God as the foundation for their experience of themselves...” (139). But even more important to Jantzen than building any cumulative case is the project of knowing oneself in order to achieve acquaintance with God, because it leads to “personal integration,” as well as union with God. Indeed, she suggests that pursuit of personal integration is the right road for us even if there is no bridge to God at the end.

Any adequate cumulative case for Christian belief must account for evil. Swinburne’s paper supplies a theodicy of natural evil. He is dissatisfied with Plantinga’s suggestion that natural evil may be due to the free activity of Satan and his cohorts, at least as the sober truth of the matter. His answer is designed to complement his soul-making theodicy of moral evil—that God
permits moral evil in order to allow us to make of ourselves what we freely will. So how might we account for natural evil? Swinburne argues that we (free beings) must be able to see in nature what the consequences of natural processes are, good and bad, so that we can freely and intelligently choose good over evil. This answer seems to leave something to be desired as an account of natural evil. Surely there is much natural evil that nobody learns anything about; why does God permit it? According to Swinburne, effects must be universal and lawlike, otherwise we are likely either to suppose we can evade certain effects or to deny that "this time" our act really will have certain effects. There must be no chance that the effects we are talking about are not lawlike. But, we might ask, could not God have taught us in some other way? Swinburne wants to say no, at least not without other equally bad consequences. He shrinks from calling this argument conclusive, but he does think it is a strong case for the necessity of natural evil, part of the theodicy required for a strong cumulative case.

Brown’s paper gives us a fascinating look at Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*, with a view to confirming Mitchell’s suggestion that nondeductive or “fitting” reasons are important in the case for Christianity. Although Anselm in *Cur Deus Homo* attempts to provide “necessary reasons” for the Incarnation quite independently of Scripture, Brown argues that the deductive case collapses, mainly because Anselm seems to regard fittingness and beauty as guides to truth. However, Brown uses Anselm’s exposition and some of his own criticisms of Anselm to examine the notion of “fitting reasons.” “Fittingness” plays an important role in accepting beliefs, even if most philosophers have preferred to spend their time on more precise notions. Because I agree that “fittingness” or something like it plays a major role in accepting beliefs inside and outside of religion, I see this paper as calling our attention to a concept important not only for a cumulative case for Christian theism, but for epistemology generally.

II.

The remaining essays deal with other aspects of the rationality of religious belief. Although Wiles would like to be able to say how rationality applies to religion, he is unable to articulate precisely the middle ground he wants between fideism and Locke’s dream of producing a reasonable Christianity by an unbiased study of Scripture. Of the subsequent essays, perhaps Lucas’s thesis that theological reasoning is like practical reasoning, and Soskice’s defense of the theological realists’ use of metaphor in describing God are steps toward what Wiles might be hoping for, while Kaufman’s plea for radically revising traditional Christian theism into something more suitable to the modern temperament might be a tad too rationalistic for Wiles.

Only Kaufman’s essay directly challenges Mitchell’s defense of traditional
Christian theism. According to Kaufman, theology can no longer be based on revelation and claims of divine authority because “the idea of revelation is itself part of the very pattern of concepts and symbols which has become questionable....” Kaufman believes that our religious concepts have lost their referents; the word ‘God,’ for example, can no longer be sensibly taken to refer to some objectively existing being. Although Kaufman does not really give an argument for this, he suggests certain stages that we go through in progressing to his opinion. This reviewer, alas, has spent his entire adult existence in the first stage of naive awareness, foolishly supposing that there really is a God. If someday he should comprehend Freud, or Nietzsche, or Foucault, et al., he would move into a critical moment and realize that God is really a human creation, and hopefully he would then become reflective enough to realize that while “symbolic meaning is indispensable to human life,” we humans create our own meaning. If all goes well, this reflection will produce a kind of faith which includes “commitment...to the meaning of our most profound orienting symbols,” which, as nearly as I can make out, means that I would still be committed to thinking that the god-concept is very important even though God does not exist.

Kaufman goes on to present a second argument for revising our modes of thinking about God rather than jettisoning them or continuing to insist on “orthodoxy.” Like the first, it is not an argument in the usual sense, with premises and a conclusion, but consists in the suggestion that we demythologize theological talk in a rationally acceptable way which still preserves its power to shape human life constructively. Kaufman thinks that Christian belief as traditionally understood is not rational, but if we revise it according to the “right” kind of philosophical and anthropological considerations, we may be able to turn it into something intellectually respectable. It should be obvious that Kaufman is marching to the beat of a higher drummer, but that drummer is not a God capable of self-revelation.

Lucas considers what sort of reasoning is appropriate in religion. He starts by asking what sorts of reasoning are appropriate in general, given skeptical attacks beginning with Hume. How can the theist respond to the skeptic? Suppose we have a skeptic who allows only deductive reasoning. Such a skeptic may be nearly impossible to refute, but he also must allow any consistent form of Christian theism, for his logic cannot distinguish among differing consistent positions. If he permits inductive reasoning as well, it is difficult indeed to show where (if anywhere) to hold the skeptical line. (At “minimal inductive inference,” or at “inductive generalization,” or elsewhere?) Practical reasoning, especially moral reasoning, makes matters even messier, but it surely is acceptable. Taking his cue from Mitchell, Lucas concludes that theological reasoning resembles practical reasoning in having moral consequences and being personal, because God is personal and a God
of love. Lucas further argues that if God is personal, God is rational, although also inscrutable, which gives rise to the need for revelation. God cannot be simply the God of the philosophers, but “he must be also the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Father of Jesus.”

Soskice has a useful and salutary essay defending the theological realist’s use of metaphor to describe God. The realist insists on divine realities while conceding our inability to catch them with our theological formulations. On the other hand, instrumentalists, e.g., Feuerbach, Cupitt, (and Kaufman?) take theological formulations to be action-guiding but not referential in the traditional sense. Soskice suggests that the contrast parallels the realist-instrumentalist contrast in the philosophy of science, and she goes on to propose plausible ways of supposing that religious talk, for all its metaphors, culture-boundedness, etc., may be “reality-depicting.” Such a realist need not be the hard-line dogmatist feared by Kaufman; she might be well aware of and even agree with the kinds of considerations that sway instrumentalists—the pervasiveness of metaphor, the ties to social and cultural contexts, and the expectation of future changes in vocabulary—while remaining consistent in her realism.

The other essays in this volume, especially those by Harré and Dummett, are stimulating, and all warrant additional examination and criticism. This Festschrift comprises a fitting tribute to Basil Mitchell and his contributions to philosophy of religion.


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This book will be loved and hated. It is vintage Phillips, a further development of some of the ideas that he has expounded and championed in earlier books. There is some that is new in nuance and much that is new in the focus of his concern, but there is no great change in philosophical direction. Those who find a strength in Phillips’ approach to philosophy of religion will find that strength again in this book. Similarly, those who fail to find a strength in his approach will not be disappointed. For those sympathetic to Phillips’ Neo-Wittgensteinianism and interested in its development, this book will provide Phillips’ thinking about recent turns in reflection on religion, notably “Reformed Epistemology,” but more too. For those not sympathetic or not acquainted with Phillips’ thinking, it will provide a readable opportunity to enhance their philosophical literacy regarding what is undeniably a significant mode of contemporary philosophy of religion. Accordingly, I recom-