

RELIGIOUS TRUTH-CLAIMS AND FAITH

Even though we have no knowledge at all of the truth of religious truth-claims, can it possibly be the case that it is reasonable to accept the central claims of Christianity even without a shred of adequate evidence for their truth? In his important but unfortunately largely overlooked, *The Reasonableness of Faith*, Diogenes Allen argues that this indeed is the case. His enterprize is no less than to present “a case for the reasonableness of adherence to God. . . by enlarging our notion of ‘reasonableness’ or ‘rationality’”, though it is indeed part of his case here to establish that this enlargement is a thoroughly non-arbitrary one.¹ His central claim “is that the satisfaction of *some* needs is a sound ground for the affirmation of religious beliefs.” (p. XII) Allen is well aware that this has a puzzling ring, for usually the satisfaction gained from a belief is not a sound ground for the affirmation of that belief, but he wants to show that there are a class of exceptions to this generalization and that belief in the Judeo-Christian God is a member of this class.

Allen makes this claim against the background of a specific stage in the development of the argument between belief and unbelief. The religious and theological atmosphere is such that (certain Catholic circles apart) it is almost universally believed that there is no sound argument for the existence of God and that appeals to revelation, religious experience and faith are all at best inconclusive. Given such intellectual convictions, religious belief appears to be irrational: an absurd leap in the dark. But if that is what the situation actually is, such knightsmanship is certainly in various ways unsatisfactory.² Faith is surely in need of a better defense than that. Allen attempts to provide one.

¹ Diogenes Allen, *The Reasonableness of Faith*, (Washington-Cleveland: Corpus Books, 1968), p. XIII.

² I have attempted to show this in my *Reason and Practice*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), Chapters 19 and 20 in my “Religious Perplexity and Faith,” *The Crane Review*, Vol. VIII (Fall, 1965) and in my “Can Faith Validate God-Talk?” *Theology Today* (July, 1963).

It is his belief that the usual defense of the reasonableness of faith moves in the wrong direction. He argues that even if we cannot know or have good grounds for believing that our central religious affirmations are true, we still can have good reasons for believing in God and Christian doctrine on “the basis of the needs which they satisfy.” He claims that “reason does have its uses in religion. . . but its role need not be that of seeking to establish the truth of religious beliefs.” (p. XV) His aim is the demanding and crucial one of establishing the reasonableness of Christian belief “without the need to argue for God’s existence, to show that Christian theism is the best metaphysical position, or to purge it of all metaphysical elements.” (p. XVI) His central claim is that “as long as there are no reasons which count decisively against the truth of his religious beliefs, the fulfillment of his needs – which lead him to respond with faith and to retain his faith – can be a reasonable ground or basis for him to adhere to religious belief and to assert them as true.” (p. XVII)

It should be noted that he is claiming that “faith is a sound ground for religious truth-claims independent of reasons which count toward establishing their truth.” (p. XVIII) Faith is what Allen calls the *intrinsic ground* for adherence to religious truth-claims. When Christian belief is reasonably criticized or the believer himself comes to suffer doubts, he should seek answers to those criticisms and to those doubts. Those reasons which are brought forward to rebut specific challenges to religion and which establish the truth or count toward establishing the truth of religious truth-claims are called by Allen “rationales”. Rationales *may* be a basis for an adherence to religious truth-claims, but they do *not* supply a deeper or firmer foundation than faith. Rather their role is that of rebutting the various challenges that, from time to time, arise concerning faith.

Allen’s strategy is, in reality, an application in the domain of religion of Peirce’s and Wittgenstein’s attack on Cartesian doubt. Most of us, in Western cultures at any rate, naturally, in the course of growing up and in the course of trying to make sense of our fragmented lives, come to believe in God. Such belief answers to distinctive human needs. With these beliefs come a set of practices and indeed a way of life. Concerning the beliefs and practices, etc. many questions could be raised but they need not all be raised

simply because they could be raised. Moreover, we should say that such beliefs are rational unless doubts, which arise in the course of living, give us *decisively* good reasons for the rejection of the central claims of Christianity. Even then, where the practices are firmly established and deeply motivated, if we cannot straight off answer a given challenge, even a challenge which appears to be decisive, it is more reasonable, according to Allen, to go on believing while continuing to search for a rationale with which to rebut this challenge.

Allen is not using some method of tenacity to render belief permanently immune to a critical assessment such that rejection of religious belief could never be the course to be followed by reasonable men. If a challenge gives what certainly appears to be a decisive reason for rejecting religious belief and if, after careful review, the challenge cannot be successfully answered, then the religious belief should be rejected. Part of what it is to have faith is to believe (trust) that this state of affairs will never obtain. But Allen does not rule out the possibility of a reasoned rejection of Christianity or any other system of salvation with its attendant doctrine of revelation.

What, in Allen's judgment, are the distinctive needs, satisfied by religious belief? He reminds us initially that "unless there is a distinctive range of needs, there is great force in the view that religious beliefs are psychological projections; a view that would undermine my thesis that the fulfillment of needs is a sound ground for religious belief." (p. 54) There is, however, he avers, a distinctive range of hopes and aspirations as well as fears that arise from hearing the 'word of God'. One comes to fear the judgment of God, hope that one may escape death *and* "live as a son in the fellowship of God", and one comes to yearn for a righteousness and a purity of heart which we know is beyond our powers of attainment but which, with God's grace, we trust we shall attain "in the Kingdom that shall come." These needs are all distinctive religious needs and can arise only with the hearing of the 'word of God'. That is to say, we come to have a need for a certain kind of judgment on our lives, a certain kind of immortality and a certain kind of moral purity and these are all distinctive religious needs.

However, if belief in God is like belief in the Easter Bunny, if, that is, Christian religious truth-claims are not true, these needs

will not be satisfied. We need not only to *believe* that there “is a redeeming God who will give us an eternal home with him” but this actually must be so if religious needs are to be fully met. Such a claim both creates needs, e.g., the need to attain moral purity, and satisfies some needs, e.g., it will enable “a man to pull a broken or ensnarled life together.” (p. 56)

With the work of Feuerbach and Freud in mind, Allen raises the question of whether “other things besides religious beliefs may arouse these needs and satisfy them.” (p. 57) His answer is that the needs we have discussed are not needs “common to the human condition” and “hence the beliefs cannot be projections arising from our needs as human beings. That is, we cannot *create* the beliefs, since it is they that create the needs.” (p. 57) But this seems to me to overlook the modification of Feuerbach made by Marx and the modifications of Freud made by the Freudian anthropologist Weston Labarre. When we consider the particular culture in which Christianity flourishes with its patriarchal family structure, the dehumanization and deprivation of great masses of men in the face of the fact that there are needs, and indeed even wants, which are common to nearly all men, the particular needs most of us have in such a cultural complex can be explained, *pace* Allen, without any transcendent reference. (pp. 69–71) The need for ‘a judgment of God’ can readily be explained by reference to our patriarchal family structure. The hope of somehow escaping death is a very widespread cultural artifact and is quite understandable without reference to God. That it takes the form that it does in Christianity, again can be explained by reference to the peculiar family structure, the Oedipal complex and the need for some eschatology to serve as an opiate for a sorely pressed animal in a hopeless or nearly hopeless condition of exploitation. Finally, our desire for moral purity, together with our conviction that with God’s grace it can only be attained ‘in the life to come’, can be explained on a combination of Marxian and Freudian grounds and in terms of our psychological awareness of moral failure, together with the hope, implicit in the very concept of morality, of overcoming that failure. Conceptualizing that need just as Allen does – though such a conceptualization is by no means necessary – we will come to see that of course it is only *fully* satisfiable if religious beliefs are true. Perfect moral purity is not the sort of thing we are going to attain; but there are degrees of purity and

there is the crucial kind of purity that goes with moral integrity which may be attainable or at least approximatable even in a world without God. What is important to see is that changes in social conditions, expectations and culturally distinctive features, modify radically certain needs and wither away certain wants without its becoming the case that less sense can be made of life. Moreover, the changes can be attributed to changes in specific cultural dynamics, e.g., family structure. Given such an alternative account, the psychological projection theory, though far from perfect, remains (to put it minimally) at least as plausible as Allen's account.³

However, all this aside, it is still correct to maintain, as Allen does, that we come to believe in Christianity as we come to believe in many other things through training in a social group. What is distinctive about Allen's account is his claim that "a person could legitimately cite only this training and its consequences as a reason why he is a Christian. . . ." (p. 67) A person's reason here, Allen claims, is a motive for adherence to religious truth-claims. "At the core of this motive would be the fact that he finds himself a man with faith. . . ." (p. 68) Unless there are actual challenges to such a faith, his motive is sufficient for remaining in faith; it is not necessary to give rationales for his belief. Such faith is not blind or irrational, for such a believer "has come to have faith in response to the witness of the Christian community and in the condition of faith he finds his soul nourished." (p. 69) In such a context, he finds his life transformed in a highly desirable fashion and this is the ground for his religious belief. (p. 69) It is not an irrational leap in the dark.

Moreover, even if there are actual reasons for doubt, *motives alone* could serve, Allen argues, as supporting ground for belief. Such an appeal to motives would in turn indeed be justified by showing that the challenges to religious belief are ill-founded: the rebuttals to the challenges being cited as the reason for continuing to believe in the face of a challenge to one's belief. (p. 70) But one's motive, could still be the actual reason for one's belief, just as one's fondness for a person may remain the actual reason (motive) why a person is your friend even though you offer evidence to rebut a challenge to that friendship.

³ Without doubt there are difficulties in such a "projection theory". I have tried to state it in such a way that it is free of at least the most evident difficulties in my "God as a Human Projection," *The Lock Haven Review*, No. 9 (1967), pp. 58-63.

If the Christian has rationales for his belief, they are reasons for his belief in the sense that in the face of internal and external challenges they give him reasons for turning back a claim that Christianity is absurd. But “the actual and decisive reason for belief is still that a man finds himself believing, responding with faith to religious truth-claims.” (p. 72) The rebuttal shows that he may rightly continue to adhere to his faith. But the “challenges do not reveal gaps in motives; motives are not the sort of things which have ‘gaps’ revealed by challenges and filled by rebuttals.” (p. 73) The actual foundation for religious belief is the nourishment one receives by one’s faith. Religion, we must remember, is not a theoretical activity but is the medium of man’s salvation and redemption. The function of rebuttals, frequently carried out by philosophical argument, is not to give ‘the real foundation’ of faith but to “deal with challenges to the truth of religious beliefs which are affirmed by faith.” (p. 73) Rebuttals endorse the achievement that results from his faith; they are not ‘the true road’ to his achievement.

Concerning what he takes to be the fundamental truth-claims of his faith, a Christian must believe that there is an answer to every challenge to his faith. If he did not, he would not be affirming truth-claims. But he may not himself know how to answer every challenge raised to his faith. That indeed is very likely what his situation will be. If in such a situation, he continues to believe, we are not justified in claiming that his belief is baseless. His very religion has taught him how to live with unmet challenges. His faith still has a ground, for it is still answering to fundamental needs. Rather he is faced with “the choice of whether or not this nourishment is sufficient to enable him to live with a doubt he cannot resolve or a challenge he cannot rebut.” (p. 74) As long as there are “no decisive reasons which count against their truth”, the response of faith in which the believer finds his or her religious needs satisfied is a reasonable basis for the affirmation of religious truth-claims.

One fundamental and fairly obvious objection to Allen’s account here is that he has done nothing to show what would or would not count as a *decisive* reason against a religious truth-claim. At one point he equates ‘there being no reason which decisively rules out religious beliefs’ with ‘challenges to religious beliefs are successfully rebutted’. But what constitutes ‘a successful rebuttal’ is left as much in the air

as what constitutes 'a decisive reason against'. What would have to happen to make the abandonment of Christianity a reasonable and justified step to take? Allen does not give us even the suggestion of an answer.

We know that if Christian faith is reasonable, all challenges to this faith can at least in principle be rebutted. But where a case against belief *looks* decisive, under what conditions would it be correct or reasonable to claim that the case not only *looks* decisive but actually *is* decisive? If we would never be justified in saying this but would always be justified in remaining knights of faith, then the claim to have made faith reasonable is indeed a very problematic one. At the very least, Allen must do something to meet this point.

It is natural to object to Allen's layout for a defense of faith on the grounds that the *source* – the motive for a belief – is not and cannot be a *ground* for the belief. To think that it is, is to commit the *genetic fallacy*. To rebut this, Allen points to the fact that there are motives which are *only* sources and there are motives which are both sources *and* grounds for adhering to truth-claims and that the motives for the religious beliefs he is talking about belong to the latter class of motives. Faith is not only a source it is also a ground for belief. If it is the *truth* of a truth-claim which satisfies the need for belief and thus motivates a person to assert the truth-claim, then the motive in question is both a source and a ground. To make clearer what is involved here we need to work with an example. Suppose I judge a group of landscapes with fishing scenes in them as excellent paintings. But suppose I am a devoted angler and I so grade them because they satisfy my interests in fishing, e.g., you see how they went after trout in the Sixteenth Century. But whether or not these are excellent landscapes or even good landscapes is quite independent of whether or not they satisfy my angling interests. Very mediocre paintings could answer to those interests just as well. They could quite adequately show how people fished in the Sixteenth Century. But whether or not there actually is a redeeming Saviour is relevant to the satisfaction of a human being's needs to attain purity and an eternal life with fellowship with God. (p. 80) In the latter case, the *truth* of the truth-condition does matter. For if what the putative truth-claim claims is not actually true, the interests in question will not be fully satisfied. But in the fishing case it does not matter.

A good test for relevance here is whether or not the relation between the need in question and what satisfies it is bizarre. The relation between a painting having fishing scenes in it and the claim that it is a good picture is a bizarre one while that is not true with our religious example. In saying it is bizarre, Allen is making a conceptual remark. With the above example about paintings and angling, he would be giving us to understand that the claim that the paintings are good is irrelevant to satisfying the angling need. What is actually important for the satisfaction of that need is that they are portrayals of people fishing – something which is surely irrelevant and bizarrely related to a picture's being good. But these conditions do not obtain in the religious case. The yearning to be righteous and the claim that there is a God who redeems stand in a natural, non-bizarre relationship. Whether the truth-claim is true matters to the believer. This supposedly does not obtain in the other case. As Allen points out, in the religious case “the reminder of the source of the judgment does not have the tendency to cause one to consider withdrawing the judgment.” (p. 81) In fine, the source for believing a truth-claim may also be the ground for believing that truth-claim where 1) there is no *decisive* evidence that the truth-claim in question is false and 2) where the *truth* of the truth-claim matters to the needs which motivate the assertion of the truth-claim.

A very crucial difficulty in Allen's account surfaces here. Christian faith, he rightly stresses, satisfies certain very fundamental needs. We have, for example, a deep desire to attain moral purity and belief in God satisfies that need. If we have such a faith we will not fall into despair or anomie, for we believe that it is true that God is our redeemer. But Allen fails to note that to escape such frustration we need only believe the central claims of Christianity or Judaism are true; they need not actually be true. Thus it is not the truth or even the probable truth of the religious truth-claims which satisfy that need, but the belief – no matter how ill-founded – that they are true. Indeed if the putative religious truth-claim that God is our redeemer is false, we will never actually attain moral purity, but we can, by accepting it, whether it is true or false or even neither true nor false, satisfy the central need that faith answers to, namely the need to pull ourselves together so that we have the *hope* of the redemption of our broken and ensnarled lives. Our need is to

live so that our lives are no longer fragmented and this we have achieved, for we now have a sense of purpose and direction in our lives. Whether we actually are under God's providential care does not affect that. Indeed our hope may never become a reality if there is no God. But without God – even if it is necessary that we still must believe that He exists – we can, as knights of faith, pull together our ensnarled lives and direct them toward something of greater worth than what we had hitherto concerned ourselves with.

However, it still remains at least reasonable and indeed perhaps even true to assert that there are certain quite different religious needs which could not be satisfied if certain fundamental religious truth-claims were not true. And it was an important consideration for Allen to have stressed just this point. After all, one's need in the 'hereafter' to obtain fellowship with God cannot be satisfied if there is no God.

Even granting his important distinction between motives and rationales, it is, as Allen points out, still quite tempting to respond that it is not rational to affirm and hold to beliefs on the basis that they awaken and satisfy needs even where nothing counts decisively against these beliefs. This is most particularly evident when the rationales for them have been destroyed. Given the fact (if indeed it is a fact) that there are no sound arguments which prove – that is either demonstrate or inductively establish – the existence of God, and given the further facts (if indeed they are facts) that appeals to religious experience, revelation, authority, morality and faith have failed to show that men should affirm and continue to hold to Christian beliefs, and finally given the fact that the very coherence of God-talk is in question, it then seems at least *prima facie* unreasonable to continue to believe.⁴ Belief, in such circumstances, one is inclined to say, is not the reasonable thing Allen takes it to be, but a desperate Kierkegaardian leap in the dark. How in such a context can we rightly maintain that challenges do not, when taken cumulatively, constitute a decisive reason for rejecting Christian belief. Allen (in Chapter 6) tries to show why they do not.

We must first, Allen reminds us, recall the immense human

⁴ There is, of course, an extensive volume of literature devoted to attempting to establish that these putative facts are indeed facts – that is, that it is true that this is the situation in which we find ourselves. I have tried to establish that this is our situation in my *Reason and Practice*, pp. 135–257.

importance of religious truth-claims. They are not merely truth-claims which seek to increase our information or understanding of the world but they are “directed toward the redemption of broken and ensnarled lives.” (p. 85) Religious truth-claims are such that properly to understand their meaning is to understand that they call for a change – a fundamental re-orientation – in our lives. Moreover, “participation in a form of life,” Allen claims, “can give one a reasonable basis for adherence to it.” (p. 85) That is, until I learn carefully to read poetry, to compare various poems, to understand something of poetic form and the like, I can understand little of the significance of poetry or the reasons for reading poetry. It is through participation in a form of life – i.e. the activity of reading and listening to poetry – that I can come to see and give reasons for such a participation. Allen maintains that the same thing obtains vis-a-vis religion. In talking seriously about religion in a practical context, one gives, if one has those religious commitments, *persuasive* reasons that men need to participate in some overall form of life which gives them a conception of their nature and destiny, and some conception of what the character of life and society should be. Without such a conception, human beings can find little significance in their lives. Christianity, Allen contends, offers “a form of life that is of a morally high nature and can be seen to be morally superior to many other ways of living.” (p. 88) And we can, as we in part have, describe the distinctive needs it satisfies. If this can persuade a person to start participating in this form of life, certain needs will be met and new ones aroused and satisfied. This will then be his ground for adhering to this form of life. (The situation is quite parallel to the poetry reading situation just described.) Given that such beliefs are not shown in any way to be decisively intellectually untenable, there is nothing unreasonable about such an appeal to faith. Our lives are threatened with chaos and loss of hope and meaning. Belief in God provides a surcease from this. To insist that such considerations are irrelevant, Allen argues, is in effect to adopt, as the sole standard, the kind of warrant which permits only the assertion of analytic statements, common sense empirical statements of fact and scientific truth-claims. But to do this is simply “to ignore the character of religious truth-claims and to treat them as non-religious ones.” (p. 90) After all, Allen remarks, “religious beliefs make no claim about the universe which needs to be empiri-

cally established.” (p. 90) We may legitimately regard “the world as a creature because of the need for redemption which belief in God satisfies. The nourishment we receive allows one reasonably to have faith in God.” (p. 95) The reasonable acceptance of Christian beliefs *de fide* does not entail that we know the truth or probable truth of these beliefs. (p. 115) The proper reaction to religious beliefs is to “allow them to test, measure and fulfill one’s life.” (p. 116)

II

In *The Reasonableness of Faith*, Allen has done something very similar to what William James tried to do with his doctrine of “The Will to Believe”, though with much more thoroughness and analytical rigour. Allen’s strength does not lie in the novelty of his approach but in the care and thoroughness with which he carries it out. If such an account or some modification of it can withstand critical scrutiny, it will, by wedding fideism to an enlarged conception of the scope of reason, provide a powerful alternative to religious scepticism. That is to say, Allen will have shown by convincing philosophical argument what such classic fideists as Pascal, Hamann, Kierkegaard or James wish to show, namely that the foundation of religious belief is grounded in the response of faith, and neither can nor need receive a more fundamental philosophical or rational justification.

I have hitherto, in discussing *The Reasonableness of Faith*, only raised difficulties which, genuine as they are, are not, in my judgment, the most fundamental ones. I shall now move to a more fundamental and sustained criticism of Allen in particular and of such an approach in general.

I have expounded the positive core of his argument contained in his introduction and in Chapters IV, V and VI. But prior to that, Allen argues in Part I, what James and many earlier fideists (Pascal and Newman for example) simply assume, namely that the central religious utterances of Christianity and Judaism do succeed in making genuine truth-claims. Traditional fideists take it on faith that they are true and simply assume that such religious utterances are capable of being either true or false, and that they are not so indeterminate in meaning as to make no intelligible or coherent

claim. Allen is well aware that he cannot safely make such assumptions and seeks to establish in the first part of his book that 1) these religious utterances make genuine truth-claims and 2) that “Christian beliefs make no claims about the cosmos which need to be established by empirical data. They call for devotion to God.” (p. 84 and 90) (Why, reflect, should their calling for devotion to God be incompatible with their being established or being establishable by reference to empirical data?)⁵

I shall elucidate the central issues here and seek to show how Allen’s account fails, and how there are serious problems about the intelligibility of religious faith which would seem at least to undermine any claim to defend religious belief.

For very laudable motives, Allen tries to minimize the stake Christianity has in philosophical disputes. His strategy is to isolate philosophical issue after philosophical issue and to show that Christianity, quite properly viewed as a medium of redemption, does not stand or fall over the resolution of these philosophical issues. Sometimes I think that he is successful, but at some very crucial junctures his argument fails. It might be the truth that for faith to be reasonable, a good case need not be made out for the truth of such religious beliefs as the core belief that the world is a creature of God, but, as both Allen and I agree, it must be possible to make out a case for their being distinctively religious truth-claims.

However, there are determined philosophical efforts to show that such God-talk is so indeterminate in meaning that it fails to make intelligible truth-claims.⁶ And to fail here, if indeed it does fail, is serious, for Christianity purports to make such truth-claims, and tis very *raison d’être* is bound up with its capacity to make such

⁵ See here Basel Mitchell, “The Justification of Religious Belief,” in *New Essays on Religious Language*, Dallas M. High (ed.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 178–197.

⁶ See my *Contemporary Critiques of Religion*, (London: Macmillan, 1971) and my *Scepticism*, (London: Macmillan, 1972), Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy*, (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1966), Ronald Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox*, (New York: Pegasus, 1968) and C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1959). For an older and unfortunately neglected analysis see Axel Hägerström, *Philosophy and Religion*, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1964). This is a translation from the Swedish by Robert Sandin. Hägerström’s essays translated here were actually written during the first half of the Twentieth Century.

truth-claims. Allen considers some of these sceptical arguments but I shall try to establish that he does not adequately rebut them.

Allen agrees that his defense of the reasonableness of faith “requires that the world be capable of being regarded as a creature.” (p. 47) But it is just such God-talk whose very factual intelligibility some philosophical arguments have rendered suspect. It may be that the need for redemption leads Christians to talk of referring all things to God. But once we abandon an anthropomorphism (as sophisticated forms of Christianity have) in which God is conceived of as a super existent among existents, it is not clear that such talk has the kind of meaning that would allow it to be a truth-claim. Such talk, unlike explicitly metaphysical talk, does have a natural habitat in an on-going form of life. It does not involve a misuse of language or a deviation from linguistic regularities. But that is not enough to settle the case concerning whether we can make sense of it. It can be and indeed is admitted by everyone that religious utterances are meaningful in the sense that they have a use in the language, but, Allen rightly stresses, they “are not meaningful in any important sense” unless they are meaningful as truth-claims. (p. 26). “Christianity”, he points out, “must *claim*. . . . that no world view can be adequate which ignores a deity; and it must claim its world view is the true account.” (p. 21) But we are faced with the fundamental empiricist challenge: what observable states of affairs, actual or conceivable, count for or against a belief in God or a belief that the universe is a creature? For a claim to be a factual truth-claim – the kind of a truth-claim fundamental religious claims purport to be – it must be so related to observables such that in principle at least something observable must count either for or against its truth. The word ‘God’ must be shown to have some empirical anchorage. But, as Allen points out, following Wisdom and a host of others, between sophisticated non-anthropomorphic believers and sceptics, at least, there seem at least to be no such disagreements about what the observable facts are, actual or conceivable. They agree about the existence of these observable states of affairs and yet claim to disagree about whether there is or isn’t a God. But, if no even conceivable observable difference can be specified which at all demarcates between what must be the case for it to be true or probably true that there is a God and what must be the case for its denial to be true or probably true, then God-talk

fails to make intelligible factual truth-claims.⁷ While it is true that such religious utterances also have a normative force, it is just this kind of factual truth-claim that they purport to make. They purport to make fundamental factual-cosmological assertions yet they appear at least to be not even in principle testable.

Allen might reply that it is at least sometimes the case in science that the same statements of observable fact are used to confirm incompatible hypotheses. But both incompatible hypotheses, for all of that, still have factual and indeed empirical significance.⁸ They both are empirically testable: that is to say, empirical evidence is relevant to their truth or falsity. Why not in the religious case say that the same empirical evidence confirms or disconfirms (as the case may be) 'There is a God and 'There is no God'?

The reason for not saying it in the religious case is that, if there is no independent way of specifying what we are talking about in speaking of God (showing what 'God' refers to), it begins very much to appear as if there were only a verbal difference, plus a difference in attitude, between the man who says 'There is a God' and the man who says 'There is no God'. It is very like the difference between the man who asserts 'He is a nigger' and the man who asserts 'He is a black'. But neither Allen nor any other sensible Christian wants to assert (try to assert) that there is a God is just another way of asserting (trying to assert) that there is no God. They want the difference to be more than a verbal difference and a difference in attitude. But the problem remains of giving some intelligible account of *what more* they can be asserting when they say 'There is a God' and 'There is no God', are equally compatible with the same range of empirical evidence and indeed when there is no conceivable evidence which would alter that situation.

Allen takes it to be the case that the most powerful rebuttals to the above challenge consist in 1) either an attempt to specify God's activities or 2) "an attempt to show that it is a mistake to insist that all propositions be based on observables." (p. 29) But in his subsequent discussion, Allen does nothing to show what could count as

⁷ There appears, at least, to be a conflict between what Allen says above and what he says later (p. 84 and p. 90) about the fact that religious truth-claims stand in no need of empirical verification. How the two sets of claims go together, if indeed they do, requires a careful explanation.

⁸ I am indebted to George Monticone here.

an apprehension of God, nor does he succeed (as I shall argue) in showing what conceivable empirically observable phenomena confirm the believer's claims and infirm the sceptic's. Thus he does not support rebuttal 1).

Fundamental Christian truth-claims would be falsified, Allen argues, if it were discovered that there never had been such a person as Jesus or that his life did not have a high moral quality. But there are Christians (Tillich for example) who would not even take Jesus' non-existence as a falsification of such claims, and there are indeed many sceptics who admit there was such a person, and agree that he was a good man, and do not agree that this even in the slightest degree confirms the fundamental putative truth-claims of Christianity. Allen would need to show how they are somehow mistaken. But he does not even see the necessity to undertake this.

Similarly, that the world is capable of arousing awe, wonder, and a sense of mystery need not be taken as evidence for the existence of God, or even as evidence for the alleged fact that the world can be regarded as a creature. Many a sceptic could have such numinous feelings and yet could make nothing of the strange sounding notion that the world be regarded as a creature. He would not have the slightest inkling of what he must do to regard it or interpret as a creature. But he could have an intense sense of awe, wonder, and mystery. In short Allen has failed to specify what would even in principle confirm the believer's claim and/or infirm the sceptic's claim or *vice-versa*. He has not, that is, been able to specify God's activities.

The second way of meeting the empiricist challenge seems to be the more fundamental one for Allen. It is indeed true that it is a mistake to believe that all propositions are based on observables, for clearly analytic and moral propositions are not based on observables. But, while this is so, this is not what Allen has in mind in claiming that it is a mistake to believe that all propositions are based on observables. He wants to show that some *factual* propositions are not *based* on observables, for they are instead *interpretations* of the empirical facts (the observables). If they are such interpretations, they are themselves intelligible factual propositions (or so the claim runs) even though they are not *based* on observables. 'The world is God's creature' is factually intelligible, Allen claims, if it can be

used in interpreting observables (actual or conceivable empirical phenomena).

There are basic flaws in Allen's argument here which obviate it. This can be seen by working with his examples (in part taken from Hick). Consider the plain statement 'they have been plotting a revolution' which turns out to be a misinterpretation of a certain stretch of observable facts. That is to say, a person coming into a room, which is actually a set for a film, might – not knowing that a film was being made – naturally so interpret what he sees. When he realizes that a film is being made, he sees – that is he interprets – the phenomena in a very different way. But focussing just on the room, ignoring the camera and the arc lights, what he sees remains the same, though at one time he saw it as real life and at another time he saw it as acting.

However, 'they have been plotting a revolution' still remains open to straightforward empirical confirmation and infirmation and, through a wider range of observations; on the basis of the confirmation and infirmation, one interpretation of what is going on could be verified as correct and the other as incorrect. But the situation is radically different with the so-called 'total interpretations' of which religious interpretations are key examples. Compare 'the world is God's creature' to 'they have been plotting a revolution'. The former cannot be confirmed or infirmed by empirical observations. And 'he sees the world as God's creature' cannot be confirmed either, for only if we understood what it would be like for the world to be God's creature, could we know what it would be like to see the world as God's creature. And since this is so, we do not know whether it is even possible for it to be true that the empirical world (assuming that notion isn't otiose) must be or even is capable of being seen as or looked on or viewed as a creature. Thus, Allen has not met the empiricist challenge concerning the intelligibility of God-talk. Believers, to make sense out of Christianity, must not only have reason to believe that God-talk has standard employments in modes of discourse that human beings habitually employ, but they also must have good grounds for believing that crucial segments of that religious discourse so function that they are used to make truth-claims. Allen is perfectly aware of that, but, given the use 'God' and allied expressions have, Allen has failed to show that that is possible, let alone actual, for God-talk.

Allen defends the reasonableness of affirming religious truth-claims. But if requisite religious utterances fail to make truth-claims or are meaningless when taken as truth-claims, then Allen's defense of the reasonableness of faith has been undercut. It is *perhaps* too strong to say that empiricist arguments have established that such key bits of God-talk are devoid of factual significance. But, as Allen stresses, they have thrown out a serious challenge. Allen tries forthrightly to meet this challenge but he fails.

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