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Faith, Scepticism and Experiencing-As

This paper is an attempt to explore some of the problems involved in giving an analysis of religious faith. No attempt is made here to say whether such faith is justifiable or not; this is another problem. Our concern is with the question of what it is to believe in God, to have fellowship with God and so on.

There is, first of all, a brief statement of the view defended in the paper. Then follows an account of an alternative view recently put forward by Professor John Hick.¹ His paper is extremely rewarding but with so many philosophical and theological implications and presuppositions that there can be no hope of covering anything like the same ground here. The main part of what follows is taken up with arguing against Hick's central claim and diagnosing what I believe to be the trouble. This is simply because since the view I take is by no means new, the best way of expounding it is to pinpoint what I take to be some of the deficiencies in a rival account.

The view I defend is not the view that religious belief is simply belief that such and such is the case, nor, as Hick puts it, that religious belief is 'primarily an assent to theological truths' (p. 21). Rather my view is that religious belief involves both assent to propositions and the esteeming or trusting of the one believed. (There is no dichotomy between believing a proposition and believing a person if one takes the proposition to be something the person says). Assent alone is too weak; it does not do justice to the evaluative and affective elements in 'belief in'. When a believer believes in God this means that he trusts God; to be able to say in what respect he trusts God, what he trusts God *for*, he must be able to offer propositions. It is this view that I wish to defend and elaborate in this paper.

¹ 'Religious Faith as Experiencing-As' in *Talk of God*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures, Volume 2, 1967/8 (Macmillan 1969) pp. 20-35.

I

In his paper Professor Hick maintains that the phenomenon of knowing God by faith which the religious believer claims, is more like perceiving something than it is like believing a statement about some absent object. His aim is to give a descriptive analysis of this faith that could be acceptable to believers and non-believers alike. He does not deny that 'propositions may be validly founded upon the awareness of God, and that they then play an indispensable and immensely valuable part in the religious life'. (p. 22). But knowing God does not principally consist in believing propositions about him. Or, as Hick would put it, the analogy of religious belief as belief that such and such propositions are true is less helpful than religious belief as experiencing an object or event *as* an object or event of a certain kind. The stress of the Bible and the devotional life of Christians is on being acquainted with God, hence perception is a better model than belief for understanding this phenomenon.

In his discussion of the word 'see' in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein takes the case of two people, each seeing a face as clearly as the other; one person notices that it is like another face, the other not. 'I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I *see* that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience "noticing an aspect"'.² The same shape in print may be an illustration of very different things in different textbooks; it may be seen *as* one thing or *as* another, according to how the text interprets it. Thus one can distinguish between 'seeing' and 'seeing as'; each of two people see the same shape, one sees it as the head of a rabbit, the other as the head of a duck, and so on.

Professor Hick takes his cue from this discussion and argues that being acquainted with God, or knowing God by faith is to be understood as, say, experiencing the events of one's life 'as a continual interaction with the transcendent God' (p. 23). He guards himself against subjectivism with the claim that all experiencing is experiencing-as. All perception necessarily involves identification and recognition. Recognition must be

² L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Second Edition, Blackwell 1958, p. 193e.

recognition under a certain description. 'Indeed to say that he does not have this concept and that he cannot perform this act of recognition are two ways of saying the same thing' (pp. 24-5). So why cannot religious faith be a higher-order recognition? He finds support for this in biblical data. Referring to Old Testament prophets he writes, 'Humanly explicable events were experienced as also acts of God, embodying his wrath or his mercy or his calling of the Jewish nation into covenant with him' (p. 31). 'The biblical cognition of God is typically mediated through the whole experience of the prophet or apostle after his call or conversion' (p. 27).

II

This paper is not concerned with this latter claim of Hick's, only to question the appropriateness of the analogy between faith and experiencing-as. The first thing I want to argue is that the dichotomy between knowledge by acquaintance (what Hick also calls 'cognition in presence') and knowledge by description ('cognition in absence') which Hick uses is not a particularly useful one for helping us to understand religious belief. He uses this distinction because he wants to argue that religious faith is a case of cognition in presence. Faith must be assimilated to perception.

But though this distinction is an important one in epistemology it seems to me to be unilluminating in discussing faith as it operates in a historically-grounded religion such as Christianity. (By 'historically grounded religion' is simply meant a religion whose distinctive character depends on certain historical claims being true). People do, as Hick says, claim to see the presence of God mediated by the world around them. Being acquainted with the world they are acquainted with God, though this is not to be taken as implying pantheism. But what about the particular historical claims of a religion such as Christianity?

Hick speaks in one place of faith as a religious response to God's redemptive action in Christ (p. 21). Now the claim of Christians is that this action took place in history; as Hick says, 'in the life of Jesus of Nazareth'. But a person cannot know the events of the life of Jesus of Nazareth as he can know the ex-

ternal world today. He knows these historical events by description, not by acquaintance.

Clearly Hick wants to recognize the revelatory character of Jesus but how is he going to be able to do this? How is it possible to hold (a) that faith is like perception in that it is a case of cognition in presence, (b) faith is a religious response to a person who lived two thousand years ago? In this latter case what is the cognition in presence cognition of? In the case of seeing the events of one's life as an encounter with God one is in the presence of material objects, one witnesses events which happen, etc. But in the other case one is in the presence of propositions only, propositions about Jesus.

The same point can be put as a question about Hick's use of the word 'revelatory'. In the closing section of his paper he distinguishes between primary and secondary senses of the word. The Bible is revelatory in a primary sense because it contains events of unique significance 'which became revelatory through the faith of the biblical writers'. The Bible is revelatory in the secondary sense because it mediates the same revelation to subsequent generations 'calling in its own turn for a response of faith' (p. 34). What is the relation between these two senses of 'revelatory'? The one requires knowledge by acquaintance, the other knowledge by description.

Part of the trouble is that Hick on the one hand wants to stress the immediacy of religious faith, hence his assimilation of it to perception. On the other hand he is working with a particular epistemological model, adapted from Wittgenstein, of perception as recognition or identification (p. 24). Now it may be the case that the notion of perception entails the notion of recognition, and Hick may be claiming this by claiming that all perception is perception-as, though he does not say whether this is a necessary or contingent fact about perception. However this may be it is certain that there is no reverse implication. Recognizing x as such and such does not imply that x is known by acquaintance, 'cognized in presence' as Hick says. Instances of cognition in presence are not the same as instances of identification as such and such, or recognition as such and such. A narrative can be interpreted in a particular way, as pointing to a moral, say; or the characters in it can be recognized to be

avaricious or timid without knowing by acquaintance any of the characters in the story. Indeed acquaintance with them may be logically impossible if the story is a piece of fiction.

The conclusion to be drawn from this discussion is that acquaintance and description are not helpful on the grounds that though it is perfectly proper to speak of recognizing stories or historical accounts as exemplifying morals, or of recognizing stories as incidents in the life of individuals about whom one knows this cannot imply direct acquaintance. At this stage it is much wiser to use broader expressions such as 'recognizing as', 'interpreting as', 'seeing the significance of', expressions which do not in the least imply cognition in presence. To see Jesus as the Christ would then be to interpret the life of Jesus in a certain way. At this stage in the discussion I am quite prepared to allow that the other cases Hick cites, like seeing one's life as a continual encounter with God involve both cognition in presence and experiencing as in the way that he suggests.

The next questions must be: given the above argument how strong is the analogy between Wittgenstein's thesis about 'seeing as' or 'noticing an aspect' and faith as a response to God's redemptive action in Jesus of Nazareth, examples which are clearly crucial for any analysis of *Christian* faith?

Professor Hick stresses that his argument is to the conclusion that faith, being a form of cognition in presence is more like knowledge by acquaintance than it is like propositional belief. (p. 22). I now want to suggest that in the course of his argument he neglects certain features of religious belief which greatly weaken this analogy. One implausible corollary of his account is that he neglects what can for the moment be called evidential beliefs, i.e. beliefs that certain unique events took place. (This will be made clearer as the argument proceeds).

Let us begin with Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit. The point of this and the other illustrations in the *Investigations* is to make the distinction between seeing and what Wittgenstein called 'noticing an aspect' (p. 193e). What a person sees does not change yet he may notice first one aspect then another. The characteristics of a drawing can remain the same while the significance of it can change according as one directs one's attention. Now as Hick shows (and I accept this, though I want

to give a different account of it later) a religious belief can supervene on ordinary beliefs in this way: the believer and unbeliever are agreed on 'the facts', but disagree on the significance of them. One sees a particular act as providential, the other not, etc. The Pharisees and Romans may not see Jesus as the Christ, but his disciples did. Each is exposed to the same selection of data, but each recognizes it differently. I accept that this happens, but it is not all that can happen.

Take the following case. Seeing the resurrection of Christ as an act of God. What is involved in this? A necessary condition of seeing the resurrection of Christ as an act of God, or as revelatory of God is that one believes that the resurrection of Christ took place. In connection with miracles Hick says 'we may say that a miracle is any event that is experienced as a miracle'. (p. 35). This is not circular because Hick defines a miracle as an event that is religiously significant. But now, what is this event that is religiously significant? How this differs from the duck-rabbit case, and why the analogy fails to hold, is that there are cases where there is no neutral description of the event acceptable to both believer and unbeliever. The difference involves a difference over evidence. The point may be put as follows. There can be at least three sorts of scepticism in a religion like Christianity which has an historical base; ontological scepticism, i.e. about the existence of God, evidence for this, meaningfulness of assertions about him; scepticism about evidence e.g. the virgin birth of Christ, his miracles, his resurrection, based on either *a priori* or *a posteriori* grounds; and thirdly scepticism about the significance of the evidence. If the claim is made by religious believers that God is revealed through a suspension of a law of nature it is possible either to deny that this suspension has taken place, for some reason; or allow that in this case a law of nature has been suspended but deny a miraculous character to it, explaining it as a statistical freak or whatever. That is, refuse, for some reason, to see the event as revelatory of God either because a person does not believe in God or because he fails to see what possible religious significance such an event could have.

While what Hick says will do where there are those who are prepared to allow that a miracle has taken place *if* they can be

made to see its significance, it will not do for those cases where there is a dispute between believer and unbeliever over the evidence, as so often happens. This is a more basic disagreement; the shape on the paper must be agreed upon before the question of whether it is the shape of a duck or of a rabbit can be argued over. Hick says 'there is a sense in which the religious man and the atheist both live in the same world and another sense in which they live consciously in different worlds'. This may be true in the case of events taking place in 1969, but is not true of events that took place years ago in Palestine. The difference between believer and unbeliever is not merely at the level of perceiving a certain event as an act of God but of affirming and denying that such an event took place. Thus their difference cannot be expressed as a difference in the significance to be attached to events. For the atheist there is no event for significance to be attached to, only, say, a set of hallucinations.

Before one can begin to apply a hierarchy of concepts to a thing, before I can teach you to regard the thing not only as a speck in the sky but as a bird, not only as a bird but as a hawk, it must be possible to identify what is being denoted independently of these higher-level ways of denoting it. But this is just what is not possible in the case of some disputes between believers and atheists. Recognizing or identifying something as such and such may require one to go beyond what is presented to the senses but one cannot be released from what is presented to the senses. Though it may in practice be difficult to establish just what the limits of imagination are, it is perfectly obvious that a plain spherical shape cannot be 'seen as' a battleship.

So far I have tried to argue that the dichotomy between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description is an unhelpful one; it is not possible by it to give an account both of faith as a response to certain historical events and as a way of regarding one's life at present. Secondly it has been argued that the analogy between faith as perception and unbelief as misperception is considerably weakened by introducing what have been called evidential beliefs. Because of this Hick's programme of giving a descriptive analysis of faith that could be acceptable to believer and non-believer alike (p. 20) founders. The difference between the two is not *just* that the one sees events as

x the other as non-x, though this may well be a difference between them on some occasions.

III

What Hick is trying to do is to offer an analogical account of religious belief. But what is religious belief? Hick himself uses a wide variety of expressions to characterize it. Here are a few: 'Knowing that God is real by faith', 'encounter with God', 'men's personal dealings with the divine Thou', 'religious response to God's redemptive action in the life of Jesus of Nazareth', 'the ordinary believer's awareness of God in our present earthly life', the experience of life 'as continual interaction with the transcendent God', 'to experience some event as an act of God', 'living with the sense of the presence of God', 'conscious of God', 'contemplative and mystical awareness of God', 'encounter with God in nature and through solitary prayer'.

What I want to say about these expressions is that their range precludes giving any one account of them. It is possible to discern at least three varieties; I call them evidential beliefs, mystical experiences³ and complementary beliefs. When Hick writes of faith as a person's 'religious response to God's redemptive action in the life of Jesus of Nazareth', this faith clearly has to have an evidential base. It is necessary for the person who has this faith to believe such propositions as 'Jesus of Nazareth existed' and a lot more besides. The belief is dependent on such propositions in the sense that if the propositions are taken to be false the religious belief becomes an irrational belief, a belief without adequate evidence.

When, on the other hand, he writes of experiencing an event as an act of God (e.g. p. 26), no separate evidential foundation is introduced, and questions such as, 'Why do you experience this event as an act of God, and not this other event?' become relevant, and perhaps awkward, questions to answer. But I suspect he means more than this. When he speaks of faith as an

³ 'Mystical' can mean almost anything. I use it to refer to those experiences in which people take themselves to be in direct communion with God. Perhaps 'experimental' would be better.

encounter with God, as being conscious of God, aware of God and so on he seems to be including mystical experiences. Hick does it is true differentiate on pp. 30–1 between a contemplative and mystical awareness of God and ‘the prophetic type of religious experience’, but not on the grounds that these are two different kinds of experience of God, only on the grounds that the former may have a looser link with ethics than the latter. He says, ‘Thus the dispositional response which is part of the awareness of God is a response in terms of our involvement with our neighbours within our common environment. Even the awareness of God through nature and mystical contemplation leads eventually back to the service of God in the world’. (p. 31).

My point is that this bracketing together of on the one hand a religious response to Jesus and on the other, an awareness of God that includes mystical experiences is misleading. It is misleading because for one thing someone who claims to be aware of God or to have an experience of God would use the language of knowledge than of belief. For another while the first is mediated by events, the second is not. Hick says of the latter ‘the sense of the presence of God may occur without any specific environmental context, when the mind is wrapt in prayer or meditation’ (pp. 30–1). But now in this latter case what is it that is perceived-as or experienced-as on Hick’s view? This is an experience that is personal, interior, not dependent on events which in themselves are ambiguous but which may be taken as divine acts (pp. 26–7).

But there is a more fundamental reason why it is misleading to conflate these cases. ‘Having a sense of the presence of God’, ‘being aware of God’, ‘having an encounter with God’ – these are all expressions that can only be used to characterize episodes. This is true of mystical experiences in general – they are conscious experiences, they last so long, it makes sense to ask when they began and when they ended, and so on.

But this is not true of another class of expressions that Hick uses. ‘Experiencing life as a continual interaction with the transcendent God’, ‘life as a sphere in which we have continually to do with God and he with us’ (pp. 23, 26), ‘religious response’ (p. 21). To regard the whole of one’s life as involving dealings with God, to live out one’s life as a religious response to

God, these are dispositional expressions. A man's whole life can be a religious response to God. A man can be said to regard his life as a religious response to Christ when his mind is occupied with all sorts of things, but a man cannot have a mystical encounter with God when his mind is so occupied.

Whatever difficulties there may be in analysing these expressions by analogy with perception, it is certainly true that sometimes a perceptual model has been used to try and elucidate what a person has experienced who has 'encountered God'. I quote two cases to illustrate this, as well as to illustrate the episodic character of these experiences and the certainty that characterized them. The examples are from the religious experiences of Jonathan Edwards and his wife.

'The first instance, that I remember, of that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things, that I have lived much in since, was on reading those words, I Tim. i. 17 *Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.* As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from any thing I ever experienced before. Never any words of Scripture seemed to me as these words did. I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was, and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be rapt up in him for ever!'⁴

Speaking of her experience of God, Jonathan Edwards' wife records:

'I cannot find language to express, how *certain* this appeared – the everlasting mountains and hills were but shadows to it. My safety, and happiness, and eternal enjoyment of God's immutable love, seemed as durable and unchangeable as God himself. Melted and overcome by the sweetness of this assurance, I fell into a great flow of tears, and could not forbear weeping aloud. It appeared certain to me that God was my Father, and Christ my Lord and Saviour, that he was mine and I his. Under a delightful sense of the immediate presence and love of God, these words seemed to come over and

⁴ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, A. M. London 1834, Vol. I, p. lv.

over in my mind, "My God, my all; my God, my all". The presence of God was so near, and so real, that I seemed scarcely conscious of anything else'.⁵

The point to be made about these and other similar experiences is that they are not strictly cases of religious belief but of religious knowledge. The individuals here claim to know God, or to have communion with him, in a direct way, and in such a way that they are certain that it is God they are in communion with. These experiences formed longer or shorter episodes in the lives of those concerned, and those who have them are driven to use perceptual analogies to try to elucidate what it is they have experienced. (Thus Jonathan Edwards talks of a 'new sense'; he was to work out this more fully in his classic *Religious Affections*).

In my view Hick fails to distinguish things that differ when he considers experiences such as those of Jonathan Edwards and his wife – what might fairly be called 'encounters with God' – along with 'the religious experience of life as a sphere in which we have continually to do with God and he with us . . . awareness in our experience as a whole of a significance which transcends the scope of the senses' (p. 26).

A brief word about the third variety of what Hick calls faith; in my view he rightly stresses that one aspect of religious faith is seeing a naturally explicable event as an act of God. In this case there is no special evidential base for the belief as there is for the belief that Jesus rose from the dead; instead it is a characterization of an event at another level than that of physics or psychology. This point has usually been made in terms of the notion of complementarity. Hick uses the word 'supplementary' (p. 28) for each successive stage in the hierarchy but this perhaps suggests that an explanation in terms of natural laws is somehow inadequate and needs supplementing, when of course this is not the case. The point about the notion of complementarity is that it expresses the truth that each explanation in the hierarchy is adequate at that level. No more will be said

⁵ *op. cit.* p. cv.

about it here as it has been the subject of plenty of discussion lately.⁶

The point we have reached is this. It has been argued that Hick's analogy between belief and perceiving-as, is deficient on a number of counts and the suggestion that he brackets together phenomena which should be kept separate, has been offered as a diagnosis. There are three different cases (at least) – religious experiences of God, expressions of faith in and devotion to God-in-Christ, religious beliefs about one's own life. While I am maintaining that no one account can account for all three of these what I want now to suggest is that it is much less troublesome to analyse expressions of faith in God and religious attitudes to one's own life and God's activity in it, in terms of the notion of belief. This I now go on to do.

Let us take again Hick's characterization of faith as 'a religious response to God's redemptive action in the life of Jesus of Nazareth' (p. 21). This is for him an instance of cognition in presence and to stress this he uses the perceptual model of belief as experiencing-as. Any such response is, as we have seen, in any case (if it is to be intelligible) going to involve 'beliefs-that'. If not how is a religious response to Jesus going to be distinguishable from a religious response to someone else? For something to be a response to God's action in Christ, it must involve propositional attitudes towards Jesus. But what more? Why cannot the 'something more' that Hick rightly stresses simply be trust in what is believed to be true, where this is regarded not as a theological proposition but as something that God has stated or promised? Having faith in God is then not just assent to truths about him (Hick is right here) but involves trusting what the believer takes God to have said. This it should be stressed is not to interpret religious faith on analogy with belief but *as an instance of* confident belief, 'belief in'. One of the basic drawbacks with Hick's view is that on it, religious faith is 'something I know not what'. One can never say what it is, only what it is like.

⁶ e.g. by D. M. Mackay in 'Complementary Descriptions' *Mind* 66, pp. 390–394, 1957, and 'Complementary II', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary*, Volume 32, pp. 105–22, 1958.

The 'something more' over and above the beliefs the Christian has about God-in-Christ is reliance or trust in God. And one trusts God because one *believes that* such and such things are true of him. This is a case of what Professor H. H. Price has called 'evaluative belief-in', where one has a 'pro-attitude' towards whom or what one believes in. Price seems to me to be perfectly correct when he writes, 'When we trust someone or something, these beliefs-that are the ones we must mention in order to answer the question "in respect of what do you trust him (or it)?"' And this question is a perfectly proper one, and does require an answer. But when it has been answered, we still have not explained what trusting is, or what it is like to trust or "put one's faith in" someone or something. Perhaps we can only know what it is like by actually being in the mental attitude which the word "trusting" denotes.'⁷

Turning now to complementary beliefs, the belief, for example, that one's life is a sphere in which one has continually to do with God and he with us. On the view I am putting forward regarding one's life as a gift from God, for example, is simply believing that one's life is a gift from God. There is not a further quasi-cognitive relation over and above such a belief; what there is instead is a series of dispositional responses of appropriate kinds – thanksgiving, care, etc. My experiencing life as a gift from God just is my belief that life is God's gift. This is not merely assent to a theological truth, but involves appropriate affective responses. In just the same way, if I regard the tie in the wardrobe as a gift from my children this involves believing that it is a gift, and responding appropriately. To see the tie as a gift is not like having some further quasi-perceptual experience but it is possessing the ability to respond appropriately in a given variety of circumstances. It is not stretching things too much to say that the gift of the tie mediates the kindness of my children, that their kindness is shown through the gift and so on. But seeing the tie as a gift is not like seeing the duck as a rabbit.

⁷ H. H. Price, *Belief*, London, 1969, p. 452.

IV

The problem that has been discussed in this paper should not be confused with that of giving an account of why it is that so many people do not find religious language meaningful at all, of why they find the religious propositions they are asked to consider nonsensical. It may be that in considering this question it will be helpful to think in terms of perceptual analysis. What Wittgenstein says about seeing-as, and 'aspect-blindness' may provide a useful model. [Using perceptual analogies is of course nothing new: the Bible itself speaks of those who see but do not perceive (Mark iv. 11 ff.) and of those who have ears but do not hear (John ix. 39).] This is large and difficult territory; thankfully, all that needs to be done here is to point out that the questions 'What is it to have faith in God?', 'What is involved in a failure to understand a religious assertion?' are not to be confused.