

ON THE RATIONALITY OF CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT

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It is appropriate, I think, to point out at the beginning of this paper that the word "rational" is not as simply understood as it sometimes appears. In ordinary language it has innumerable uses, only a few of which will be discussed here. One important aspect of the use of this word is that it carries both a descriptive and an emotive meaning. For example, it is one thing to point out that a particular philosopher's argument contains a logical fallacy and is therefore refutable on "rational" grounds, but it is quite another to say that the I. R. A.'s response to the situation in Northern Ireland is an "irrational" response. In this latter sense "rational" and its cognates are similar to words like "communism" and "democracy." The word is also sometimes given to persuasive definition. It is important to bear these facts in mind when discussing the rationality of religious belief in order to be clear about what the discussion is aiming at.

In this study I shall concentrate on the descriptive meaning of "rational." Of course I do not intend to ignore the emotive meaning of the term. If participation in religious belief can be shown to be in any way rational in the descriptive sense, this, I suppose, will work in its favor in the emotive or persuasive sense. So this aspect will not be ignored. It is, however, not the important point at issue in what follows. What I wish to focus on is the rationality (or lack thereof) of religious belief, in the descriptive sense. In doing so, I propose to consider a particular recent attack on the rationality of religious language. I will investigate the theory of rationality implicit in this attack, its application to religious belief and language, and show why I think it does not really get the job done—i. e., it does not show participation in religious belief to be irrational. In the end I hope to make it clear that participation in such belief is at least as rational as participation in some other universes of discourse—say, science or moral discourse. The "attack" I refer to is that of W. W. Bartley in his book, *The Retreat to Commitment* (London, 1964).

The theory of rationality that Bartley presents is called "comprehensively critical rationalism." Bartley's man who adheres to this rationalism is defined in the following way:

The new framework permits a rationalist to be characterized as one who holds *all* his basic beliefs, including his most fundamental standards and his basic philosophical position itself, open to criticism; who never cuts off an argument by resorting to faith or irrational commitment to justify some belief that has been under severe critical fire. I shall call this conception *comprehensively critical rationalism*.¹

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¹W. W. Bartley, *The Retreat to Commitment* (London, 1964).

In developing his particular notion of what rationalism is, Bartley briefly discusses two others, both of which he feels are misguided. One such view is the rather dogmatic idea that in the last analysis rationality needs no justification, as it simply "is what it is." Bartley calls this theory "critical rationalism" and dismisses it because it appears to base rationality on an irrational commitment.² Another theory he considers is what he calls "comprehensive rationalism." The adherents of comprehensive rationalism hold to the view that there can be standards of rationality that are self-justifying. This view is found to be mistaken, involving its defenders in an infinite regress, as each of the so-called standards of rationality refers back to another, and this goes on *ad infinitum*. He claims that this rationalism asserts its own untenability and builds a strong argument for his contention that "a comprehensive rationalist not only does not *happen* to exist, but is a logical impossibility."³

In presenting comprehensively critical rationalism Bartley claims to be putting forward a theory of rationality which avoids the pitfalls and inadequacies of both the other theories. This means he thinks he has a theory of rationality that does two things. On the one hand, he has worked out a theory of rationality which needs no justification beyond itself. On the other hand, it leaves the way open for a rationalist to be rational even in his commitment to rationalism.⁴

Now if comprehensively critical rationalism is able to pull this off, it is an impressive theory indeed. It is certainly worthy of some investigation. Since Bartley asserts that it is not logically possible for a comprehensive rationalist to exist, I think it fair to question whether or not it is logically possible for a comprehensively critical rationalist to exist. Bartley not only asserts that it is, but issues a challenge to philosophers to show that it is not. The challenge runs as follows: Contending that any opponent must show that comprehensively critical rationalism is itself uncriticizable, he challenges the opponent to do so. After all, the comprehensively critical rationalist (if he exists) would claim that even his most basic philosophical presuppositions are open to criticism and liable to be abandoned. If, therefore, the opponent can show that the comprehensively critical rationalist is, after all, not really open-minded, he has shown that the comprehensively critical rationalist is irrational in his commitment to his position and, what is worse, irrational by his own definition.

I think this challenge must be taken at face value. He is genuinely asking for one falsifying example, and if one is found it will vitiate comprehensively critical rationalism. He even goes so far as to offer an example of how his challenge might be met. The whole notion of reasoned argument is based on the belief or standard that only true premises lead to true conclusions. This seems to be a minimum

²*Ibid.*, p. 133.

³*Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁴W. D. Hudson, *A Philosophical Approach to Religion* (London, 1974), p. 180.

requirement if there is to be reasoned argument at all.

The idea of critical argument presupposes the notion of deducibility, i.e., the idea of the retransmission of falsity from conclusion to premises and, ipso facto, of the *transmission of truth* from premises to conclusion. That is, when the conclusion of a valid argument is discovered to be false, that falsity is retransmitted to the premises whence it must have come: at least one of these premises must be re-evaluated. If our totality of beliefs implies "x", and if, upon testing, we get the result "not x", then there is a mistake in our set of beliefs *which needs to be corrected*.⁵

The point in this is that the notion that only true premises lead to true conclusions appears to be a sort of basic presupposition of rational argument, or "tacit assumption," if you please. And if such a basic presupposition exists, we have found a kind of indispensable standard of rationality which the comprehensively critical rationalist must cling to at all costs. This situation would of course falsify Bartley's comprehensive critical rationalism as, according to its lights, all standards of rationality are open not only to criticism but also to possible abandonment. This basic standard of rationality is not open to these possibilities—at least not the latter, that of abandonment.

I do not believe, however, that the argument in Bartley's challenge is as clear as he thinks. Bartley seems to be laying down that if such an uncriticizable standard were found, and his rationalist therefore abandoned his rationalism, this would be a case of a rationalist *qua* rationalist abandoning his rationalism.⁶ This possibility needs some pondering. Notice that he does not seem to be saying that what would have occurred was simply that a theorist had abandoned a false theory of rationality. Rather it is the stronger assertion that the rationalist *qua* rationalist is abandoning his rationalism. Now this could only mean that he has found *reasons* for this abandonment. What can we possibly make of this? Bartley wants to say that it is like democrats giving up democracy:

Just as it is possible for a democracy, through democratic processes, to commit suicide (e.g. through a majority vote to abolish democracy in favor of totalitarianism), so a comprehensively critical rationalist who was not *committed* to the belief that his position was the correct one could be argued, or argue himself, out of his rationalism.⁷

The analogy, however, does not really work. Although it may be unlikely that any democracy would use its own processes to abandon the democratic system, there is nothing self-contradictory about the idea. We can conceive of it without violating our normal ways of thinking and speaking. It may even be that history provides examples of this, or at

⁵W. W. Bartley, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

⁶W. D. Hudson, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

⁷W. W. Bartley, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

least examples which could be interpreted in this light. But would this *really* be analogous to a rationalist's finding good reason to give up his rationality? As I said, it seems to me that the notion of a rationalist *qua* rationalist abandoning his rationality could only mean that he has found a *reason* for doing so. Clearly, as a rationalist, the only good reason for such abandonment would be that there is something invalid about it. Now what bites into Bartley's argument here is the fact that the situation is not that the abandonment takes place because some move within a process of reasoning was invalid and therefore in need of correction. Rather, Bartley is trying to say that such a yielding up takes place because *the process of reasoning itself was found invalid*. This does not appear to make sense. It is *not* like democrats voting to give up democracy. It seems to me to be more like democrats finding that democracy is not democracy (if the analogy applies at all). This would be a rather startling state of affairs, to say the least. In fact such a state of affairs is inconceivable, given our normal ways of thinking and speaking. Bartley's analogy is an unfortunate one, and it contributes little to an understanding of his challenge. It also reveals critical weaknesses in the entire argument. It begins to appear that just as a comprehensive rationalist could not logically exist, neither could a comprehensively critical rationalist.

Bartley's purpose is to contrast his comprehensively critical rationalism with Christian belief. He makes special reference to those Christian apologists who indulge in what he calls the *et tu quoque* argument. These theologians, who have enjoyed a degree of popularity of late, claim that in the end rationalism rests on a commitment that is not justifiable in ultimate terms, just as (they say) religious belief does. Bartley wants to say that if rationality is located in criticizability, as he claims it is in the case of comprehensively critical rationalism, this theological *et tu quoque* argument is groundless. He compares his rationalism with this theological explanation of Christian belief as follows:

The *tu quoque* argument cannot be used at all against comprehensively critical rationalism. Theologians have argued that not only to abandon allegiance to Christ, but even to subject that allegiance to criticism, is to forsake Christianity. But for a comprehensively critical rationalist, continued subjection to criticism of his allegiance to rationality is explicitly *part* of his rationalism.⁸

Now I am not concerned at this point to rebut the notion that Christianity is irrational. It is conceivable that Christian thinkers could reach a point in their argument where anything they say about God from then on would involve some sort of contradiction. This, in fact, seems to be the position of theologians like Torrance and Tillich, to name only two. The criticism of Bartley here does not focus on this point.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 150.

The point being made is that Bartley's notion of rationality goes too far in its concept of what a rationalist *qua* rationalist can be open-minded about. This point should not be misunderstood, however. Bartley is correct in his claim that rationality is located in criticizability, to the limit of logical possibility. The problem lies in drawing the boundaries of logical possibility. It has been asserted that open-mindedness is essential to rationality. If rationality is to be compared to religious belief, the question will naturally arise, "How open-minded is it possible for the religious believer *qua* religious believer to be?" This is the critical question, and its cogency can be recognized despite whatever mistakes may be present in the theory of rationality with which Bartley contrasts religious belief. Bartley seems to feel that there is something about Christianity that makes it logically impossible to be committed to it in a manner that is like the manner in which people are committed to other activities—say, physical science or moral discourse. This is especially the case when it comes to the phrase "allegiance to Christ." He claims that according to theologians (or at least those particular theologians he has chosen to discuss) it is impossible to abandon "allegiance to Christ" without abandoning one's Christian faith. Now this may well be the case according to these theologians, giving their understanding of what "allegiance to Christ" means. But I do not think this is the end of the matter. There are two philosophical points that I want to make about the phrase "allegiance to Christ."

This phrase is without doubt an important part of Christian language. It is part of the content of Christianity in the same sense that the notion that Christians should love one another is part of the content of this faith.

Now if "allegiance to Christ" is thus regarded as part of the content of Christianity, and it is said that Christians must cling to this allegiance at all costs, then it does indeed appear that Christianity is irrational. It is irrational in the sense that it places a very strong limitation on open-mindedness, a limitation not found in other universes of discourse.

I believe, however, that this phrase can be seen to have a different use in the framework of Christian language than Bartley would have it. As I see it, "allegiance to Christ" is a "boundary notion"—i. e., it exists theologically and logically on the boundary of Christian language. One must cross it if one is to participate in Christian belief and understand its language. So this phrase has to do with commitment and can be interpreted in the light of J. L. Austin's commissive speech acts.⁹ In other words, from the logical point of view one can see this as a statement of ultimate commitment, an "end statement,"¹⁰ if you please. It has to do with the constitutive element of Christian belief and

⁹J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, 1962).

¹⁰For more about "end statements," "constitutive concepts," "bliks," and the like, see D. D. Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement* (London, 1963); John Hick, *Faith and the Philosophers* (London, 1964); Basil Mitchell, ed., *Faith and Logic* (London, 1958); D. Z. Phillips, ed., *Religion and Understanding* (Oxford, 1967); *Talk of God, The Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures, Volume II, 1967-68* (London, 1969).

language, the concept of God. It is not necessary here to unpack the whole theological Christ-idea, but only to assert that Christians have traditionally believed that God was in Christ and is known through him. "Allegiance to Christ" has to do with this basic notion. Asserting such allegiance, then, is asserting acceptance of one of the ultimate presuppositions of the Christian universe of discourse. It means accepting those tacit presuppositions apart from which it is not logically possible to speak or think in a Christian way. It is plausible then to claim that in expressing allegiance to Christ the Christian is in a position something like that of the scientific thinker who, when pressed on the continuous existence of physical objects, simply says, "This notion must be accepted if we are to engage in scientific research." He is saying that such a belief is a constitutive concept of science—i. e., it exists on the logical boundaries of science. If this is the case, "allegiance to Christ" is nothing more nor less than the logical impossibility of participating in a universe of discourse without accepting its ultimate or tacit presuppositions.¹¹ It should be quite clear that this kind of impossibility is not peculiar to Christianity, and equally clear that it does not render it irrational. Surely in this logical sense it is as impossible to speak in moral terms and deny allegiance to the concept of moral value, or in terms of physical science and deny allegiance to physical objectivity, as it is to be a Christian believer and not give allegiance to Christ.

Bartley's point concerning "allegiance to Christ" is mistaken, then, because he sees this as reporting an unyielding commitment to a concept *within* the Christian universe of discourse, whereas I want to claim that it has to do with the basic presuppositions of this universe of discourse. It exists "on the boundary," so to speak.

Along the same line, a similar point is relevant. This is the point that what counts as a reason is always dependent on the context in which one is speaking—i. e., reasons are context-dependent. Although the universes of discourse just discussed are all linked together in the broader context of ordinary language, with some interchange and overlap of meaning, they are nevertheless also distinct from one another. They are distinct in the sense that they are constituted by a concept or set of concepts basic to each particular context. They are also distinct in that each has, to some extent, its own rules of inference. As pointed out, physical science is constituted by the concept of a physical object, and moral discourse is constituted by the concept of moral value. Moreover, the conclusions of science are not established in precisely the same way as the conclusions of moral discourse. It is important to keep these logical distinctions in mind, since to ignore them leads to confusion.

Now with all this in mind I want to point out that when one who considers himself a rationalist abandons a particular belief he does so on the basis of good reasons. Similarly, a rationalist in religion will necessarily be a person who, if he abandons a belief, does so for good

¹¹W. D. Hudson, *Ludwig Wittgenstein, the Bearing of his Philosophy on Religious Belief* (Richmond, 1968), pp. 46-49; and, along the same line, L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York, 1970), p. 179.

religious reasons. This is an important point. What I am suggesting is that *within* the religious context it is possible to hold all the beliefs that one holds open to abandonment or modification if he believes he has good religious reasons for such abandonment or modification.¹² Even within a particular form of belief, such as Christian theism, it is possible to be rational in this sense.

Bartley's conception of allegiance to Christ would make it an adherence to certain static dogmas. But the suggestion here is that such allegiance is a much more dynamic process, and I think a great deal of contemporary theology would agree with this suggestion and its understanding of what allegiance to Christ actually means. Clearly there is much diversity within evangelical circles today regarding beliefs and life styles. All are agreed that one must give allegiance to Jesus Christ, but within that framework some believe in infant baptism, some teach the baptism of adults, some encourage glossolalia and some eschew it. These are controversies *within* the boundaries of Christian commitment. Christians who debate such issues understand that they are debating with other Christians (unbelievers do not debate the merits or demerits of infant baptism) and they cite recognized authorities.

Furthermore, I think the history of Christian doctrine bears out this understanding of what "allegiance to Christ" means. This is a history that has sometimes emphasized one aspect of Christian doctrine, sometimes another. The Reformers in their day emphasized grace and faith. The liberal-fundamentalist controversies of the early twentieth century found evangelicals emphasizing the deity of Christ. The future no doubt will find new problems and new emphases. The history of doctrinal studies, taking place within the larger context of historical theology, can hardly be viewed as a static history. It is, on the contrary, one of growth and change that takes place *within* a particular logical framework. It is, I think, plausible to speak of this as a case of a universe of discourse growing and changing with men's experience of the world. And from this perspective it can be asserted that a Christian, as such, is free to modify particular beliefs concerning what is revealed about God in Christ and still remain a Christian. What he cannot abandon is the notion that what is revealed about God is revealed in Jesus Christ. This is basic to being a Christian as opposed to, say, being a Moslem. As we have seen, this is a logical point. It is really to say nothing more than that he cannot abandon his Christianity without abandoning his Christianity. What we have here is not a case of a closed mind but a case of defining words, concepts, and universes of discourse. Again, as pointed out earlier, this is something like physical science, since within that universe of discourse there is much growth and change but it all takes place within certain logical boundaries. Clearly it would be distinctly odd to accuse a physical scientist of having a closed mind because he refused to give up the concept of physical objectivity. To refuse to abandon such a concept as a physical scientist is not to be narrow-minded; it is simply to refuse to abandon physical science.

¹²W. D. Hudson, *A Philosophical Approach to Religion*, pp. 184 f.

Now I am aware that the opinion that the Christian is not as free or open-minded within his context as I have claimed is an opinion that has often been held within the Church. The Churches of Christ, for instance, teach that only those baptized by immersion are genuinely Christians; for them this is a boundary issue. But it cannot be denied that this is only one notion of how Christian language and belief work, and it has existed alongside other more open views, such as the one put forward here.

On the understanding of the phrase "allegiance to Christ" that I am laying down here, then, it is possible (logically) for a Christian to hold all his *particular* Christian beliefs open to criticism. In answering the earlier question, "How open-minded is it possible for the religious believer *qua* religious believer to be?", I would claim that he can be at least as open-minded as the rationalist *qua* rationalist can be. If this is correct, it refutes Bartley's assertion that participation in Christian belief is inherently irrational.

Is it rational to participate in Christian belief and its universe of discourse? Although I am aware that there may be other problems involved, I would suggest that it is at least as rational as the other universes of discourse that have been discussed here. If this is so, the claim that participation in Christian belief and its attendant life are inherently irrational activities is a false claim.