books will, of course and rightly, find their readerships. But Auden's address to Clio seems, still, addressed to all critics and readers of 'literature':

> I dare not ask if you bless the poets
> For you do not look as if you ever read them
> Nor can I see a reason why you should.

Against Natural Theology

Alistair Grimes

I want to take up the challenge made by Brian Davies in a recent article, in which he argues that natural theology remains unscathed at the hands of contemporary theological criticism.[1] I shall try and show that his optimism is largely unfounded, firstly, by showing the confusions in his own arguments, and then by indicating some grounds for a more widespread dissatisfaction with the whole enterprise of natural theology.

For both Davies and myself, the natural theologian is one who holds that the proposition 'God exists' is a respectable assertion that can be rationally sustained without recourse to a priori acceptance of God's existence, or any kind of special revelation.[2] As Davies notes, such an approach contrasts strongly with Liberal Protestantism, and in particular Barth and Tillich, who insist that there is no *justification* or *foundation* for Christianity in the sense understood by natural theology. Barth's own attitude is well expressed in his masterly summation of 'Church Dogmatics', "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the bible tells me so". Davies will have none (or very little) of this and spends some time attacking both Barth and Tillich. His first target is, however, Alasdair MacIntyre, or at least the Alasdair MacIntyre of 'The Logical Status of Religious Belief'.[3] MacIntyre suggests that natural theology is incompatible (in the sense of trying to provide a proof) with the idea of freely accepting the love of God and that, paradoxically, the *success* of such arguments would be as destructive of religion as the

[1] 'Theology and Natural Theology', *New Blackfriars*, June 1977.

[2] Ibid. p. 256.

[3] MacIntyre subsequently changed his mind (see 'Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing?' in *'Faith and the Philosophers'* Ed. J. Hick).

sceptic holds their failure to be. For MacIntyre, the justification for religion is not to be discovered in the search for foundations, but by *elucidating* more fully what is involved in religious belief.

According to Davies, MacIntyre's position rests on three questionable assumptions. Firstly, it assumes that what is believed *cannot* be proved. This is obviously false, Davies argues, since one can believe something now and later on have it shown to be true, or believe in something, unawares that it has been shown to be true elsewhere. The second assumption is that what is believed must be a matter of *decision*. This, says Davies, may be true in some cases, but is not a necessary condition. For example, some belief statements are claims to knowledge and vice versa ("I believe that the earth is round" *can* be the equivalent of "I know that the earth is round"). But, since to talk of knowledge is to talk of compulsion and not of decision (I do not decide to accept Euclid's theorems), it follows that where belief claims include claims to knowledge there can be no talk of decisions either. Thirdly, if God's existence can be proved, someone who holds this cannot freely choose to love God. Davies replies that coming to love someone may be a matter of finding oneself doing something rather than coming to a decision, and secondly, that coming to accept God's existence does not guarantee a religious (i.e. loving) response to Him. One could believe in God but rebel against him.[4] To the possible supplementary argument that, in Pascal's celebrated phrase, "the God of the philosophers" is not "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", we find Davies arguing that two people can give different descriptions of the same person or thing, but still have enough in common to agree that it is the same person or object they are talking about.

The main failing of Davies' argument is that he cannot see (despite having read Wittgenstein) any difference between the grammar of 'I believe in God' and 'I believe that McX is in town'. Most importantly, he fails to see that belief in a religious context does not express a degree of *uncertainty* in the way that it would with empirical statements. Of course it is true to say that 'I believe McX is in town today' can be proved to be true later on, viz. by someone seeing McX. But it is important to see that the evidence produced changes things, for now we no longer believe, we know. As long as belief expresses a degree of uncertainty in relation to knowing, we cannot believe *and* know at the same time. MacIntyre's point to this effect is not touched by Davies' example.

In fact, Davies' suggestion of proof turning up at a later date creates difficulties for his own account. It is certainly not a char-

[4] This example is mine and not Davies'.

acteristic of religious beliefs that we hold them provisionally or conditionally whilst awaiting more evidence. What kind of evidence does Davies imagine we are waiting for? Does he himself say such things as "I'm just believing in God till some better evidence turns up, then I'll *know* that He exists"? As Wittgenstein remarked, 'You might say (in the normal use): "You only believe—oh well..."'[5] but it would be a misunderstanding to say to the religious believer 'So you *only* believe'.

This confusion over the grammar of religious language is present in Davies' discussion of the relationship between belief and decision. It is odd to see him quoting Wittgenstein with approval, when the point being made in 'On Certainty'[6] is the opposite of that implied by Davies. Briefly put, Wittgenstein is arguing against G. E. Moore and an imaginary sceptic about the nature of propositions such as 'I know that I have two hands'. Against the sceptic, Wittgenstein argues that there is no possibility of doubting such statements or of making a mistake about them, they are the 'bedrock' of language, the 'hinges' on which the door of language turns. But he does not agree with Moore, who treats them as *empirical* propositions, such that anyone who doubted them would be disagreeing over a matter of *fact*. Wittgenstein insists that doubt in such a case is not a possible alternative *within* a mode of discourse. but a rejection, or failure to come to grips with that mode of discourse. As doubt is not an option here, 'knowing' and 'believing' are not options either (since their opposite is clearly nonsensical). But it is important to note that this is not true of religious beliefs. If someone says (in ordinary circumstances) "I don't know whether I've got two hands or not", it is clear that they are not making a mistake but are mad or joking. We cannot decide to believe in the material world, but the existence of God does not present itself in such a brute fashion. Whilst there *are* available alternatives to a religious view of life, there is no sane alternative to accepting the language of physical objects, or indeed, the physical world. It is not clear that 'knowing' and 'believing' are inappropriate in religious talk in the way that they are in the central examples of 'On Certainty'.

It is also worth pointing out that by claiming that if I believe in God, meaning (in part) that I know that God exists, then belief is involuntary (since knowledge is a matter of compulsion), Davies begs the question. He assumes that we have grounds, not only for asserting that God exists, but that He actually does exist. In other words, belief in God will only be a matter of compulsion if, and

[5] L. Wittgenstein, *'Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief'*, Ed. C. Barrett, Blackwell 1966, p. 60.

[6] Blackwell, 1969 paras. 173, 177, 218.

only if, there is a God. And here we are entitled to ask Davies' grounds for holding such a belief; for we cannot move from claiming that 'I believe X exists equals I know X exists' to 'X exists' without independent grounds for establishing that X does exist. What are they?

I do, however, agree with Davies that religious beliefs are not always a matter of decision. A child brought up in a religious family does not decide to believe in God, a point brought out by Kierkegaard's reply to the question 'How do you know God exists?'—'I was taught it as a child'. The child learns about the reality of God in the context of activities such as praying and worshipping, in the same way that it learns about the reality of physical objects in the context of touching, carrying and recognising them. The two activities go together in the sense that the child does not first of all master 'talk about physical objects' and then go on to more advanced 'God talk' but learns about God and tables and in doing so starts to grasp the similarities and differences between them. Nevertheless, there comes a point at which it is religiously important that the child becomes mature enough to confess belief in God for itself. It is true to say that deciding to believe in God is not like deciding to go for a walk (how odd if it were) or even to trust another human (though there are parallels). Rather, belief in God shows itself in a host of decisions that we make about what to do, just as our understanding of the physical world shows itself in other kinds of decisions. But it is still true to point out that we can reject the religion of our childhood for another faith or atheism in a way that we cannot reject the physical world. Nothing Davies says refutes this, and his parallel will only hold if neither can sensibly be rejected.

Davies suggests, and I agree with him, that MacIntyre is wrong to claim that even if Divine utterances were accompanied by thunderbolts, we could not look up and say with Rush Rhees:

> If my first and chief reason for worshipping God had to be a belief that a super-Frankenstein would blast me to hell if I did not, then I hope I should have the decency to tell this being, who is named Almighty God, to go ahead and blast.[7]

In fairness to MacIntyre it ought to be stressed that if our decision to worship God was on the basis of our fear of punishment, we would not be loving God at all, but cravenly acting out of self-interest. As Rhees puts it:

> Is the reason for not worshipping the devil instead of God that God is stronger than the devil? God will get you in the end, the devil will not be able to save you from his fury, and then you will be *for* it. 'Think of your future boy, and don't throw away your chances.' What a creeping and vile sort of thing

[7] Rush Rhees, *Without Answers.* Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969 p. 113.

79

religion must be.[8]

But by saying that acceptance of the proofs offered by natural theology does not guarantee a loving response, Davies is saying far more than he thinks; for what then is the purpose of natural theology? If natural theology cannot bring us to see that God is our creator and father, and accept the religious significance of that confession, how is it related to, or important in, the context of religious beliefs?

A final difficulty arises over Davies' claim that there is no reason for not accepting that we cannot know that the 'God of the philosophers' is the same as the 'God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'. As he correctly says, we can come to discover that two different descriptions do in fact refer to the same person. This is because, in the circumstances envisaged, we have appropriate methods and techniques for comparison. But again, is such a procedure applicable with God? As Wittgenstein points out, our *normal* technique of comparison leaves us here.[9] We can't point to God and say "That's Him" in the way that we can with a tree or Mrs. Thatcher. In short, there is not the philosopher's description, be it that of Prime Mover, First Cause, or Necessary Being, the believer's description, 'He Who Is', 'Our Father', *and* a way of comparing them. We simply have the two sets of descriptions and no obvious way of bringing them together. To use the criteria of either would be to beg the question. Nor could we argue that *all* of these descriptions apply (in part) to God, like a series of clues that eventually leads to the criminal's identity. We would still need an independent check, and if God really is all of the things philosophers and theologians have said about Him, He must have an Almighty identity crisis!

II

Barth and Tillich are brought into the discussion by Davies when he considers further questions. Are, he asks, natural theology and faith unconnected? and is natural theology alien to the bible? Both of them answer these questions with a 'yes'. For the former God is 'wholly other', for the latter 'God exists' is a denial of God. Both these statements wear the air of paradox. If God is 'wholly other', how can we intelligibly say anything about Him? or distinguish between sense and nonsense when God is the subject of a sentence? Tillich's remark is, on the face of it, contradictory.

Now I do not want to defend Barth and Tillich in general,

[8] Ibid. p. 113.

[9] *Cf. Lectures and Conversations* p. 63.

but in the cases cited they are not as hopelessly placed as Davies suggests. Kierkegaard once said that 'God does not exist—He is eternal'[10] and this has the force of a grammatical remark. Like Tillich, he is bringing out what can and cannot be said about God. As Anselm points out in the Proslogion, the fool cannot ask "Did God exist yesterday, and will He exist in five years time?", for God is not a being among beings who, as a matter of fact, might or might not exist. Instead of plunging in and asking 'Does God exist?', Tillich wants to find out the *kind* of reality that God has, and this is more akin to asking 'What kind of reality do physical objects have?' than 'Does this object exist or not?' Davies may reply that this begs the question by presupposing that God exists, but this is not so. The general point I wish to establish is well made by Peter Winch.

> Reality is not what gives language sense. What is real and what is unreal shows itself *in* the sense that language has. Further, both the distinction between the real and the unreal and the concept of agreement with reality themselves belong to our language. I will not say that they are concepts in the language like any other, since it is clear that they occupy a commanding, and in a sense a limiting, position there. We can imagine a language with no concept of, say, wetness, but hardly one where there is no way of distinguishing the real from the unreal without understanding the way this distinction operates in the language. If then we wish to understand the significance of these concepts, we must examine the use they actually do have— *in* the language.[11]

Davies speaks as if there were such an external check, outside the use of language. This is why he can tell us "To say that God does not exist is therefore to say that there is not a something or other, where this 'something or other' is God." And again, "When existential claims about the sort of thing God is said to be are made in non-theological contexts it makes perfectly good sense to ask for evidence, reasons and proofs. There is no obvious reason why one should not ask similar questions in the case of existential claims concerning God."[12] Davies seems to think that the same standards of rationality apply to all subjects (hence his unqualified use of 'rational' and 'reasonable') and that there is no difference in principle between finding out if God exists and finding out if Edinburgh Library has six floors. We simply see if these propositions agree with reality.

If Winch is correct, we can see that not only is there no overall concept of reality (or reason) outside various ways of living and

[10] See *'Concluding Unscientific Postscript'*, Princeton University Press, 1944, p. 296.

[11] P. Winch, *Ethics and Action*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972. pp. 12-13.

[12] Op cit. pp. 260-62.

modes of social life to which Davies can appeal, but that he himself is guilty of begging the question. To ask 'Does God exist?' appears to be an impartial request, but it assumes that we already *know* the kind of reality God has and how to go about finding if He is there or not. My point is that to understand the question we must see what kind of reality God has for the religious believer, and this can only be done by looking at the context in which the believer talks about God, in prayer and worship. To do otherwise would be to erect a straw deity. In this sense religious language is prior to philosophical reflection about God, and if this is so, religious language is itself the *standard* to which philosophy must appeal, rather than being an entity that is *justified* by philosophy.

To labour the point, we learn *in* science what counts as good and bad reasoning and we learn *within* religion what can and cannot be said about God, though not by using the same methods. By taking praise of God that occurs in the context of prayer to be a *description* of 'something', Davies can ask 'Is there something that corresponds to this description?' without recognising that he is committing an *ignoratio elenchi*. He tells us that we can ask 'similar' questions about God to those we ask in any other context, but are the methods the same, and if not, how do they differ? What kind of criteria does he think will span these seemingly diverse questions? Surely not those of empirical investigation? Davies would like 'reason' to romp unrestrained over all questions, but this merely blinds him to how different questions and the method of answering them can be.

Davies criticises Tillich for not demonstrating that the idea of a non-material being (to be identified with God) is incoherent, but he has put things the wrong way around; surely it is the task of the natural theologian to show that we *need* the concept of such a being to make sense of the world. It is because he recognises the power of the objections to this line of reasoning that comes from Hume and Kant that Tillich wisely steers clear of such an enterprise. These arguments are too lengthy and well known to bear repetition here, but it would be interesting to see how Davies intends to circumvent them. In the absence of any arguments in his paper, the case must go against him by default.

But I do not wish to stray too far from the questions we started with. Suppose that an argument was successful. Oddly, it is MacIntyre who holds that this would commit us to obeying and worshipping God (if not loving Him) and Davies who holds that we could be impressed by its intellectual rigour, whilst remaining unmoved in any religious sense. I have already suggested that this would tell against Davies's own argument. If someone told me that there existed a being of enormous power who had made the world, why should this have any more *religious* significance than someone else telling me that the record for staying underwater

without oxygen is ten minutes? Why couldn't I reply "That's amazing, how *did* he do it" to both of them? If religious people wanted me to see the importance of their beliefs, would they start with the concept of a First Cause? If they did, I should wonder what they were so impressed by. If they read me the Sermon on the Mount, or Genesis, I might *start* to understand something about its importance. Religion is not a theoretical matter, and I cannot understand how an argument could bring anyone to understand what is involved in loving or trusting God. If Davies objects that we need the bible, but that natural theology provides a foundation for the rationality of religion, I can only reply that I still cannot see what His existence has to do with worshipping Him. If Davies means that talk of God must refer to something, I can happily agree with him. My point is that referring to God is very different from referring to objects and that it cannot be understood *outside* of religious language in the way that he wants to.

Arguments, we are both agreed, do not lead people to act in a loving way towards God. I do not know what kind of thing Davies has in mind when he discusses natural theology and the bible, but I do know that there are no arguments for the existence of God in it. The Jews in exile are told to trust Jaweh, not given arguments to show that 'It's all right, He does exist'. Nor did Jesus do anything like produce an argument to show God exists and that he was His Son. He lived a certain kind of life. The Bible shows a people incapable of understanding an enterprise such as natural theology. I doubt if there were many Jewish atheists who needed a rational proof of Jaweh's existence.

Perhaps it is because we do not live in a society permeated by religious notions that men feel the need to *demonstrate* that God exists. We can no longer turn to the bible, so we turn to the idea of a proof, hoping that the heart will follow the mind.[13] But such a view is as irrelevant now as it was for the Jews; the natural theologian is not one who leads the unbeliever towards God, but one who in Kierkegàard's words "at the outset took the wrong way and then continued to go farther and farther along this false way".[14]

[13] In view of MacIntyre's belief that our obedience would be out of fear, if nothing else, a more appropriate sentiment might be that of the U.S. general in Vietnam, "When you've got them by the balls, who cares about their hearts and minds!"

[14] *Purity of Heart*, Fontana Books, p. 48.