



BASIL MITCHELL

Basil George Mitchell

1917–2011

Career Outline

ALTHOUGH BASIL MITCHELL was eventually to make his reputation as a philosopher of religion, his first interests suggested a somewhat different trajectory, perhaps in comparative religion. Born on 9 April 1917 to middle class parents in Bath (his father was a quantity surveyor), it was while living in Southampton that his mother became permanently confined to bed as a result of severe rheumatoid arthritis and remained there for the last twenty years of her life (1928–47). Although Basil was confirmed in the Church of England, his parents' search for some relief for his mother's condition led him along with the rest of his family to attend Sufi services of universal worship that included extracts from the sacred texts of all the major religions. Indeed, that search included taking his mother in 1938 to the Paris headquarters of Hazrat Inayat Khan who had brought this particular version of Sufism from India. Although Basil's decision to read Greats at The Queen's College, Oxford was quite conventional, it is significant that he confesses to not finding the way philosophy was then taught particularly interesting and that the real satisfaction of his desires came when he was awarded a scholarship to study Indian philosophy under Radhakrishnan, then a professor at Oxford, and began to learn Sanskrit.¹

¹Further details are available in Basil's autobiography, B. G. Mitchell, *Looking Back: on Faith, Philosophy and Friends in Oxford* (Durham, 2009), and, more briefly, in 'War and friendship', in K. J. Clark (ed.), *Philosophers Who Believe* (Downers Grove, IL, 1993), pp. 23–44.

What profoundly changed Basil's attitudes were his experiences in the Second World War. Initially tempted towards conscientious objection, he came to see this as an inadequate response to the sheer evil that Hitler represented. However, in approaching the alternatives he was also struck by the inadequacy of the most famous discussion of duties in war in Indian religious writing, the dialogue between the warrior Arjuna and the god Krishna in the *Bhagavadgita*, where the issue seems reduced to duties consequent to being born into a particular social class.² By contrast, the ministrations of his chaplain in the Royal Navy, Lancelot Fleming, made a profound impression, but so too did the context in which he now operated. He had come to see, in contrast to his earlier search for the universal in all religions, the importance of particularity, of the way in which individuals are nourished (or otherwise) by particular historical processes and institutions: in this case, the Navy at its best and at its worst.³ More importantly for his future, the stress in Christianity on the embodiment of the divine in a particular figure and within a particular time and place in the incarnation of Christ no longer seemed incongruous but to fit well with his understanding of human existence in general.⁴

Although he had undertaken no studies in western philosophy since the conclusion of his undergraduate studies in 1939, he secured initially a lectureship at Christ Church in 1946 and then a fellowship at Keble the following year, where he eventually promoted (in 1960) the election to Warden of another major influence on his life, Austin Farrer.⁵ In particular, Farrer's 1948 Bampton Lectures (subsequently published as *The Glass of Vision*: London, 1948) had had a profound impact, confirming him in a belief in the congruity of natural religion and Christianity in an exercise of what he called 'the controlled imagination'.⁶ So it is perhaps not surprising that, rather than engaging with the sort of topics that interested the majority of his philosophy colleagues, he found most satisfaction in delivering the standard course of thirty-six lectures on Plato's *Republic* or in the activities of the Socratic Club, of which C. S. Lewis was then President, and to which role Basil eventually succeeded.

Whereas the Socratic Club was essentially an undergraduate society in which senior members also participated, the Metaphysicals (founded in 1948 by Eric Mascall) was for senior members only who were interested in

²Mitchell, 'War and friendship', pp. 28–9.

³Ibid., pp. 31–2; Mitchell, *Looking Back*, pp. 68–130.

⁴Mitchell, 'War and friendship', pp. 36–7.

⁵Mitchell, *Looking Back*, pp. 227–8.

⁶Mitchell, 'War and friendship', pp. 38–9.

the relations between philosophy and theology. The group included, at various times, apart from Mascall and Mitchell, David Brown, Ian Crombie, Jane Day, Austin Farrer, Michael Foster, Richard Hare, Andrew Louth, John Lucas, Iris Murdoch, Ian Ramsey, Richard Swinburne, Christopher Stead, Maurice Wiles, and Rowan Williams.⁷ The group was also the occasion for Basil's first edited volume, *Faith and Logic*, which appeared in 1957 (London). While two articles from about the same time clearly reflect the immediate preoccupations of his philosophical colleagues, here he felt free to venture more widely into the topic of divine grace.⁸ His first sole authored monograph, *Law, Morality, and Religion in a Secular Society* (Oxford, 1967), also ranged more widely, in a contribution to a debate between two lawyers, H. L. A. Hart and Patrick Devlin, over how far, if at all, religious perceptions might legitimately be allowed to contribute to the shaping of legislation in a secular society. Prior to publication Hart offered nine handwritten pages of critical comment, while afterwards Gilbert Ryle sent an appreciative note.⁹

The following year, 1968, saw him appointed to the Nolloth Chair of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion which carries with it a fellowship at Oriel College, and there Basil remained till retirement in 1984. Although eventually elected to the British Academy in 1983, his selection for the chair in 1968 seemed to many surprising. Not only had Basil published relatively little by this stage of his career (the monograph mentioned above is quite brief), there also seemed a more obvious candidate in the wings, in the shape of John Hick who had already published two important and substantial volumes (*Faith and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY, 1957) and *Evil and the God of Love* (London, 1966)), as well as a standard textbook *Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1963) which would go on to sell over half a million copies. In his own autobiography Hick generously comments on Basil's election that 'this was an excellent appointment with which neither I nor anyone else could quarrel'.¹⁰ Yet Hick continued to be the much more widely known name, while several of his books, unlike Basil's, continue to be in print. So (without directly comparing the two

⁷The group did not long survive Basil's own retirement.

⁸His first two articles were on 'Theology and falsification' and 'Varieties of imperative' (1957). The former with its parable of the partisan or stranger was to become a much used example in later years of how the then popular contrast between confirmation or refutation of God's existence was oversimplified: see A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (eds.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London, 1955), pp. 103–5.

⁹Mitchell, *Looking Back*, pp. 264, 266.

¹⁰J. Hick, *An Autobiography* (Oxford, 2002), p. 155.

figures, inappropriate in any case in such an essay), it is worth reflecting on why Basil's writings might nonetheless be of lasting significance.

On social morality

Law, Morality and Religion in a Secular Society was first delivered as a Cadbury lecture series at the University of Birmingham. Given the topical nature of the lectures, the result was reviews in law journals as well as philosophical and theological periodicals.¹¹ While Lord Devlin had defended the right of legislators to impose laws that reflected the views of society as a whole and Professor Hart restricted this right to what in general inhibited harm towards others, Mitchell attempted to steer a middle course. On the one hand, he found Hart too minimalist in his approach, while against Devlin he urged caution over what he saw as too easy readiness to make legislation correspond with contemporary prejudice, not least where openness to blackmail might otherwise be the inevitable result (Devlin's British Academy lecture had taken the issue of homosexuality as one of his key examples¹²).

One of the most interesting reviews came from Baroness Wootton in the *Philosophical Quarterly*. In his book Mitchell had expressed the worry that the kind of position espoused by Hart (and others such as Glanville Williams) might lead to the presumption that 'non-theological utilitarian principles should occupy a privileged position' in which our legislators 'should be permitted to listen to Lady Wootton but not to the Archbishop of Canterbury (unless, perhaps, he forgets his theology)'.¹³ Intriguingly, Wootton replied by entirely rejecting Mitchell's objection, arguing that 'rational argument can only proceed from common premises: and, in this case, whilst the Christians accept the premises of the secularists as valid, but insufficient, to the secularists the additional premises of the Christians are wholly unacceptable'.¹⁴ But what Wootton here altogether ignores is one of Basil's key points, that there is in fact no such entirely neutral starting

¹¹ For example, *The Law Society Gazette*, *The Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly* and *The Solicitors' Journal*.

¹² The lecture was published as 'The enforcement of morals', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 45 (1960), 129–51. Devlin's later book had the same title (*The Enforcement of Morals*: Oxford, 1965); it was partly written as a response to H. L. A. Hart, *Liberty and Morality* (Oxford, 1963).

¹³ B. G. Mitchell, *Law, Morality, and Religion in a Secular Society* (Oxford, 1967), p. 129.

¹⁴ *Philosophical Quarterly* (1968), 280–1, esp. 281.

point since understandings of harm, for example on the question of abortion, significantly differ.

It was a point that Mitchell was to elaborate in his later Gifford Lectures at Glasgow, published as *Morality: Religious and Secular* (Oxford, 1980). Surprisingly, perhaps because of their relatively informal, popular style, most reviewers assumed a relatively simple aim. As Richard Swinburne, his eventual successor in the Nolloth chair, put it, ‘the theme of Professor Mitchell’s Gifford lectures is that our traditional morality obtains an adequate justification in Christian theism and that without this framework it seems to lack such justification’.¹⁵ But this is only one thread to the argument and not necessarily of the most interest. The most fundamental idea (though not the most developed in the book) is the notion that even the basic shared foundations of liberal humanism on which people like Hart and Wootton based their assertions have not quite the impartiality to which they laid claim. Of the contributions to *Faith and Logic* which he had edited, Mitchell came eventually to most admire that by Michael Foster exposing the presuppositions in contemporary philosophers’ deceptively ‘innocent’ use of the pronoun ‘we’.¹⁶ It was a theme that Mitchell was to take up in a number of subsequent articles, including his Inaugural.¹⁷ In *Morality: Religious and Secular* a number of examples are offered *en passant* of such dubious universality, among them the difference between rights understood in terms of persons absolutely or of them as the subject of experiences (affecting issues such as abortion) or again differing social conventions that might reconfigure what constitutes an appropriate commitment to honesty.¹⁸

Secondly, there is the point that even non-Christian philosophers have seen the need for a greater richness in the basics shared by society before the transition is allowed to what are seen as matters of purely personal preference. Thus Sir Peter Strawson’s influential essay contrasting ‘Social morality and individual ideal’ is set against the desire of both Iris Murdoch and Stuart Hampshire for something more, Murdoch in terms of disinterested pursuit of the Good and Hampshire in continuing concern for the ‘sanctity’ of human life.¹⁹ The way Mitchell writes it is easy to draw the

¹⁵ *Journal of Theological Studies* (1981), 567–70, esp. 567.

¹⁶ Mitchell, ‘War and friendship’, p. 43.

¹⁷ B. G. Mitchell, *Neutrality and Commitment* (Oxford, 1968); also available in B. G. Mitchell, *How to Play Theological Ping Pong* (London, 1990), pp. 113–31.

¹⁸ B. G. Mitchell, *Morality: Religious and Secular* (Oxford, 1980); on abortion, see for example, p. 131; on honesty pp. 59–60.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, chap. 5, pp. 64–78. Strawson’s original article is included in his *Freedom and Resentment* (London, 1974).

conclusion that for him the only way of justifying that further move lies in an appeal to Christianity. However, although Mitchell does indeed move quickly in that direction, this does not quite seem to be his point. Rather, underlying any such inference there is a more basic insight, that one way or another *any* adequate social morality must move beyond the basic utilitarian strategy that Strawson had advocated. As Mitchell observes later in the same work, 'I have not claimed that there can be no morality without religion . . . it remains open to the secular moralist to contend that a secular world-view of some sort can provide a rationale.'²⁰

That this admission was not explored in any detail, though, is a pity since it could have greatly strengthened Mitchell's argument. The question is whether any society can truly flourish if only some basic grounds are shared or whether rather more is not required. British politicians commonly employ the rhetoric of a shared respect of human rights that unites us as British but, if this is all there really is, it is hard to see why the same objective could not be equally achieved by the break-up of the United Kingdom on the one hand or on the other through a United States of Europe. It was because Basil saw the need for this something more that he explored with such enthusiasm notions such as community life and tradition, and the key role institutions play in supporting them. Not all such elements need be specifically moral but the moral and the traditional are quite frequently interwoven. So, for instance, to give an example of my own, it could be argued that the current success of monarchy as a cohesive force in Britain is bound up not just with its rootedness in a particular history of the nation but also, no less forcibly, in the way privilege can be seen to carry with it correlative responsibilities and duties and so act as a moral critique of other privileged aspects of that same society. Although in the Preface Basil expresses 'a special debt' in the genesis of his own ideas to the then White's Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford, it is clear that even in his last major work *Moral Thinking* (Oxford, 1981), which came out only a year after Mitchell's Giffords, Richard Hare had still gone very little along the way towards acknowledging the complexity that Mitchell detected in issues of social morality.

However that may be, the heart of Mitchell's book was undoubtedly the aspect on which so many reviewers chose to focus exclusively, though even here it is important to note the limited nature of Mitchell's claim. It was that 'the traditional conscience' would only find its characteristic

²⁰Mitchell, *Morality: Religious and Secular*, p. 157.

social values adequately buttressed (beyond the utilitarian minimum) by appeal to the Christian roots from which those values had taken their origin. It is unfortunate that Mitchell's principal examples come from sexual ethics and the beginning and end of life since these are areas where common assumptions have veered most sharply away from the 'traditional conscience' as Mitchell portrayed it thirty years ago. That, however, emphatically does not mean that the argument of the book is without interest. It is significant, for example, that some sociologists are now arguing that the notion of the sacred has not at all disappeared but focused itself on new objects such as the inviolability of childhood where the degree of protection offered often seems out of all proportion to the harm done, by which is meant not that the protection is unjustified but that it speaks of something rather more than simply utilitarian considerations.²¹ If so, the argument nowadays might be not between religion and some purely secular enrichment of basic social norms but rather over whether some values can be successfully enhanced in an aura of inviolability without any resort to religion.

One aspect of Mitchell's position that will certainly continue to be relevant in any such debate is his insistence that such positions are not in general adopted simply by individual decision-making but rather generated in interaction with social institutions. In other words, the liberal humanist model of free choice is far from adequate in characterising how values are in fact acquired and fostered. Instead, they are heavily dependent on the sort of glue that society provides for them, not least in institutions taking one particular form rather than another, since no general value exists *in abstracto* but always in some one concrete expression rather than another. So once again the question could be raised how far a secular society can successfully underpin its values without some of its institutions requiring ritual reinforcement similar to the trappings of religion, for example in respect of oath-taking or marriage, and, if so, why not the real thing?

On philosophy of religion

Some have taken the view that rather than Mitchell's work on the philosophy of religion 'his contribution to Christian moral and social theory

²¹ For example, G. Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World* (Oxford, 2012), esp. pp. 54–86.

may prove to be of more lasting significance'.²² An initial impression might well suggest this, given the way in which philosophy of religion has moved on since Basil wrote his two key works in the area, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (London, 1973) and his Sarum Lectures, *Faith and Criticism* (Oxford, 1994). The former rejected the idea of formal arguments, deductive or inductive, for God's existence, and suggested instead the notion of a 'cumulative case', a series of considerations which taken together might weigh in favour of belief. Although Mitchell's proposal had also excluded any argument from strict probability, Richard Swinburne, his successor in the chair (and whom Basil had also strongly supported for that role), was to offer just such a cumulative case in his 1979 work *The Existence of God* (Oxford) with much use of probability theory, including Bayes' theorem. There religious experience was argued to tip the balance decisively in favour of 'more probable than not'. Hugely influential (with a new edition published in 2004), *The Existence of God* could be said to have eclipsed any further importance for the earlier book. Certainly, Mitchell's volume has a more obviously dated ring to it with its many references to various academic disputes of the time that are less significant now. More importantly, it also fails to deliver what the title suggests, a justification for belief in God.

But to leave matters there would be in fact to distort Mitchell's intentions which were not in any case to offer such a cumulative argument but rather create an appropriate framework against which its presentation could be accepted as legitimate and reasonable. It was for this reason that he spent so much space considering how argument is conducted in other academic disciplines: in literary criticism, in historical judgement and in scientific debates over rival theories. His point was that the more disputed evidence there is at stake, the more difficult it becomes to reduce such discussion to formal syllogisms. Instead, a nexus of factors interweave, with it impossible to predict in advance at precisely what point one stronghold falls and another arises to take its place. To illustrate with one of Mitchell's briefer examples, literary critics who believe the poet Andrew Marvell hostile to Cromwell are compelled to treat ironically one poem that seems to evince a contrary view. However, while those who take the opposing position can find support in that particular poem, it is significant that they are nonetheless forced to admit Marvell's use of irony else-

²²O. O'Donovan, 'The reasonable man: an appreciation', in W. J. Abraham and S. W. Holtzer (eds.), *The Rationality of Religious Belief: Essays in Honour of Basil Mitchell* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 1–15, esp. 8.

where; so the argument cannot reach any immediate or simple solution.²³ Such a brief summary might possibly suggest that Mitchell comes perilously close to the arbitrary free play of much postmodernist thought. But that is not at all his intention. Rather, what he wants to suggest is that in most intellectual reflection there are no hard and fast rules. It is a matter of how easily the various factors presented allow us to inhabit a certain space without too much change to our existing presuppositions.

How differently the nature of justification of Christian belief is conceived by Mitchell and Swinburne is well brought out by one of Mitchell's most distinguished former research students, William J. Abraham. He notes in particular how, while Swinburne talks of justification of belief in God, for Mitchell it is more a matter of the reasonableness of Christian theism, the whole interrelated sweep of Christian belief, an approach that brings him more into line with Austin Farrer, John Henry Newman and Bishop Joseph Butler. But three further contrasts are also noted, the dialectical character of Mitchell's reasoning (with conclusions allowed to modify premises and so on), a distinctively personal element, and what can sometimes appear as alarmingly loose criteria.²⁴ More substantially, Abraham doubts whether any one individual could quite offer the kind of justification that Mitchell envisages since the considerations are 'too fine, subtle, circuitous, numerous and various ... that any attempt is almost bound to appear hopelessly artificial, wooden and inadequate'.²⁵ However, such a conclusion seems to my mind unnecessarily pessimistic. What Mitchell was trying to do was steer a middle course between the Scylla of modelling the arts disciplines (including philosophy) on science and the Charybdis of a postmodernist collapse into an arbitrary free-for all. Admittedly, much contemporary philosophy takes science as its model, as in impressive recent volumes on moral philosophy from Derek Parfit or the project on religious epistemology upon which John Hawthorne has recently embarked.²⁶ But Mitchell may yet be proved right, that capturing the essence of ethics and religion requires a greater range of types of consideration and of argument than can easily fit within such a model.²⁷

²³ B. G. Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (London, 1973), pp. 49–51.

²⁴ W. J. Abraham, 'Cumulative case arguments for Christian theism', in Abraham and Holtzer, *The Rationality of Religious Belief*, pp. 17–37, esp. 23–7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁶ D. Parfit, *On What Matters*, two volumes (Oxford, 2011); John Hawthorne, Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy at Oxford, has been awarded a Templeton grant of £1.3 million to research the issue.

²⁷ For an in-depth comparison between Mitchell and Swinburne, see R. Prevost, *Probability and Theistic Explanation* (Oxford, 1990).

In *The Justification of Religious Belief* only once had appeal been made to John Henry Newman and his famous depiction in *The Grammar of Assent* of ordinary human reasoning as ‘the culmination of probabilities . . . probabilities too fine to avail separately, too subtle and circuitous to be convertible into syllogisms, too numerous and various for such conversion’.²⁸ By contrast, in *Faith and Criticism* Newman is referred to no less than nine times, and Mitchell’s still tentative exploration of this understanding of human reasoning in the earlier work now converted into a firm basis for the exploration of Christian belief itself. This is still not to say that we are offered an actual justification. However, Mitchell now provides a far clearer and more substantial exposition of what it might mean to declare such an approach reasonable and rational not only in approaching the mere fact of religious belief but also its consequences in everything from approaches to the authority of Scripture to religious education in schools. Although Mitchell’s archive indicates that it sold quite slowly (presumably explained in part by the fact that it was written a decade after retirement and in part by the very lack of topical reference that makes *The Justification of Religious Belief* now seem so dated), I personally would have no hesitation in regarding *Faith and Criticism* as the best of Mitchell’s works.

Mitchell had clearly been stung by D. Z. Phillips’s parody of the position he had advocated in the earlier work. So far from characterising actual belief, Phillips had suggested that the certainties of Psalm 139 would now need to be rewritten: ‘If I ascend into heaven, thou are probably there; if I make my bed in hell, it is cumulatively likely that thou are there.’²⁹ Mitchell’s response is to suggest how, contrary to philosophers such as Phillips or Kierkegaard or theologians such as Karl Barth, faith and openness to critical inquiry are natural partners. Instead of the usual depiction of the liberal in theology as revisionary he relabels that debate as between traditionalist and progressive and suggests that the natural position for a Christian is as a liberal open to criticism with its opposite not orthodoxy or conservatism but fundamentalism, the refusal to countenance any change whatsoever. Indeed, the book ends with a strong affirmation of a Christian undergirding for valuing those who disagree with us since all are valued in the sight of God and it is through interaction with others that our own beliefs are either strengthened or corrected.

²⁸ J. H. Newman, *Grammar of Assent* (New York, 1955), II, 8,2, p. 230.

²⁹ D. Z. Phillips, *Faith after Foundationalism* (London, 1988), pp. 9–10.

For Mitchell there is no ‘sharp dichotomy between scientific explanation and other kinds of explanation ... instead, there is a continuum of rational disciplines from physics and chemistry through the biological and social sciences to the humanities and metaphysics ... At each stage of the continuum, not excluding the first, there is discernible a broader type of rationality in which rival explanations are canvassed and defensible choices made between them. The degree of analogy between each stage and the next, and the evident conduit between them, make it highly implausible to suggest that at some point in the sequence we encounter a decisive break.’³⁰ All disciplines thus involve prior commitments and assumptions and so the ideal academic virtue is not neutrality but impartiality, that is willingness to treat counter-positions and arguments fairly while at the same time resolutely pursuing the course that one personally believes will lead to the truth. Accordingly, as evoking the right kind of attitude Darwin can be evoked from one end of the spectrum and Mr Knightley in Jane Austen’s *Emma* from the other. The reason is that at the end of *The Origin of Species* Darwin announces his continuing commitment to his theory even while conceding that some objections ‘are so grave that to this day I can never reflect on them without being staggered’, while Mr Knightley finds that his understanding of Emma and her foibles is intensified by his love for her, not diminished.³¹ Although in drawing science nearer to the arts the influence of Thomas Kuhn is acknowledged in both books, significantly two other major influences that according to his autobiography helped shape his thinking found no mention at the time, namely W. V. Quine on logic and William Dray on the philosophy of history.³²

So the conclusion drawn is that the countless theologians from Schleiermacher to Barth who have retreated from claims to reasonableness for theology have erred in assuming too narrow a conception of rationality and indeed of truth. As Newman saw, it is impossible to proportion our beliefs precisely to the evidence given the way in which they are intricately interwoven with other assumptions, while, as Farrer insisted, poetry and myth can give access to truths no less profound than those generated by scientific investigation.³³ It is perhaps therefore not surprising that in his review of his successor Swinburne’s book on the same topic (*Faith and Reason*, Oxford, 1981) he spoke of its ‘curiously

³⁰ B. G. Mitchell, *Faith and Criticism* (Oxford, 1994), p. 77.

³¹ *Ibid.*, for Darwin, p. 18, for Mr Knightley, pp. 12–14 and 85.

³² Mitchell, *Looking Back*, pp. 262–3.

³³ Mitchell, *Faith and Criticism*, for Newman, pp. 11 ff.; for Farrer, p. 79.

one-dimensional' character. Swinburne's description of true belief as involuntary Mitchell suggests works best for 'comparatively low-level theories,' particularly of a relatively simple perceptual or experiential kind but altogether fails when applied to 'the subtlety and complexity' of deep commitments.³⁴

It is also in *Faith and Criticism* that is to be found one of Basil's more robust defences of religious education in schools, a repeated theme in fact throughout his career.³⁵ Including plagiarism and sexual education among his examples, he observes how immeasurably weakened any discussion is where the teachers fail to provide some wider context of their own moral values. In effect, a culture of indifference, of the lowest common denominator, is created. Yet equally bad would be the imposition of the teachers' own values. Instead, the object should be to demonstrate that the answers given matter. That is why teachers at one and the same time should present their own vision and continue to leave it open to criticism and questioning. In a similar way, then, religious education can be easily distinguished, Mitchell believes, from indoctrination. It is the offering of possible imaginative and intellectual frameworks in a way that allows children to see what it might mean to inhabit them. The children are then free to adopt them or otherwise as their own personal reflections dictate.

Dialoguing with the past

When Basil was in his eighties and John Lucas in his seventies the pair jointly produced a commentary on Plato's *Republic*, a return to a topic on which they had once given lecture courses, both separately and, for one year, as dialogue partners. How effective the book is as a commentary need not concern us here. Instead, I want to note the principles on which they operated as this will help clarify how Basil approached classics of the past in the philosophy of religion. As the Introduction makes plain, their object was 'to relate Plato to contemporary issues', and as such they needed to encourage readers to enter imaginatively into Plato's thought and thus feel the full force of his arguments.³⁶ So, for example, in respect of Plato's quarrel with the arts, it will not do to approach the matter like

³⁴ Review in archives, but no indication of where it was published.

³⁵ Mitchell, *Faith and Criticism*, pp. 131–50.

³⁶ B. Mitchell and J. R. Lucas, *An Engagement with Plato's Republic* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. viii–ix.

‘the grey men’ of modern philosophy who show little interest in the arts.³⁷ Instead, it was precisely because Plato was so passionately interested that he felt the potential of their corrupting power. Again, Plato’s stress on education needs to be seen as a standing challenge to modern assumptions that autonomy can succeed of itself without the help of supporting institutions, while instead of wasting energies trying to make the image of Cave and Line exactly parallel one another, what one needs to hear is ‘a more informal cumulative style of argument’.³⁸

While the examples I have given accord with Basil’s overall position, it would be a mistake to assume that the two authors simply impose their own views on Plato. They equally try to enter into the spirit of Plato’s arguments where they strongly disagree, for example on the question of eugenics. But it does well illustrate how different Basil was from so many contemporary philosophers of religion where references to the past are few and far between. Because no thought could be presupposition free, he thought it important to dialogue with the past as a way of helping to bring to consciousness how far one continued that past and how far one had in fact modified or developed beyond it. In this respect, it is therefore especially salutary to note how he responded to the figures from the past closest to his own position—Joseph Butler, John Henry Newman and Austin Farrer.

In the case of Butler, Mitchell begins by admitting that in view of the general confidence in reason at the time and the fact that his main opponents were deists and not atheists, the bishop’s world now seems ‘infinitely remote from our own’.³⁹ Nonetheless, Butler can be made to engage with contemporary debates in interesting ways. While an atheist like J. L. Mackie would be right that the Christian can no longer easily appeal to the evidence of miracles or prophecy, Butler continues to have a point that most of the evidence on which we daily act is much less than strongly probable, while in the case of religion a reason can be offered for God making this so since Christianity teaches that this world is one of probation for another.⁴⁰ Again, although Butler’s life antedated the rise of biblical criticism, he was fully alive to the possibilities of the text’s authority being undermined by the mediation of oral traditions.⁴¹ Yet, so far from resorting

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 154–67, esp. 154.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, on education, pp. 144–53, esp. 153; on Line and Cave, pp. 88–108, esp. 107.

³⁹ ‘Butler as a Christian apologist’, in C. Cunliffe (ed.), *Joseph Butler’s Moral and Religious Thought* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 97–116, esp. 97.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 103–9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

in consequence to the agnostic deism of so much contemporary theology (here Mitchell probably has his colleague Maurice Wiles especially in mind), Butler saw the answer in slow, painstaking analysis. He can thus continue to provide a model for us in a faith that is 'both firm and critical, both rational and committed'.⁴²

Newman's debt to Butler is well known but rather than beginning there Mitchell focuses on Newman's response to Locke.⁴³ In challenging Locke's view that our assent should be proportional to the evidence, Mitchell notes how both in his *University Sermons* and in *The Grammar of Assent* Newman insists that this is not how assent works: 'We are so constituted, that, if we insist upon being as sure as is conceivable, in every step of our course, we must be content to creep along the ground, and can never soar. If we are intended for great ends, we are called to great hazards.'⁴⁴ However, Newman goes further than Butler in allowing that our own desire may also help furnish such evidence as there may be, and in this, Mitchell suggests, Newman anticipates the position of Alvin Plantinga in his analysis of true belief on the basis of a properly functioning mind. Basil is less sure of such a claim since a disposition to believe is in principle just as likely to create evidence as to enable it to be more clearly seen.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, he ends by siding more with Newman and Plantinga than with Locke (and Swinburne) since the former seem to cater better with the complexities of how we do in fact come to belief.

It is, however, his discussion of Austin Farrer that is perhaps the most interesting.⁴⁶ He opens with a confession, that, having been asked to read the manuscript of Farrer's *Faith and Speculation* (London, 1967), he returned it without comment, so disappointed was he in what he saw as Farrer's lapse into fideism after his clear espousal of a cumulative case in his earlier *Finite and Infinite* (London, 1943). But more mature reflection on the two periods in Farrer's thinking led Mitchell to what is a truly fascinating piece of analysis of the two main competing positions in more contemporary philosophy of religion. So far from seeing Richard Swinburne on one side as a rational foundationalist and Alvin Plantinga (and Nicholas

⁴²'Butler as a Christian apologist', pp. 109–116, esp. 116.

⁴³'Newman as a philosopher', in I. Ker and A. G. Hill (eds.), *Newman after a Hundred Years* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 223–46.

⁴⁴J. H. Newman, *University Sermons* (London, 1970), Sermon XI, p. 215.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁴⁶'Two approaches to the philosophy of religion', in J. C. Eaton and A. Loades (eds.), *For God and Clarity* (Allison Park, PA, 1983), pp. 177–90.

Wolterstorff) on the other as allowing only reasons internal to religious belief, he suggests that both incorporate elements of the other's position and so approach more nearly than they think to the middle ground and thus to Mitchell's own more nuanced view. Thus Swinburne's principles of credulity and testimony are more like presuppositions than the basic perceptual claims commonly associated with foundationalism. Similarly, the alternative approach does not rely solely on internal coherence but also asserts the legitimacy of yielding, where the evidence is sufficiently strong, to challenges from science or history. So, Mitchell concludes, Farrer's two books can be reconciled in someone like Farrer (or indeed Mitchell himself) who wants to be both 'a theoretical rationalist' and 'a practising fideist'.⁴⁷

As Mitchell explored thinkers of the past, his own understanding can be seen to have developed as he engaged in a dialectical discussion between their own original ideas and where contemporary thought seemed now to have moved. So it is perhaps no accident that in the end Mitchell juxtaposes Newman's more static view of standing within a tradition and T. S. Eliot's recognition of the possibility for radical change as inheritors of a tradition and its presuppositions interact with its past.⁴⁸ Mitchell's mediating position in various contemporary debates should thus not be mistaken either for being muddled or as an unthinking adherence to the past.

Contributions to university, church and wider society

The Nolloth chair was of relatively recent foundation (1920), Basil being only its fourth incumbent. Of his predecessors, only C. C. J. Webb had written widely on the philosophy of religion. L. W. Grensted's expertise was more as a psychologist of religion, while Ian Ramsey was arguably more of a theologian than a philosopher. Austin Farrer could have made a difference to the esteem in which the chair was held but he declined in what turned out to be the false hope of being awarded the Regius Chair in Divinity.⁴⁹ So Basil's appointment came at a critical time. Whatever

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 190. For a more detailed discussion of the issues raised here, see R. MacSwain, *Solved by Sacrifice: Austin Farrer, Fideism, and the Evidence of Faith* (Leuven, 2013).

⁴⁸ 'Tradition', in P. L. Quinn and C. Talaferro (eds.), *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 591–7. The reference is to Eliot's essay, 'Tradition and the individual talent' (*Selected Essays*, London, 1932).

⁴⁹ P. Curtis, *A Hawk among Sparrows: a Biography of Austin Farrer* (London, 1985), pp. 136–7 and 145–6.

evaluation is finally accorded his writings, what is incontestable is the way in which he succeeded in moving the chair from the margins of the theology faculty to a central place in the university as a whole.⁵⁰ An early success came in the creation of the Joint School of Philosophy and Theology, of which I myself was an early beneficiary, and this was soon followed by philosophy of religion becoming an optional paper in several other Schools.⁵¹ Basil's self-effacing character certainly played its part in overcoming any opposition from the Philosophy Sub-Faculty. Mitchell also built up a significant cohort of research students whom he supported not only through the normal pattern of supervision but also by means of special seminars and entertainment in his home. Billy Abraham, as one of those former students, singles out a number of key virtues, among them Basil being 'totally opposed to having disciples': 'What stands out in this is the space he gave me to think for myself' and 'the rule that before you criticize you should state the opponent's position better than he stated it himself.'⁵² Basil's friend, John Lucas, noticed related traits: 'He did not just talk; he listened. He entered into the mind of the person he was talking to, and not just telling him what he himself thought, but, beginning from where his listener actually was, and embarking with him on a journey of exploration.'⁵³

While still at Keble he became Senior Proctor (in 1956), a position he seems to have enjoyed and which led to other university posts, among them membership of the Hebdomadal Council and of various other administrative bodies such as the committee responsible for restoring the Sheldonian Theatre. All these were entirely voluntary whereas at Oriel some came simply as a result of his professorial responsibilities. However, in at least three cases he had a real choice of whether to act or not, and in each instance he threw himself wholeheartedly into the chairmanships involved. Their variety is indicative of the range of Basil's interests since they share little in common. First came the request to act as chair of the newly founded House of St Gregory and St Macrina in Oxford, an institution committed to improved understanding of Orthodoxy in the West; next an initiative in social responsibility for trainee priests in poorer parts of the city; and, finally, the Ian Ramsey Centre based at St Cross College

⁵⁰The Philosophy of Religion paper had been optional in the Theology School and was taken by relatively few undergraduates; it became a standard option in PPE.

⁵¹Mitchell, *Looking Back*, pp. 270–5.

⁵²Personal communication to me from Professor Abraham.

⁵³Words from his Memorial Address in the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, 5 Nov. 2011.

concerned with relations between theology and science.⁵⁴ Also, given the emphasis in his writings on the importance of social institutions, it will come as no surprise that he took a full part in college life. A weekly attender at College Evensong, he was also a college benefactor, with a lecture room in Oriel now named after him. He was also no less assiduous in supporting his local parish church at Wootton. A revealing detail in Basil's archive is a letter to the then Labour Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott. Complaining that library, museum and local carers for the elderly were all now under threat in his locality, he observed that 'one of my motives for voting Labour in the election was the hope that a Labour government would allow greater freedom to local government' than had been the case under Mrs Thatcher.⁵⁵ What is revealing is not only Basil's willingness to vary his voting habits (as he apparently often did) but also the reason on this occasion, his firm belief in the principle of subsidiarity, that social institutions flourish better if they are firmly embedded and fostered at a local level and so on a more human scale.

Basil also developed a flair for cooperative writing in the various more academic committees of the Church of England on which he served. His concern for religious education in schools not only saw the publication of the *Durham Report* in 1970,⁵⁶ but also extensive involvement in the Bloxham project through both its meetings and its various publications as it sought new ways for public schools to be loyal to their founding Christian charters in a changed social environment.⁵⁷ Then under the Board of Social Responsibility he took part (along with Richard Hare among others) in producing three booklets outlining appropriate responses for the Church to changing social attitudes towards abortion, euthanasia and homosexuality. In the case of euthanasia he was particularly influenced by the type of palliative care exercised by Dame Cecily Saunders at St Christopher's Hospice in London.⁵⁸ Also worthy of note is his work for the Doctrine Commission. He joined when the body was at a low point in the Church's esteem, having just produced a report consisting of individual essays that strayed far both from each other and also in several notable cases from the Church's official teaching.⁵⁹ While the next report retained the individual

⁵⁴ Mitchell, *Looking Back*, pp. 280–8.

⁵⁵ Letter dated 18 Dec. 1997.

⁵⁶ *The Fourth R: the Report of the Commission on Religious Education in Schools appointed in 1967 under the chairmanship of the Bishop of Durham* (London, 1970).

⁵⁷ See <<http://www.bloxhamproject.org.uk/>>.

⁵⁸ Mitchell, *Looking Back*, p. 295. The booklet's title *Dying Well* also indicates the connection.

⁵⁹ *Christian Believing* (London, 1976).

essay format, partly under Basil's influence there was much more of a meeting of minds, while its successor report became fully corporate, Basil's role this time being to moderate the unrestrained enthusiasm of two bishops who were members for talk of a passible God.⁶⁰

Much to the surprise of his friends, in both autobiographical essays Basil devoted much attention to the first love of his life, Phoebe Llewellyn Smith, who eventually rejected him.⁶¹ She was to die a few years later in a boating accident but not before she had become godmother to his son. As he describes the relationship (perhaps romanticised given the passage of time), what he missed was the complete meeting of minds. Even after sixty years of marriage (he married in 1950), he felt that he knew his wife less well: 'Phoebe had always been a clear swiftly running stream fed by deep springs which were utterly translucent. Margy, by contrast, was a deep pool which did not want to be seen into.'⁶² Yet the marriage was in fact a very close one from which both parties benefitted hugely. Margy had a practical knowledge of art and music that Basil lacked, while her upbringing in France meant that she was effectively bicultural as well as bilingual. So she brought with her 'the colours and food of the south of France' and perhaps also 'a certain Mediterranean earthiness'.⁶³ As Basil himself acknowledged, it was a 'complementary' partnership that 'in different ways provided needed reassurance for one another'.⁶⁴ So the marriage flourished and they remained utterly loyal.

Like Rowan Williams, Basil was deaf in one ear (due in his case to wartime service) and like Williams this could result in a more directed and penetrating glance than was intended. Interlocutors were thus not always initially at ease but the warmth of Basil's personality quickly emerged as did his gentle, self-deprecating humour.⁶⁵ At his funeral service (he died on 23 June 2011), Ernest Nicholson singled out his 'striking tranquility and calmness . . . even in the face of the frequent dangers he faced in his war service' and noted how this grew as the years advanced, a fact not uncon-

⁶⁰ *Believing in the Church* (London, 1981). Significantly, Basil's essay ('I believe: we Believe') is placed first and the report subtitled 'The Corporate Nature of Faith'. For the later report, *We Believe in God* (London, 1987) the Bishop of Winchester (John V. Taylor) was chairman and the Bishop of Salisbury (John Austin Baker) a member. The key passage on a suffering God is on pp. 157–60.

⁶¹ In the earlier 'War and friendship' she remains anonymous.

⁶² Mitchell, *Looking Back*, p. 163.

⁶³ Emails from his daughter, Nell: 10 July and 2 Aug. 2012.

⁶⁴ Letter of 14 Feb. 1992.

⁶⁵ There are numerous examples of such humour in *Looking Back*.

nected with his deepening faith.⁶⁶ It was a faith sustained in the memory by the richness of the language of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and by several defining moments of religious experience, varying from the Wordsworthian to an intense sense of divine care for the vulnerable.⁶⁷

He is survived by his widow, Margy, their four children, Nell, Matthew, Kate and Clare, and several grandchildren.

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⁶⁶Funeral address at Wootton, 30 June 2011.

⁶⁷For an example of the former, Mitchell, 'War and friendship', pp. 25–6; of the latter, Mitchell, *Looking Back*, p. 187.

