PHILOSOPHY

Difficulties in Christian Belief. By ALASDAIR C. MACINTYRE. (London: S.C.M. Press Ltd. 1959. Price 8s. 6d.)

This little book generates a brisk feeling of respect which rises in temperature until it bursts into enthusiasm. Mr. MacIntyre writes in the tradition of reasonable Christianity, to give intellectual courage to the intelligent faithful. He gives no grace to the classical proofs of the existence of God, not because the believer does not need arguments and does not base himself on propositions, but because these particular arguments are fallacious; they cannot do what they set out to do because they are circular; they can explicate, they cannot convince. He shows that the argument from religious experience is equally inconclusive. At the same time he will not allow religious faith to be explained away by causal arguments drawn from psychology or sociology, for he shows that these arguments can be applied with equal force to every belief, including disbelief; and he therefore insists on the distinction between causes of and reasons for a belief. Nor does he allow the explaining away of the theological (that is to say, propositional) content of the faith; there is no sleight-of-hand, the faith remains foolishness to the Greek. And when he confronts the apparent contradictions between statements about God and the common findings of human experience, he does not prostrate himself before the Baal of paradox. Thus Mr. MacIntyre takes sober measure of the difficulties in Christian belief, and leaves to others the tricks of the theological trade. That is what earns uncommon respect.

Difficulties do not necessarily add up to doubt. One is not required to resolve them conclusively, but one does need to be able to see the possibility of a solution. Mr. MacIntyre's clue is a God who offers Himself for acceptance or rejection to men who are free to accept or reject. If they accept, on the basis of certain evidence, they trust; and if they trust they can believe in the good God of an evil world and in resurrection from the dead. To ask for rigorous proof or irresistible revelation is to turn the back on the God of the Bible who loves men, in whom the Christian has learned to trust.

If Mr. MacIntyre were trying to convince the sceptic (and it is impossible to address Christians on this theme without putting the faith in question), he would have to say more about the status of these fundamental propositions, "that God created us, preserves us, sent His Son into the world for our salvation," and so on. If trust in God is based on such propositions, and such trust supports further propositions which defy evidence, the fabric is very shaky unless this initial trust is well-founded. Mr. MacIntyre makes it clear that the fundamental propositions are not inferences from experience, they are not logical knowledge. The trust which rests on these statements is needed to make them trustworthy, and that original trust, apparently, is inspired by the Jesus of the gospels. Thus we are still in the circle within which it is impossible to bridge the gap between belief and unbelief. Faith remains an option, not a rational requirement, and the difficulties in belief are gratuitous in the sense that they are occasioned by assumptions which, although not baseless, are far from necessary. Success in dealing with these difficulties proportionately reduces the riskiness of the assumptions. Mr. MacIntyre's task, therefore, is not gratuitous. If he makes one sceptic even more incredulous, that is a tribute to the distinction and integrity with which he carries it out. At least he raises, or causes to be raised, the questions most worth discussing.

<div align="right">H. J. BLACKHAM.</div>