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Talking about God

TALK about God consists of theological sentences. It is the function of a theological sentence to express a theological proposition. It is the function of a theological proposition to convey information about God. Problems of two sorts arise: (i) there are those concerned with the nature of theological propositions—these may be described as problems of *meaning*; and (ii) there are those concerned with the effectiveness of theological sentences—these may be described as problems of *communication*. The first kind of problem is theoretical; the second kind (at any rate for those whose job it is to talk about God) is, to some extent, practical. In what follows we shall consider two questions: (i) When we talk about God, are we talking about anything? (ii) When we talk about God, do those to whom we talk understand what it is that we are talking about? Reflection upon these two questions leads to some interesting and important conclusions.

MEANING

Consider first the problem of meaning. "When I talk about God, am I talking about anything?" may appear, at first sight, to be a silly question, to which the answer is, "Of course. If I am talking about God, then of necessity I must be talking about something." It is not, however, quite as simple as that. Of course, if one means by "When I talk about God, I am talking about something" only that sentences about God have subjects, then of course this is true. Sentences about God are cast in the same grammatical form as sentences about oneself or one's neighbour—"God is alive," "I am alive," "You are alive." The first of these has a subject and a predicate as do the second and third. But it does not follow that if the second and third can be said to be "about something," in some sense other than the purely syntactical, then thus must necessarily be true of the first as well.

It is the great achievement of that movement in modern philosophy, associated in this country with the names of Moore, Russell and Wittgenstein, to have shown that mistakes often arise from assuming that, because propositions are expressed in sentences which have the same grammatical structure, these propositions must have the same logic. This is a false assumption. We may illustrate its falsity by considering the two sentences: (i) This road goes to

Liverpool, and (ii) This line goes to infinity. These sentences have the same grammatical structure and we might assume, if we were very naive, that the logic of the former is identical with that of the latter. But a moment's reflection shows quite clearly that this is not the case. It makes good sense to ask, in reply to the former statement, How far is it to Liverpool? But it makes no sense at all to ask, how far is it to infinity? The one question is meaningful, the other meaningless. It appears, then, that the expression 'goes to' means something quite different, when it links subjects concerning lines with predicates concerning infinity, from what it means when it links subjects about roads with predicates about places. We talk of infinity as though it were a place, but, of course, it is not and its logic is not the logic of places.

Or again, consider the two sentences: (i) Mail vans are red, and (ii) Kind acts are right. It may appear, from the grammatical structure of these sentences, as though rightness were a simple quality, of a similar kind to redness, which we perceive in objects. But the two cases are not at all analogous. The former proposition (Mail vans are red) is tested by empirical observation—we can go and look at mail vans and see that they are red and, which is more important, we can take other people, who may doubt it, and show them the redness of mail vans. The latter proposition (Kind acts are right) cannot be tested in anything like the same way—there is no quality, rightness, which can be observed as redness is observed. We know what we mean, when we ask of statements about mail vans being red, "Are they true or false?" because we know how to answer it—how to get at the facts. But if we ask of statements about the rightness of actions, "Are they true or false?" there is no similar way of answering it—we cannot go and look at (or touch, weigh, measure, etc., etc.) kind actions to see if they have some observable quality called "rightness." The fact, if it be a fact, that kind acts are right is a fact of an entirely different kind from the fact that mail vans are red. The two propositions look as though they were both factual, in some identical sense of "factual," but this cannot be the case. However statements about rightness are related to facts, it is (as even philosophers, who want to regard them as factual in some metaphysical sense, agree), in a way that is logically quite different from that in which statements such as "Mail vans are red" are related to facts.

We must now turn to our prime concern here, i.e. theological propositions, such as "God is good" or "God created the world," and consider what sort of meaning they have. We shall find that we are confronted by problems of a similar kind to those which we encountered in considering moral statements. Theological statements look like statements of fact, but we shall find that, whatever their logic is, it is not the same as that of other statements of fact.

We shall see this, if we reflect, first, on the subject of these theological propositions, i.e. God. Now, the subjects of statements of fact are known to us either by acquaintance or description. We may say, for instance, "Smith is good," or "The man in the red coat is good." If we are acquainted with the individual, Smith, then we know what that subject refers to by direct acquaintance; if we know what a man in a red coat would be like, then we know what that refers to by description. We are not, however, acquainted with God in any way which is similar to that in which we are acquainted with Smith. We speak figuratively of being acquainted with God, of course, but whatever that means, it is something different from acquaintance with Smith. If anyone said, "Who is Smith?" we could take him and point and say, "That is Smith"; but if anyone asked, "Who is God?" we could only answer by saying things about Him, e.g. "He made us," "He watches over us," etc. In the case of every other proper name, if we know to whom (or what) it refers, we know by acquaintance, and we can convey its meaning to another by bringing him into a situation where, if he is normal, he will share this acquaintance. But this is not so in the case of God.

Suppose now that we describe God and say, "The omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient Being is good"; though this looks like, it is not really at all like, the statement "The man in the red coat is good." We know what it would be like for an object to fulfil the latter description and so it has meaning for us. But we cannot conceive what a being would be like who fulfilled the former description. It is difficult to see how an expression can be said to have meaning for us, if we cannot conceive what that to which it refers would be like.

These considerations may be swept aside by the impatient reader as very naive and as proving no more than that God is not Smith, much less a man in a red coat. But this will not do. It is surely sound theology to say that God is a Being whose nature is beyond man's comprehension. We have no knowledge of Him which is at all like the knowledge which we have of the subjects of other factual statements. We cannot see, touch, hear (etc.) Him as we can Smith; on the other hand we cannot conceive what a Being would be like who possessed the qualities of omnipresence, etc., which are attributed to God. But how can we be said to know things about such a subject?

Even more difficult problems arise, when we reflect on the predicates of statements about God. They are not testable by reference to the facts in anything like the way that other factual statements are. For instance, the statement, "There have been four ages of advance and three of recession in the history of the Church" is one which can be verified or falsified in ways which are admitted

by all reasonable men. There are facts which support this statement. We could imagine facts which would falsify it: if, for instance, evidence came to light that all the documents on which it is based are fabrications. The point is that there are facts which count *for* this theory of Latourette's; and facts—conceivable, if not actual—which would count *against* it. We know what it means to say that this is true—it means there are facts to support it; we know what it would mean to say that it is false—there would have to be facts which did not support it.

But now consider the proposition: God created the world. Is this, in anything like the same sense, testable? We may point to evidence which seems to us to confirm it, e.g. the beauty and order of the world. But that is not enough; nor would any amount of positive evidence of this kind be enough. We must ask ourselves, If this evidence disappeared—if, for instance, the world became ugly and disorderly—would that lead us to retract our assertion that God made it? The answer of a man of faith to this would be "No." If the worst happened, as a man of faith, he would still assert that God made the world and that there must be some good purpose behind what was happening. This is what is required of him when things go wrong in his own personal circumstances, and it is, presumably, would be required of him, if things went wrong in the world as a whole. It may be objected that there are conceivable facts which would make him retract his belief in Divine creation, e.g. if it were shown that there is pointless and unnecessary suffering anywhere in the world. This, no doubt, is true; but the whole point is that a man of faith would refuse to believe that any suffering was pointless or unnecessary, however strongly the circumstances seemed to suggest this. The theological proposition, "God created the world," is not a theory, like Latourette's about Church history, which stands or falls with the facts. It shares with other theological propositions an immunity from facts. This is its virtue, considered as an expression of faith; but its defect, considered as a factual statement. It is a very odd sort of factual statement which can be—and indeed must be—affirmed whatever the facts may be.

As philosophers point out, when we assert that some state of affairs is a fact, we must at the same time implicitly deny that some other conceivable state of affairs is the case, or our assertion has no meaning. For instance, suppose I go to the window, look out, and say, "It is sazzling." The word is new to you, but you look out of the window and see that rain is falling. You therefore conclude that my odd word 'sazzling' refers to a state of affairs where rain is falling. But suppose I go again to the window on the following day, look out, and say, "It is sazzling," although now the sun is shining. From this you will conclude that my word 'sazzling' must

cover both rain and sunshine. Now, suppose that I repeat the performance every day for a year, and, whatever the state of the weather (sun, rain, hail, snow, wind, etc.), I say every day, "It is sazzling." At the end of the year, you will say to me, "Look here, what does this word of yours, 'sazzling,' mean? It seems to refer to every possible state of the weather." "Precisely," I reply, "that is the great virtue of my word. Whatever the weather, 'sazzling' covers it." "But," you rightly object, "in that case it means nothing. If it does not indicate one state of affairs, which is the case, as distinct from some other, which is not, it tells us nothing. We know what 'raining' is because we know what 'not raining' is. But we can't know what 'sazzling' is because there is nothing conceivable which can be called 'not sazzling.' Your proposition 'It is sazzling' covers everything and therefore indicates nothing."

Now, the trouble with theological propositions—when they are regarded as statements of fact comparable to scientific or historical statements of fact—is precisely this: they seem to be compatible with any state of affairs whatever, and so it is difficult to see what they can possibly mean. When the man of faith asserts that in all things there is a good purpose, the philosopher asks, "What conceivable state of affairs would lead you to retract this faith?" When the believer answers "None," he goes on, "Then, if there is nothing conceivable which is incompatible with it, what do you tell me when you say this?" By this criterion, propositions such as, "God is good," "God created the world," etc., appear to be as meaningless as "It is sazzling" in the above illustration.

To summarize our reflections so far: there is something very odd about theological statements, since, (*a*) their subject is not knowable in any of the ways in which the subjects of other factual statements are knowable, and (*b*) their predicates attribute qualities to, and make assertions about, this subject, which are not testable by reference to the facts of experience and observation and are apparently compatible with any conceivable state of things whatsoever.

Theological statements, though they purport to be statements of fact have a logic that is different from that of all other kinds of factual statement. From this, however, we need not conclude that they are meaningless. It was the mistake of the early logical positivists to do that; a mistake since rectified to some extent. To be meaningful, it is only required that a statement should fit into a logical system, the rules of which are known. What has become clear in the foregoing discussion is that theological and factual statements belong to different systems. Religion is not science. We have always professed to know this, but, whereas we have always been quite clear that science is not religion, we have sometimes tried to pretend that religion, or at least theology, is science—only more so. We have described theology as the queen of the sciences, and,

in gracing it with that poetic description have tended to overlook the fact that, if she is queen, she is an alien queen, who does not speak the language nor obey the laws of her subjects. The casualty in all this is most definitely not theology, as such, much less religion. It is natural theology, the enterprise which attempts to establish theological conclusions on factual premises, drawn from science or history.

Logical analysis has dealt body-blows at natural theology from which it will not recover. This disturbs me, for, looking back, I see that I came to faith, as I suppose many who read this will have done, across the bridge of natural theology. In my youth, when the Christianity on which I had been brought up seemed to be melting in the 'acids' of the Sixth Form, I found books which presented the argument from design in forms which seemed to me intellectually respectable, and by these I was much helped. It is rather alarming to look back and see that the bridge across which one came to faith isn't really there, and that this natural theology, by which one was so greatly helped is, if anything, somewhat less respectable logically than the fundamentalism which one rejected. I do not deny of course that natural theology may still have some apologetic value in allaying the doubts of the Sixth Form. For instance, to the inquirer who is troubled by the problem of evil, one may point out that much evil is the consequence of human freedom and that personality implies freedom; and that many have found in these two considerations a solution of the problem. How can there be evil in a world made by a good God? I do not think that this is really a solution of the problem of evil, but I do not think it would be dishonest to put it to a young person, who was thinking about the Faith, as a point to be considered. It may help him at one stage of his development, as it has helped many.

Lest any tremble for the ark of God before this attack on natural theology, I would remind them that the loudest "No" to natural theology which the modern world has heard, was uttered not by a philosopher, but a theologian; not by the Vienna Circle, but by Barth.

Christian theology, from a logical point of view, is the explication of a myth; it is drawing the morals of a fable. The myth or fable is the Gospel story. Christianity rests upon the dogmatic assertion that in this story the transcendent God is revealed. Here we are in the presence of what Paul calls the "mystery"—i.e. the thing which is, at one and the same time, (a) utterly incomprehensible, and (b) so clear that the simplest may observe it. There is no evidence for the assertion that the Gospel story is the revelation of God. If we make it all, we do so by faith alone. Theology must start (i.e. start logically, whatever the start psychologically for any particular believer may be) from this assertion for which there are

no reasons, the truth or falsity of which it is impossible to test. There is no theology "Christo remoto." We start from what we are told in the Story. Theology's concern is not with the question: Is this story the revelation of God? That is unanswerable to reason. Theology's concern is with the question, Assuming that this is the revelation of God, what, in the light of it, may we say about God, man, the world, life? Theological propositions have meaning as answers to this question, but in no other sense.

COMMUNICATION

The problem of communication, i.e. of making our theological sentences effective, is, we said above, the second problem which exercises us, when we reflect on talk about God. There are two aspects of this problem: they concern the means and the matter respectively. Or, to put the same point differently, "effective" in this context means two things, viz. (i) making our talk such that people will listen to it, and (ii) such that people will understand it.

We are often told that the former of these objectives can be achieved, if only we put the Gospel into contemporary terms and proclaim it through contemporary media. To this end modern translations and paraphrases of the Bible are produced in abundance. To this end preachers take pains to use the language of their day. (I recently met a preacher who said that he thought it would be a good idea to learn the language of Rock 'n' Roll so that he could put the Gospel in these terms to his youth club. He would not find it all that difficult; this jargon is surprisingly evangelical—one "gets the message," one "is sent." . . .) To the same end of being contemporary in approach, we find modern publicity methods impressed into service. Mr. Billy Graham justified the posters, etc. of his campaign on the grounds that modern publicity works on the 'star' system; it demands a name, a face. Another contemporary means of communication is films. It is doubtful whether cinematic productions about the adventures of early Christian blondes, dressed in diaphanous nylon, do much for the Kingdom, but they are not all on this level. All this kind of thing is said to be valuable on the not unreasonable ground that, if only you talk about God in terms which are familiar and tones which are loud, people will listen to you.

The problem, however, is not only to get them to listen, but also to understand. By "understand" here something more is implied than understanding in an intellectual sense. The phrase "justification by faith" is perhaps understood intellectually, when one has explained (a) that the word "justification" was used by Greek writers to mean "acquittal" and in the Hebrew Bible to thought he talks of it in judicial terms, and (b) that the word

mean "deliverance," and that Paul's basic idea is deliverance, "faith" in Paul means the passive acceptance of what God has done for one. But there is a deeper sort of understanding, which we may call "existential." Talk about God, when it comes from preachers at any rate, aims to communicate this deeper kind of understanding. It aims to make one realize one's own need for deliverance and to cause one to accept for oneself what God has done. The hard core of the problem of communication is: How do you make those to whom you talk about God understand what you are talking about *in that sense*? How do we communicate the fact that the 'mystery' of grace has something vitally to do with their existence?

Part of the answer to this is demythologising. Every generation thinks of that which concerns it existentially in terms of some mythology. The New Testament was written in terms of a first century mythology, and if the significance of its message is to come through to modern men, there is need, as Bultmann says, to demythologise it; or rather, since to do that absolutely is impossible, to translate it into twentieth-century mythology. It is, for instance, an aid to understanding for modern men when the phrase "in Christ" is interpreted in terms of the contemporary psychological notion of a Christ-sentiment.

There are, however, aspects of the Gospel which it is difficult, if not impossible, to re-mythologise because there is little, or nothing, in the thought-forms and spirit of the age to fit them. Consider, for example, the latter of the two ways in which grace may be regarded: as power and as pardon. If you preach grace as the pardon of God to sinful men, this is good news of the first moment to men who firmly believe that, unforgiven, something terrible will happen to them. It has something vitally to do with their existence. The response which the preaching of the Gospel as forgiveness aroused a generation or two ago had much to do with the fact that the mythology of those days included a firm and definite idea of Hell. Now we have largely abandoned the belief in Hell, and it is interesting to see that with it we have largely abandoned the preaching of the Gospel as pardon. We now preach the Gospel as power. This fits in so much better with the dynamic myths of our time. Ours is an age of activism; an age of moving things. And grace is preached as a moving thing—a thing which can make men better, which can deliver them from the things inside which make them bad or frightened or weak, a thing which can put the world right. Grace, we say, is power. And, if it occurs to us that it is also pardon, we find it necessary to give an activist justification to forgiveness by explaining that the forgiveness of God is a good thing because, when they realize that they are forgiven, men are constrained by the love of Christ and this makes them

better. Grace is preached as the power which lifts one above self, the moral dynamic, the spiritual moving thing.

But this is not the whole Gospel. Speaking personally, the more I reflect upon what I know of the New Testament, and even more on what I know of my own heart and what I see in the world, the more impressed I am by the other side of grace—pardon. By the tremendous and fascinating mystery that God forgives us for being what we are. This fact seems to me astonishing. It requires no psychologising to make it impressive. This is how the early Church seemed to feel about it. They were not primarily a community which rejoiced in the fact that God had placed in their hands a new moving thing; but a community which stood amazed before the objective fact, now revealed, but incredible almost, that God forgave them for being what they were. Their religion was a response of gratitude. But it seems to me that much modern Christianity is subtly different from this. It is not so much a response of gratitude as an, in some ways, dangerous urge to make use of grace and get things done.

It is not necessary, nor indeed possible, of course, to separate pardon and power within the experience of Divine grace. But I find my own response to the Gospel becoming more and more a response to the objective fact that God forgives men for being what they are. But I have difficulty in finding the terms in which to preach this. When I talk to my people of the power that is available from God, they look (or some of them) interested; but when I talk of sin and forgiveness, like the negro preacher, "Ah notices a kinda coolness come ober ma congregation." How do you convey to a man, in terms that he will understand 'existentially,' the fact that he has been let off, if he does not consider himself a criminal and is sure that there is no gaol? Or, more accurately, how do you convey a fact which is essentially objective to a generation whose mythology is predominantly psychological?

Talk about God cannot be separated from the context of worship. Outside that context it has little meaning, and certainly little effectiveness. There is a theology as well as a psychology of mass evangelism. It is only as part of the worshipping community, which is making the response of gratitude, that a person has fellowship in the mystery. There is a sense in which we cannot know the truth about God unless we do it. And so far as the strategy of evangelism goes, the important thing would appear to be, not finding some new way of talking about God, but (i) using such means as we can of drawing men into the worshipping congregation, and (ii) making sure that in the worship those themes of confession, thanksgiving, adoration—which are the human side of pardon—are clearly expressed and in ways which require the active participation of the worshippers.

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