

FAITH  
AND  
THOUGHT

1976  
vol. 103  
No. 2

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A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation of the  
Christian Revelation and modern research

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The Problem of Talking about God

Religious language – how do we understand it? Literally; with God as grey-beard in the sky? ... Analogically? ... Symbolically? ... Poetically? ... or as a combination of these? ... In his inimitable way the author discusses the possibilities in this paper given at the recent VI Symposium ("Communicating the Christian Faith Today", 22 May, 1976)

The title of this paper will probably channel the thoughts of the philosophically inclined towards the prolonged debate about whether logical assertions can be 'cashed' in terms of observable facts, and if not, what sort of assertions they are – if, indeed, they deserve that name at all. This debate has been going on in Britain for about forty years now. But it has been largely confined to professional and amateur philosophers. In this symposium on the communication of the faith it is probably unnecessary to raise the issue.

An equally important problem, and one more immediately relevant, is simply, "Why do people so rarely talk about God?" We are assured by the opinion polls that large numbers of our fellow-citizens profess belief in a God of one sort or another; and one might have thought that if anyone did have such a belief, the nature and purposes of this God would seem important to him. Yet this seems not to be so; and if we try to engage one of these supposed theists in conversation about God, there is a good chance that at some point he or she will say that talk of God, Christ, redemption or the like means little or nothing in his lives. This is plainly a problem for the Christian communicator; I hope to show that it is also one for the philosopher.

When someone says that talk about God and so on "doesn't really mean anything to me", this may just be a piece of autobiography. It is possible that he or she is simply unwilling to think deeply about anything, so that the defect is in the hearer, not in the message, nor in the one who is trying to communicate it. But it may be that we do have a problem in framing the message itself, that there is a difficulty in the very notion of talking about God at all.

How do people *think* of God? Do they learn the use of the word from the role it plays in Christian lives? Perhaps it might be better if they did, perhaps not; but most have instead a "definition" of associations and images which accompany and affect their use of it and (more important for us) their *hearing* of it when *we* use it.

There are those who tend to think of God, whether they believe in Him or not, as (in effect) The "Old Man in the Sky". Small blame to them. The image is scriptural, and has been used in thousands of paintings and stained-glass windows; we habitually speak of God as "above", and use "heaven" both for His dwelling-place and (when we are being literary) for the sky. Who can blame the man in the street if he supposes that we mean what we say? Yet obviously the image cries out to be rejected. God is not a man, and the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him.

There are others — far fewer, but they do exist — to whom the word "God" suggests, shall we say, a kind of golden blur. Whatever its exact nature and origin, the point of this image is that it is basically impersonal. God is an 'It', not a 'he', and even if It is thought of as corresponding to some reality, that reality is not one to which we can relate.

Now these images can be given greater logical precision. We can talk about God in anthropomorphic language. Not literally, that is, as the 'image' pictures Him; but we can and do speak of Him as loving, acting, judging, forgiving and so on — all terms which are normally used of human beings. And the philosopher will ask at once: "How is this possible? Surely God is no more a magnified human in His mental makeup (if one may use the phrase) than in His physical? If He exists at all, He is utterly unlike us, and we cannot use this crude man-centred language about Him. God is infinite, and these are limiting words."

What alternative is there? Can we speak about God in *non-anthropomorphic* language? Certainly philosophers and others have offered us a selection of possible ways. We can speak of the *Prime Mover*, or the *First Cause*, or the *Absolute*, or "something, not ourselves, that makes for righteousness", or of "Being-Itself". But all these obviously share the same sort of drawback as a golden blur. Can we really pray "O Absolute", or confess that we have sinned against Being-Itself? I do know of one fine hymn addressed to God as Prime Mover ("O Strength and Stay upholding all creation"), but even that I suspect really has the Father of lights, with Whom is no variableness or shadow of turning, not the Prime Mover of Aristotelian physics, in mind. In general, we are faced with a dilemma: If God is described anthropomorphically, He is incredible, and if He is described otherwise, He is irrelevant. How are we to escape from this?

One possibility is to retain the anthropomorphisms and abandon the idea of an *infinite* God. Even God is Himself, so to speak, coping with a world not all of whose qualities are His work. Such a view has had distinguished supporters: Plato in the ancient world, Brightman in the modern, Madhya in India. And it has something to be said for it from a purely philosophical point of view. Are there not some truths that are in effect "given" even where God is concerned? The laws of logic and mathematics, for example. And the moral law; could even God have made it a duty to hate one's neighbour and a sin to love him? So also with certain connections and separations between concepts: redness surely implies inescapably, spatial extension, and Wednesday cannot possibly be in the key of F minor. And there may be other "given" elements which we do not recognise as such. Hence God is, on this view, to some extent limited, and one of the main objections to anthropomorphic language is removed.

Perhaps we may need to fall back on this; but not till we have looked for alternatives. It has difficulties. It runs counter to Christian tradition: but this might be got round, for "infinite" is not a Biblical term, and if later generations have been paying God what Whitehead called "metaphysical compliments", they may have gone wrong. But even if they did, there are difficulties. Firstly, suppose we grant these "given" elements in the world, does this make God enough like us for human-based language to apply to Him? The mere fact that He cannot set aside the laws of logic does not mean He is in any way like us in other respects. Secondly, from a practical point of view, is this limited personal God any more credible to the man in the street than the unlimited one we began with? Isn't He still the Old Man in the Sky? We must look for alternatives first.

The oldest and perhaps the best-known solution to our dilemma is the theory of *analogy*. The analogist maintains that we do not have a straight choice between using words of God and man in exactly the same sense and using them in quite different ones. There is a middle way. To take a secular example: if I say two shirts are the same colour, and that the Prime Minister and the First Lord of the Treasury are the same man, how am I using the word "same"? Differently in two cases; the two men are identical in every way, yet the two colours may be hundreds of miles apart. Yet there is an analogy between the two; the word "same" has, shall we say, one sort of appropriateness when used of universals (like colours) and another sort when used in particulars (like prime ministers).

So, it is argued, do words have different sorts of appropriateness when they are used of God and of human beings. They do not have different meanings in the way that (say) "plane" has when used of a carpenter's tool and of a kind of tree; nor do they have

identical meanings; but each meaning is analogous to the other. To call God "loving" is not to say that He feels, or even acts, in exactly the same way as a human who loved would. It *is* to say that He feels and acts in a way bearing the same relationship to His Divine Nature as our loving feelings and actions do to our humanity.

The trouble is that we do not in fact know what the Divine Nature is like. We have as it were an equation: Divine love is to Divinity as human love is to humanity; but we do not know the value of *either* term on the "divine" side. All we know is the relationship between them; it is like a map where the scale has been lost, so that we can tell it is twice as far from A to B as from C to D, but do not know how far either distance actually is. Moreover, has not the theory embarrassing consequences? When Abraham pleaded with the Lord for Sodom, he said "Far be it from Thee to kill good and bad together", presumably trusting in the Lord's justice. Fair enough if "justice" means the same as with humans, but if it does not, was not Abraham's confidence misplaced? Consequently, though analogy has able defenders, it may not be enough.

Perhaps we can reduce the difficulty by dividing our concepts into two parts. Many of the terms we have been looking at are so divisible; one part of, say, 'loving' refers to actions, another to a state of mind, and both must be present if the concept is to be applicable. The man in James 2:16 who says to the poor "Go in peace, be warmed and filled" may have had a loving mind, but not the actions; the one in Matthew 6:2 who gave alms to the sound of trumpets had the actions but not the state of mind. Now I think it could be argued that God's *actions* must be described univocally (i.e. in the full normal sense). Some, as a matter of fact, have gone further: Maimonides, for one, thought that all adjectives applied to God in Scripture referred *only* to His actions. But this seems to leave open the possibility of His being a kind of transcendent robot (or even hypocrite), with the wrong sort of mind or none at all. Perhaps we should believe that as far as the inner life of the Godhead is concerned we call the Lord "loving" or "just" analogically, but that as far as His deeds are concerned we call Him these things in the strictest sense of the words.

But analogy is not the only claimant for our attention. Another possible way out of our dilemma is to say that all our statements about God are *symbolic*. The trouble with this is that 'symbolic' is so vague. It might be used to mean that they are not statements about God at all (as Professors Braithwaite and van Buren would say); or that they are given to us in revelation by a God Whom we cannot hope to understand properly, but must believe when He says they are the best guides we can have to the truth (as Dean Mansel held). But the most lucid statement of a 'symbolic' theism I know of is that of Professor C. A. Campbell in "On Selfhood and Godhood" (which was

briefly described in this Journal for 1968 by Dr. Lewis Drummond). Campbell holds that concepts like Power, Goodness, Love and so on do *not*, strictly speaking, apply to God at all (whereas an analogist would say they do apply, but not in their usual sense). They symbolize something which *is* true of God, though we cannot grasp it. But they are justified, by Campbell, in two different ways.

Firstly, by religious experience, especially experience of the "numinous". Such experiences arouse in us certain emotions which are strikingly similar to those aroused by symbols. We admire and respect people who are good and wise. But, says Campbell, "anyone reflecting on a moment of deeply felt religious experience will, I think, confirm that his emotion of adoration felt *like* the natural emotions of admiration and love — that it pointed, as it were, in the same direction — while feeling not merely *unlike* but clean contrary to such natural emotions as contempt and hate — pointing, as it were, in the opposite direction". The very nature of the experience forces the mind to symbolize that which it has experienced — i.e. "God" — in this way and with these symbols; and this fact points, surely, to their being valid.

Secondly, Campbell seeks to justify the symbols on metaphysical grounds. He stands in the Idealist tradition, in which the world — the whole of reality — is seen as having a single ground, an ultimate reality which incorporates all the variety and differences we see in the world about us. Now the best model we have for this sort of incorporation of differences is the way our own minds incorporate all the various experiences, volitions, desires and so on that make up our mental lives, while themselves (the minds) remaining basically *unities*. It follows that mind or spirit is the best model we have (doubtless a very inadequate one) for symbolizing that ultimate reality which is God.

As it stands, Campbell's position is, I think, on the side of the "Golden Blur". It gives no ground for regarding God as Himself loving. He may well deserve our adoration for what He is in Himself, but not for anything He does for us. Neither the experience of the numinous nor Campbell's metaphysical proposals (even if we accept them) will yield a God who is actively concerned with His creation. This conclusion could possibly be avoided if we extended the range of experiences we are using to include ones which suggest an "I-Thou", person-to-person response, not just one of admiration and respect. But the more we do this, the more difficult it is to combine the religious-experience symbols with the unity-in-difference ones.

Another possibility, related, I think, to symbolism, is to draw a parallel between the language of religion and that of poetry. This is particularly relevant when it is 'revealed theology' that we are concerned with, for the Bible is of course a highly poetical book. It may be that poetry is able to convey truths that prose

cannot, and that this is what God has in fact done. An excellent statement of this position was made by C. S. Lewis in his posthumously published essay *The Language of Religion*. There he quotes Burns's description of one woman as "like a red, red rose" and Wordsworth's of another as "a violet by a mossy stone/ Half hidden from the eye". Literally, obviously neither of these is accurate. But they do in fact *describe*, and if we had known those concerned we could have judged whether the descriptions were true or false. But, Lewis goes on, poetic language can even express an experience neither we nor the poet have ever had— and he quotes Shelley's "My soul is an enchanted boat" and Pope's "die of a rose in aromatic pain". So short and simple an expression as the title "Son of God" can work in much the same way. The reality described by it is outside our experience; but it does describe that reality in much the same sort of way as Burns 'described' his love. This applies both to God when He seeks to reveal His truth to us and to us when we seek to express our own religious experiences to one another.

Professor R. W. Hepburn, in an able and not unsympathetic discussion of this sort of position, objected (in effect) that poetic language can *lie* or *mislead*. A poet may have insight which he expresses — can only express — in poetry; but we cannot tell whether that alleged insight is in fact a true one. Poets may describe the world differently: a Christian poet (Hepburn quotes from T. S. Eliot) may describe it in a way incompatible with the description given by a non-Christian (say a pessimist like A. E. Houseman). This is true; but it need not, I think, bother us in our present concern. We are only concerned to see how anthropomorphic language might be justified even when it is, taken literally, hard to believe — how it can symbolize, or rather express, a non-anthropomorphic truth. Which particular items of language are to be used, and what is the truth that we ought to express, are different matters. It does look as if we had a possible aid to communication here — provided always that the person we want to communicate with appreciates poetry. By no means everybody does; and we do not want Christianity to be infected with a kind of literary snobbery! Still, the line of approach looks a helpful one. It might even be combined (this is Lewis' suggestion again) with the theory of analogy, the latter being confined to attempts to express Christian truths in technical or prosaic language, as for instance when we try to give theological content to the idea of Christ as the Son of God, instead of remaining content with it as a vivid aid to, say, prayer and meditation. Obviously this approach needs detailed examination, which I am not sure it has yet received, but it does, as I said, look hopeful.

It may be felt that since God has, we believe, become incarnate as a man, objections to anthropomorphism are surely misguided. Christ revealed the Father, not only in His words, but in His person; "he who has seen me, has seen the Father". Hence God is wise or loving in the full sense of the words as we normally use them, for

He has been a human being. This has attractions; but on the whole I fear it will not do. Firstly, some of the most anthropomorphic language in the Bible comes in the *Old* Testament; God was apparently telling mankind about Himself in human terms before He became incarnate. Secondly, because surely in so far as Jesus is a revelation of God, it is because God already was like that in Himself. If Jesus is full of grace and truth, and in being full of grace and truth reveals the Father, that is because the Father was grace and truth from all eternity. Certainly we must agree that some things are now true of God which were not true before His Son came to us: that He has reconciled us to Himself, and made Himself a Church at the cost of His own blood. But these are not things Christ came to reveal; He came to *do* them. Anything that was true of God before the Word became flesh may be revealed in Christ, even for the first time, but was true before; anything that Christ Himself made to be true while He was in the flesh could not indeed have been said truly beforehand, but makes no difference to the rest of what we say about God.

Where have we got to after all this? It seems to me that we can sum up the discussion rather like this: There really is a dilemma or paradox about "God-talk" which shows itself both in the form of a technical philosophical problem and in that of a problem of communication: how can we speak of God in human terms and yet remember His superhumanity? Basically, there seemed to be two possible ways out. One is the rather technical doctrine of analogy. This has its own, technical difficulties which can perhaps be resolved; what is more of a nuisance to us with our present concerns, it is unlikely to be of much assistance to us in evangelism. It may reassure us when we are reflecting in private on the contents of our beliefs; it will not help us when we are trying to communicate those beliefs to the world for which Christ died.

The other way out was to draw the parallel between religious language and that of poetry. The one is absurd taken literally. So is the other; yet it can convey ideas which prose never could. Why not, then, admit the possibility that the first can do so too? Perhaps the moral for the Christian communicator is to make his or her language so obviously 'poetical' and figurative that no hearer will be misled into thinking that we do believe in a gigantic bearded figure floating about among the stars? But that is easier said than done, and I certainly have no wish to press the point.

If we cannot give an intellectually satisfactory account of what we are talking about, there is almost certainly something seriously wrong. It need not be a *complete* account, but at least it must be reasonably *coherent*. If no such coherent account can be given, our preaching will be 'incoherent' too. The reverse does not necessarily follow. There are undoubtedly many scientific

theories of which intellectually satisfactory accounts could be given, yet which could never be communicated from a pulpit or a soap-box! But we believe that the Gospel can be preached to all; and this may give us some hope that once we have straightened out the confusions in our minds we may by God's mercy be enabled to make straight His paths among our fellows.

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