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THE LOGIC OF RELIGIOUS AND THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

Twenty-five years ago, I published a book with the title *God-Talk*,¹ and with the explanatory subtitle "An Examination of the Language and Logic of Theology". At that time the question about religious language was very different from what it is today. In 1967 we were still in the period when analytical philosophy and even logical positivism were very strong, and when many philosophers, especially in the English-speaking countries, were following in the paths of A. J. Ayer and maintaining that language about God is meaningless, or, at most, simply an expression of emotion. That very negative point of view, which seemed to offer a shortcut to the end of religious argument, has in the meanwhile died the death of a thousand qualifications. Already in the nineteen-sixties people were doubting whether one could really equate the meaning of a proposition with the method of its verification. Jonathan Cohen pointed out that it is not really so clever to complain that someone's remarks are meaningless, for there are many kinds of meaning besides the kind that Ayer and company had talked about.² So then the complaint was that religious language, though not meaningless, is incoherent. But again philosophers came along who showed that a very good case can be made for the coherence of religious and theological language.³ The ground of criticism shifted again, and in effect we were back to the situation that had obtained before the days of logical positivism – a situation in which there is an unfinished and perhaps inconclusive argument between theists and atheists, but one in which neither side can be dismissed as using meaningless language, and each is called to new exertions and refinements of argument. It is now clear that language is, to use an expression introduced, I think, by Robert Evans,⁴ multidimensional – it has more

1. *God-Talk* (Harper, New York and SCM Press, London, 1967).

2. L.J. Cohen, *The Diversity of Meaning* (Herder & Herder, New York, 1963) p.89.

3. See the writings of Planting an Swinburne.

4. R. A. Evans, *Intelligible and Responsible Talk about God* (Brill, Leiden, 1973).

uses and more subtle gradations between major types than was understood even a generation ago. For instance, it used to be thought useful to make a distinction between informative and emotive language. There is indeed a distinction here, but it is very easy to exaggerate it. The informative and the emotive are limiting cases, seldom if ever found in unadulterated condition. Most of the language that we use has both an informative and an emotive component, though one or other of them may predominate. This is true even within particular types of language: for instance, within religious language we find devotional utterances which have a strong emotional flavour, though they also carry cognitive implications: while at the other extreme are theological statements, such as the Athanasian Creed, and in these the emotional component is very much reduced.

The phenomenon of the multidimensionality of language, even within its religious use, may be illustrated by calling to mind a theory which was very influential in the later decades of the nineteenth century – the view of theology taught by Albrecht Ritschl. He claimed that the propositions of theology are "value-judgements", not "scientific judgements" or statements of fact. According to Ritschl, when a theologian asserts that Christ is divine, we are to understand this not as the assertion of a metaphysical fact, but as the attribution to Christ of an ultimate value. But Ritschl was apparently aware that propositions are not likely to be purely factual or purely evaluating, but to have a mixed character. So, without perhaps being fully aware of the consequences, he proceeded to break down his own distinction between judgements of fact and judgements of value. He claimed that even scientific propositions are not purely descriptive or informative but include an element of valuation: and the reason he gave was that the scientist discriminates. His description of phenomena is never exhaustive, and he must pay attention to some matters and leave others aside. Here Ritschl was anticipating things that have been said more recently by the philosopher of science, Michael Polanyi. But Ritschl failed to go on to say that in a predominantly evaluating judgement, there may be also factual or descriptive elements that are hidden and need to be uncovered. If one follows Ritschl and interprets the claim that Christ is God as a value-judgement, this is true up to a point, but it is not the whole truth. The person or community making such a claim has got to answer the question, "on what do you base your value-judgement? Why do you make the

claim for Jesus Christ rather than for one of the many other figures in history for whom similar claims have been made?" There are further dimensions to the claim than the dimension of a value-judgement. Even if value was uppermost in the minds of the Christian community when it first began to make such a claim for Christ, that community had already discerned some characteristics of Jesus Christ that supported the claim. If it were no more than a value-judgement, then, as Bonhoeffer ironically remarked, Jesus Christ would be God by popular vote.

In theological propositions, therefore, we can distinguish more than one dimension or level of meaning and function. Depending on the method (and perhaps also the temperament) of the theologian, one dimension may come to expression more obviously than another, but other dimensions will still be there, though muted and held in the background. Let me give an example, in which some sharp contrasts are to be observed. Luther, and many Lutherans after him, including Ritschl, thought of God primarily in terms of value. So when Luther wanted to explain the meaning of the word "God" for catechumens, he said: "That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is your God". In quite a different way of thinking, St. Thomas Aquinas spoke of God as "He who is," an ontological way of conceiving God as Being, and this way has been important for later generations of Catholic theologians, also for some Protestants, including Tillich who spoke of God as "Being itself". The empirical temperament of America, with its emphasis on process, finds expression in the claim of Wieman that "God is the behaviour of the universe". Are these three different Gods, or is there some way of reconciling them?

I would argue that reconciliation is possible. As all theologians who have sought to reconcile apparently conflicting points of view in the ecumenical dialogue know, the conflicts often give way when we attend not only to the bold statement in which one point of view has been expressed, but to the unspoken assumptions that go along with it. Luther, for instance, says plainly that God is that to which our heart clings. But he also tells us that our hearts may cling to an idol, rather than God. So the meaning of the word "God" is not exhausted just by defining him as that to which our heart

clings. There is a "true" God, and there must be some way of describing and recognizing him, apart from the fact that human beings cling to him. The true God can be distinguished from false Gods and idols only if we introduce judgements of being or reality as well as judgements of value. The same is true on the other side. Tillich speaks of God as "Being itself", but then we find him also speaking of God as our "ultimate concern". If "Being itself" were something cold and impersonal, it could not be God. For that, it would need to embrace those highest moral and spiritual values which draw to God our deepest aspirations and constitute him the centre of our worship. And in the modern world, understood as it is in terms of natural science, we cannot shut our eyes to empirical fact. It is here that Wieman's view relates to the other two. The "behaviour of the Universe" is a clue to the nature of God. Does that behaviour, so far as we can observe it, encourage us to believe that values are being realized in cosmic history and that there is a creative spiritual reality at work in the world?⁵

So I am saying that even in these sharply differing concepts of God that we have seen in Luther, Thomas, Tillich and Wieman, what we have is not so much three incompatible points of view as three differences of emphasis. When we search below the surface of each formulation, we find that there are implied other dimensions, and that when these are brought to light, they can all be seen as having a place in the unimaginably rich and complex texture of the Being of God. Our language never can fully grasp and describe God. But our different traditions can enrich one another by bringing into dialogue their varied insights. This is possible within the ecumenical conversations of Christians, and possible in an even more exciting way in the wider interfaith dialogues that take place between Christians and the great non-Christian faiths of humanity.

Let us now carry our analysis of theological and religious language a little further. Can we specify in more detail some of the dimensions that enter into this kind of discourse, and can we say what are the claims of these several dimensions and how may these claims be reconciled? This is not just an academic question about language

5. See his book, *The Source of Human God* (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1946).

and logic, but has obvious practical consequences for persons coming from different traditions and engaging in dialogue with one another in order to reach better understandings and friendlier relations.

Perhaps the most obvious tension between dimensions of religious language is the one to which we have already been paying attention in the earlier part of this essay - the evaluative-descriptive tension. Christology affords a very good illustration of how acute this tension can become, yet shows us at the same time that it need not be destructive. Classical christology sought to be (metaphysically) descriptive. Its greatest achievement was probably the Chalcedonian definition of the year 451. Even today, the definition or formula proposed by the Chalcedonian fathers remains something of a norm for the Church, as far as the doctrine of the person of Christ is concerned. The best insights of the philosophy then in fashion were called into service. A precise "scientific" vocabulary was used, and terms were to some extent purged of ambiguities which had led to so many misunderstandings and bitter disputes in the past. With the employment of such terms as "nature", "person", "substance" and so on, it was hoped to reach a form of words on which all could agree and around which the whole Christian Church, in east and west alike, could rally. But very soon it became clear that even Chalcedon would not claim the allegiance of all Christians. As time has gone on and the philosophical ideas that lie behind Chalcedon have become increasingly obsolete, the ancient formula has lost much of its force. This is due not simply to the gradual decay of its philosophical basis, but even more to the fact that in seeking to be "scientific" the formula stressed so much the descriptive dimension that the evaluative dimension was very much obscured. So Chalcedon appeared more and more as a dry abstract formula, far removed from the vivid pictures of the gospels and apparently far removed too from the warmth of faith. To Chalcedon, one might give an intellectual assent (so far as its language could be understood) but it could hardly serve to evoke a living personal faith. The most extreme reaction is probably to be observed in the existential christology of Bultmann. In a way reminiscent of Ritschl but going further, Bultmann declares that "the formula 'Christ is God' is false in every metaphysical sense that can be attached to it: it is correct (only) if 'god' is understood here as the event of God's acting."⁶ He explains this to

6. R. Bultmann, *Essays, Philosophical and Theological* (SCM Press, London, 1955), p. 287.

mean that Christ's divinity is not an eternal property of his person nor is the confession of his divinity an eternal dogmatic truth. It simply means that in the moment when we hear and receive the word of Christ, we hear and receive the word of God – or, to put the matter in Ritschlian language, Christ has for us the value of God. But the same type of objections that were raised against Ritschl apply in the case of Bultmann. One may admire Bultmann's insistence that faith is more than assent to a formula and must have its centre in an act of radical allegiance. But why have faith in Jesus Christ rather than someone else, unless we can bring forward some reasons for believing that when we hear his word, we hear the divine word. So the descriptive and the evaluative dimensions are both essential to Christian theology, and room has to be found for each of them.

The next pair of contrasting dimensions to be considered may be called the confessional and the critical. Theology is continuous on one side with faith, which it seeks to bring to expression in words. This is the respect in which theology is confessional – it testifies out of the deep experience of the believing community, of which the theologian is spokesman. But on the other side, theology is critical and is continuous with "science", in the broadest sense of the word. On this side, theology has to be in constant dialogue with secular studies – history, philosophy, the natural and human sciences. Again, we sometimes find the contrast made vivid and even extreme in particular historical encounters. In 1923 there was a notable exchange between Harnack and Barth. Harnack firmly believed that theology is basically a science, committed to scientific methods and to elucidating truth rather than defending dogma. He was therefore deeply disturbed when Karl Barth appeared on the theological scene in Germany, for Barth believed that theology is primarily related to preaching. The theologian seeks to refine the Church's teaching in the light of the word of God, as that word has been communicated in scripture or in proclamation or, above all, in Jesus Christ, understood as the incarnate Word. Here we have one of the sharpest confrontations within Christian theology, and one which is still found in new forms today and probably will continue to be found in the future. Yet I have deliberately said that the confrontation is within theology. Both Barth and Harnack were Christian theologians, both were commending Christian faith in their times. Furthermore, both of them sincerely believed in the way which each

had adopted. We cannot say that one of them was right and the other wrong. We can say, I think, that both were onesided and had taken up exaggerated stances. Confession and criticism are alike necessary dimensions within the discourse of theology. Christianity would never have come into being unless there had been some people like Thomas the Apostle who confessed of Jesus, "my Lord and my God". But Christianity would never have survived for any length of time unless there had come Christian theologians who reflected deeply on the first confessions of faith and were not afraid when necessary to revise and correct and criticize them.

A third important tension is that between the symbolic and the conceptual dimensions of language. Religious language arises out of the experiences of faith, and to talk of these experiences is to move into areas where our direct descriptions, based on perception and applicable within the world as perceived by the senses, cannot be used. We have to turn to various forms of indirect language, to similies, metaphors, parables, allegories, myths and analogies. Religion has used these indirect forms of language throughout its history, and there have been many attempts to explain it, from Dionysius the Areopagite *On the Divine Names* in the fifth century to Tillich's admirable book, *The Dynamics of Faith*, in the twentieth. But where symbolic language is extensively used, one finds attempts to offer interpretations, either in a non-symbolic language or in an alternative set of symbols. This may be part of the theologizing process, especially in its critical aspect. So the language about incarnation, about the word becoming flesh and sojourning on earth provokes the development of a conceptual language which speaks of natures, persons and so on, and produces abstract formulations, notably that of Chalcedon. What is at stake here is the truth-claim of religion. Those who uphold this claim have to find a way of relating religious statements to reality. So long as religious language is shut up in a symbolic or mythological world, one might suppose (and, indeed, some have supposed) that this language refers to nothing beyond itself. It is a product of human subjectivity, perhaps bringing some enhancement or therapy to the human spirit, but having no reference to any realities independent of that spirit. On such a view, religious language is like some highly abstract poetry, and the entities of which it speaks, above all, God, have no independent or objective reality but are only projections of the human mind. It is at this point that religion would seem to have an inevitable encounter

with metaphysics. This is where the theologian has to develop a conceptual language, something which he will usually do in dialogue with one or other of the major philosophies of his epoch. Failure to resolve this tension properly may result in either of two distortions. In some cases there may be produced a theology that stays so close to the original myths and symbols that it never attains intellectual maturity. This is a problem at the present time, where the temptations to fundamentalism, the exaltation of praxis over theory and the glorification of so-called 'base communities' is in serious danger of producing an anti-intellectualism. On the other hand, if the conceptualizing and theorizing tendencies carry all before them, we end up with an 'academic' theology that has no appeal outside of the universities and that has lost the vitality of faith.

The three tensions briefly considered above are not the only ones and they obviously overlap with one another. But they do show us something of the complexities which belong to religious and theological language. They also show however that what may sometimes appear as irreconcilable differences between theologies or religious beliefs may be resolved when we penetrate into the different dimensions that underlie the language.

It also seems to follow that theology is not only a science but an art in which we have to pay attention to proportion and balance. No theology, one suspects, will ever fulfill the ideal. There is never a last word, for whatever has been said, something more remains to be said: whatever dimension have been opened up in the language, other dimensions remain to be explored. Clearly, too, it would be hard to say that any single type of theology has an unquestionable advantage over all others. It might well be the case that in different situations, different theologies are demanded. It could be argued that in the face of the National Socialist phenomenon the Germany of the 1930s, Barth's confessional and kerygmatic style of theology was far more adequate than the liberal theology which he sought to displace. But in the 1990s, it may be that something quite different from either of these is needed.

But to deny that there is any final theology or any unassailable orthodoxy is no warrant for indifference on matters theological, or

for thinking that one theology is as good as another. On the contrary, the very multiplicity of theologies makes it even more urgent to find ways of discovering the meaning of Christianity for our time. Just because there is no once-for-all theological package, the theologian has to hold himself open to the "signs of the times" and to bring faith to expression accordingly.