A2 RS Religious Language

On the Empirical Significance
&
Possibility of Religious & Theological Language.

The ideas of R.B. Braithwaite, I.T. Ramsey
& I.M. Crombie

Stephen Loxton
Introduction

By the early 1950s a prevailing and negative mood had grown over the issue of the meaningfulness of theological or religious language. Due to the powerful influence of A J Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936; 2nd edition 1946) a clear view emerged that religious language was meaningless because it could not be accepted as logically self-evident and because the referents of religious language – ‘God’, ‘the risen Christ’, e.t.c. – were not available to empirical investigation. Ayer’s work was influential in this period not least because the persuasive style of his writing and the promotion of the second edition to the post-war reading public, coupled to Ayer’s contributions to debates on radio, gave his ideas currency and acceptance.

Yet in the mid-1950s several major contributions emerged where the focus was on showing how religious language had an empirical aspect and thereby a means by which verification could be achieved, or how a substantial case for the fundamental coherence and meaningfulness of theological discourse was possible. The contributions were, with regard to the empirical case for religious language, from Cambridge R. B. Braithwaite and from Oxford – although he studied originally at Cambridge, and went on to become Bishop of Durham, I.T. Ramsey. Braithwaite is best known for his study ‘An Empiricist’s View of the Nature of Religious Belief’ (1955) and, in this context, Ramsey for his book ‘Religious Language’ (1957). The third major contribution came from I.M. Crombie, an Oxford philosopher who specialized in the study of Plato, but who produced a very highly regarded study entitled ‘The Possibility of Theological Statements” also first published in 1957, where the focus turns to the logic and plausibility of theological and religious language.

A little more on these scholars:

**R.B. Braithwaite** studied at Cambridge University and specialised in mathematics and science. In the early 1930s he studied with Wittgenstein and there is no doubt that emerging ideas of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy had a considerable influence on Braithwaite. Braithwaite was interested in issues in the philosophy of science as well as ethics and philosophy of religion & his book *Scientific Explanation* was a classic in its field. After lecturing at Cambridge (1934-53) he became Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy (1953-67). Braithwaite’s study, *An Empiricist’s View of the Nature of Religious Belief*, was written as the Eddington memorial lecture for 1955.
**I.T. Ramsey** was also a Cambridge scholar, gaining Firsts in Mathematics, Moral Sciences and Theology. He was ordained and after some chaplaincy work and lecturing in 1951 he became Nolloth Professor of the Christian Religion and Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford. He held this post, doing a lot of writing and lecturing, until 1966 when he became Bishop of Durham. He chaired a committee looking into Religious Education in Schools in England and Wales – the highly influential report was entitled ‘*The Fourth R*’. He died in 1972 of a heart attack and his early death was widely lamented.

![Bishop I. T. Ramsey (1915-1972)](image)

**I.M. Crombie** (1917-2010)

Ian Combie was a lecturer in Philosophy at Oxford University. He became a Fellow of Wadham College Oxford in 1947, succeeding A.J. Ayer as he moved to London University where he became Grote Professor of Philosophy at University College, London. Crombie’s major area of academic work was the philosophy of Plato and his main works were *An Examination of Plato’s Doctrines*, published in two volumes in 1962 and 1963 and *Plato: The Midwife’s Apprentice*, 1964. Crombie retired from full-time work in 1983 and was thereafter an Emeritus Fellow of Wadham College.

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Braithwaite and ‘An Empiricist’s View of the Nature of Religious Belief’

Braithwaite’s work displays strong influence from the later philosophy of Wittgenstein, and in particular the mantra from *Philosophical Investigations* (1953):

‘the meaning of a word is its use in the language.’

Braithwaite approaches the issue of religious language by affirming that he does not intend to consider ethical or religious language as language to be categorised as cognitivist, as language to be analysed on a framework of literal or factual truth. Rather, Braithwaite proposes a non-cognitivist view; the question of truth is thus subordinate to the question of meaning, and view presented is that the meaning of language is expressed via the user and the usage determines the meaning.

**Braithwaite states his view thus:**

‘the meaning of any statement… will be taken as being given by the way it is used.’

Braithwaite makes it clear that he does not use an empirical method in a narrow sense to run a cognitive audit on religious and ethical language – here he is implicitly criticising Ayer’s approach. What he proposes is using the empirical method to describe the phenomena of language-use. The aim is to reveal the usage and thereby the meaning of religious and moral assertions.

**Explaining this,** Braithwaite says his view is ‘conative’ not ‘emotive’. By conative he means that his view will be related to the intentions expresses in the language – the intention as to usage will be the indicator of meaning. Braithwaite dislikes the view that religious language can be classed as non-cognitivism – again, against Ayer. Whilst feeling is a key aspect of moral assertions and all that follows from them, Braithwaite does not think it is the most significant aspect. The key thing is the users ‘intention to perform the action.’ (Remember: conative meaning has to do with intention and the will).

Braithwaite then affirms that

‘the primary use of a moral assertion is that of expressing the intention of the asserter to act in a particular sort of way specified by the action.’

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1 *Philosophical Investigations* 1: 43


3 Braithwaite, p334

4 Ibid.
As an illustration, following Braithwaite’s exposition, if we consider a utilitarian’s assertion of acting well to ‘maximise happiness’ we know that what this means is that this utilitarian is intending to act so as to bring about the greatest happiness to a greater number. Considering the assertion in this way is, Braithwaite argues, helpful, as it gives us something that the emotivist could not provide, namely, a way of explaining how the user could think that he had reason to make the assertion – or that he has a reason for the action – i.e. it wasn’t just emotive. The reason for the action to the user is that he intends to do it so as to maximise happiness, all other things being equal.

**Turning to religious assertions,** Braithwaite thinks that is clear from the vast literature that exists on religious and theological matters that religious language has to do with emotion and feelings, such as feeling of harmony between the self and the universe. But he thinks that for religious people the language of faith is about much more than just feeling. It is a common feature of religious self-understanding that a person’s faith and commitment will be demonstrated through that person’s action. Therefore Braithwaite says that

> the intention of a Christian to follow a Christian way of life is not only the criterion for the sincerity of his assertions of Christianity; it is the criterion for the meaningfulness of his assertions.’

**Braithwaite’s next move** is to consider an objection. If we take a moral assertion, such as the proposal that ‘I am going to act so as to tell the truth and not be a liar’, the resolution to so act presupposes that I know what it is to lie and what it is to tell the truth. It is not problematic to set out the empirical facts concerning these policies. But what about religious assertions? How are we to know the policies specified by the religions the worth of which we assert? This is an issue, of course, for those of Ayer’s disposition who consider that the legitimacy of both metaphysical and theological utterances has been wholly eroded.²

**Braithwaite’s solution to this difficulty** is in effect to promote a coherence view of truth. He thinks that the assertions of a distinctive religion are a part of a larger body of assertions that collectively constitutes the religious system in question. The particular assertions are therefore to be ‘taken by the asserter as implicitly specifying a particular way of life.’³

**Braithwaite thinks that the matter is in fact analogous to what happens in science:**

> We understand scientific hypotheses, and the terms that occur in them, by virtue of the relation of the whole system of hypotheses to empirically observable facts; and it is the whole system of hypotheses, not one hypotheses in isolation, that is tested for its truth value against experience. So there are good

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¹ Op cit p336


³ Braithwaite, Op cit p336
precedents, in the empirical way of thinking, for considering a system of religious assertions as a whole, and for examining the way in which the whole system is used.’

As might be guessed from the remarks made above, Braithwaite then puts focus on the sense in which religious assertions have a moral function – as in ‘specifying a particular way of life’. To deny this, he argues, would require the mediation of a moral assertion between the assertion of the religious view and the intention to follow the policy of action in question. However, the ‘intention-to-act’ concept of moral and religious assertions requires no other reason to explain why a religious person acts morally. This view of religious assertions ‘is the only view which connects them to ways of life without requiring an additional premiss.’

Braithwaite thinks it is clear that within Christianity the assertion that ‘God is love’, - *agape* as in I John 4:8 – is the epitome of Christian assertions and that it connects directly to the intention ‘to follow an agapeistic way of life.’

Braithwaite then explains how empirical testing as set out earlier can be applied to interrogate the asserter of such a view to see whether other consistent and coherent principles are articulated to express the systematic view of the religion as typically understood. And we would observe the actions of the asserter to examine the extent to which they were consistent with the assertions made as statements of intent. Here the maxim of ‘actions speaking louder than words’ fits the case!

**We thus come to the most commonly quoted passage from Braithwaite:**

> the primary use of religious assertions is to announce allegiance to a set of moral principles: without such allegiance there is no “true religion”.

Braithwaite adds that the religious commitment is a ‘state of the will’ – emphasising the conative nature of his view as mentioned earlier.

Braithwaite anticipates the criticism that he has reduced to religious to moral assertions, and he is keen to argue that this is not all his purpose. He suggests that there are distinctive empirical features of religious as opposed to moral assertions; religious assertions are a part of a system – moral assertions might not be; religious assertions are not abstract – they are related to concrete examples, such as Christian teachings, parables and so on in the case of the assertion of Christian commitment. And religious assertions imply an implicit as well as an explicit aspect; there is a concern for the inner life of the asserter, for reflection, as well as for the active side:

> The conversion involved in accepting a religion is a conversion, not only of the will, but of the heart. Christianity requites not only that you should behave towards your neighbour as if you loved him as yourself; it requires that you should love him as yourself. And though I have no doubt that the

1 Op cit p337
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
Christian concept of *agape* refers partly to external behaviour – the agapeistic behaviour for which there are external criteria – yet being filled with *agape* includes more than behaving agapeistically externally: it also includes an agapeistic frame of mind.¹

Braithwaite thus thinks we can empirically distinguish religious from moral assertions.

**How do we distinguish particular religions?**

Braithwaite thinks that each religious system is characterised by its own particular stories or sets of stories, and he says that for the Christian the intention to follow the agapeistic way of life is associated with thinking of particular sets of stories. In this sense, we might say, the assertions of the Christian is a form of the ‘imitation of Christ.’ Braithwaite thinks that there will be variations of types of Christian assertion, but that they will all be empirically testable. By the same methods, we can identify and measure other religious traditions.

Braithwaite’s Wittgensteinian allegiances come through again when he argues that on the view he has developed it is not necessary ‘for the asserter of a religious view to believe in the truth of the story involved in the assertion; what is necessary is that the story should be entertained in thought, i.e. that the statement of the story should be understood as having a meaning.’² The meaning is more vital than the truth and what Braithwaite sees is that religious stories have a psychological and inspirational force that can shape and direct action.

‘A religious assertion… is the assertion of an intention to carry out a certain behaviour policy, subsumable under a sufficiently general principle to be a moral one, together with the implicit or explicit statements but not the assertion, of certain stories.’³

**Problems with Braithwaite’s view**

One major question is raised against Braithwaite: is it accurate and is it legitimate to cast into the role of intentional statements of an ethical character all religious assertions? Religious people are not only making ethical statements when they express in devotional or theological terms statements of faith. Some statements may be referential, relating to the nature of reality, the divine (however conceived) or to the self as a means to the end of obtaining a clearer insight. Braithwaite’s reference to the ‘implicit’ meaning of religious language is his acknowledgment of this aspect – but is it sufficient?

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¹ Op cit p339

² Op cit p342

³ Op cit p345
I T Ramsey on Religious Language.

In 1957 I.T. Ramsey published *Religious Language* and this text remains as one of the most frequently consulted studies of the topic in question. The book is marked by clarity of thought and yet a level of rigour in argument that make it an exemplary piece of work; readable and scholarly!

What does Ramsey argue for? In essence his view is that religious experience is empirically measurable; religious language expressive of this distinctive experience is coherent, meaningful and valid.

Ramsey’s main ideas can be put under the following four headings:

1. **Being is the presupposition for language.**

   Rather like Braithwaite, but in a much more deliberate manner, Ramsey seeks to reply to the charges made by the Logical Positivists that religious language was meaningless as it could not be verified. Against this Ramsey thinks a substantial response is possible. His first line of thought is to argue that the basis for religious language is a religious life. The life of a religious person is a state of faith and a condition of commitment. It is a commitment within and for reality. In relation to this, religious language is expressive and reflective – but the key thing is that propositional arguments do not have a great deal of significance. Ramsey’s point is that it is an empirical fallacy to think that there are evidential grounds for thinking that religious belief rests on the validity of linguistic propositions.

   We can follow and adapt an example discussed by Vardy & Arliss:\(^1\):

   Suppose a person, Person A, gets up at 4am. Why? ‘To go fishing’. Thus the action, getting up, is the consequence of a commitment (to fishing). Language serves to express that prior commitment. If we ask ‘Why do this?’ we might get the answer, ‘Fishing is fishing!’ This is meaningful tautology that communicates an expression of the intrinsic commitment felt for fishing within and for the life of Person A. Whether we like or approve of fishing, the meaning is clear.

   Suppose a person, Person B, gets up at 4am. Why? ‘To go to pray.’ Thus the action, getting up, is the consequence of a commitment (to praying). Language serves to express that prior commitment. If we ask ‘Why do this?’ we might get the answer, ‘Prayer is prayer!’ This is meaningful tautology that communicates an expression of the intrinsic commitment felt for prayer within and for the life of Person B. Whether we like or approve of prayer, the meaning is clear.

   Ramsey’s point is that the language of religious commitment makes empirical and experiential sense. As he says, ‘…for the religious man “God” is a key word, an irreducible posit, an ultimate of explanation of the kind of commitment he professes.’\(^2\)

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2. The Irreducible ‘I’

Ramsey argues that the concept of the self is analogous to the concept of God. If we try to capture in words a total and complete, wholly exhaustive definition of the self, the ‘I’ that we all tend to assume we each are, we get into trouble. We can characterise individual selfhood in a variety of ways, but we will see that even the sum total of descriptions of a person’s character is not the same as the ‘I’ within. It is a safe best that we are all sure that we each are more than the collective view the rest of us have of us! This shows us that there are expressive limits to the ways in which we can express some ideas and experiences. Here, we can note that we are close to a point made by Wittgenstein in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, that

‘What can be shown, cannot be said.’

In much the same sense Ramsey thinks that we cannot, in human language, capture and express directly God, the mysteries of creation, the nature of freedom and the matters of love and salvation and so on. What is expressed is, in various ways, faith and commitment to these things. Thus ‘God’

‘is to be talked about in terms of the object-langue over which it presides, but only when this object-language is qualified: in which case this qualified object-language becomes also currency for that odd discernment with which religious commitment, when it is not bigotry or fanaticisms, will necessarily be associated.’

3. Discernment.

Ramsey is very persuasive in dealing with phenomenon of commitment when he relates it to the underlying insight or discernment that that discloses the religious understanding that religious language then expresses. Ramsey likens this to the colloquial moment of new insight we express with the phrase ‘when the penny drops’. We must allow that this was a more regular and resonant image in 1957 in the age of Sterling, than it might be in today’s cash-scarce world! Ramsey’s point is that we all have moments in our development, in our learning, when a transformational discernment occurs. In Mathematics, we might have been taught that ‘2+2=4’; we might have been shown on a number of occasions that ‘2+2=4’. But then, at some point, we see that ‘2+2=” cannot-not be ‘4’. Ramsey’s idea is that the faith commitment is similarly a transformational discernment that evokes commitment – and this is the basis for the meaning and sense of much religious language.

4. Models and Qualifiers

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1 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 4.1212

2 Ramsey, Op cit.

3 See Ramsey Op cit, p49ff
Ramsey offer a means by which religious language can be understood via an operational analysis of what happens when we try to say something about our sense of or faith in God. No less than earlier scholars and in keeping with the views of most biblical writers, Ramsey is sure that it is not possible to express direct or literal knowledge of God. On the other hand we use human language to express our faith. How can we use everyday language from the physical world to express something of what we have by way of faith in and commitment to that which transcends the everyday world?

Ramsey’s idea is that what happens is that we take a term from everyday language as ‘model’ for the sort of thing we are trying to express about our faith, and we apply a term as a ‘qualifier’ to indicate that what we express is not a part of the everyday world.¹

We might, for example, have terms such as ‘wise’, ‘loving’ or ‘good’ as ‘models’ for expressions of our sense of God; we then have ‘qualifiers’ like ‘eternally’, ‘wholly’ or ‘infinitely’ to signal that here we do not mean the literal meaning of the term used as a ‘model’, that here the literal meaning is being transcended. There is negation and affirmation going on.

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<td>‘Models’ are literal, partial and relative…</td>
<td>‘Qualifiers’ signal depth, mystery, otherness and the absolute…</td>
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<td>Wise</td>
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Here we might be reminded of Anselm’s approach to the definition of God in Prosligion:

‘... not only are you that than which a greater cannot be thought, but you are also something greater than can be thought.’²

Notes

¹ See Ramsey Op cit, p49-89.

² Anselm, Prologion 15
Against Ramsey

Ramsey’s attempt to ground religious language in framework that is empirically verifiable is widely respected as having achieved a lot to provide a reading of such language that clarifies its sense (if we follow Frege!). The snag is, does this achieve a convincing defence of the idea that such language has a reference beyond the experience of the subjects who use the language expressive of the experiential commitments that have? Ramsey shows us what is going with religious language. Does he show us that religious language is also expressing truths about the nature of things?

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Ramsey: A Summary

Ramsey considers a range of philosophical problems that Theology faces. In particular he examines the question of the validity of theological language. Concern about this had been prompted by the philosophical writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) and also the Logical Positivists such as Alfred Ayer (1910-1989). Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) argued that religious or theological language was analytically unscientific. Religious statements were considered to be technically meaningless as it was argued that claims such as "God exists" were not mere tautologies and were observationally unverifiable.

Ramsey was concerned to argue that traditional theological language was empirically meaningful. His arguments were developed on a model of religious language grounded in personal experience and personal disclosure. As humans communicate with each other personal disclosure occurs. Ramsey used this point to argue that humans come to encounter God also by way of personal disclosure and so Ramsey offered a version of an argument from analogy. It is an analogy of experience, of you like! Ramsey's theological work thus re-emphasized the traditional theological view that all religious language is analogical, and the religious words that humans create always involve the use of analogy.
I.M. Crombie on ‘The Possibility of Theological Statements’

Ian Crombie is one modern scholar who develops a defence of the meaningfulness of religious and theological language that is reminiscent of the apophatic style but in manner that links to the use of analogy. He thus offers a way of combining the two of the traditions we have previously examined.

Crombie’s work arose from a discussion group at Oxford called ‘The Metaphysicals’. A group of philosophers and theologians began meeting after The Second World War. All were Anglicans and all felt uneasy about two trends, one in Theology and one in Philosophy. The one in Philosophy was that of the Logical Positivists with Ayer’s campaign to eliminate metaphysics, theology and ethics. The other was from the neo-orthodox tradition in twentieth-century Theology, as associated with Karl Barth (1886-1968). Barth’s premise was that faith was a ‘miracle’, ‘vertical from above’, a ‘revelation’. In contrast, religion was ‘a human work’ and no human work, religion, philosophy, science or history, could attain or defend faith.¹ Crombie and his associates sought to counter both trends with ideas of how a reasoned explanation of theological language could be presented. In due course, and after a variety of other public airings, the main members of the group put their ideas into print in Faith and Logic, edited by Basil Mitchell, and published in 1957.²

*Crombie: First Considerations:*

What do we mean by ‘theological statements’?

Crombie – whose academic work was, as we noted above, principally concerned with Plato’s philosophy - means statements expressing beliefs that have an objective and factual status and that are characteristically Christian.

Crombie is quite clear that to be a Christian is to have a commitment to certain beliefs and these beliefs have a factual character – they pertain to reality as it is or was, and in relation to these beliefs, if they are valid, this is because reasons can be given for them.

Crombie make this clear:

‘Christianity, as a human activity, involves much more than simply believing certain propositions about matters of fact, such as that there is a God, that He created this world, that He is our judge. But it does involve believing these things, and this believing is, in a sense, fundamental; not that it matters more

¹ See K Barth, The Epistle to the Romans. etr of 2nd edition.

than the other things that a Christian does, but that it is presupposed in the other things that he does, or in the manner in which he does them.”¹

Crombie does not agree with views that suggest that religious truths are non-cognitive or symbolic, in the sense of theological and religious language being a mode of symbolic language being expressive in the moral or aesthetic sense – cf. R B Braithwaite & J H Randall.

Nevertheless, Crombie appreciates that with regard to faith the issue of verification is problematic. Key issues have to do with what is consistent or compatible with the facts that support one’s belief – and here the facts can be historical and experiential.

Crombie know that, as noted above, some theologians try to avoid the ‘faith-facts’ or ‘faith-history’ interface, and philosophers like the logical positivists say that theological statements are meaningless anyway.

Crombie seeks to overcome these no-go areas!

He is mindful of the distinction between ‘believing in’ and ‘believing that’. This is found in some of the debates over philosophy of religion in the 1950s in the wake of the later philosophy of Wittgenstein and has to do with the contrast that can be drawn between factual beliefs (‘belief that’) and commitments and attitudes represented as ‘belief in’.

Crombie takes a realist and correspondence view about truth: as we might expect from the passage quoted earlier, he argues that ‘belief that’ is the presupposition for ‘belief in’.²

For example:

You might believe in Dr Jones’ ability to get you through your Botany A level, but you have to believe that she exists for this ‘belief in’ to be significant.

Think of other examples of the contrast between ‘belief in’ and ‘belief that’

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¹ Crombie, Op cit, p31
² Crombie, Op cit, p32
Crombie is strongly against the idea that religious language and faith can be reduced to an activity, a mode or form of life, or to the expression of feelings. This is a cumulative rejection of the interpretation arising from the later Wittgenstein and it is implicitly a rejection of Braithwaite’s argument in ‘An Empiricist’s View of the Nature of Religious Belief’. Against this Crombie thinks there is for theological statements and the faith they express ‘an irreducible element of belief’ and he means that this has an objective character.

Christian faith and devotion

‘… is thought of by the Christian as an entry into relationship with a transcendent being, whom non-Christians do not believe to be there to enter into relationship with. Christian worship, therefore, is not only something which the non-Christian does not do, it is something which, by virtue of the difference of his beliefs, the non-Christian cannot do…’

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*Crombie on ‘Theological Statements’*

Crombie defends a classical view about religious language when he develops the idea that ‘theological statements’ have a distinctively ‘paradoxical’ character. He accepts that the critics of the claim that theological statements are meaningful base their view on the idea that such statements are paradoxical – they appear to be about something but they are not about anything that can be meaningfully verified. But Crombie thinks that these

‘paradoxical features need not be regarded as demonstrating the impossibility of meaningful theological statements, but rather as contributing to a grasp of their meaning by giving a partial characterisation of their subject.’

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1 Ibid

2 Ibid. Crombie’s idea here is confirmed by the debates engendered by Dawkins’ *The God Delusion!*

3 Op cit p34
Crombie’s aim, as we will see, is to hold that the term ‘God’ is meaningful yet it is mysterious and incomprehensible. The trick, if we put it that way, is to have a coherent explanation of how an incomprehensible mystery can yet be meaningful. This is what Crombie sets out to do, and one writer who he does not mention but who we might call to mind is Anselm, and his notion of God as ‘that that which nothing greater can be thought’!

Crombie suggests that the first step in theology is to understand that ‘God may not be identified with anything that can be indicated’, this because the religious or faith aspect of the paradox in such statements results in the truth that such statements

‘are made about no object which falls within our normal experience, or any imaginable extension of our normal experience.’

So, on Crombie’s view theological statements are a) about ‘a mystery’ and b) a mystery that can be elucidated via a consideration of the relationships between theological faith and the ethical commitments that have affinity with them – as in the ‘Great Commandment’ teaching in Mark 12, where the love of God is linked to love of neighbour as oneself. c) We are able to investigate the question as to whether a ‘sense of mystery’ is appropriate to any part of our experience and by this means we can judge the sense of theological language.

Crombie thinks that the mystery aspect of theological language is a consequence of what, in faith terms and in the religious vocabulary within Christianity, we would term ‘revelation’, and this we can explain and express an understanding of, but we employ language paradoxically in this process – but we must keep clear the character of the paradox, which is summarized thus:

‘The problem about theological statements is simply that there is a sense in which we cannot know what they are about (a sense in which we cannot know God) nor what it is that they assert.’

This is akin to an apophatic approach, if nothing else!

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**Notes**

1 Ibid

2 See Mark 12

3 Crombie. Op cit, p35
Proper ‘proper’ names and ‘improper proper’ names.

Crombie develops his idea of the paradoxical character of theological statements via the view that what goes on is kind of ‘as if’: when we word some statement of faith to express, in some sense, something of ‘God’. We find a tension in that the statements ‘are to be interpreted as if their subject was a particular individual, and yet differ in logical character from all other statements about particular individuals.’\(^1\)

Crombie takes as an example the statement ‘Tom loves Mary.’\(^2\) If we ask who Tom is, then logically we can point out who he is. ‘Tom’ the proper name correlates to the individual in question. But if we say ‘The average man falls in love at least once between the ages of 18 and 27’ and then ask ‘Who is the average man?’, then the problem is that we are not showing that we understand the term ‘average man’.

‘Tom’, says Crombie, operates as a proper proper name; it is directly about Tom. ‘The average man’, to be clarified, needs to be reduced. It is oblique in its reference, and is about ‘people in general’.

If we say ‘God loves mankind’ the question ‘Who is God?’ is proper and all the rules of grammar suggest a direct reference. But Combie insists that ‘there is an improper sense in which it cannot be answered.’ The really vital matter Crombie then notes is that whilst in respect of ‘Who is Tom?’ we have a procedure for introducing somebody to Tom, we have not such procedure for introducing somebody to God – unless, Crombie adds, ‘there are operations… from the standpoint of faith’.

\(^1\) Op cit, p39

\(^2\) See Crombie Op cit, p39f
Something Crombie makes clear in his discussion is that the question of the meaningfulness of theological statements is a vital one for the critic who is also a sceptic: it is not an issue for a person of faith. But it comes to expression in the consequence of the review Crombie makes of the ‘Who is God?’ question: the upshot is that this name (‘God’) is an improper proper name: it isn’t an oblique statement about a generality but it isn’t about a being with whom one is acquainted in the way that we might be with Tom.

Crombie notes a number of other ways in which terms can be significant, although the rules of grammar get contradictory:

1. ‘Point’ in geometry: it denotes a) that points are in space and b) they are sizeless. Common sense and our usual rules of expression suggest that if something is ‘in space’, it must have some size! A thought (of lunch, for example) can be sizeless, but it isn’t usual to think of thoughts being ‘in space’ like the London Eye or Clifton Suspension Bridge. Still, ‘point’ operates in this ‘improper manner in geometry.

2. Fictitious characters have proper names – Crombie takes ‘Titania’ as his example. We can explain who Titania is relationally within the characters in A Midsummer Nights Dream but we can’t literally point ‘Titania’ out.

Crombe remarks that ‘the expression “God” in some ways resembles words which stand for fictions.’

Crombie does not want to press the comparisons with geometric points or fictions to illuminate theological statements – he uses the examples simply to show that we can, in a more modern phrase, ‘think outside the box’ of usual grammatical expression when doing mathematics and drama – and we do this in theology too. This shows us that theological statements are in a ‘logically anomalous position’:

‘On the one hand statements about God are not reducible, and in that they are like statements about Tom as opposed to statements about the average man. On the other hand, although they are not reducible, but have their own distinct subject, in the manner of “Tom loves Mary”, that subject is not an ordinary subject...’

And:

‘God is not known to anybody, and... descriptions which are sometimes offered as uniquely characterizing Him (“the first cause”, “the necessary being”) are such that nobody can say what it would be like to conform to one of them (if one knew what it would be like for something to be a necessary being, then one could say that “God” stood for whatever satisfies these conditions; but one does not)’

1 Op cit, p40
2 Op cit, p41
3 Op cit, p43
Again, we are in an apophatic mode of thinking here!

Crombie argues that the character of statements about God are not distinct from other statements in purely logical or physical terms: this makes the question of the proper reference for the expression ‘God’ hard to fix – and for Crombie this is where his argument turns: if we can identify an appropriate reference-range for an expression, then we can make sense of it. Can we find a reference range for ‘God’ and for theological statements?

Notes

Theological Statements: the problem of content and the issue of a reference-range of meaning.

Crombie thinks that a further range of problems can be linked to theological statements if we ask more searchingly about their content, about what they are about. In short, when theologians or persons of faith talk about God they reckon to express truths and to have definitions, albeit paradoxical ones, that make sense of what they mean. However, the theologian and the person of faith will not allow that scientific enquiry can arbitrate the meaning of theological discourse. Phrases like ‘God loves us’ can be used a) because the usual meanings of terms is clear to us and b) because in the faith context of expression, the phrase ‘acquires formal properties which render it utterly baffling to the critic’\(^1\). Thus not only is the critic puzzled as to the reference of theological language, he is lost as to the nature of its content. The theist, however, is in the following state:

‘believing in a mystery beyond experience, traces of which he claims to detect in experience’

Thus Crombie suggests that the believer contends that

\(^1\) Op cit, p48
'he is obliged to use, for the expression of his beliefs, language governed by paradoxical rules.'

Crombie then thinks that we can examine some affinities between theological and other statements to the end of helping to fix the reference range of theological language. This follows because the subject-matter of theological statements overlaps with subject matters about which empirical generalisations and moral judgments are made, and this means that ‘theological statements are sensitive to, and have affinities and relationships with statements of other kinds.’

As examples of affinities and relationships we have

a) ordinary language use – as discussed (and which links to the doctrine of analogy)
b) the language of psychology and related disciplines – as in theological statements about love.
c) Moral language – in statements about the nature and extent of human suffering.

Nevertheless, theological statements are distinctive, irreducible and paradoxical and essentially this is because they are impelled by ‘a conception of the divine’, that is to say,

‘a conception of a being outside time and space, on whom the spacio-temporal universe is in some sense dependent.’

As consequence of this conception it follows that in theological discourse

‘It will not be possible, in any ordinary way, to indicate such a being, for indicating is selecting a region of space-time in which certain qualities are manifested.’

Crombie also says

‘it also seems natural to suppose that if God is conceived as the source of the space-time universe, Himself outside space and time, His activity will not be manifested (at least normally) here rather than there (for then He would be here rather than there) and hence that statements about his relation to the created universe will not take the form of cosmological hypotheses, verifiable by observing the contents of particular spacio-temporal regions.’

Crombie makes clear on a number of occasions the strict sense in which we can and can’t speak meaningfully of God:

‘We must acknowledge at once that in the ordinary sense we have no conception of the divine nature. We do no know god, and it would be absurd to claim that we know what sort of being He is.’

1 Op cit, p50
2 Op cit, p51
3 See Cromie Op cit, p51
4 Op cit, p54
5 Ibid
6 Op cit, p54-55
7 Op cit, p55
8 Ibid
But he advances his solution too!

‘What I propose to argue is could be put like this: the conception of the divine is indeed in one sense an empty notion; but it is the notion of a compliment which could fill in certain deficiencies in our experience, that could not be filled in by further experiences or scientific theory-making; and its positive content is simply the idea of something (we know not what) which might supply those deficiencies.’

Crombie’s next step is to suggest that the arguments for the existence of God that we find in natural theology are significant, not because the arguments are necessarily correct, but because they indicate the ‘intellectual pressures’ that lead people to speak about God. However, the real experiential cause of such pressure and for the quest for God as ‘spirit’ (Crombie’s preferred term) is ‘our inability to accept with complete contentment the idea that we are ourselves normal spacio-temporal objects.’ The phenomenology of human relations – love, feeling, hoping, seeing, are all concepts needs for the description of human subjects that we don’t need in the slightest when describing items in the natural world, like tables, computers or trees. Human subjects can of course be atomised physiologically, but there is nevertheless a distinction between the patient on the operating table as inspected by the surgeon, and the patient in herself, thinking, hoping feeling praying. The dichotomy or dualism is evident in the performance of an elective Caesarean or in some types of brain surgery when a general anaesthetic is not employed and the patient remain conscious throughout. Crombie is, in effect, arguing for a mode of duality in the nature of being human, in a tradition in philosophy from Aristotle to Gilbert Ryle. This is not an understanding that sees humans as body and soul in a sharply distinct manner. But it means that humans have to be describes as spiritual beings. This does not means that we are claiming that some part of ourselves is outside time and space, but rather, and again one sees the apophatic style coming into play, ‘part of our experience of ourselves is only describable with the aid of concepts of a non-physical kind.’ This means that we make, consciously and deliberately, a category-error, in that we use a term for which we can give no proper meaning. Crombie makes it clear that whilst we can set out precise meanings for terms like ‘smile’ or ‘digestion’, we cannot do the same for ‘spirit’.

‘I admit that we have no idea of spirit, and claim only that it is extravagant to say that we have no notion whatsoever of how the word is used. How the word is used (and this, of course, defines such meaning as it has for us) in the theological context is by the deliberate commission of a category mistake under the pressure of convictions which require us to depart from normal language-practice in this way.”

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1 Op cit, p56
2 Op cit, p57
3 See Crombie Op cit, p57ff
4 Op cit, p58
5 Op cit, p60
Crombie defines God as ‘Infinite Spirit’, and uses this set out the reference-range for theological language in a negative sense – again, shades of the *via negativa* here! To employ the term ‘infinite’ is not to use the term in its mathematical sense: in respect of God,

‘We mean, negatively that he is unlimited; or, more positively, that, being the source of all limitation, there is nothing whatsoever to which he is conformed, or to which He must conform Himself.’

‘Infinite’, like ‘necessary’, ‘omnipotent’, and ‘creator’ are words used of God, but the key characteristic, says Crombie, is that

‘in so far as they have any precise sense, they cannot be used about God. For, since we do not know God, they cannot acquire a precise sense by reference to His properties; if then they have a precise sense they must acquire it from reference to the properties of something else; and since nothing else can be an adequate model for God, in so far as they have a precise sense, it cannot be applied to Him.’

Here we see a reference to a qualified use of analogy and models – so an overlap with Aquinas and I T Ramsey!

Crombie makes it clear that for the person of faith no issue arises over the language of theology or over the significance of ‘God’: it refers to ‘a being who could claim one’s adoration’. Thus a case exists to fix the reference-range of theological language by looking, not at what is aid or felt about reality by religious people, but at ‘how they dispose themselves towards God – that is, to learn what worship is.’

Crombie continues:

‘It is the contrast between the attitude of worship, and the attitude which religion commends towards creatures (always to be valued, but never, absolutely, in themselves) which illuminates what religion takes the infinite-finite contrast to be.’

Crombie notes that his work is the theoretical equivalent of the ban on idolatry in the Old Testament! His point is that the ban on idolatry ‘taught the Jews what God is’.

Crombie lists the following terms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finite</th>
<th>Infinite</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contingent</td>
<td>Necessary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derivative</td>
<td>Non-derivative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We have three sets of paired terms: as used in theology we should not seek to ‘anatomise’ their meaning. If we say the world is ‘finite’ we don’t mean that ‘it can

1 Op cit, p62
2 Op cit, p65
3 Ibid
4 Op cit, p64
be counted or travelled across; when we speak of it as derivative, we do not think of it as derived from its origin by any normal kind of derivation.\(^1\)

The key thing is to see that in theology ‘the meaning to be attached to the second member of each pair is to be got at by seeing what kind of judgement about the world is intended by the use of the first.’ And the sort of judgment intended by such language is ‘an intellectual dissatisfaction with the notion that the universe is a complete system, with, as a corollary, the notion of a being with which one could be thus dissatisfied.’\(^1\)

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**A summary of Crombie’s view:**

Theological statements are logically odd, but this allows is to fix their reference range.

To know what statements about God are about we need to fix their reference-range.

By a reference range Crombie means the range that limits what we are talking about.

The problem is that ‘we neither know God nor know what kind of being He is.’

But God is not ‘this being’ or ‘that being’ – God is not *a being* among the beings!

God is ‘beyond the reach of our conception.’

God is inconceivable, but this in a sense that uses the term ‘to refer to the postulated, though unimaginable, absence of limitations or imperfections of which we are aware.’

The expression ‘Infinite Spirit’ stands for ‘the abstract conception of the possibility of the removal of certain intellectual dissatisfactions which we may feel about the universe of common experience.’

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**The Role of Parabolic Understanding.**

Crombie suggests that once the nature and range of theological statements has been fixed we appreciate freshly the role that parabolic meaning has in theological writing. If we take the parables of the New Testament as examples, Crombie means that in such parables the worlds individually are of course derived from the ordinary modes of language use. But in as the totality that is the parable the words aggregate a theological meaning that lies beyond the parable:

‘The point of a parable is that you do not suppose that there is any literal resemblance between the truth which is expressed and the story which expresses it, but you do suppose that if you accept the story, not as a literal account, but as a faithful parable, you will not be mislead as to the nature of the underlying reality.’\(^2\)

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1 Op cit, p65
2 Op cit, p70-71
Crombie concludes with the view that there is a personal faith commitment that impels the Christian to view the parables in this way, but it is not a faith commitment alone that validates the appeal: to speak of the image of God in the terms used with Christianity

‘… is based on two things: firstly on the fact that we find ourselves impelled to regard the events recorded in the Bible and found in the life of the Church as to communication of a transcendent being, and that the image is an essential part of this communication; secondly on the fact that the more we try to understand the world in the light of this image, the better our understanding of the world becomes.’¹

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¹ Op cit, p81