

RADICAL THEOLOGICAL NON-NATURALISM

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I

In developed Judeo-Christian-Islamic discourses 'God' cannot be ostensibly defined but is intra-linguistically defined via definite descriptions. But the definite descriptions, used in attempts to render the concept of God less problematic, are at least as problematic as the concept of God itself. Sven tells us that 'God is the maker of the universe' and Krister demurs, denying that 'God is the maker of the universe'. What could either appeal to establish or to even give a somewhat greater probability to his view? What **experienceable** states of affairs **count for** one view and **against** the other, such that on balance we are justified in claiming greater probability for its being the case that one rather than the other obtains? It looks like nothing empirically specifiable or not equally problematic does or even could. One need not be a logical empiricist or even crypto or quasi-logical empiricist, such as Antony Flew, to be puzzled by that state of affairs.

The central reasons for suspecting that a non-anthropomorphic concept of God is problematic and that God-talk may not make sense are the following. No one of them, taken singly, is decisive, but, **taken together**, they do, I believe, challenge the coherence of theism. They raise powerfully the question of whether the central truth-claims of Christianity are genuine truth-claims and whether we have a religiously viable concept of God.

(A), (B) and (C) to follow are the central considerations. (A), God, when conceived non-anthropomorphically, cannot be identified, yet it remains the case that, to make genuine assertions, including assertions in which 'God' and equivalent or near equivalent expressions are used, it must be possible

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successfully to identify the subject of that putative statement so that we can understand what it is we are talking about and thus understand that a genuine assertion has actually been made. But we have no idea how to identify God. (B) Personal predicates, e.g. protects, punishes, forgives, are at least seemingly essential for God-talk, yet they suffer from such an attenuation of meaning in their use in a religious milieu that it appears to be the case that we have, in such environments, emptied such terms of all intelligible meaning, so that we do not understand what we are asserting or denying when we use 'God protects His children'. (C) While purporting to be **factual** assertions, true or false, utterances such as 'God exists' and 'God protects His children' are not even in principle confirmable or disconfirmable in such a way that we can say what experienceable states of affairs would count for these putative assertions or against them, such that we could say what it would be like to have evidence which would make either their assertion or their denial more or less probably true. (This last qualification of (C) is essential. Without it the claim is vulnerable to by now standard objections.¹)

Terence Penelhum, in his **Problems of Religious Knowledge**, in his **Rationality and Religion** and in his response to me, argues that these worries about the incoherence of God-talk are misconceived.² He readily enough grants that we do not know that the fundamental claims of Christianity and Judaism are true, but, he contends, we understand well enough what it would be like for them to be true. We can describe, he claims, a verification structure which would establish quite unequivocally the truth of theism. It is perfectly possible, Penelhum believes, for believers and non-believers alike to describe a possible experienceable state of affairs which would, if it actually were to obtain, establish the truth or at least the probable truth of theism. The skeptic who refused to believe, in the face of such a turn of events would be **irrational**. But what Penelhum calls a **radical theological non-naturalist** is someone who holds just this position. Such a theological non-naturalist holds that we cannot confirm, or in any other way establish, the truth of theistic statements charac-

¹ Many of them are expressed succinctly by William L. Rowe in Chapter 3 of his **Philosophy of Religion** (Encino, California: Dickenson Publishing Company, 1978), pp. 96-109 and by R. C. Swinburne, **Sense and Nonsense in Physics and Theology**, Inaugural Lecture, University of Keele, March 1973.

² Terence Penelhum, **Problems of Religious Knowledge** (London: Macmillan Press, 1971), Terence Penelhum, **Religion and Rationality** (New York: Random House, 1971) and his response to my "On the Rationality of Radical Theological Non-Naturalism", **Religious Studies** (1978), pp. 193-204, presented at the Banff Conference in April 1977.

terizable in non-theistic terms. The radical theological non-naturalist believes not only that no non-theistic statements in fact establish, or even confirm or disconfirm to any degree, fundamental theistic statements, such as 'God created the heavens and the earth' or 'God loves mankind', but that none could, that no conceivable experienceable state of affairs, characterizable in wholly nontheistic terms, would, even if true, verify that God created the heavens and the earth, that he loves mankind or even that God exists. Penelhum thinks that we understand God-talk — even non-anthropomorphic God-talk — sufficiently well to understand what would verify the claims of theism. This view conflicts sharply with my view, Hepburn's, Ayer's and Flew's.³ If he is right, we are not only plainly mistaken, but are being downright irrational in sticking with such a theological non-naturalism. I have tried to sort this out previously but have not at all succeeded in convincing Penelhum.⁴ I am not even remotely interested in scoring debater's points or pursuing controversy for the sake of controversy, but given the importance of the issue, i.e. whether the central claims of theism are unproblematic, plainly intelligible, and straight-forwardly empirically verifiable. I want to return to the issue. That is, do they consist in propositions whose logical status is not anomalous?

II

I shall proceed by first commenting on Penelhum's attempts to rebut my previous arguments and then I shall turn to some general observations.

Penelhum agrees with me that the type of alleged verificatory structure he utilizes, and Hick utilizes as well, and the probative facts to which they appeal in their attempts to show that religious knowledge or rational religious belief is **possible**, do not have to be interpreted theistically. It is enough, he claims, for his program to be viable, that they **could** be so interpreted. What, Penelhum argues, if we found ourselves in

³ Kai Nielsen, *Contemporary Critiques of Religion* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971) and Kai Nielsen, *Scepticism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971), Ronald Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox* (New York: Humanities Press, 1958), A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1936) pp. 5-6, 33-45, 114-120 and Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (London: Hutchinson and Co., Ltd., 1966) and Antony Flew, *The Pre-sumption of Atheism* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976). Much of the crucial literature about this has been coherently selected, arranged and introduced by Malcolm Diamond and Thomas V. Litzenburg and their anthology, *The Logic of God: Theology and Verification* (Indianapolis, Indiana: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Incorporated, 1975).

⁴ Kai Nielsen, "On the Rationality of Radical Theological Non-Naturalism", *Religious Studies* (1978), pp. 193-204.

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a post-mortem society that was harmonious and was ruled over in a loving and reflective way by Jesus? If we were rational human beings, we would take it that God loves mankind had been verified. If such a rule, such a social order, were actually to obtain, then it would be **unreasonable** to interpret these facts in a non-theistic manner.

Penelhum's example is a happy one, for it is just such a claim which I contest. At least here we will perhaps not be arguing at cross-purposes. My argument is that, if we do not understand what we are talking about in using God-talk in non-anthromorphic ways, if (for example) we do not understand what 'God' or 'An infinite individual transcendent to the world' could possibly refer to, such probative facts, e.g. that Jesus is on his throne. if they are facts, could not verify or count as evidence for 'God exists', because, unless **we**, to some extent, understand **what we are talking about** when we use 'God' nothing could count as evidence for God's existence, any more than anything could count as evidence for 'Irglig's existence where we do not understand at all what 'Irglig' refers to.

It is not a question, as Penelhum seems to think, of a particular individual's incomprehension. I do not know what a neutrino is either, but I do not for a moment conclude from this that nothing does or could count toward establishing their reality. Penelhum grants that for someone who genuinely does not understand what is being talked about in speaking of God such putative facts, as he and Hick trot out, could not count for such people as evidence for God's existence. But he also rightly observes that because it does not count as evidence for them, it does not follow that it cannot count as evidence for anyone, and most particularly, that it does not follow that such putative facts, if they really are facts, would not be verificatory for the believer, if he really does understand what he is talking about in speaking of God.

If the believer is the sort of believer who takes 'God' to be some sort of referring expression and if he knows how, at least to some extent, to ascertain the reference of 'God' and yet he still rules out **a priori** that there could possibly be any evidence of God's existence, then this is plainly irrational wilfulness on his part. And it would be an additional bit of irrationality on his part on the same **a priori** grounds not to allow any actual or imagined situation, whatever it might be, to persuade him to abandon the theistic statements he makes. But Penelhum seems at least also to believe that the skeptic, who is a **radical** theological non-naturalist, is irrational in an analogous

manner. But it is anything but evident that that is so. Surely, it is not so, on Penelhum's own admission, if neither believer nor skeptic understand what they are talking about in speaking of a non-anthropomorphic, non-Zeus-like God. Penelhum just assumes that the skeptic really does understand such talk in spite of his disavowals.

So the essential question is: **do we understand what we are talking about in speaking of God** where 'God' is used non-anthropomorphically? Even, with (for example) the sudden disappearance of all degenerative diseases, we would still not be able to claim that that was evidence for God's existence, if we did not understand theistic expressions. No true proposition could verify some other proposition and no event or anything else could verify a proposition for anyone who does not at least roughly know what that proposition means. So, if no one understands what it means to speak of a non-anthropomorphic God, one cannot use those events, or some non-theistic propositions, to verify such God-talk. This would not, of course, show that certain true propositions, or perhaps certain events, would not verify those propositions for someone who did understand them. Furthermore, and most crucially, Penelhum stresses that the radical theological non-naturalists' judgment that a situation or event does not verify them, cannot, at one and the same time, **serve as a consequence of his claim that they are incoherent and as a reason for that claim.** To justifiably claim that their incoherence is a **ground** for their being unverifiable requires that their incoherence has been established independently.

This last set of remarks is fair enough and points to what by now should be evident enough anyway, that no, even attenuated, verifiability theory of meaning is at all in the cards, but it is here where it is crucial to return to the three inter-related features of God-talk mentioned at the beginning of this article. If we are puzzled about the attenuation of predicates characterizing God and we are thoroughly perplexed about what 'God' refers to, then, if we further find intractable disagreement about whether anything would, or even could, verify or even count as evidence for or against the existence of God, then it is reasonable for us to take such a lack of consensus as further grounds for questioning the coherence of God-talk.

I shall spell out the above cryptic remark and show how it relates to Penelhum's last mentioned claim. Penelhum thinks that the situation is such that there are a) some believers, and indeed some non-believers as well, who under-

stand well enough our admittedly mysterious God-talk and b) that there are, as well, some non-believers (radical theological non-naturalists) who have persuaded themselves, perhaps through a series of philosophical conjuring tricks, that they really do not understand such talk. For those, Penelhum claims, who so understand such talk, 'God exists' and the like is verifiable readily enough, and for those who do not, the question cannot even intelligibly arise. But that seems to me a parody of the actual situation. The actual situation seems to me to be this: no one understands **what** they are talking about when they speak of God, where 'God' is used non-anthropomorphically, though some have kidded themselves into believing they do. My grounds for that are that no one can specify what 'God' refers to without using, in their definite descriptions, conceptions which are equally problematic, e.g. 'maker of the universe', 'ultimate transcendent reality', 'infinite individual transcendent to the world', 'foundation of the world', 'selfexistent reality beyond the bounds of space and time'. It isn't just that the radical theological non-naturalists do not understand such talk; no one does, though some chatter on as if they really understood what they were saying when they use such words. The blank wall of incomprehension here is one central reason why the relevant bits of God-talk make unverifiable claims. We have no genuine understanding of what it is the existence of which we are supposedly verifying. It is the impossibility of specifying what 'God', construed non-anthropomorphically, actually refers to that is perhaps the most fundamental cause of the difficulty. Given that 'God' is used with referring expectations and, given that, without the satisfaction of those expectations, we do not know how, even in principle, to start verifying (disconfirming or confirming) putative factual statements employing God-talk, we have, because of those considerations, good grounds for believing that such God-talk is incoherent. So it is not a matter of asserting that some event or situation does not verify such religious utterances as either a consequence of a claim that they are incoherent or as a reason for that claim; rather the situation is that, given a) the attenuation of predicates applied to God, (b) an inability to specify what 'God' refers to, and (c) an inability to gain a consensus about what would, with even the slightest probability, count more toward establishing their truth than denying it, we have, with a). b) and c), **taken together**, good grounds for believing that there are bits of non-anthropomorphic God-talk which are without a sufficiently determinate sense to be properly regarded as genuine truth-claims. But that, if true, is a vindication of radical theological non-naturalism.