

Kai Nielsen/On fixing the reference range of 'God'

Crombie has some important things to say about the role of parables in religion. The Bible abounds in parables and they are essential for our understanding of the claims of religion. 'Parable', Crombie admits, is used by him in an extended sense. The description of Christ's action of riding into Jerusalem on an ass on Palm Sunday would in Crombie's terms count as a parable, for it helps us to understand something about the extraordinary nature of the Messianic King and the non-political nature of the Messiah's kingdom.¹

Our knowledge of what God is like is only given in parables. Our understanding of many sentences like 'God is wrathful toward sinners' or 'God is our merciful Father' can only be understood within the parables of our religion. But we also come to under-

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¹ I. M. Crombie, "Theology and Falsification" in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. A. MacIntyre and A. Flew (London, 1955), p. 118. [This article is reprinted in this volume beginning on p. 311.—Editors]

stand that our parables do not tell us, in any literal fashion, what God is really like, e.g. how he is merciful, wrathful, etc. But we trust the source of our parables. We trust, taken on faith, that our images given in the parables are faithful: that the parables are faithful, that they refer us, and refer us in a certain direction 'out of experience. . .'.² They point to an incomprehensible reality, totally out of our own or anyone else's experience, which is the underlying reality that we get at through a faithful parable.³

Why do we accept these parables as *faithful* parables—as parables which truly 'point out of our experiences'? If we are Christians, we do this because we trust Jesus and he authorises the parables. Jews and Moslems would accept other religious authorities as authorising certain parables as faithful, reliable parables. We, as knights of faith, simply trust the source of our parables. We trust (have faith) that our parabolic language refers beyond the parable to a God whom we cannot positively comprehend. But, if we are Christians, our trust in Jesus leads us to believe that we will not be misled by the parables as to the nature of the underlying reality referred to in the parables.

This talk, tempting as it may seem to some, won't do. I can only detail some of the reasons here. Unless we understand what is meant by saying, outside of the parable and quite literally, that there is a God and he is merciful, how could we possibly trust that Jesus or any other religious authority is not misleading us in the parable, for we could not, if we did not understand the utterance literally in its non-parabolic context, know what could count as being misled or as failing to be misled by Jesus or by anyone else.⁴ Without some independent way of indicating what we are

² *Ibid.* p. 124. [See p. 324 of this volume.—Editors]

³ I. M. Crombie, "The Possibility of Theological Statements," *Faith and Logic*, ed. B. Mitchell (London, 1957), p. 71.

⁴ Wittgenstein has well remarked ' . . . in ethical and religious language we seem constantly to be using similes. But a simile must be the simile for something. And if I can describe a fact by means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it'. Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'A Lecture on Ethics', *The Philosophical Review*, vol. LXXIV (January, 1965), p. 10. In spite of Wittgenstein's emotional disquietude about this, his conclusion seems unassailable. If we have a putative non-literal or figurative mode of speech (as a simile or metaphor) and cannot possibly say what it is a simile or metaphor of, then what at first appears as a non-literal expression 'now seems mere nonsense'. If we cannot in some literal fashion assert what facts stand behind what appeared to be a metaphor or a simile then we are, in using such expressions, talking nonsense. That it is 'deep nonsense' expressive of a powerful human drive does not make it any the less nonsense.

talking about when we are talking about God, we cannot understand what is meant by saying that the image or the parable is or is not faithful. And we cannot take on trust what we cannot understand, for we cannot know *what* it is we are supposed to take on trust. If, as Crombie avers, we can *only* talk about God in images, then we cannot intelligibly speak of faithful or unfaithful images any more than we can speak of married or widowed stones. And to add insult to injury, we must note that the phrase 'parables referred out of our experience' like 'unconscious toothache' has no use. Wittgenstein gave 'unconscious toothache' a use; Crombie has not given 'referred out of our experience' a use.

It might be replied that in general we know what it is like to be misled. We know it to be a distressing, unpleasant and disheartening experience. We, in trusting Jesus, at least trust that we won't have this experience. We can know something about Jesus and we can trust that he will not mislead us about God. But this misses my last point. It is just this that we can't do, no matter how much we may want to, for only if we can understand what is meant by 'God' could we take anything about him on trust. In this way faith cannot precede understanding.⁵

Crombie, like Hick, makes a further argument that is important in trying to establish the factual status of theism. (I have dealt with this argument in more detail elsewhere with specific reference to Hick, so here I shall be brief.⁶) The argument I have in mind is Crombie's appeal to eschatological verification. To first put the matter metaphorically: we see now through a glass darkly but after our bodily death we shall see face to face. It is a mistake to argue, as some have, that Crombie here uses a theological concept to explicate a theological concept.⁷ An atheist can, and some did, believe in immortality. Let us grant—which is most surely to grant a whale of a lot—that immortality is an intelligible notion, and furthermore let us even grant that it is true that man is immortal. But even granting that, we still have not got to the

⁵ Bernard Williams, 'Tertullian's Paradox', *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. A. MacIntyre and A. Flew (London, 1955), pp. 187–211. Kai Nielsen, 'Can Faith Validate God Talk?' *New Theology*, no. 1, ed. Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman (New York, 1964), pp. 131–149.

⁶ Kai Nielsen, 'Eschatological Verification', *Canadian Journal of Theology*, vol. IX (1963), no. 4, pp. 271–281. [Reprinted in this volume beginning on p. 209.—Editors] See also William Bean 'Eschatological Verification: Fortress or Fairyland', *Methodos*, vol. XVI, no. 62 (1964), pp. 91–107.

⁷ William Blackstone, *op. cit.* p. 123.

promised land, the concept of eschatological verification still will not do the job it was designed to do by Crombie. Consider the putative statement 'God is merciful'. Crombie asks:

Does anything count against the assertion that God is merciful? Yes, suffering. Does anything count decisively against it? No, we reply, because it is true. Could anything count decisively against it? Yes, suffering which was utterly, eternally and irredeemably pointless. Can we then design a crucial experiment? No, because we can never see all of the picture. Two things at least are hidden from us; what goes on in the recesses of the personality of the sufferer, and what shall happen hereafter.⁸

But presumably in the hereafter, we would be in a position to know, or have some grounds for believing, that the suffering was, or was not, utterly, irremediably and eternally pointless, for then we would be in a position to see all of the picture.⁹ But how could we even then be in such a position? No matter how long we lived in the hereafter, after any point of time, we would not have good grounds for asserting or denying the suffering was *eternally* pointless. We could never—and this is a conceptual and not an empirical point—be in a position to see things *sub specie aeternitatis* and grasp what the whole picture is like. At any point in time, the believer or the non-believer could justly claim that we could not make such a judgment because the whole picture wasn't in. In fact we couldn't know or even have reasonable grounds for believing that a fair sample had been taken. But even if we drop the requirement that the suffering be seen to be *eternally* pointless, Crombie's account has still not been saved.

Suppose we were somehow to discover after our bodily death that there is no suffering which is utterly and irredeemably pointless, then according to Crombie, we would have good evidence for believing in God. How so? Someone might well agree that there is no utterly and irredeemably pointless suffering and

⁸ I. M. Crombie, 'Theology and Falsification', *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. A. MacIntyre and A. Flew (London, 1955), pp. 124–125. [Reprinted here beginning on p. 311.—Editors]

⁹ I. M. Crombie, 'The Possibility of Theological Statements', *Faith and Logic*, p. 72. There is a clash here between the two essays. In his later essay Crombie sets conditions that are open to disconfirmation while in 'Theology and Falsification' they are not. In 'Theology and Falsification' Crombie speaks of 'suffering which was utterly, *eternally* and irredeemably pointless' (p. 124 italics mine) while in 'The Possibility of Theological Statements' he only speaks of 'utterly and irremediably pointless suffering. . . .' (p. 72).

still assert that he doesn't understand what is meant by 'God' and so he doesn't understand what it means to say that God is merciful. After all the sentence 'In spite of the fact that there is no God there is no utterly and irredeemably pointless suffering' is not a self-contradiction. What, after all, is meant by the subject term 'God'? How could suffering or the lack thereof do anything to show how there might exist an object of discourse which is particular but not indicable? If we could understand what 'God' meant, Crombie's remarks might help us to give sense to 'God is merciful', but since we do not understand what 'God' means, we cannot understand 'God is merciful'.

To this Crombie might well reply: 'Indeed I haven't shown how "There is no utterly pointless and irredeemable suffering" allows us to conclude that God is merciful or to understand the word "God", but I did not try to. Furthermore, I grant that I have not shown how, on purely intellectual grounds, one could conclude that naturalistic interpretations of such experiences are inadequate. That cannot be done. But I have done what I set out to do, namely to meet Flew's challenge. I have shown under what conditions I would be prepared to give up my claim that God is merciful. I have shown how such a claim is falsifiable "in principle".'

But I do not see how Crombie has met Flew's challenge. If the statement and denial that God is merciful are both equally compatible, as they have been shown to be, with the statement 'There is no utterly pointless, irredeemable suffering' and with any possible empirical statement, which reports experiences we have or might *conceivably* have in our bodily life and in our non-bodily life (whatever that may mean), then we have not shown, as Crombie must, how the assertion or denial of the mercifulness of God have *different* factual content, and thus we have not shown how such religious statements can be used to make factual statements, for it is the believer's claim that 'God is merciful' asserts something different from 'There is no merciful God'. It is not enough that different strings of marks are used, but different factual assertions are supposed to have been made—statements with different experiential consequences. But Crombie has not been able to show how this is so; and as a result he has not been able to show that his God-statements have the kind of intelligibility that he claims for them.

Crombie, like Hick, is perfectly prepared to admit that both naturalistic and non-naturalistic interpretations of our religious experience are perfectly possible and quite plausible. He trusts, he says, that the non-naturalistic theistic interpretations more adequately depict the facts. But this, he claims, is for him, and should be for all believers, a matter of *faith* and not a matter of knowledge. But if my above arguments are correct it could not possibly be a matter of *faith* for him, for he has not succeeded in establishing that his theistic beliefs are indeed beliefs of the sort he takes them to be, for he has not shown how they are expressible in factual statements, and thus he has not shown how they form an intelligible alternative to naturalism. He is in the same boat as the Edwardian who steadfastly denied that lovely young ladies sweat—they only glow. The Edwardian shows by his speech that he no doubt has a different attitude toward young ladies than the plainest of plain men, but he doesn't show that he has different factual beliefs about them.

There is one further line of argumentation that Crombie avails himself of that might be taken as establishing the factual status of theism. The claim that a sentence is used to make a factual statement if and only if it is verifiable (confirmable or disconfirmable) is, Crombie argues, a confused conflation of two distinct claims. Once they are separated, we should come to see that we have no good grounds for *denying* that our key religious or theological claims assert facts, have the logical status of factual statements.

What are these quite two different claims? The first one is the claim that a statement of fact 'must be verifiable in the sense that there *must NOT be a rule of language* which precludes testing the statement'. Whether we can *in fact* test it does not matter, but it must be *testable* in principle; that is, there must be no logical ban on verifying it, as there is (or so let us assume) on verifying moral statements like 'You ought *NOT* to kill puppies just for the fun of it' and on analytic statements like 'Puppies are young dogs'. To try to verify these statements, Crombie argues, is to show that you do not *understand* what they *mean*. That is to say, there is a logical or conceptual ban against verifying them. But if something is a factual statement there can be no logical ban on verifying it, but whether or not it is *in fact* verifiable is quite another matter.

Crombie claims that we only require, as a necessary condition for factuality, that there be no logical ban on verifying a statement if it is to count as a genuine factual statement.

The second claim—a claim that must not, if clarity is prized, be confused with the first—is that *for any individual* fully to understand a statement, he must know what a test of it would be like. If he has no idea how to test whether a person had mutton for lunch, then he does not know what 'having mutton' means. This Crombie argues, has nothing to do with the logical status of the expression in question, but merely with its 'communication value' for the person in question. To count as a factual statement, a statement need *not* be verifiable in *this sense* or have such communication value. We would say, however, that if utterances did not have 'communication value' we could have no fair idea as to what would make them true and what would make them false.

Crombie argues that our key religious statements are only unverifiable in this *second*, quite harmless, sense. *But since they are about a mystery this is just as it should be.* But they are verifiable in the *first sense* and this is enough to ensure that they have *factual* meaning. Recall that there is no *linguistic rule* to the effect that there can be no test for 'God is loving' or 'God made man in his image and likeness'. The Christian argues that we cannot confirm or disconfirm that 'God is loving' or 'God created man in his image and likeness' because, since our experience is limited in the way it is, we as a matter of fact cannot get into the position of verifying such claims. But there is no *logical ban* on verifying them. They are perfectly verifiable in principle. This being so, they have *factual* meaning and after the death of the body we shall then in fact be in a position to verify such claims. This is enough to preserve their *factual* status.

Within the parable, 'God is merciful' and 'God loves us' even have communication value. The communication value is derived from similar utterances with a different proper name. Within the parable we understand such talk, but we do not know the 'communication value of such utterances *outside* of the parable'. But, Crombie argues, given the hiddenness, the wholly otherness, the mysteriousness of God, this is just what we should expect. As Kierkegaard has well argued, any being who didn't have these features couldn't be God. Talking within the framework of the parable—the biblical stories for example—we work in a context of 'admitted ignorance', but we accept this language because we

trust its source. We do not know how our parable applies, but we believe—have faith—that it applies 'and that we shall one day see how'.¹⁰ The religious man—if he knows what he is about, that is if he understands his religion—does 'not suppose himself to know what he means by his statements'. He does not suppose himself to be the Holy Ghost. But it is also incorrect to claim that he falls back, when pressed, on complete agnosticism, for he can turn for a check—for a test—to the person of Jesus, the mediator, and to the concrete process of living the Christian life. There, in the anguishing struggle to pare away 'self-hood', he will encounter divine love directly. Thus these key religious and theological statements are verifiable in principle; there is no *logical ban* on verifying them. They meet the minimum requirements for being factual statements, so it is a mistake to say that they are cognitively or factually meaningless on the very grounds that Flew and the logical positivists mark out as relevant for determining factual intelligibility. In fact we should say that within the proper religious contexts they even have communication value. 'Seen as a whole', Crombie can conclude, 'religion makes rough sense though it does not make limpidity'.¹¹

We have already discussed the specific difficulties in trying to move from what we understand in the parable to understanding how the parable could refer to that which is 'out of experience'; and we have discussed the difficulty in trying to appeal to authority, Jesus' or otherwise, to settle questions of meaning. We can, as Hepburn has shown, know a lot about Jesus and about Christian living, but this does not, and cannot, take us to God unless we *already understand* what 'God' means. No matter how much we love and trust Jesus, his saying 'There is a God. Love Him with your whole heart and your whole mind' cannot mean anything to us unless we already understand the meaning of 'God'.¹² It would be like Jesus' telling us to put our trust in Irglig when we had no idea of what was meant by 'Irglig'. But what is new in Crombie's arguments above, and what must be examined is Crombie's claim that there is no *logical ban* on verifying (con-

¹⁰ I. M. Crombie, 'Theology and Falsification', *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* ed. A. MacIntyre and A. Flew (London, 1955), p. 127 [See p. 327 in this volume.—Editors]

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 130. [See p. 329.—Editors]

¹² Ronald Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox* (London, 1958), pp. 50–90.

firming/disconfirming) 'There is a God', 'God loves us', 'God is merciful' and the like. *Perhaps* there is no such ban, but they still have not been shown to be verifiable (confirmable/disconfirmable) in principle, for we do not have any idea of what it would be like to confirm or disconfirm such claims. We do not understand at all what it would be like for such claims to be either true or false or probably true or probably false. It isn't that these utterances just lack 'communication value' for some (say non-believers), but since believers and non-believers alike have no idea of what would or could count as confirming them or disconfirming them, neither a believer nor a non-believer can know what it means to say that they are used to assert facts.

Now, Crombie could reply that to argue in this way is to miss his point. When Schlick and Carnap put forth the verifiability criterion as a criterion for what is to count as a factual statement, they were talking about verifiability *in principle*. To speak of 'verifiability in principle' is to speak, as they stressed, of the *logical* possibility of verification. When you say, Crombie could continue, that we cannot specify what would or could count as a verification/falsification or confirmation/disconfirmation of these theistic claims, your 'cannot' is a *factual* 'cannot'. You just mean that, as a matter of fact, we can think of none, but you don't rule out, by definition, that there might be some such verification. Thus you can't consistently say that it is *logically impossible* to verify them, as it is in the case of moral statements, imperatives, analytic statements, and the like. Since it makes sense to look for evidence for these claims, they remain verifiable (confirmable or disconfirmable *in principle*) and thus they do have a *factual meaning and content*, even under a criterion of meaning like that of Carnap or Schlick.

I think there is such a ban or at least an implicit ban on verifying non-anthropomorphic God-talk. The crucial, yet inessential, difference between analytic statements and theological statements in this respect is that in the case of these non-anthropomorphic theological statements the ban is not so obvious. We know that it is a conceptual blunder to try to verify whether 'Bachelors are really unmarried' or 'Wives are really women'. Given an understanding of the constituent terms, we know there can be no question of confirming or disconfirming such statements. But this is not true for 'There are matzos in the centre of the sun' or 'There are beings as folksy as Johnson on Mars'. There is no

way of detecting whether these statements can, as a matter of fact, be verified from examining the meanings of the constituent terms in such sentential contexts. Thus, unlike with our analytic statements, we have not ruled out the logical possibility of their verification. But consider now such sentences as 'There is an infinite being' or 'A being transcendent to the universe and not spatio-temporally related to the universe directs the universe in an incomprehensible way' or 'There is a reality in all ways greater than nature'. Such sentences, sentences which are (according to Crombie) an integral part of a non-anthropomorphic theism, are sentences which, given the meanings of their constituent terms, cannot be used to form statements which admit of the logical possibility of verification/falsification or confirmation/disconfirmation. Where 'infinite being' is being used non-anthropomorphically, there can, *logically can*, be no observing an infinite being. To understand this term, in the only way we can understand it, is to understand that there can, *logically can*, be no way of indicating or identifying what it purportedly refers to. The same is true of 'being transcendent to the universe', 'not spatio-temporally related to the universe', 'directs the universe in an incomprehensible way' and 'greater than nature'. Yet, if Crombie is correct, such talk is not just a part of the theologian's febrile chatter about 'God', but is embedded, as well, in a sophisticated religious man's talk of God. But Crombie's own remarks about such phrases *in effect* show that to understand the conventions governing such talk is to understand that such sentences cannot be used to make statements capable of confirmation or disconfirmation. (Of course, as we have seen at other places in his argument, he speaks as if such statements were verifiable; but we have shown that none of his arguments show that there are traces or indicia in the world pointing to an infinite individual transcendent to the cosmos.)

The fundamental thing to be noted here is this: God is *not* for a believer some kind of theoretical construct. God is *not* consciously conceptualised by the believer as a mystifying term we insert in our discourse to allay anxieties. Rather 'God' is supposed to be a proper name standing for an infinite, non-spatio-temporal, non-indicable individual, utterly transcendent to the cosmos. When we reflect on the meanings of these terms, we recognise that it would be logically impossible to verify that such an alleged individual exists. Anything that we could apprehend or could be acquainted with would *eo ipso* not be such a reality. (To

speak of 'indirect verification' here will not do, for if it is *logically* impossible to directly verify *x*, it makes no sense to speak of indirectly verifying *x*, for 'indirectly' cannot here qualify 'verifying *x*'.)

The above line of argument indicates that there is a logical ban on the verification of such God-statements; it is only not so obvious and not so explicit. Furthermore, we are easily tricked into thinking there is no such ban, for there are different uses of 'God', including anthropomorphic uses of 'God', where 'God created the heavens and the earth' or 'God governs the world' are factual (confirmable or disconfirmable) and known to be false. But given the non-anthropomorphic uses of 'God' that Crombie so patiently details, such sentences are not used to form statements which are logically possible to verify. Crombie has not shown how his key theistic claims, when construed non-anthropomorphically, have factual intelligibility and yet, as he rightly claims, their having such intelligibility is crucial to the soundness of the fundamental claims of Christianity, Judaism and Islam.