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## ON THE RATIONALITY OF RADICAL THEOLOGICAL NON-NATURALISM

### More on the Verificationist Turn in the Philosophy of Religion

#### I

In my *Contemporary Critiques of Religion* and in my *Scepticism*, I argue that non-anthropomorphic conceptions of God do not make sense. By this I mean that we do not have sound grounds for believing that the central truth-claims of Christianity are genuine truth-claims and that we do not have a religiously viable concept of God. I argue that this is so principally because of three interrelated features about God-talk. (1) While purporting to be factual assertions, central bits of God-talk, e.g. 'God exists' and 'God loves mankind', are not even in principle verifiable (confirmable or disconfirmable) in such a way that we can say what experienceable states of affairs would count for these putative assertions and against their denials, 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. (2) Personal predicates, e.g. 'loves', 'creates', are at least seemingly essential in the use of God-talk, yet they suffer from such an attenuation of meaning in their employment in religious linguistic environments that it at least appears to be the case that we have in such environments unwittingly emptied these predicates of all intelligible meaning so that we do not understand what we are asserting or denying when we utter 'God loves mankind' or 'God created the heavens and the earth' and the like. (3) When we make well-formed assertions, it appears at least to be the case that a necessary condition for such well-formedness is that we should be able successfully to identify the subject of that putative statement so that we can understand what it is that we are talking about and thus understand that a genuine statement has actually been made. But, where God is conceived non-anthropomorphically, we have no even tolerably clear idea about how God, an infinite individual, occupying no particular place or existing at no particular time, and being utterly transcendent to the world, can be identified. Indeed we have no coherent idea of what it would be like to identify him and this means we have no coherent idea of what it would be like for God even to be a person or an it. He cannot be picked out and identified in the way persons and things can.

Since this is so, we do not understand what it would be like to make statements in which 'God' occurs as a subject because we have no coherent idea of *what* we are talking about such that we can say something about God. In a way that I have perhaps previously not stressed sufficiently, it is these three interrelated problems which, when taken together, provide us with our deepest perplexities about whether God-talk, admittedly mysterious, makes enough sense to be capable of making intelligible truth-claims. However, if we take any one of them in isolation from the others, the problems posed appear at least not to be so insuperable.

While I believe that non-anthropomorphic God-talk comes to grief in this respect, Terence Penelhum, by contrast, thinks it makes rough sense.<sup>1</sup> He accepts a similar division of the problems to the one I have made above and then argues that such religious utterances have an intelligible verification structure and that the problems of attenuation of predicates and identification can be met. He does not claim that we have verified religious claims and can thus conclude beyond reasonable doubt that they are true. He seems not to think that it is the proper business of a philosopher either to make or deny such truth-claims. What he does claim is that 'there is no good reason to think that we could not, with a little ingenuity, think up some non-theistic statements which would serve, if true, to put some theistic conclusions beyond reasonable doubt' (RK 64). I shall be concerned here to take issue with this last claim.

Penelhum believes that we can well enough understand what it would be like for even fundamental religious claims to be true. So that is not, he would have us believe, the problem. The real problem is that we do not know, and are in no position to find out, whether they are true or even probably true. In a way that would make Wittgenstein, Malcolm, Brown, Phillips or Dilman shudder, vindicating one's faith for Penelhum comes to being in a position to see that it is verified and this means that someone must be 'aware of the verificatory facts': that is have the evidence which would establish the belief (RK 86).

Because he believes that putative religious assertions have a verification structure, he is understandably impatient with a Braithwaite and a Hare who do not construe such putative assertions as assertions.<sup>2</sup> That seems to him both a desperate and an unnecessary move and, again understandably, he takes the approach of a Phillips, Holmer, Brown and Dilman as equally desperate when they deny that fundamental religious beliefs have or need

<sup>1</sup> Terence Penelhum, *Problems of Religious Knowledge* (London: Macmillan Press, 1971) and Terence Penelhum, *Religion and Rationality* (New York: Random House, 1971). All references to these two books will be made in the text. *Problems of Religious Knowledge* will be referred to by RK and *Religion and Rationality* by RR.

<sup>2</sup> R. B. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of The Nature of Religious Belief* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1955) and R. M. Hare, 'The Simple Believer' in Gene Outka and John P. Reeder Jr. (eds.), *Religion and Morality* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1973), pp. 393-427.

either verification or any other kind of vindication or justification<sup>1</sup> (RR 147–8).

My most central thrust here will be to try to show that there is a genuine problem about the verification of religious beliefs and that Penelhum is mistaken in thinking that, with a little ingenuity, we can think up what would serve, if true, to verify fundamental religious claims. I should only add, by way of a final prefatory remark, that if I am in the main right on these large issues, both the ‘non-factualist’ interpretations of religious discourse of a Braithwaite, Hare or Van Buren and the Wittgensteinian turn of a Phillips, Holmer, Brown or Dilman gain somewhat in attractiveness and, while perhaps still ‘desperate’, they cannot reasonably be dismissed in the cavalier way Penelhum dismisses them.

## II

Penelhum and I agree that most believers *believe* that they are making factual assertions when they say that God loves mankind or even that God exists, though we disagree about whether they actually succeed in making such assertions where they are not being thoroughly anthropomorphic (RR 126). We also agree that no believer who understood what he is saying believes that ‘the facts about the divine to which he thinks his assertions refer are comprehensible through and through’, though we both also believe, as well, that ‘the incomprehensibility cannot be total or religious language would have no foothold whatever’ (RR 126). We differ in that I think that the incomprehensibility of non-anthropomorphic religious utterances is so deep that these claims do not make sense and indeed fail to make genuine factual assertions, while Penelhum believes that this is not the case and that indeed they have a sufficient verification structure such that we do understand what must be the case for them to be true and what must be the case for them to be false. It is, he believes, only by the imposition, wittingly or unwittingly, of arbitrary empiricist dogmas that it even appears that this is not the case. As he puts it, ‘insofar as Flew’s argument is merely a demand that religious assertions have to be falsifiable by reference to observable events in the world, the retort to it could simply be that this is an arbitrary standard of meaningfulness to adopt. Why must the believer be prepared to confine the assertions he makes about God within the limits of empirical criteria of significance’ (RR 124)?’ A short answer is that by so restricting himself he knows the conditions under which he can rightly claim that an allegedly factual claim of his is true and under what conditions it is false. He has, that is, by such a restriction a reasonably firm understanding of the truth conditions of his talk.

<sup>1</sup> D. Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), Paul L. Holmer, ‘Atheism and Theism’, *Lutheran World*, xii (1963), Stuart Brown, *Religious Belief* (London: Open University Press, 1974) and Ilham Dilman, ‘Wisdom’s Philosophy of Religion’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, v, 4 (December 1975), pp. 473–522.

He will know what it would be like for his claims to be true or false. And this standard – I am tempted to argue – far from being an ‘arbitrary standard of meaningfulness’ is a quite non-arbitrary standard of factual significance. That is, it provides us with a clue to whether our claims do actually have factual import: do actually make factual assertions and thus succeed in being factually meaningful.

However, for the nonce, we can put this issue aside, for Penelhum, like Hick, is confident that religious utterances are verifiable. Christians have eschatological expectations and we can describe eschatological predictions which, if things happen as predicted, would verify central claims of Christian theism (RR 137–9). The central empiricist challenge, Penelhum reminds us, is this:

The essence of the ‘falsification’ criticism could be said to be that the believer seems prepared to accept any actual or imaginable state of affairs as compatible with his claims about God, so that it is impossible to know on what he would make these claims stand or fall. The essence of Hick’s defense is to say that since the believer has certain expectations about a life after death that the unbeliever does not have, we can, by reference to these, say what would finally verify or falsify what he claims (RR 136).

Penelhum, as I just noted, believes that Hick has shown that Christian theism has a verification structure. Educated Christian believers and sceptics do not, here and now, disagree about what they expect to observe or in any way empirically detect. They do not, that is, disagree about the immediate facts. Such Christians, no more than sceptics, expect, here and now, their dying friends to be restored to life and health or epidemics to be miraculously halted. But they do have different all-inclusive world-views and these differing all-inclusive world-views involve different eschatological expectations. ‘The Christians’ total view of the world contains essentially a belief in the ultimate triumph of God’s purposes in the world, which will take the form, in part, of an afterlife for men who will live in union with God (RR 136–7).’ If such a state of affairs comes to obtain, we will have verified the statements that God loves mankind and that God exists. If it does not obtain, we will have disconfirmed those claims.

Surely this gives us a sense of how Christian believers and sceptics have different world-pictures, different *Weltbilder*, but this does not show that the Christians’ rather more ramified picture is not an incoherent or unintelligible picture. My problem is and remains that the concept of God – where ‘God’ is construed non-anthropomorphically – is so problematic that we do not have any understanding of what we would have to experience in the hereafter Hick and Penelhum describe such that the probability of *either* the truth *or* the falsity of a putative factual statement such as ‘There will be a community of persons infused by grace over whom Jesus will return to reign as the Son of God’ is seen to be one bit greater (RK 82). We have no idea at

all of what observations we would have to make or, even in principle, could make which would make the assertion of that statement more probable than its denial. We cannot describe the observations we would have to make which would count for its truth and against the truth of its denial.

To reply by remarking that this is plainly false for we could observe Jesus on his throne and *thus* observe the Son of God is to be guilty of a *non sequitur* for 'Jesus is the Son of God' is not a tautology and while we could indeed observe Jesus we would not thus have observed the Son of God and indeed we cannot – logically cannot – observe the Son of God.<sup>1</sup> In short, because of the theistic concepts ('the Son of God' and 'grace') embedded in that utterance, there is no *directly* verifying, now or hereafter, such a putatively factual statement. That is, we no more understand what it would be like for 'Jesus is the Son of God' or 'There is a Son of God' to be true or false than we understand what it would be like for 'There is a God' or 'God loves mankind' to be true or false. And if we could directly verify the former statements, we could directly verify – would understand how to verify directly – the latter theistic statements as well and so would not need an eschatological verification structure to give sense – factual import – to our God-talk.

Some of Penelhum's remarks in *Problems of Religious Knowledge* could be construed as a response to my above argument. Penelhum is aware that Hick uses theistic statements in the stating of his eschatological predictions and in the setting out of statements which he believes would verify 'God loves mankind' and 'God exists'. Recall, moreover, that a statement is a theistic one if and only if we cannot know its truth without knowing that God exists. And surely this is true of 'the experience of a community of persons whose relationship to one another represents the sort of fulfillment of human personality indicated in the Gospels, and who experience communion with God as revealed in Christ (RK 81–2)'. As if partially anticipating the sort of objection I would make, Penelhum goes on to claim that certain of Hick's crucial eschatological predictions could be 'couched in non-theistic statements' which 'have the same verificatory value'. Penelhum then proceeds to produce some which he thinks will do the job. Instead of talking of a community of persons infused by grace over which Jesus will return to reign as the Son of God, we can, in what Penelhum takes to be non-theistic statements, confine ourselves to the following paraphrase:

There will be a community of persons whose personalities are as they would be if they were infused by grace (in that they manifest love, guilelessness, self-sacrifice, understanding, purity of heart); that Jesus will rule over this community as the Son of God would (in a manner manifesting these same personality-traits plus a

<sup>1</sup> This has been clearly and decisively argued by Ronald Hepburn in his *Christianity and Paradox* (London: C. A. Watts, 1958), chapters III and IV. John Hick in his in many ways perceptive discussion of *Christianity and Paradox* does nothing to unsettle that claim. See John Hick, 'A philosopher criticizes theology', *The London Quarterly*, xxxi (1962), pp. 103–10.

uniquely high degree of knowledge, authority, forgiveness); and that the members of this predicted community think and behave as they do at least in part because they consider themselves to be infused by grace, to be redeemed sinners, to be children of one God whose Son has returned to rule over his kingdom (RK 82).

Penelhum remarks that these are non-theistic statements and that 'they could be known to be true by someone who did not know that God existed' (RK 82). However, what he does not note is that their factual import (their factual meaning or significance) would still not be understood by someone who did not understand what it would be like for 'There is a community under the reign of the Son of God' to be either true or false. For if they *did* not understand that, they *could not understand* what it would be like to be in a community with Jesus where Jesus rules as the son of God would, if there were a son of God. For, if we do not understand what must obtain for it even to be probably true or probably false that the son of God reigns and this is so because we do not understand *what* it is we are talking about in talking about the son of God, then we *cannot* understand what it would be like to be in a community ruled by Jesus or anyone else which is ruled as it would be by the son of God. If we cannot understand *what* we are talking about in talking about the son of God, we cannot understand what it would be like to live in a community which was governed as if it were under his rule, if there actually were such a reality. Our understanding is blocked here, for we have no conception of such a reality. With it we draw a blank. It is like my asking you to imagine what it would be like if there were Irgligs when you have no idea what an Irglig is.

Again Penelhum partially anticipates this response. Speaking of his above paraphrase of Hick's predictions and his comments on it, remarked on above, Penelhum in turn comments:

It is natural to object that these predictions, even if non-theistic in the sense that someone could know them to be true without knowing that God existed, are theistic in another sense – that they could not be understood by someone who did not understand the claim that God exists, since they contain references to grace, redemption, and the Son of God. We might coin another technicality and say that any statement which cannot be understood by someone who does not understand the statement that God exists is a statement which 'contains theistic expressions'. Our discussion makes it seem very likely that any eschatological predications which would be sufficient, if true, to verify the central claims of Christian theism, would be statements containing theistic expressions. But this is no objection to our claim that it is possible to state, in non-theistic statements, what post-mortem states of affairs would be sufficient to verify the central claims of Christian theism. It would only be an objection to a theory that was supposed to use the fact that such eschatological predictions can be made as a way of explaining the *meaning* of these central claims (RK 82–3).

However, this last remark made by Penelhum is just to the point, for I have been arguing that the only kind of verification which would meet what

I have dubbed the empiricist challenge would have to have verifying statements which do *not* contain what Penelhum usefully calls 'theistic expressions'.<sup>1</sup> If our puzzle is to understand how 'God exists' or 'God loves mankind' could have *factual import*, could have the kind of meaning necessary for them to be *factual assertions* – the kind of assertive force Penelhum believes believers believe them to have – then so to understand them – that is to understand what it would be like for them to be true or false factual statements – we need to be able to do what Penelhum rightly, I believe, thinks that it is rather unlikely that we can do, namely to state in non-theistic terms what would actually verify (confirm or disconfirm) the central claims of Christian theism.

Penelhum is mistaken, however, in thinking that that is no objection to his own account and Hick's, for it is central to their accounts – and central to arguments about the rationality of theism – to be able to show that non-anthropomorphic Christian God-talk has factual import (i.e. factual meaning or factual significance) such that, *contra* Hare, Braithwaite, Van Buren and Miles, God-talk can be seen to have the kind of meaning that goes with making genuinely factual truth-claims. My argument, and Flew's and Ayer's as well, has been that *in that way* non-anthropomorphic God-talk is meaningless, i.e. we do not understand what it would be like for such God-talk to make true or false factual claims where such theistic conceptions are employed. Penelhum's disclaimers to the contrary notwithstanding, a central part of Hick's response to sceptical critiques such as Flew's is to try to show how God-talk has factual significance: how 'God exists' and 'God loves mankind' are genuine factual assertions and how, in response to Flew, it could be shown that there are certain coherently describable experiences which give factual content to those utterances and would be sufficient, were we actually to have them, to verify them. This is how, at least, Hepburn, Tooley and I – and I suspect a host of others – read Hick; and even if that surprisingly is not what Hick was up to and, as Penelhum makes plain, it is not what he is himself up to, still, if that challenge is not met, if that enterprise is not successfully engaged in, there is, to put it minimally, a serious question about whether these key bits of God-talk actually achieve the logical status of factual assertions.<sup>2</sup> But if that God-talk does not have that

<sup>1</sup> See my *Contemporary Critiques of Religion* (London: Macmillan Press, 1971) and most particularly pp. 28–30.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Tooley points out that Hick actually vacillates at times about whether he is trying to show the factual intelligibility of key strands of theistic discourse or whether he is simply concerned to show how we can verify theistic claims. But there are repeated claims about the former and a realization of its central importance. In his inaugural lecture *Theology's Central Problem* (University of Birmingham Press, 1967), Hick makes it clear enough that he takes theology's central problem to be intimately linked with problems of meaning. He sees theology's central problem, when viewed philosophically, as 'a problem concerning religious language' and he remarks that in 'a sentence the issue is whether distinctively religious utterances are instances of the cognitive or of the non-cognitive uses of language' (p. 1). (See as well page 15 of the same lecture.) He is concerned to show how religious utterances are cognitive by showing that they are factually meaningful because

status, then it cannot be the case, as Hick and Penelhum believe, that 'God exists' or 'God loves mankind' or 'Love is a reality under the reign of Christ' are verifiable – eschatologically or otherwise – factual assertions. They have meaning all right, but, if they are not so verifiable, they do not have *the kind of meaning* Penelhum and Hick believe that believers think their talk has and they do not have the kind of meaning that they themselves believe is essential for the rationality of Christian belief.

Unless these doubts about the assertion status of God-talk can be resolved in a way supportive of traditionalist accounts, Penelhum is quite mistaken in claiming, as he rather vehemently does, that it would be irrational of the sceptic to continue to deny that God exists and God loves mankind had been verified – indeed conclusively verified – if he actually found himself in a post-mortem world face to face with Jesus in a community blissfully united and pure of heart which quite matter-of-course spoke of the reign of God. The sceptic could perfectly well understand (a) what it would be like to live in such happy togetherness, (b) for Jesus to be such a moral exemplar and (c) for the community to be such a through-and-through truly human society without understanding at all what was meant by 'God' or 'the son of God' or without understanding what would make 'the son of God reigns over us' false or probably false. And, [given the way] factual assertions normally operate, he could, in such a post-mortem state, reasonably ask the God-talk chaps, what more they meant by 'the son of God reigns over us' than by 'Jesus reigns over us' and it is far from evident that they could give a coherent answer.

### III

Problems about the intelligibility of God-talk are complex and at least seemingly intractable. Penelhum and I agree that typical Christians and Jews *believe* that it is a fact that God exists and that they *think* that, when 'God loves mankind' and 'God shall raise the quick and the dead' occur in standard linguistic environments, factual assertions are being uttered. However, Penelhum also believes that these utterances not only are *believed* by such believers to have such a logical status, but that such utterances *actually do* have that logical status and have a verification structure very similar to the one Hick characterized. We do not know that these fundamental religious claims are true but we – believers and sceptics alike – know very well what at least conceivable experienceable states of affairs would, if they actually were to obtain, establish their truth or at least probable truth, i.e. verify them so that it would, in that circumstance, be irrational to deny

verifiable. This is a very central point in his 'Theology and verification', *Theology Today*, xvii (1960), pp. 12–31, and comes out definitely in his exchange with Binkley. See his remarks in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, II, 1 (Fall 1962) and II, 2 (Spring 1963). Michael Tooley's key remarks on this are in his 'John Hick and the concept of eschatological verification', *Religious Studies*, xii (1976), pp. 177–99.



them. Penelhum thinks the sceptic who would deny this – a chap he calls a ‘*radical theological non-naturalist*’ – is being arbitrary and irrational. By contrast, I do not believe any of these things, and, no doubt, by Penelhum’s lights, I am, in so reacting, being irrational.

Penelhum characterizes a position like mine, and like Ayer’s and Flew’s, as a *theological positivism* committed, as well, to *radical theological non-naturalism*. He believes, as I just remarked, that one is being arbitrary and irrational in sticking with either. It is quite possible that I am in some way badly confused about this matter, but I do not see that this is so nor that Penelhum has even given us any very plausible reasons for believing it to be so.

Let us see if we can untangle something of what is at issue here. A *theological positivist* holds that ‘theistic statements would, if meaningful, be verifiable in principle by reference to non-theistic ones, but that they are not’ (RK 78). Penelhum holds (a) that that is an arbitrary criterion and (b), as we have already in effect seen in the beginning of the previous section, that even so that criterion can be satisfied by an account like Hick’s of eschatological verification. To make contact with real targets, e.g. with Ayer, Carnap, Flew or myself, *theological positivism* should be reformulated as follows: theistic statements would, if factually meaningful, be at least confirmable in principle by reference to non-theistic ones fully characterizable in non-theistic terms, but they are not. The related thesis of *theological non-naturalism* is the view ‘that theistic statements cannot be proved from non-theistic ones’ (RK 55). It has two forms, one, according to Penelhum, reasonable and the other irrational; *moderate theological non-naturalism* is, of course, the reasonable doctrine and *radical theological non-naturalism* the unreasonable, irrational doctrine. The difference between *moderate* and *radical theological non-naturalism* can be picked up readily, if we disambiguate the modal term ‘cannot’ in the above characterization of *theological non-naturalism*. A *moderate* theological non-naturalist is just denying that, as things stand, we can prove or verify or in any way establish that God exists or God loves mankind from knowing the truth of any non-theistic statement or statements. He doesn’t deny that there are or at least very well might be certain non-theistic statements which would, if true, verify such theistic claims, but they just happen, as a matter of fact, not to be true or at least they are not known or reasonably believed to be true. A *radical theological non-naturalist*, by contrast, believes that no non-theistic statements (expressible in non-theistic terms) that even could be conceived of, no matter how fanciful, would, if true, verify the existence or love of God. No matter how different things became from what they are, no matter how many terminal cancer patients inexplicably got well, no matter how often seas parted so the good guys could get through and no matter how often and conspicuously the stars rearranged themselves above Toronto to spell out ‘God’, the *radical theological non-naturalist* would not take such occurrences as verifying that God exists or that any other theistic statement

is true or probably true or even more probable than its denial (RK 58–9). He would, of course, be surprised and indeed utterly perplexed by such strange happenings especially if, after a bit, no scientific explanation was forthcoming of why they occurred. But that is an entirely different matter. It still does not help him to understand what is being claimed by those who talk of these occurrences as manifestations of God's will. He may well come to think, if such utter oddities came to pass, that there is something more in heaven and earth than was dreamt of in his philosophy, but this still does not give him an understanding of what is being talked about in speaking of God.

Traditional natural theology attempted to show, as Penelhum well remarks, 'that in the face of certain natural facts which could be ascertained by someone who did not know that God exists, it is irrational to deny that he does exist' (RK 60). *Theological non-naturalists*, both radical and moderate, deny that there actually are any facts which would establish that claim of natural theology. But the *radical non-naturalist* goes on to claim that there could be none, 'that nothing could make it irrational to refuse to accept any theistic conclusion if one does not have some knowledge of God already' (RK 60).<sup>1</sup> It is this position, along with *theological positivism*, which Penelhum regards as arbitrary and irrational.

Penelhum believes that the claim that he has described as a conceivable eschatological situation which, if it obtained, would unambiguously verify core theistic claims, can only be resisted by opting for either or both *theological positivism* or *radical theological non-naturalism*. We need now to follow out his argument that it is irrational to adopt either of these positions.

I shall consider first what he says about *radical theological non-naturalism*. To insist, Penelhum claims, upon denying that the eschatological situation he described would, if it obtained, verify Christian theism is a desperate irrational resort on the part of the sceptic. If we found ourselves, Penelhum maintains, mysteriously, after the death of our present bodies, in the presence of Jesus and among old friends whom we had long since thought dead, and if we found there an egalitarian community united in love and sisterhood-cum-brotherhood with all sexist distinctions erased, and if we found, as well, a community where people were doing interesting and humanly satisfying things, we could not, rationally or reasonably, deny any longer that theism is true or even reasonably wonder whether it is true.<sup>2</sup>

That claim seems to me to be false. Not being able to make sense of 'An infinite individual', 'A pure spirit or pure Thou beyond the bounds of space and time' or an 'Infinite being who created the world', we could accept all

<sup>1</sup> Putting it just as Penelhum does in the above quotation obscures the force of radical theological non-naturalism. They say that it is not irrational to refuse any theistic conclusion until we have a sufficient understanding of God-talk such that we can understand what kind of truth claim, if any, is being made or presupposed in its characteristic use.

<sup>2</sup> I have accepted for the sake of this discussion the claim that talk of life after the death of our present bodies is coherent talk. In reality I would challenge that as I do in my 'Logic, Incoherence and Religion', *International Logic Review*, forthcoming.

the above eschatological goings on as a cluster of amazing and, presently at least, quite inexplicable but still perfectly natural facts, and still wonder – indeed rationally wonder – what all that had to do with that strange talk about God and about beings beyond the bounds of space and time and transcendent to the world. If that talk didn't make sense to us before, it would make no more sense after those experiences and we could readily wonder, if perhaps the theistic expressions were after all just umbrella terms referring compendiously to such phenomena or we could reasonably wonder if perhaps they did mean something else in addition and wonder *what more* that was and what, even in principle, verifiable, non-verbal difference there was between the fellow who claimed that that was all we were talking about and the person who said that there was something more but could not, and indeed felt no need to try to, spell out the difference in terms of at least some conceivable experiential states of affairs.

The person who says things like the above need not at all be making the quite mistaken claim, 'that one statement *q* can only suffice to verify another *p*, if it entails it . . .' (RK 83). Both Penelhum and I have been concerned to argue – in my case in some detail – that it is 'a mistake to claim that *q* can verify *p* only if *q* entails it'. The 'accumulation of facts of a certain kind may serve to verify a statement even though they do not entail it' (RK 68). But the *radical theological non-naturalist* is not at all committed here or elsewhere to talking of verification in terms of entailments. For him the God-talk in question seems at least to be nearly incomprehensibly problematic and he thinks he at least can understand the alleged verifying claims, when expressed in non-theistic language, perfectly well without making reference to such talk and, given those two factors, he sees no reason why we should say that even if the statements describing such possible, plainly experiential, states of affairs were to transpire that he should regard this as verifying or even counting as evidence for the claim that there is a bodiless, infinite individual beyond the bounds of space and time.

So, while *radical theological non-naturalism* may be irrational, Penelhum has not shown it to be irrational, arbitrary or even mistaken or even given us a good reason for believing that it is any of these things.

Does he fare any better with *theological positivism*? He thinks that no good grounds have been given for accepting the restrictions of even the weakest forms of positivism, but he also believes that if we do accept a weakened form of it in which non-theistic statements have at least some non-expungeable theistic expressions, that key theistic claims can be shown to meet these positivist criteria of verifiability, but that this is not so for the stronger forms of *theological positivism* – the ones I have contended are the actual challengers – which do not allow that the allegedly verifying non-theistic statements can have any non-expungeable theistic expressions. Penelhum claims, as we have

<sup>1</sup> I do this at some length in my *Contemporary Critiques of Religion*.

seen, that such positivism is irrational, not simply because it has a criterion for factual meaning (factual import) which is arbitrary but also because the demand that the non-theistic statements which serve to verify theistic claims be statements that do not contain theistic expressions 'is a demand which cannot be met nor is it reasonable to expect it to be met' (RK 83).

I agree, that it cannot be met; it was indeed one of the central points of my argument to show that it cannot be met. I also agree that it is not 'reasonable to expect it to be met' (RK 83). But it is just the recognition of these two things which leads one – or should lead one – to the recognition that, if this is so, theistic utterances are not genuine factual truth-claims, with an empirical anchorage in virtue of which we could come to know whether they are true or false or in virtue of which they could be reasonably believed to be true or false. Because they lack these features, they are not genuine factual statements whose truth or falsity can be empirically ascertained or in any other way ascertained (if indeed there is any other way). Penelhum – strangely it seems to me – thinks, because these demands cannot be met and because it is unreasonable to expect them to be met, that these demands are therefore unreasonable, but that does not at all follow, for the point of these demands is just to show that they cannot be met, and because they cannot be met, that these key theistic utterances cannot have the logical status they are usually thought to have, i.e. they cannot be genuine factual statements whose truth or falsity can be ascertained. So it is not this feature of *theological positivism* which shows it to be irrational. What Penelhum must do, to make out his contention against *theological positivism*, is to return to a general position he shares with many philosophers – Copleston, Mavrodes and Plantinga among others – to wit, the position that such a general criterion of factual significance is arbitrary. But to do that is no longer, as he was above, to play Crombie's, Mitchell's and Hick's game of at least provisionally accepting such a criterion of factual significance and then proceeding to show that even key theistic utterances could meet it. Abandoning that way of meeting the empiricist challenge, he would then have to return to his arguments, made in *Religion and Rationality*, and discussed at the beginning of Section II of this essay, that Flew's challenge is arbitrary if it simply amounts to insisting on the requirement that religious assertions to be factually significant must be falsifiable by reference to observable events in the world (RR 124). He would have to make good his claim that there is no good reason why the believer must 'be prepared to confine the assertions he makes about God within the limits of empirical criteria of significance' (RR 124). And to do that he would, at the very least, have to meet the arguments I made against him at the beginning of Section II.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> If the general thrust of my arguments is well taken here, they would also tend to undermine, with only slight modifications, Basil Mitchell's criticisms of my account in his *The Justification of Religious Belief* (London: Macmillan Press, 1973), pp. 7–20.