

# ON THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

By ROBERT BUTTERWORTH

**I**N HIS BOOK, *The Perfect Stranger*, the poet P. J. Kavanagh relates the delightful and poignant tale of his love for Sally, his wife, who died tragically young in Java. At the beginning of the book he makes a kind of apology for the deeply personal nature of the facts he has to tell:

... because things happen in one way and not in another this is sometimes their point; and so for fear of missing the point (buried somewhere under the facts and nowhere else) the facts as they happened it has to be, and not done up into fiction.

This has its advantages (saves you having to invent) but lands you in difficulty. There are those who have come too close for you to describe them in the way novelists use – you can't even see them, in any ordinary sense, although you see them better than anyone, but description gives a quite false idea of their distance. Even if you wanted to it's not in your power to cash in on their specialness. What you can do, though, is to describe their effect on you, and the kind of life it was that they stepped into, and this is why there are so many I's and me's in the story. But maybe that's the most we can say about another person with any certainty; however we wish to celebrate them we only have the bits and pieces of ourselves to do it with.<sup>1</sup>

Our human words simply fail when we try to express the reality of meaning of someone we love in all their closeness and 'specialness'. The words fall almost hopelessly flat, refuse to cope, reveal their literal inadequacy. Not that their use in an attempted description is entirely meaningless and without point. But the description can go only so far – or rather, the one described can come only so close. The description inevitably transforms the person loved into an object as if for inspection, at a distance which can only distort; so that what we had hoped to bring out in telling close-up we find ourselves viewing as if down the wrong end of a long and distorting mental telescope. There is an object there, no doubt; but

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<sup>1</sup> Kavanagh, P. J.: *The Perfect Stranger* (London, 1970), p 7.

it is a distant and dim approximation. We find that we have to that extent lost track of the person of whom we wished to speak. However subtly we may use our descriptive words in our attempt to express the reality that the person we love has for us, it comes about that we have described not really the person we wished to communicate to others, but a kind of object. The use we make of the words does not express the meaning the person has for us – or it does so in a radically unsatisfactory way. Fiction can avoid the problem because its descriptions are not supposed to be of factual, living persons. Its persons are bundles of judiciously selected and edited qualities descriptive of such persons, or of such personal traits, as can be and often are, encountered in common experience. But the quite uncommon, totally particular and special character of a real and loved person cannot and indeed must not be reduced to any sort of type. Such a personality cannot be directly fitted into the common categories that our human words describe.

There are at least two reasons why this is the case. In the first place, human words are common words. They take their rise from our common human need to articulate and express our common experience of being human and our human experience of living in a common world. Such experience is common to all who are human. In fact it might be said that to be human is, precisely, to share in the common experience of what it is to be human in the world. And without common words there could be no sharing in the common experience, and so without such words we could not be really human. Indeed a wholly private experience of being human would seem to be a nonsense. Wholly private words are not really human words. And in the second place, human words are, and must irreducibly remain, *our* words, *my* words. They serve, when I use them, to reveal and express what I make of the common human experience, my way of being human. My words express my self – the self I have managed to become and in fact am still in process of becoming, mainly in and through the words I use. Thus human words partake of a double and paradoxical quality. For all their commonness, they are mine and express me; and they are none the less common for all their being mine. And yet these paradoxically clumsy words, usually tarnished by their all-too-common usage, are all we humans have at our command when we wish to articulate and express the quality of 'specialness' or uncommonness which we discern in the others we know and love.

What consistently escapes the clumsy, groping grasp of the words

we have to use of others is precisely the *otherness* of others. It is their personal otherness that others cannot have in common with one another. Still less can another's otherness be mine. Others are, and must irreducibly remain, uncommon and other. With the common words that are all I have to use of them I can never get the full and proper measure of the otherness of others. I must always find myself expressing their otherness in my own terms: in terms of me and of my experience of them in their otherness. And this in words drawn and transferred from the description of different fields of common human experience, so that I can at least somehow communicate my singular experience of the other. With such transferred descriptions – metaphors, analogies, similes and the like – I do my best to evoke the otherness of others which I cannot directly describe. I can at best offer even to myself a still distant approximation.

These obvious truths about the natural limits of the human words we have to use of others who are close to us have a manifest relevance and importance when we come to think about how we have to use words about God. For by the word 'God' – and, after all, it is, and remains, a human word – we mean that which it is given to us to experience as both so close to us as to be constitutive of our very reality and also and at the same time infinitely other than our human selves. If our common human words cope only inadequately with the otherness of others, then they must cope, at best, very inadequately indeed with the otherness of God. Yet cope somehow we must, since we have only our all-too-human words to use.

It is very necessary to stress the completely human nature of all theological language, all the words we use in thinking and speaking and communicating theologically (that is, in terms of God and God's activity in our regard), if only because the familiarity with which we have learned and accustomed ourselves to use them, whether in theology or in catechetics or in prayer and meditation, dulls our sense of their utter humanity. No human words, not even the words of the inspired biblical writings or the words of infallibly defined doctrines, can ever shed their human nature. Like all properly human words they must make sense and have meaning. And in order to have meaning they must, like all human words, conform to certain rules, follow a certain logic, when we use them. Unless we intend consciously to pursue meaninglessness, we cannot exempt theological language from the thorough investigation of what such language actually means, or how we mean it when we use it. How-

ever many theological words we have at our command, and however adept we may have become in the clever use of theological language, we still, as human beings using human words, have to try to know what we really mean by them. We must always be asking ourselves that over-arching question which it is the proper task of the theologian to pose and try to answer: what exactly do I suppose I mean when I use these words?

It could be justly said that it is the ability to pose and try to answer this question that distinguishes the good theologian from the bad one. And, on these terms, there have been remarkably few good theologians. It might be over-provocative to try and list them; but at least Origen and Thomas Aquinas would certainly qualify. So much theological work can proceed, and has in fact gone on in the past, without the key question ever coming really to the fore. So much theology has consisted in peddling theological words without bothering about what such difficult, non-literal, allusive, evocative and basically analogical language might possibly mean. So many theologians have either never noticed the importance of the question or have let themselves off facing up to it. But the problem caused by using human words theologically remains. It can, of course, never be fully solved in our present state, where and while the use of human words cannot be transcended – just as we can never solve the problem of capturing the otherness of other persons in our common human words. ‘For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood’.<sup>2</sup>

Still, if the problem of theological language has to be faced, then there is need of some theory (and this is one key place where philosophy must be called in to help and serve theology) which will offer an explanation of how words can be thought to be meaningful: a theory of the meaningfulness of human words in general, not just of theological words in particular, for it would be wrong to make theology a secret and private area of discourse for the initiate alone. It is precisely the tendency to let theology remain a kind of druidical gnosis, using words of its own and exempt from the normal rules of meaningfulness, that has got theological language such a bad name and reduced it to such ineffectiveness. Whether in theology proper or in the catechetical teaching of the faith, we need to know both what and how we mean words when we use words, and especially

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 13, 12.

the symbolic words of theological language. The philosophy of language has elaborated a number of theories of meaning, and this is not the place in which to review and criticize them. It seems best simply to sketch out what is perhaps the one theory of meaning which has had the greatest recent influence, and to see how it might help us with the problem of theological language.

The mighty Wittgenstein, in his later work, came to the following conclusion:

For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.<sup>3</sup>

This general definition of how words are meaningful, come to have meaning, is particularly helpful in trying to appreciate the problem of theological language. After all, words about God cannot have their meaning in that they literally refer, or are literally applied, to God. Nothing we can say about God can be literally true of God, or be meant literally of God. If we do mean the theological words we use of God in a literal sense, then we can be quite sure that we have got God wrong. We have just reduced God to the literal meaning of the human words which we are using. And God, on account of his absolute transcendence and total, infinite otherness, can never be capturable in literal terms. No more – indeed still less, infinitely less! – than we can grasp the otherness of a loved person in our literal terms. We can never *mean God* literally, but only somehow indirectly – some would say only negatively, by consistently denying all likeness and comparability between God and our human selves. Else we are talking not about God but about some idol of our own projection, some object of our own ‘verbi-facture’. But if our human words, when used of God, cannot have literal meaning, how do they come to have any meaning at all? How can we *mean* them? What – on earth – makes them meaningful for us?

Wittgenstein would say that we have to look to the special *use* we are in fact making of human words when we speak theologically, when we engage in the theological ‘language-game’. They are meaningful because and insofar as we use, and know we use, them in a special way. But in what special way? Not, as we have said, to express the reality of God and his activity as such, directly and in a

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<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein, L.: *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1953), p 43.

literal sense. This is not possible. We might helpfully return to Kavanagh's apology for a moment:

What you can do, though, is to describe their effect on you, and the kind of life it was that they stepped in to, and this is why there are so many I's and me's in the story. But maybe that's the most we can say about another person with any certainty; however we wish to celebrate them we have only the bits and pieces of ourselves to do it with.

In using language theologically we are putting words to the special use of expressing what we believe to be the ultimate truth about ourselves, about the full dimensions and depths of our human life as such. We find it necessary, on account of what we experience and hold human living to be at its fullest and best, to speak of ourselves in terms of God and of God's activity in our regard. We find we must speak theologically. Without this special, theological use of language we find that we simply cannot get our grasp of our experience of human life right. We find that 'the bits and pieces of ourselves' cannot acquire proper sense and meaning unless we learn to see ourselves in the light of a God who has acted, and does and will act in our regard. Left to ourselves we lack our full meaning. We need God in order to make sense of ourselves, in order to grasp our own reality. And so we must speak of ourselves in a theological way, learn to use theological language, finding our meaning in the meaning that 'God' has for us. If the word 'theology' can be said to mean anything, it means just this: an enquiry, using human words in a special, theological way, into the *logos* of our *Theos*—the meaning that God has for us, the meaning wherein alone our own human self-meaning is to be found, is revealed to us.

The special use we are making of our common human words when we speak of God is thus expressive of that faith which we have in what it means to be really and truly human. Theological language is used to express this meaning. Without the theological use of language, the full meaning of life eludes us. We believe that there has to be the God-dimension to human living if we are ever to appreciate what human living actually means. And for this appreciation to be realized, the God-dimension has to come to expression—somehow. We try to give it expression, try to grasp the meaning of life in its God-dimensionality, when we use theological language. So what we mean *directly* when we use such language is the ultimate truth about our human selves. We cannot *mean* God in himself directly, because our words will not cope directly with the meaning

and reality of God in himself. God is both too close, too intimately bound up with our own meaning and reality, and also too other for that. But we can and do mean God *indirectly* (analogically, if you like) *via* our grasp in faith of what our human lives are about, *via* his transcendent effect on our human lives. We can celebrate our God only through 'the bits and pieces of ourselves', and through his savingly creative effect on our reality and meaning.

However startling such an account of the radically human nature of theological language may seem to be, it can and should lead us to helpful conclusions. There is no future in hiding from its implications. It does not imply, of course, that we are somehow making God no more than a function of our own humanity, no more than a kind of useful but dispensable name for the possibility of that self-transcendence which we might think we find solely within our human selves.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, by the account of theological language outlined above, we are trying to show how God is the inescapable foundation and source of what it is to be human. We imply that there is no being human without God; that we cannot express our human selves without words about the meaning and reality of God. If theological language appears to be man-centred, it is only because man himself is God-centred. This paradox derives from the ultimate paradox that without God we cannot become our human selves.

But the account we have given does imply a certain liberation vis-à-vis our use of theological language. And faced as we are with the massive and growing problem of communicating belief in our God to men of all conditions, such a liberation has become quite vital. Once it has been realized that theological language consists, as all human language must consist, of human words which are variously used to express the otherwise inexpressible meaning and reality of our God, then it is clear that theology is an interpretation, an all-too-human interpretation, of the meaning of the relationship which exists between ourselves and God, a relationship which is constitutive of our own meaning and reality. It also becomes clear that no theological words are so sacrosanct that they can never be re-interpreted as need arises. In the interests of communicating the faith that we hold, we might well have to substitute another set of more meaningful human words for a set that has become humanly outworn or outdated. Theology lives by such re-interpretation, by

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<sup>4</sup> Such is the basic error of the recent and perversely admirable book by Alistair Kee: *The Way of Transcendence: Christian Faith without Belief in God* (London, 1971).

the discovering of better, more adequate, above all more meaningful words which will communicate the revealed truth in which the theologian believes.

This view of theology as interpretation excludes, of course, any suggestion that the theologian can feel free to interpret, or re-interpret, the revealed truth in any way he happens to like. It means, above all else, that the theologian (or the catechist, or the spiritual father) must first of all make quite sure that what he is trying to communicate through his re-interpretation is in fact the revealed truth as it has come down to him in the tradition of the Church. Hence the theologian cannot afford to ignore a single jot or tittle of the past enshrinement of the revealed truth in human words, whether those words be the inspired human words of scripture or the infallibly truthful human words of the Church's own solemn declarations. Untraditional innovation in theology is nonsense; for what the theologian has to interpret can only be the tradition of the truth in the Church. Otherwise the theologian reduces himself to a quack theosophist, peddling a gnosis of certain falsity. In his mistaken urge to communicate his own brand of the truth, he can excommunicate himself and his hearers. Nor can he pick and choose among the formulations of scripture and the Church's tradition. For then he becomes, literally, a heretic – a picker-and-chooser. The theologian's responsibility is to the *whole* 'catholic' tradition of truth in the Church, since this is the only way in which he can be sure that he is interpreting and communicating the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth to people.

Nonetheless, conscious of the human nature of the words he both interprets and seeks, the theologian should, within the saving limits of the Church's truthful tradition of his faith, have that freedom which he needs if he is to contribute to the growth and communication of the revelation transmitted by the Church. Meaningful re-interpretation can be done only if the theologian has that mental and spiritual elbow-room within which he can responsibly, but creatively, re-think and re-word the meaning of revealed truth in and through the use of words which will communicate that truth more meaningfully to his contemporary world. He needs to be able to widen the verbal limits of the theological language-game in order to make it more appealing to new participants and new spectators. If he believes – as he does – that the truth he has to communicate is saving truth, the only truth that can make men whole and real, he will find it hard to stop short of any re-interpretation which will



communicate that truth (and not some truth of his own making) to others. What, for instance, *can* the word 'grace' mean to contemporary man? Can the word 'supernatural' mean anything but ghosts? Can talk about 'redemption' still be meaningful? These words are common human words. There might well be better words, human also in their turn, which will serve better, if they are carefully and responsibly used, to communicate the meaning of the truth once communicated by the older vocabulary. In a real sense, the theologian is engaged in the science of the communicable. Knowing what truth he has to communicate, he must be free to search out ways of making it communicable.

If it be thought that what has been said is dangerously man-centred, we need urgently to recall that the basic warrant for taking such a radically human view of all the words in which God's revelation must perforce be communicated is the totally human nature in which God revealed himself in Christ. God's own Word became and remains a human Word. If God did not hesitate to utter his *logos*, to express his own meaning for us, in the humanity of Christ, then how should we dare to hesitate to express that meaning by the faith-directed use of our common human words? Provided, of course, that we ensure, by study and reflection and in fidelity to the Church's tradition of the truth of Christ, that the meaning we will only ever stumbingly manage to express and communicate in our human words of re-interpretation is, as nearly as we can make it, the meaning that God has revealed to us in his Word. We cannot, and should not, seek to slough off or forget the human nature of our words about God, because it is precisely in what is most human about us, in our common human nature as such, that God most certainly reveals himself.