

- 9 Ibid. note 13.
- 10 See article by Terry Eagleton 'American Criticism Today' in *New Left Review*, No 127 May-June 1981.
- 11 Unpublished lecture by Timothy Radcliffe on Daniel.
- 12 See *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*, Norman Perrin SCM 1976.
- 13 *Protest and Survivè*, eds. E. P. Thompson and Dan Smith . Penguin 1980 pp 50-51.
- 14 In *Womanspirit Rising*, eds. Christ and Plaskow.

## Problems and the Rhetoric of God-Talk

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In this paper it will be argued that the type of situation in which the question, Does God exist, becomes urgent for the questioner is fundamentally a rhetorical situation. It is also a situation where theology is forced to provide rhetorical answers – in the special sense of 'rhetoric' outlined here (as well as in last month's edition of this journal).<sup>1</sup> This is partly because of the influence on theological language which is exercised by its recipients' needs, and partly because rhetorical discourse is, from an epistemological point of view, uniquely suitable for talking about God.

When it seriously matters to someone whether God exists or not, at least this much can be said about his situation: it is one where it is felt to be urgent that some position should be reached or some decision made, but where the grounds for doing so fall considerably short of theoretical certainty. They fall short, too, of the ordinary logical and empirical grounds on which we are used to reaching decisions on simpler matters. Nonetheless, when the problem of God's existence becomes compelling, its very importance means that no solution to it is likely to be experienced as adequate unless it conforms to the highest standards of reasonableness available for dealing with such a question. At the same time, the questioner is putting his enquiry not only as an intellectual being but also as a person with emotional and moral dispositions; he requires conviction from a source which he can respect in these terms, and in order to understand an answer and to gain any satisfaction from it he needs to perceive it from an emotional situation which at least allows of its appreciation. Though one need not, for example, feel hilarious in order to believe in God, one is not likely to be able to do so from a position of total despair. The affective state of the questioner must in some way, then, be taken into account when he is provided with any attempt at an answer.

To say that these facets of the questioner must be taken account of is part of what is involved in the claim that the type of

situation from which the question of God's existence becomes vital to the questioner is a rhetorical one. This claim can be summarised by saying that, within a situation of urgency but uncertainty, the question functions on all three of rhetoric's constitutive levels: that of 'ethos', which concerns the answerer's credentials of reliability; 'pathos', concerning the affective disposition of the questioner; and 'logos', the argument itself, expressed in terms which are as reasonable as its subject-matter allows. Theology, moreover, cannot avoid dealing with questions asked from this sort of position, whatever else it may include as well. This means that it is obliged to try to deal with enquiries which are basic to it in a correspondingly rhetorical fashion, if it is to attempt to be convincing at all.

This will be shown here by examining the development of a type of situation in which such enquiries become increasingly pressing. At the same time, the unfolding of seven steps in this development is itself an argument with a rhetorical structure. It follows the figure of 'amplification', which means the expansion of a theme along lines which may not follow a strictly logical pattern but which can elaborate a recognisable pattern of experience and can themselves be convincing. The language used in such an amplification will follow a similar pattern of development.

But first, some remarks on the peculiarity of the problem of God's existence. In many academic situations, the intellectual structure of an argument – the level of logos – seems clear to all who are concerned with it, and it is necessary to go to some trouble to draw the extra-intellectual dimensions of the argument to people's attention. But the question whether God exists is special enough not to fall into this category. Though theologians argue oftener about, say, what characteristics may be ascribed to God on what grounds, or what significance God may be taken to have for human life, the most basic problem in this connection is whether whatever we are prepared to call God exists or not; and this is a question which presents some strange features. It may often appear that with it we have reached the end-point of our intellectual capacities, and that these conflict even with themselves at this point: we can proffer grounds for taking one side or the other in this debate without, it seems, being able to produce any reason for a decision either way which would be capable of refuting an opponent. This need not mean that the question must be dealt with irrationally; but if we look at the level of logos which is one of its components, we already find indications that this may not be the only level of argument involved.

The simplest way out of the dilemma caused by the lack of all-convincing argumentative solutions to the question of God's exist-

tence may seem to be to declare the situation only apparently problematic. This may mean terming the question itself meaningless, irrelevant or ideologically determined, despatching it and everything connected with it once and for all; or else emphatically affirming the existence of God on the basis of a faith untouchable by doubt. But one may be so oppressed by the difficulty of finding valid criteria for the sense or nonsense of the problem which are not themselves dependent on some kind of ideology that one hesitates to choose either alternative; then the question takes on the same significance for theists as for atheists. Both positions are brought into question; that of the theist, in that he is confronted by the possibility that the vital point in his conception of the world may just not exist; that of the atheist, in that he must reckon with the chance that his denial of God's existence, or indifference towards the question of assenting to a belief in God, may rest on a self-deception.

Both theist and atheist, then, are disturbed in the comfortable acceptance of their positions when some event in their lives affects them violently enough to confront them consciously with the problem of God's existence – given that both have learnt to use the word 'God' in such a way that its meaning has some connection with their own being and that of their surroundings, however vaguely this connection may be made. But in order to reach a first stage in a situation which may progress to a point where the problem of God's existence becomes inescapable, and to take the first step in our argument, it is not necessary to begin by asking what the word 'God' means, independently of the world around us. We can begin at the primitive stage of human awareness which takes the form of affirming the positiveness of what is experienced as given. This 'world' is composed of a multitude of things which are the case: facts, states, events, and ourselves with our experiences, wishes, hopes and plans, also envisaged as part of our world. Although the word 'God' is used in the most various contexts, whatever it may be applied to does not itself appear among these constituents and cannot therefore be experienced as 'given' in this simple sense. Nonetheless, it is by examining what happens in a situation where this ordinary relation to what is given is disturbed that we can discover the most basic demands that are made of language about God.

The constituents of the world share the basic characteristic of *being the case*; trivially, they are not nothing; this seems to be the most elementary quality which is immediately obvious to us. But it is also the case that in living in the world, we unavoidably associate with and deal with its contents, not only in thinking and acting but also in recognising and feeling. We form relationships with

what that world contains, but do not create such relationships from nothing; rather, we succeed either in structuring or restructuring them in various ways or in breaking them off entirely. Thus, dealing with what is the case, including ourselves, does not occur of its own accord; rather, whatever is, in continually affecting us, shows itself as more or less *meaningful*. (This fact cannot be evaded even by the nihilist, even if he takes his own life, insofar as he intends this step as a definitive reply to meaninglessness.) Whatever is the case appears to us, therefore, insofar as it is, and we experience it as more or less meaningful in the course of reacting to or co-operating with it in some way.

The uninterrupted continuance of this familiarity with and trust in what is given and what has meaning would be possible in a life where there were no problems apparently unavoidably connected with us and our world. This brings us to the mention of a second stage, yielding a second step in our argument, in which the insecurity caused by individual problems is recognised. For reasons which either originate in ourselves or overwhelm us from outside, we can be torn out of the security which stems from experiencing the positiveness of what is given, whenever problems occur – whether these are connected with one's friends, marriage or career, with society at large or with oneself. Whenever someone does not simply choose to ask himself questions connected with such matters, but instead they force themselves upon him, he is said to be in a state of crisis. Something is no longer 'in order'; he feels 'disordered', 'out of harmony with himself'; he may well feel frightened, and in any case makes every effort to dispose of the problem in some way. Whether this is more or less successful, the suspicion may well remain that the cause of his exposure to problems which remove him from the immediacy of what is given and from its meaningfulness may lie in the nature of his existence itself. The suspicion arises, that is, that the permanent possibility of problems confronts him with the recurrent necessity of searching for explanations, reasons or decisions which can restore its positiveness to the world which is given. Nevertheless, it is possible to become accustomed to this situation – to 'learn to live with' problems without feeling forced to ask questions about God. One may tackle difficulties as they arise, in the style of 'crisis management', or else cultivate attitudes intended to ensure that one's relations to oneself and the world remain relatively stable. If none of these directions is available, one can resort to surrogates which may be hoped to make life easier by allowing one, anyway at times, to forget altogether such problem situations as may occur.

It appears, then, that it is possible to accommodate oneself to living not only in a given, meaningful world but also in one which

contains problems and, because of them, an insecure relationship to what there is. This too can be accepted by both theist and atheist. However, the very suspicion that the possibility of problems may be attributable to human existence itself indicates the outlines of a further complex of questions. These confront us not only with the matter of individual difficulties which may impinge on us from time to time, but with the problematisation of the facticity and meaningfulness of our whole existence, together with that of the world in which we live and with which we have to deal. For even when we manage to attain some security in the midst of a reality which repeatedly throws up entanglements, we are continually brought up against certain limits. In the end these are the limits of our own existence between birth and death; and with this a third stage is reached, that of the problematisation of the beginning and end of one's individual life. But even before this stage is reached it is clear that the reasons compelling a search for intelligibility in problem situations are by no means exclusively intellectual. The search is one which demands answers applicable at and appropriate to every level of the questioner's personality.

Birth and death mark the boundaries of a field of experience about whose complexity only the most tentative theories can be proffered. But still it can be said that these boundaries colour our lives to the roots; they determine the beginning and end of the way in which being and meaningfulness appear to us, and thus too the way in which the world can affect us here and now. Now at the latest we are confronted with a complex of problems whose implications cannot be avoided and in relation to which we cannot escape feeling, acting or thinking – at least by implication and at least at times. These are problems affecting the whole person; any solutions proffered must function on planes which are, though not exclusively, emotional and social. (It seems to be an epistemological fact that when (partly) emotional and social questions are asked, the affective states of the recipients of their answers are relevant to the ways in which these answers are understood; this itself already gives us reason to suppose that the language in which they are couched must be able to respond to such states at the same time as expressing all reasonable reflections the situation allows.)

Because of their overwhelming character, one may be tempted to banish questions of birth and death as far as possible from one's conscious life; so as to be confronted as infrequently as possible by the sorts of problems they involve. Here too it is possible to accommodate oneself to the world, and here too theist and atheist can agree. But now problems of a special sort may thrust themselves upon one which radically and globally question the positiveness and meaningfulness not only of one's own existence but of

everything which is; including what one may believe to be the reality of a God who gives reason and significance to all that exists. If the characteristics most basic to our experience are being and meaningfulness (*Sein und Sinn*), realising the insecurity and the precariousness of the significance of everything that is given is a fourth stage on the way to a situation whose problems are crucial to theology. This is the fourth step in this amplification of a typical problem.

Problems at this stage are those which must be attributed to anyone who seriously makes statements such as 'I wish I were dead,' or 'Everything is meaningless.' In making such a statement, the speaker has given a special, negative response to this complex of questions. They are the same problems which someone believes himself to have solved positively when he can say, 'Life is wonderful,' 'I believe that God loves me,' or – in another vein – 'The only way for human beings to live is to rely on themselves.' The problems leading to such statements are at source occasioned by the fact that what is given does not simply lie before our eyes in a wholly uncomplicated way. People have always asked the question – if it has not forced itself upon them – why they exist at all and what meaning their lives have; and this is easily extended into asking why anything exists rather than nothing, and whether anything at all has a meaning or not. With this, not only individual things and events but everything becomes problematical. When the existence and meaning of all that is is put into question, the world as a whole is experienced as doubtful and strange. In the face of a problem of this order, it is less easy to accommodate oneself to the world again; such a problem can disturb even those who have long professed a decision in favour of a reason and meaning for everything, as well as those who have grown used to keeping questions of this sort at a distance. In asking what can be done in the face of such a predicament, a fifth stage is reached, and a fifth stage in this amplification.

With the question whether everything which is, including one's own life, can have a reliable reason for being and meaning or not, one seems to have reached the limits of what reason can decide – for nothing can be found in our world which can at the same time supply itself with meaningfulness and everything else too, unless this were the world itself. But it is just this world whose reason for being and being meaningful is in question. It might at this point be claimed that this questioning is no longer justified, that if there is nothing more which can be used to provide reasons, the search for meaningfulness must stop; that it is confronted by a final barrier beyond which there is nothing. Then this last basic problem would have to be answered with the statement that the world is as it is,

and that is all. Any theism which did not willingly identify God with the world itself but preferred to ask for some other reason for what exists and for its meaning would simply be thinking, believing, loving or hoping in a vacuum. However, it is not yet clear that the claim that we can go no further in looking for reasons is justified; the next, sixth stage in this progress in problems is looking for criteria which might allow us to decide on the rightness or wrongness of this preferred solution to the question. If these criteria exist, there is hope either that we can take some step further or that we shall at least have the right to content ourselves with the answer which has been reached so far. If they do not exist, the problem will be revealed as undecidable, and the only remaining course is to stay suspended between theism and atheism, or else to join one side or the other without any particularly compelling reasons for doing so. If the seventh stage in this process is one in which positive reasons for accepting the existence or non-existence of God are produced, the sixth should help us to see what criteria these reasons should satisfy.

To make it clearer what sort of criteria are being sought here, it may be useful to summarise the problem. It concerns the question whether there is a final reason for what we call 'the world', a reason not grounded in anything more fundamental than itself; but it also concerns the question whether such a final reason could also endow the world, including one's own existence, with a reliable significance. For a proof of the existence of a God who could bestow no meaning on anything else might perhaps satisfy our theoretical curiosity, but could hardly rescue anyone from the mildest despair.

When we begin to look for criteria, therefore, for making some decision with regard to God's existence, they are in an important sense criteria which we could consider fulfilled if we were able to understand God as a possible source of meaningfulness. And here we tend to be concerned in the first place with the meaningfulness of our own lives. When should we say, then, that someone's life was meaningful? A provisional answer might take the form that such meaningfulness is equivalent to, or based on, a familiar trust in the positiveness of the given world – but it is just this interpretation of meaningfulness which is put in question by the person who feels impelled urgently to ask whether God exists. Other attempts at defining a meaningful life might claim that someone's life has meaning when he can not only work but work well, not only communicate and interact but do so well. When, that is, he can carry out a particular sort of activity and at the same time do it in a satisfactory and satisfying way. But it does not seem to be the case that people in general exist in order to produce some specific sort

of achievement; no one task can be named which can convincingly be attributed to everyone. People do not seem to exist for any 'reason' in this sense – only in the sense that the specific achievement proper to man is itself to live. Living, though, cannot here mean existing in the most elementary sense – eating and growing, or perceiving and feeling. Nor can it only mean using one's reason; it would be arbitrary to suppose that the only point in human existence is the exercise of this one faculty. It may thus be plausible to claim that it is also part of a meaningful life to be able to express feelings in a manner appropriate to ourselves and the situations in which we find ourselves, and to be able to develop attitudes which allow appropriate responses to our feelings, actions, circumstances and neighbours. We need to be in a position to develop virtues and make them the bases of our actions, since they too constitute conditions for living a good life.

Hence it may be said that someone's life seems to be lived well when he instantiates that unity of feelings, morality and reason which is appropriate to him and the situations in which he has to live. Using a concept which has played a decisive role in the history of piety, this unity might be termed 'the heart'. The heart is the centre of a person; only when he can live 'from the heart' can he claim to be able to live well. Again, if he can show other people that his life is based on such a unity, he can convince them 'in their hearts'; he can communicate meaningfulness. But it is not only the permanent possibility of estrangement from oneself, one's fellow men, and one's circumstances of living which can cause the dissolution of this attempt to create and communicate meaningfulness, by splitting apart the unity of rationality, moral custom, and feeling. This happens too insofar as the good life itself can also be made to appear meaningless when confronted by a radical questioning of everything that is.

Thus we do not seem able to avoid the need to postulate the existence of 'something' which can give us an emotional, moral and intellectual sureness that there is some final rightness about our life and our perceptions of meaning – although this 'something' cannot be a constituent of this world, since the world is what has been put into question. Nonetheless, we are searching for something which affects us as entire persons, in our hearts; this is a decisive criterion for the existence of what we would call God. A God to whom this characteristic did not pertain would be either uninteresting or monstrous. The inevitability of a postulate, though, does not entail the actual existence of what has been postulated. We must look for further criteria which could allow us to take a last step towards answering the question whether God exists or not. But here we must ask whether, in attempting to find criteria



for a final and definite 'demonstration', we do not reach the limits of our world – so that any attempts of this nature would per se be destined to failure. It may be that we are now confronted with a problem which we are trying to solve with linguistic and epistemological means wholly unsuited to it, as if trying to use water to hammer a nail into the wall. However, instead of of this a far stronger claim can be made: that the language which is used in such contexts functions in a way which, because it is intrinsically rhetorical, allows us to perceive what it – at the same time and to the same degree conceals. This is the language of metaphor, symbol and other devices rhetoric has at its disposal to enable the expression of perceptions which go beyond the bounds of empirical knowledge. With this claim, we approach the seventh stage in the argument.

Suppose that there were such a reason for all that exists and for its meaningfulness. The first thing to be said about it would be that it was 'something'. But this harmless observation would already bring us to a standstill, since 'something' would be being used in a different sense from the normal one. We usually speak of some thing when it is a certain instance of a certain sort; we say that something is a typewriter, a thought or an economic disaster. But the totality of all that is definitely of some particular sort – in this sense it is nothing in particular at all, and lacks the usual differentiation things have from each other. Nevertheless it is not nothing, nor a mere configuration of thoughts. The same would apply to the source of everything that exists. If it is something, it seems that it must be a thing of a particular kind; but if it is a thing of a particular kind, then it is still part of everything that is – and this has been ruled out. But if God exists, he is not nothing. If he cannot at the same time be and not be something, what is he? One might be inclined to answer that he is not in a normal but in an 'eminent' sense 'something', insofar as he is the reason for the existence of everything that can be called a thing. This looks at first as if it is an affirmation of some sort, but is only comprehensible when we know what is meant by 'eminent'. So proposing a new meaning for 'something' only pushes the problem further back; and this will be the case for every predicate which we try to apply to a reason or source for all being and meaningfulness.

If we wish to say anything about God, we are left with rhetorical means of doing so; for example, that, again, of amplification, which expands and extrapolates God's characteristics to the point at which they transcend conceptual thinking. Nonetheless, such an amplification is neither contradictory in itself nor simply meaningless. Rather, it points to 'something' beyond which nothing greater

can be conceived, and which cannot even be grasped by saying that it has unsurpassable greatness in any possible world<sup>2</sup> – in this sense God is not a ‘thing’ in any world, real or possible. Ontological arguments which take God to be a ‘thing’ are therefore bound to fail. Thus, when we search for the existence of God, we are forced to rely on notions which we can make comprehensible and thus grasp as meaningful, but which refer to something which radically retreats from our form of understanding insofar as we cannot help trying to think of it as an object of some sort. What remains within our reach, though, are the multitudinous ways in which what there is can show itself as pointing to God. This we can experience with our whole personalities, in our moral attitudes, emotions and theoretical understandings. This may be termed a rhetorical situation in which everything can persuade us of the existence of God. The argument given here does not itself prove that God exists; it shows that it is reasonable, on the intellectual level, to believe that he does. This provides for at least part of the process of persuading someone to believe in God; for the other, non-cognitive aspects of persuasion with which it is blended, other rhetorical activities are necessary to extend the process.

From this rhetorical situation, the more we understand that no more final and definite rational answer to the problem of God’s existence can be given, though a reasonable one can, the more the language of revelation and the New Testament can also become plausible. This is the kind of rhetorical language that is the language of faith. Theologians such as Luther, therefore, follow a patristic tradition in talking of God as an ‘orator’.<sup>3</sup> In the metaphoric language of belief, God does not ‘speak’ to our heads only, as if he were simply the end-point of some metaphysical system about which it is possible to learn particular true propositions. He speaks at the same time to our feelings and our moral sense. In fact, he speaks particularly to them, since he meets us in our hearts.

- 1 Cf Ricca Edmondson and Markus Wörner, ‘Theology and Rhetoric’, *New Blackfriars*, September 1981.
- 2 Cf A. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, O.U.P. Oxford 1974, pp 213-217.
- 3 Luther, Commentary on Psalm 121; lecture ‘In XV Psalmos Graduum’, Weimar Edition XL, 13, p 59.