

# Religious Language

## I

### The challenge

Religion makes use of expressions such as “God is Love”, “God is three persons in one” that require interpretation. It is claimed that they express truths, but those truths are written in a language that refers to objects that are non-physical, such as God, and to properties that are paradoxical, such as being “three persons in one”.

Therefore, religious language is open to the charge that it is meaningless.

This attack has gained momentum in the C20th owing to the prevalence of the doctrine of empiricism – that all knowledge is abstracted from sense-experience. If this is the case, how can language referring to non-sensory objects and to contradictory properties be meaningful?

Logical positivists adopt the verification principle. They argue as a consequence that religious language cannot be meaningful. Ayer drew a distinction between strong and weak verification – “A proposition is ... verifiable in the strong sense of the term, if, and only if, its truth could be conclusively established... But it is verifiable in the weak sense if it is possible for experience to render it probable.” In fact, the criterion of weak verifiability has never been conclusively formulated in a way that would exclude statements that are genuinely meaningless! (See the chapter on verificationism for this.) Nonetheless, this has still felt to be a challenge. How will theologians meet it?

## II

### Anthony Flew: Theology and Falsification (1950)

Anthony Flew is a leading exponent of the attack on the meaningfulness of religious language. He adopts the related criterion of falsificationism – a statement is meaningful if, and only if, it can be shown in principle to be false.

#### From *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*

Now it often seems to people who are not religious as if there was no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be a sufficient reason for conceding “There wasn’t a God after all” or “God does not really love us then.” Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are reassured. But then we see a child dying of



inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his Heavenly Father reveals no obvious sign of concern. Some qualification is made – God’s love is “not merely human love” or it is “an inscrutable love,” perhaps – and we realize that such sufferings are quite compatible with the truth of the assertion that “God loves us as a father (but, of course ...).” We are reassured again. But then perhaps we ask: what is this assurance of God’s (apparently qualified) love worth, what is this apparent guarantee really a guarantee against? Just what would have to happen not merely (morally and wrongly) to tempt but also (logically and rightly) to entitle us to say “God does not love us” or even “God does not exist”? I therefore put to the succeeding symposiasts the simple central questions, “What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or the existence of, God?”

This can be summarized as follows

1. The existence of God cannot be falsified.
2. Therefore, the existence of God is meaningless.

The empiricist attack on theology is exemplified by the idea of verificationism. Statements will only be meaningful if, in principle, there is some way of determining through experience whether the statement is true or false.

Thus, although Flew does not explicitly state the conclusion of his argument, the context makes that clear. If the existence of God is not a matter of fact, then to say that God exists is meaningless.

Why, then, the switch from verification to falsification in Flew’s article? The answer lies in the philosophy of science. It turns out that scientific theories never are verified. This is a consequence of the paradox of induction – the inference from any number of particular observations to a general law is never sound. To overcome this objection, Karl Popper proposed that science works through falsification not verification. What makes scientific theories objective and meaningful is that they can be wrong. Crucial experiments decide between rival theories.

In this context, then, Flew switches the attack on theology by introducing falsification. Theological statements cannot be falsified, and hence, they are meaningless.

It is worth noting that philosophy of science has moved on from Popper’s day. It is now also accepted that there are no really crucial experiments, and that science is also moving forward along lines of growth determined by politics as



well as experiment. To review these ideas further one should start with Kuhn's *The Logic of Scientific Revolutions*.

The strength of empiricism at the current time is illustrated by the attempts of various philosophers with Christian backgrounds to answer the challenge illustrated by Flew's article. One such attempt is offered by John Hick.

### III

#### **John Hick : Theology and Verification**

John Hick attempts to reply to Flew by offering an "eschatological verification" as a reply to this: the truth of God's existence will be revealed when we die.

The purpose of his essay is to demonstrate that religious statements are meaningful and questions of fact.

My concern here is not to seek to establish the religious facts, but rather to establish that there are such things as religious facts, and in particular that the existence or nonexistence of the God of the New Testament is a matter of fact, and claims as such eventual experiential verification.

Thus, he accepts some kind of criterion of verification as a criterion for what is meaningful. For his argument to work, he has to make certain claims about verification.

- (1) Verification is a psychological event in a private consciousness, and as such a statement could be verified by just one person. The verification that is required for a proposition to be meaningful is both a psychological and logical process, and does not have to be a "public" event. It is sufficient for a statement to be meaningful if just one person can verify it as an event of private experience.

"Verification" is thus primarily the name for an event which takes place in human consciousness. It refers to an experience, the experience of ascertaining that a given proposition or set of propositions is true. To this extent verification is a psychological notion. But of course it is also a logical notion.

... When  $A$ , but nobody else, has ascertained that  $p$  is true, can  $p$  be said to have been verified; or is it required that others also have undergone the same ascertainment? How public, in other words, must verification be?



- (2) Verification is not the same as logical proof beyond all doubt. Statements that are verified are not statements about which there can be no doubt.
- (3) Verifications can take the form of conditional statements.

For example, statements about the features of the dark side of the moon are rendered meaningful by the conditional predictions which they entail to the effect that if an observer comes to be in such a position in space, he will make such-and-such observations.

- (4) Verification and falsification are not symmetric conditions. In other words, a statement may be verifiable but not falsifiable. The correct criterion of meaning is the verification principle, not the falsification principle. He rejects Flew's recasting of the question about whether the existence of God is factually significant in terms of falsification.

Anthony Flew and others have raised instead of the question, "What possible experiences would verify 'God exists'?" the matching question "What possible experiences would falsify 'God exists'?"

... But it would be rash to assume ... that verification and falsification must always be related in this symmetrical fashion.

Consider, for example, the proposition that "there are three successive sevens in the decimal expansion of  $\pi$ ." So far as the value of  $\pi$  has been worked out, it does not contain a series of three sevens, but it will always be true that such a series may occur at a point not yet reached in anyone's calculations. Accordingly, the proposition may one day be verified if it is true, but can never be falsified if it is false.

Having assembled these ingredients, Hick reveals his idea of "eschatological verification".

The hypothesis of continued existence after bodily death provides an instance of a different kind of such asymmetry, and one which has direct bearing upon the theistic problem. This hypothesis has built into it a prediction that one will after the date of one's bodily death have conscious experiences, including the experience of remembering that death. This is a prediction which will be verified in one's own experience if it is true, but which cannot be falsified if it is false.



This would be (1) a private experience; (2) not a proof beyond all doubt; (3) a conditional statement; (4) capable of verification, but not falsification.

This clever argument turns verificationism on its head, and does demonstrate the hopelessness of verificationists in excluding all theological concepts from being meaningful.

The argument gives no reason for believing in life after death, but its purpose is to establish that, on verificationist principles, the concept of life after death is meaningful. He is probably right in his analysis that the example only works if the four conditions he has sited are granted. So criticism of his argument by an empiricist could begin by considering whether his four conditions are valid, and if so, genuinely met by his example.

On the other hand, he works overtime to establish that the “eschatological verification” is indeed capable of verification. This is partly because he has a second thesis that he wishes to establish – he believes in the bodily resurrection and not the survival of a disembodied soul. In fact, he thinks that the dualism of body and soul is genuinely inconceivable, so he wishes to distance himself from this concept. By survival after death he does not mean, survival of a disembodied soul. He means, the resurrection of the body. He claims that man is “an indissoluble psycho-physical unity”. Thus

If there is no soul in distinction from body there can be no question of the soul surviving the death of the body. Against this philosophical background the specifically Christian (and also Jewish) belief in the resurrection of the flesh or body, in contrast to the Hellenic notion of the survival of a disembodied soul, might be expected to have attracted more attention than it has. For it is consonant with the conception of man as an indissoluble psycho-physical unity, and yet it also offers the possibility of an empirical meaning for the idea of “life after death”.

He goes on to defend the idea of a resurrection of the body is meaningful and capable of verification, through the creation of three “pictures” – each requiring the reader to acknowledge that a resurrection of the body is meaningful.

Mr. X, then dies. A Mr. X replica, complete with the set of memory traces which Mr. X had at the last moment before his death, comes into existence. It is composed of other material than physical matter, and is located in a resurrection world which does not stand in any spatial relationship with the physical world.



It could be objected that the terms “other material than physical matter” and “a resurrection world which does not stand in any spatial relationship with the physical world” are meaningless, and not capable of verification. If so, this would undermine his whole argument, precisely when he seems to have gained victory.

However, he also acknowledges that his argument is not complete. He rightly acknowledges that life after death may be meaningful, but if it were verified this would not thereby give meaningful content to any theological statement about God. An atheist could find the concept of life after death meaningful as well.

So far I have argued that a survival prediction such as is contained in the *corpus* of Christian belief is in principle subject to future verification. But this does not take the argument by any means as far as it must go if it is to succeed. For survival, simply as such, would not serve to verify theism. It would not necessarily be a state of affairs which is manifestly incompatible with the non-existence of God. It might be taken as just a surprising natural fact. The atheist, in his resurrection body, and able to remember his life on earth, might say that the universe has turned out to be more complex, and perhaps more to be approved of, than he had realized. But the mere fact of survival, with a new body in a new environment, would not demonstrate to him that there is a God.

In order to turn the verification into a verification of the existence of God, the experience would require two further ingredients – according to Hick.

These are, *first*, an experience of the fulfillment of God’s purpose for ourselves, as this has been disclosed in the Christian revelation; in conjunction, *second*, with an experience of communion with God as he has revealed himself in the person of Christ.

The first of these means that we experience self-fulfillment and happiness in conformity with Christ’s teaching.

Now the argument is getting very strained, and moving in the realm of terms that no strict empiricist would allow to have meaning, such as “an experience of communion with God”.

It seems, then, on a generous appraisal of the article, that Hick has established that the idea of “life after death” is meaningful to an empiricists. No great achievement in this since almost any ghost story, we may imagine avidly read by empiricists, would establish that. However, even in this matter Hick manages to shoot himself in the foot



by introducing concepts such as “other material than physical matter” which have no factual content.

Stepping back from the whole article, the biggest problem with it is that it gives not one coherent reason for supposing that one does survive after death. Survival after death may be meaningful, but why should one believe in it? From an empirical point-of-view it is contrary to the evidence. Likewise, why should one relate survival after death to a single passage of revealed scripture? As he says himself, it could turn out to be an odd quirky new fact about existence.

The answer to these questions lies in an altogether different direction. One believes in these things because of religious experience and faith. Therefore, the meaning of religious concepts is to be sought in religious experience and faith, and if these are vacuous then so too are the concepts.

It is an error to attempt to beat the verificationists at their own game. Religious concepts are not empirical concepts and facts by themselves do not prove the objective content of anyone of them, least of all the existence of God. Hick is barking up the wrong tree.

My concern here is not to seek to establish the religious facts, but rather to establish that there are such things as religious facts, and in particular that the existence or nonexistence of the God of the New Testament is a matter of fact, and claims as such eventual experiential verification.

He should be seeking to establish the religious facts, and leave their meanings to take care of themselves.

## IV

### Five types of theology

The American theologian Hans Frei in his work *Types of Christian Theology* described five types of modern Christian thinking.

Before introducing these we have to make a historical/cultural observation.

At the time of writing Western society is going through a period of transition, and nowhere is this more evident than in the position of religion. Society has entered a state of *modernity*. What this means is that scientific rationalism has become dominant as an explanation of phenomena – it is particularly prominent in academic and intellectual circles. Religion is rooted in premodern attitudes and thinking. Therefore, religion is in decline. The reactions of theologians to the changing cultural



environment is varied. This problem facing religion is illustrated by the following extract from David Ford's work *Theology, A Very Short Introduction*.

What about the religions? Because they touch on all aspects of life they have been profoundly and complexly affected by the transformations. Because all the major religions are rooted in premodernity and need to be able to sustain significant continuity with the past, the constant changes and uprootings of modernity have struck especially hard at them.

Given this context Frie identifies five possible forms of theology.

- (1) Type I. This theology rejects religion as truth. It does so because it accepts some other system of belief as wholly true and rational, and rejects religion because it cannot be made to be consistent with it. Flew represents this kind of theology. He is a scientific, rationalist materialist and God and religion have no part to play in his alternative world-view; therefore, he claims that all religious language is meaningless. Nor is this merely a ploy – he is quite sincere. It is a logical extension of his empiricism, since religious language does not and cannot be explained by concepts that are derived or abstracted from experience.
- (2) Type II. This theology attempts to interpret religion in terms of some other modern point-of-view. If necessary, certain previously strongly held beliefs will be abandoned. Essentially, the strategy is to attempt a compromise with modernity. Hick's reply to Flew represents a theology of this kind. Essentially, Hick accepts the empiricist viewpoint, but he seeks to show that religious statements can still be meaningful by verificationist criteria. The difficulty with this type of theology is that it is precarious. Religion is generally about faith, and it is possible to question the faith of someone who needs to compromise this much. It is arguable, for instance, that it is an error to attempt to beat the verificationists at the own game!
- (3) Type III. This is a theology that is sceptical. No one system of thought is acknowledged to represent the whole truth. It seeks to avoid direct comparisons between religious language and other language, but perhaps seeks to establish a dialogue between them and establish correlations. The danger in this theology is that it too lacks a clear expression of faith. It seems to want to run with the hounds and hunt with the hairs.
- (4) Type IV. This theology gives primacy to the religious interpretation, and makes a commitment to it. It seeks to interpret modernity in terms of religious language. The danger in this position is that it does not acknowledge sufficiently the challenge of modernity, and hence the need for change. The theology is a premodern way of thinking with window dressing to make it





seem modern. However, because it is not modern it cannot engage the modern mind, and hence must also lose ground to scientific rationalism.

- (5) Type V. This might be described as a “fundamentalist” reaction. This theology refuses to acknowledge the challenge of modernity, and to reassert unchanged and undiminished the premodern religious state-of-mind. The problem in this approach is that it denies that a change has taken place, and hence will inevitably lose touch with the mainstream of socio-cultural development.

Most of the statements and replies to the attack on the meaning of religious language derive from type II or type III theologies. Another type II response is that offered by Richard Swinburne. He uses an example of toys in a cupboard to show that statements that cannot be falsified can be meaningful. It cannot be falsified that toys in a cupboard do not move when we don’t look at them, but the statement that they don’t is still meaningful. Once again, this seeks to integrate religious language with verificationism rather than challenge verificationism directly.

Another similar reply is that religious statements could satisfy the weak criterion of verificationism – the proposition *God is the Creator* could be supported by evidence of possible design in the world. There is historical evidence that counts towards propositions such as *Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah* or *Jesus rose from the dead on the first Easter Sunday*.

An example of a type III response is provided by R.M. Hare. He argues that religious statements are non-cognitive and they function to indicate the way someone looks at the world. A person can have a paranoid delusion that people are going to kill him that is not supported by any evidence; however, the delusion is still meaningful. Hare calls ways of looking at the world ‘bliks’, and claims that religious beliefs are ‘bliks’.

R.M. Braithwaite also agrees that religious language is non-cognitive and that the verificationist and falsificationist principles do not apply. According to Braithwaite a religious claim is essentially a moral claim and expresses an attitude; however, a religious claim expresses this moral through a story, nor is it necessary for a person to believe in the literal truth of the story in order to adopt a certain way of life.

These responses seek to establish separate domains of meaning between scientific rationalism and theology. However, the position is genuinely precarious. Too much is conceded to scientific rationalism in acknowledging that religious statements are “non-cognitive”.

Of course, this approach does accord with theological statements of the past. Particularly, with the tradition of the *via negativa*. This claims that religious language is essentially equivocal – its use is to refer people to things beyond their understanding – that is the infinite. Religious language is essentially mystical and



adopts the *via negativa* – that is, God’s attributes are mystically hinted at by describing what God is not.

A related approach is to argue that religious language is analogical – that is, God’s attributes are hinted at through analogies. St. Thomas Aquinas adopts this approach. Aquinas adopts analogies of proportion and attribution. It is an analogy of proportion to attribute greater power to God; it is an analogy of attribution to say that God is a living God, or God loves us – a term originally used with reference to one thing is applied to a second thing because the one causes the other.

Aquinas is a pre-modern thinker, but the reintroduction here of his ideas is a response to the modern period of transition. It is also as precarious as the other type III responses. The use of analogy within religious language can be attacked as meaningless.

Similarly, Ian Ramsey argues that analogies are used to develop models of God. For example, *God is good* is a model of God. However, the models need to be qualified. In *God is infinitely good* the term *infinitely* is a qualifier.

It is also argued that religious language is metaphorical and symbolic. A symbol is something that stands for something else. This approach has been developed particularly by Paul Tillich. J.R. Randall also appears to adopt this approach, though there is a more sociological bias to his understanding of religious language, which stirs strong emotions and binds communities together.

Once again the precarious nature of this position is shown by the reply to Tillich by Paul Edwards who argues that symbols do not convey facts and they are meaningless. The directions and insights to which symbols point cannot be verified.

Wittgenstein adopts the view that “meaning is use”. He applied this principle also to religious language – A non-believer will find religious language meaningless because he or she is not in the religious ‘game’. But an outsider cannot claim that the language used in a particular ‘game’ is meaningless just because it does not make sense to them. Once again, this is just another example of a type III response, since it seeks to separate the two discourses of religion and science, and even the two communities to the extent that they cannot literally understand each other. It is another precarious reply, since the stronger system of beliefs will win the battle for the future generations. It is all very well to say that two communities exist that speak separate languages (participate in different language games); but the future generations are being taught at school to speak the language of modernity, not the language of religion.

Basil Mitchell points out that believers have faith, and this is why they do not allow evidence, for example, the problem of evil, to undermine their faith. This is a type IV response.



In conclusion, religion is in decline. As it is in decline the meaning of its terms are being questioned. Theological responses have sought to compromise with the onslaught of modernity. The understanding of the content of religious symbols and language is waning.



Copyright © Blacksacademy – June, 2003