

## II. The Problem of Religious Language

With the rise of analytic philosophy in the early part of the twentieth century and its emphasis upon linguistic analysis, it should not be surprising that a significant crisis developed by midcentury among both philosophers and theologians concerning religious language. That there was such a crisis is evidenced both by the explicit recognition of the challenge in the writings of several leading figures in both the philosophy of religion and in theology and by the plethora of books and articles that appeared in print in the period from approximately midcentury until ten years or so afterward.<sup>1</sup> There was much disagreement among different analytic philosophers; however, the one underlying, common tenet upon which nearly all of them would have agreed is that language is the one continuous thread from which the entire fabric of religion and religious belief is woven. Some of the problems with religious language are illustrated by the more extreme positions, for example, A. J. Ayer's claim that the language of theology is meaningless and nonsense and Paul van Buren's claim that "the word 'God' is dead."<sup>2</sup> Other concerns were prompted by the repercussions of attention to language by the more moderate analytic philosophers and the elevation of the importance of the analysis of language for philosophical or theological pursuits.

### RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE AND RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

The way in which an understanding and analysis of religious language was viewed as fundamental to all of religion is perhaps best illustrated by the relationship between religious language and religious knowledge. A good way to understand the inseparable and symbiotic relationship between religious language and religious knowledge is to see the epistemic content of religious claims as dependent upon and derivative from an analysis of the cognitive content of those claims, that is, the content on the basis of which those claims might be regarded as

<sup>1</sup> A casual inspection of the copyright dates of the references in this chapter will indicate how concentrated the interest in religious language was from the late 1940s through 1960. Although the publication of some additional original material continued beyond that date for some thinkers, the 1960s, for the most part, saw the appearance of secondary source material in the way of books, anthologies, and articles responding to earlier works.

<sup>2</sup> See A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), Chapter 6, and Paul van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 103.

true or false. Consequently, much of the attention during this period was focused upon issues concerning “the cognitive meaningfulness” of religious language and the impact of these issues upon claims concerning religious knowledge. It appears that religious language has to be cognitively meaningful in order to have epistemic content or value. The problem of religious language and the problem of religious knowledge came to be regarded as inextricably interwoven,<sup>3</sup> and a reprioritizing of issues and problems within the philosophy of religion occurred – the result of which was that the analysis of religious language came to be regarded as basic and fundamental to the myriad of other issues and problems. In this view, approaching questions about claims to religious knowledge philosophically begins with an analysis of the language that is used to affirm, describe, or communicate those claims, and analyzing the religious language within which those claims are couched invariably leads to epistemological questions.

The view that understanding and analyzing religious language is basic and fundamental to the philosophy of religion leads directly to the need for resolving the question of the logical status of religious language, and attempting to resolve the question of the logical status of religious language requires pursuing several different avenues of inquiry that, at different times, parallel and intersect each other. Is religious language assertive? Are religious beliefs “cognitively meaningful”? If so, are the statements of these beliefs “literally true or false” or “symbolically or metaphorically true or false”? What is the criterion (or criteria) for determining cognitive meaningfulness? Can language have epistemic content and not be cognitively meaningful? Are there other kinds of meaningfulness besides cognitive meaningfulness? If so, what about the criteria for “nongognitive meaningfulness”? But what about these questions themselves? Do they presuppose certain rigid ways of categorizing possible approaches to religious language? In some Wittgensteinian-based views, these very distinctions between cognitive and nongognitive meaningfulness and between literal and metaphorical truth and falsity are regarded as arbitrary and restrictive. In pursuing answers to these questions, as well as the others addressed in this chapter, it is a mistake to talk about and treat religious language monolithically. From the most radical to the most conservative, those who have dealt with problems of religious language have admitted that different utterances are intended to be regarded and treated in different ways. Not all utterances are intended as statements. Different utterances by theists may be exaltations of praise, professions of beliefs, descriptions of religious practices, reports of religious authority or history, or factual claims about the world.

The problem of religious language in the twentieth century was a complex one of sorting through the multifarious kinds of religious utterances and establishing and analyzing the different logical types of religious utterances, the logical status of the different logical types of religious utterances, and the logical relationship between the different logical types of religious utterances and other questions in the philosophy of religion (such as the problem of religious knowledge). For most who have addressed these issues, the question of whether certain kinds of religious

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, William T. Blackstone, *The Problem of Religious Knowledge: The Impact of Contemporary Philosophical Analysis on the Question of Religious Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), and *Religious Language and the Problem of Religious Knowledge*, edited by Ronald E. Santoni (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968).

utterances are cognitively meaningful is at the very core of the problem of religious language. Pursuing the issue of the cognitive meaningfulness of religious language leads directly into the question of the proper criterion for assessing cognitive meaningfulness. The earliest and most extreme forms of assessing cognitive meaningfulness, advocated by the logical positivists, traded upon full or partial direct verification and rejected all religious statements in toto and "out of hand." Logical positivism flourished briefly and then faded (see Chapter I). However, the spirit of positivism and the lingering, fundamental question about the cognitive meaningfulness of religious statements did not fade away so quickly or easily. About midcentury, several critics renewed the attack upon religious language in more moderate guise. So far as the philosophy of religion is concerned, logical positivism had been a wolf in wolf's clothing; the renewed attack came in the form of a wolf in sheep's clothing.

### POPPER AND FALSIFIABILITY

Since its first introduction by Karl Popper, the notion of falsifiability has gained and continued to enjoy significant currency in the philosophy of science. Falsifiability was used by Popper as a criterion and a test for empirical and scientific claims for settling what he calls "the problem of demarcation." Facing a situation in which scientific theories were becoming more and more abstract – primarily as a result of Einstein's introduction of the theory of relativity and developments in quantum theory – Popper was faced with dealing with the methodological significance of scientific theories that did not lend themselves to verification in any straightforward sense. The problem was one of distinguishing between legitimate science and "pseudoscience." In contrast with the prevailing view of the nature of science, which depended upon the notion of confirmation, Popper's answer to the problem of demarcation was that, to be empirically significant, statements of science must be falsifiable in principle. Also, in contrast with the logical positivists' use of the verification criterion of meaning, Popper did not develop a general theory of meaning. Through the process of attempting to falsify a statement, we simply test individual statements "in a negative sense." The *empirical content* of a statement is determined by its degree of falsifiability; thus, the easier it is to falsify a statement (that is, the more evidence that is potentially falsifying), the greater the degree of empirical content of the statement.<sup>4</sup> A meaningful, legitimate scientific hypothesis is one on the basis of which a scientist is able to deduce specific expectations concerning matters of fact. If, in certain, specifiable circumstances, the predicted results are not obtained, then the hypothesis is refuted or falsified. Any hypothesis or other claim that is theoretically immune to any such falsification is not empirically significant, and whatever else it might be or do, such a statement does not contain any factual information about the world. Pseudoscientific claims such as those of astrology are not empirically meaningful because they are not falsifiable.

<sup>4</sup> For Popper's treatment of the problem of demarcation, see Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1959), pp. 34ff.

## FLEW AND FALSIFICATION

Although the grand program of positivism proved to be a failed enterprise, its influence was (and continues to be) significant. The positivists could never agree on a formulation of the verification criterion of meaning that would do what they wanted it to do;<sup>5</sup> however, the notion of verification never completely faded away and continued as an undercurrent of analytic philosophy. The continued dominance of the scientific method and the glaring differences between the scientific method and the many ways of forming and explaining religious belief invited the continued comparison of the statements of science and religious language. One of the most compelling variations upon the early positivists' emphasis on verification and empirical meaning has proven to be the notion of *falsification* introduced by Antony Flew. Flew's falsifiability criterion of meaning for religious statements is an attempt to take Popper's falsifiability test for scientific claims and apply it within the philosophy of religion. Flew's use of falsification also has proven to be the most poignant and lasting formulation to capture and preserve the positivists' original concern with empirical meaningfulness. Flew introduced his notion of falsification as part of the famed "University Discussion" about religious language in his article entitled "Theology and Falsification." This has become one of the most commonly known, reprinted, and anthologized pieces ever produced in analytic philosophy of religion.<sup>6</sup> Flew begins his discussion of falsification by relating a parable first used by John Wisdom in his article "Gods."

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, "Some gardener must tend this plot." The other disagrees, "There is no gardener." So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. "But perhaps he is an invisible gardener." So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. "But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves." At last the Skeptic despairs, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?"<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Carl Hempel, "Problems and Changes in the Empiricist Criterion of Meaning," in *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language*, edited by Leonard Linsky (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1952).

<sup>6</sup> Flew's paper prompted the "Discussion," which took place between Flew, R. M. Hare, and Basil Mitchell.

<sup>7</sup> "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, edited by Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 96. Cited by Flew as originally appearing in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1944-45. Also in *Logic and Language*, edited by A. G. N. Flew (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), pp. 187-206.

The application of the parable of the invisible gardener to the philosophy of religion is immediate and direct by Flew. The theist and nontheist disagree about the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, transcendent God who “tends” his creation. What evidence can possibly resolve this dispute? We can only look to evidence that would be compatible with one assertion but not the other. In the parable, when the Believer and the Skeptic (the theist and the nontheist) perform tests to attempt to discover evidence to support one claim or the other, no evidence to support the theist’s claim that there is a God is ever discovered that is not equally supportive of the nontheist’s claim, and no evidence is regarded as possibly falsifying of the theist’s claim. However, the Believer continually accommodates the potentially falsifying results by qualifying the original claim that there is a gardener by saying, “Well, there is a gardener, BUT the gardener is invisible, intangible, etc.” We can easily imagine that if more varied and sophisticated tests were introduced with the same results, the Believer might say, “Well, there is a gardener, BUT the gardener is completely and necessarily undetectable by any possible means by human beings!” The original claim then becomes meaningless, according to Flew, and indistinguishable from the competing claim that there is no gardener at all. With the turn of what has become an enduring phrase, Flew concluded that the original claim dies the “death by a thousand qualifications.”<sup>8</sup>

Flew’s point concerning the claims of the theist is forceful and straightforward. The theist makes such claims as “God has a plan,” “God created the world,” and “God loves us as a father loves his children.”<sup>9</sup> If such claims are intended by the theist as assertions – as propositions with truth value – then in order to assert something the theist must thereby also be denying something – namely that the negation of the original proposition is *not* true. A proposition that does not preclude some state of affairs from being true, that is, a proposition that is not falsifiable by some possible state of affairs, is thus cognitively meaningless or cognitively empty regardless of its declarative syntactical form. According to Flew’s falsifiability criterion of meaning, for any assertion, “anything which would count against the assertion, or which would induce the speaker to withdraw it and to admit that it had been mistaken, must be part of (or the whole of) the meaning of the negation of the assertion. And to know the meaning of the negation of an assertion, is as near as makes no matter, to know the meaning of the assertion.”<sup>10</sup> The conclusion of the application of the falsifiability criterion is obvious: if an alleged assertion denies nothing, then it asserts nothing. As several critics have pointed out, the state of affairs that a meaningful statement must deny must be an empirical state of affairs (it is arguable that a standard use of “state of affairs” designates only empirical states of affairs or empirical matters of fact).

Flew represents this position as a simple point of logic. In a footnote, he suggests that his claim is the same, in fact, as acknowledging that to assert P is to assert the denial of not-P (the law of double negation). However, things are surely not so simple as this, and when the underlying complexity of Flew’s position is

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.



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