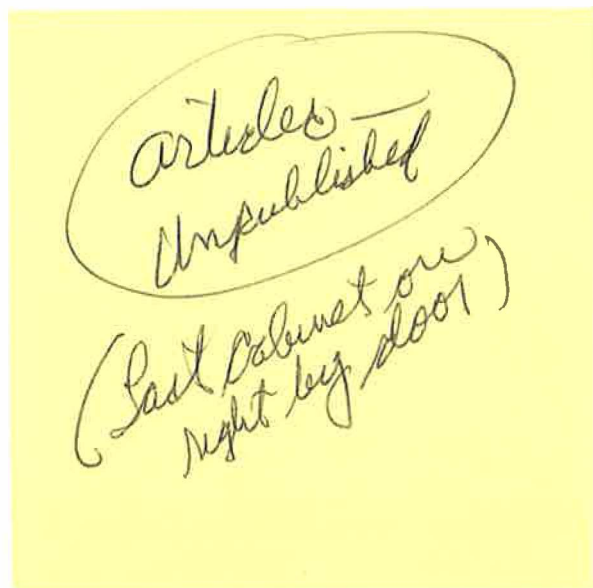


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'ACOGNOSTICISM': FRIEND OR FOE OF RELIGIOUS MEANING?

#### INTRODUCTION

Traditionally one could categorize the major views concerning God as either: 1) Deistic (asserting there is a God beyond this world but not within it), 2) Pantheistic (there is a God within the world but not beyond it), 3) Theistic (there is a God both beyond and within the world), 4) Atheistic (there is no God beyond (or within) this world), or 5) Agnostic (we don't (or can't) know if there is a God beyond this world). Together with various forms of Dualism (there are two gods, usually one good and one evil) and Polytheism (there are many gods), these views exhausted the existing categories of attitudes toward the question of the existence of God or gods. Today, this is no longer so. For over a generation now there has been another view which does not fit into any of these classes. It is the view that the very question of whether or not there is a God is meaningless. This view neither asserts (as a theist) that God is, nor denies (as an atheist) that God is ~~not~~;

nor, in fact, does it say (with the agnostic) that ~~sufficient~~ <sup>is lacking</sup> evidence<sub>A</sub> to either assert or deny God's existence. Indeed, it is (often) contended that all of these positions are equally meaningless. It is simply not meaningful to talk about God, metaphysical entities, or the supernatural at all. A. J. Ayer, one of the fountain heads of this view in the English-speaking world, asserts in the first preface of his now famous Language, Truth and Logic that "...it can not be significantly asserted that there is a non-empirical world of values, or that men have immortal souls, or that there is a transcendent God."<sup>1</sup> He adds further,

"It is important not to confuse this view of religious assertions with the view that is adopted by atheists, or agnostics. For it is characteristic of an agnostic to hold that the existence of a god is a possibility in which there is no good reason either to believe or disbelieve; and it is characteristic of an atheist to hold that it is at least probable that no god exists. And our view that utterances about the nature of God are nonsensical, so far from being identical with, or even lending any support to, either of these familiar contentions, is actually incompatible with them. For if the assertion that there is a god is nonsensical, then the atheist's assertion that there is no god is equally nonsensical, since only a significant proposition can be significantly contradicted. As for the agnostic, although he refrains from saying either that there is or that there is not a god, he does not deny that the question whether a transcendent god exists is a genuine question. All he says is that we have no means of telling which of them is true, and therefore ought not to commit ourselves to either. But we have seen that the sentences in question do not express propositions at all. And this means that agnosticism also is ruled out."<sup>2</sup>

If this view is not atheistic or agnostic, then what is it?

Originally it was called 'logical positivism,' later 'logical

empiricism,' which takes on more recently, forms of 'linguistic analysis.'

However, as it relates to God or metaphysical reality, it would seem to be more

appropriate to label it 'Acognosticism,' for it is a denial that one may have any cognitive, factual, or 'significant' knowledge of God or the metaphysical. The reason for this is that a statement (or even a question) about God is allowed to be meaningful only if it is 'empirically verifiable,' and since there seems to be no way to reduce metaphysical or theological statements to empirical or sensible data, they must be considered nonsensical or meaningless. As Thomas McPherson aptly put it, "What to the Jews was a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness is to the logical positivists nonsense."<sup>3</sup>

The question before us, then, is this: is this new 'acognosticism' really an enemy or an ally of theistic and religious meaning?

#### AN APPARENT FRIEND?

There are those who contend that 'acognosticism' is really a friend of religion, claiming that it makes a positive contribution to religion. Thomas McPherson, for example, concludes the following: "I have discussed the positivistic way as a serious contribution to philosophy of religion because that is what I think it is. To regard it as anti-religious is wrong."<sup>4</sup> Several reasons have been urged from various sources in favor of this general position.

#### It Points Out the Transcendence of God

First, as any good theist will assert the transcendence of God, contending that God is not to be identified with His creation, but ~~is~~ is transcendent over it, so, therefore, the theist should rejoice that the 'acognostics' have pointed up a principle of verification that

would stress that it is not meaningful or sensible to reduce God to the categories of human (empirical) experience. God so transcends the sensible that He must be spoken of in 'paradoxical' ways. As Bernard Williams states it, a paradox tells us "...that it is in a certain way the essence of what is to be believed. This is particularly so in the case of religious beliefs, where the feeling has itself been expressed in many ways: perhaps by saying, that there is an infinity of things that are beyond our comprehension; or that our reason cannot embrace the deepest truths; or that what we say can only be an unsatisfactory (or perhaps, analogical) account of what we believe on faith."<sup>5</sup> That is, by an 'empirical verifiability' principle the 'agnosticists' have placed an emphasis on the transcendence or 'totally otherness' of God, and have thereby rendered a service to believers in God by stressing the paradoxical which is at the very heart of religious belief.

#### It Is a Return to What is Essential in Religion

Akin to this first reason in favor of 'agnosticism,' is the contention by positivists and some religionists alike that this kind of philosophy encourages a return to what is truly essential in religion, viz., the inexpressible. McPherson forcefully argues as follows:

"Now positivistic philosophy is commonly held to be an enemy of religion. But a branding of religious assertions as 'nonsense' need not be anti-religious. It can be interpreted as an attack on those who in the name of religion are perverting religion. It can be interpreted as a return to the truth about religion. What is essential about religion is its non-rational side, the part that cannot be 'conceptualized'--that is, the part that cannot be put into words. Otto [a Christian mystic, Idea of the Holy] travels the same road as Wittgenstein. Are we to call Otto an enemy of religion? Why not call Wittgenstein its friend?"<sup>6</sup>

Wittgenstein, who is a kind of father to 'agnosticism', had written

"There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical."<sup>7</sup> He left the door open for the mystical and inexpressible, but emphasized that it is inexpressible.<sup>8</sup> McPherson reechoes this and adds, "There are some things that just cannot be said. As long as no one tries to say them there is no trouble. But if anyone does try to say them he must take the consequences. We ought not to try to express the inexpressible. The things that theologians try to say (or some of them) belong to the class of things that just cannot be said."<sup>9</sup> Acognosticism, then, would seem to aid religion by forcing the theologian away from his theoretical and really unutterable and nonsensical assertions back to what is most essential to religion, viz., his mystical and inexpressible religious experiences.

#### It Helps to Eliminate Theological Confusion

Furthermore, when 'linguistic analysis' is adapted to the traditional theological puzzles, it helps clear away the abstract confusion and get at their practical, concrete meaning. Ian T. Ramsey, in his book Religious Language (1963), claims that analytic philosophy "...far from being soul-destroying, can be so developed as to provide a novel inroad into the problems and controversies of theology, illuminating its claims and reforming its apologetic."<sup>10</sup> "Need we trouble," he adds, "if we discover meanwhile that a whole heap of metaphysical furniture--underlying substance, indelible characteristics, and so on--which some might have supposed to be indispensable, has in fact belonged only to a confusing dream?"<sup>11</sup> J. J. Smart's article "Metaphysics, Logic and Language" makes

a similar claim for analytic philosophy when he says, "Some philosophers would say that philosophy is of the greatest importance for prospective theologians simply because a logical analysis of theological concepts would show theology to be a mass of confusion, a system of statements which either are obviously false or else are nonsensical."<sup>12</sup> Another religious analyst, David Cox, attempts to get at the meaning of religious statements by analyzing the purpose behind them. In this way the abstract "creation ex nihilo" means "the material world can contribute to the well being of man."<sup>13</sup> Each author in his own way translates theological formula into its practical, 'cash value' meaning and thus would evade the abstract confusion of the theoretical theological problems.

#### It Avoids the Charge of Irrelevance

One of the serious charges that religious and theistic belief has had to bear in the contemporary world is that it is largely irrelevant. Religious men themselves have seen the validity of this charge. Michael Novak in the introduction to The Open Church (1964) puts it this way, "For centuries the church has not appeared to be developing a Godlike race. It has not appeared to be forming men to integrity, to courage, to humble charity. It has seemed to many to call men to lead an unreal life, an irrelevant life." It is the problem of apparent irrelevance that Jean Lacroix addresses in The Meaning of Modern Atheism (Macmillan, 1965) and that Johann speaks to in his Pragmatic Meaning of God (1966). Now it would appear that the reduction of religious propositions to their empirical, practical meaning would certainly aid religion by making it relevant to modern man. As Ramsey put it, "Not the least merit of logical

empiricism, then, is that it provides us with an inroad into theology which can break down misunderstanding, and by centering attention on to both language and 'facts,' can from the beginning hope to be both intellectually honest and devotionally helpful--a combination not always achieved."<sup>14</sup>

#### It is Against Atheism and Agnosticism

The 'acognostic' is opposed to the atheist and agnostic. And since whatever opposes atheism and agnosticism aids the theist, then it may be viewed as a friend of theism. Wittgenstein himself refuted skepticism. He wrote, "Scepticism is not irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical, when it tries to raise doubts where no questions can be asked. For doubt can exist only where a question exists, a question only where an answer exists, and an answer only where something can be said."<sup>15</sup> Likewise, A. J. Ayer attacks the agnostic and atheistic positions, as was noted earlier, saying that "agnosticism also is ruled out." In effect, then, positivism, as a foe of agnosticism and atheism, is the indirect friend of theism.

#### It Establishes a Basis for Meaning

Finally, 'acognosticism' may be considered an ally to theism insofar as it establishes a criterion for meaningfulness. For if significant statements are to be made about God, a foundation for meaning must be laid. And in this regard it is the logical empiricist to thank for getting the theist on the right track. Such acknowledgements have been forthcoming from religious quarters, as the earlier quotes from Ramsey and McPherson indicate. Another recent author, Willem F. Zuurdeeg, joins them, affirming

that "the analytic method is a most appropriate approach in philosophy of religion".<sup>16</sup> The precise nature of this foundation for meaning and its necessary modifications will be discussed shortly, but here it would seem sufficient to note that many are claiming that positivism and subsequent language analysis have made a real contribution to religion.

#### PROBLEMS WITH THE 'ACOGNOSTIC' APPROACH

However, a closer analysis of this non-cognitive view of religious assertions would <sup>seem to</sup> reveal that it is really opposed to any meaningful or significant predications about God.

#### 'Acognostic' Verification Eliminates Cognitive Knowledge of God

Logical positivists or empiricists have given various formulations of the verification principle, all of which either eliminate any significant knowledge of God or so severely limit it that no meaningful or sensible religious statements may be made. They usually contend that religious statements are 'nonsensical,' not 'significant' or are literally 'meaningless'. Now 'non-sensical,' 'meaningless,' etc. are pejorative words, and anyone using a pejorative word of another's position is scarcely friendly toward that position. Therefore, the 'acognostic' is really an enemy of the theologian and theist.

#### Hume's 'Sense Impression' View

David Hume is the acknowledged source of the positivists' verification principle, which allows a statement to be meaningful only if it meets certain empirical conditions. The last lines of his famous Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding state the only two kinds of meaningful propositions Hume will allow.



"If we take into our hands any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."

That is, he permits statements (1) about the relation of ideas (a priori, mathematical, etc.) and (2) about matters of fact (a posteriori, experiential). "When we entertain," he says, "any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but inquire, from what impression is that supposed idea derived? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion."

How can one's ideas of God and suprasensory realm be reduced to sensory impressions? If taken literally and seriously Hume would eliminate any empirically meaningful knowledge of God whatsoever. Epistemologically, then, one would have to commit the whole Bible and body of Christian theology 'to the flames,' unless of course he could find some sense impressions for them. But where does one get sense impressions of the supra-sensory realm?

#### Wittgenstein's 'Mysticism' View

The father of linguistic <sup>analysis</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, would seem to offer some help to the dilemmas posed by Hume. He acknowledged that we could not speak meaningfully about God in empirical terms but left the door open for a mystical experience of God. "It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists",<sup>17</sup> he writes. And again, "How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world".<sup>18</sup> Or, in

a more familiar passage, "There are indeed, things that cannot be put into words. . . . They are what is mystical".<sup>19</sup> Now, while Wittgenstein's view would not eliminate the religious experience, this does not make it ipso facto a friend of religious meaning. The problem is not whether one can have an inexpressible religious experience but whether he can make meaningful religious statements about his experience. On this score Wittgenstein is as emphatic (although not as drastic) as Hume. Wittgenstein closes his famous Tractatus with these words, "What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence." Nevertheless, the effect of both Hume and Wittgenstein is the same, viz., we cannot make meaningful statements about God.

#### Ayer's Verification Principle

As to the source of his own view Ayer writes, "Like Hume, I divide all genuine propositions into two classes: those which, in his terminology, concern 'relations of ideas,' and those which concern 'matters of fact.' The former class comprises the a priori propositions of logic and pure mathematics, and these I allow to be necessary and certain only because they are analytic . . . . Propositions concerning empirical matters of fact, on the other hand, I hold to be hypotheses, which can be probable but never certain."<sup>20</sup> Now ". . . an a priori truth is a tautology. And from a set of tautologies, taken by themselves, only further tautologies can be validly deduced,"<sup>21</sup> Ayer contends. Furthermore, "When we say that analytic propositions are devoid of factual content, and consequently that they say nothing, we are not suggesting that they are senseless. For although they give us no information about any empirical situation, they do enlighten us by illustrating the way in which we use certain symbols."<sup>21</sup>

The only propositions that really 'tell' us anything or 'add to our knowledge' are a posteriori or probable assertions about empirical experience. And, for Ayer, these do not apply to God. "The mention of God brings us to the question of the possibility of religious knowledge," he writes. "We shall see that this possibility has already been ruled out by our treatment of metaphysics."<sup>23</sup>

In chapter one, under the title "The Elimination of Metaphysics," Ayer ruled out metaphysics by his 'criterion of verifiability,' which held that a factual significant proposition had to be 'empirically verifiable.' Metaphysical and theological propositions are not empirically verifiable and so ". . . all metaphysical assertions are nonsensical."<sup>24</sup>

As Ayer originally stated it, "the criterion which we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact is. . . that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express--that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false."<sup>25</sup>

¶ Some ten years later (in 1946), Ayer, in the introduction to another edition of Language, Truth and Logic, modified his original verification principle to include analytic statements that are not mere tautologies and some empirical propositions that are verified conclusively. Of the later he states, ". . . I have come to think that there is a class of empirical propositions of which it is permissible to say that they can be verified conclusively. It is characteristic of these propositions. . . that they refer solely to the content of a single experience, and what may be said to verify them conclusively is the occurrence of the experience to which

they uniquely refer."<sup>26</sup>

Ayer also made room for a third kind of <sup>meaningful</sup> propositions, saying "Thus, while I wish the principle of verification itself to be regarded, not as an empirical hypothesis, but as a definition, it is not supposed to be entirely arbitrary."<sup>27</sup> That is, there are some kinds of propositions which are meaningful in some (non-literal) sense of the word. "I do not wish to deny," he says, "that in some of these senses [of 'meaning'] a statement may properly be said to be meaningful even though it is neither analytic nor empirically verifiable."<sup>28</sup> Now this would seem to open the door for the meaningfulness of metaphysical or religious propositions. However, Ayer did not think so. He pointed out that such 'meaningful' ~~definitions~~ statements are neither true nor false nor 'factually meaningful'. "I confess," he adds, "that it is unlikely that any metaphysician would yield to a claim of this kind."<sup>29</sup> In other words, he still wished to rule out metaphysics even though he realized ". . . that for an effective elimination of metaphysics it needs to be supported by detailed analyses of particular metaphysical arguments."<sup>30</sup>

#### Flew's 'Falsification' Principle

Ayer had pointed out, and others before him, that one cannot ". . . accept the suggestion that a sentence should be allowed to be factually significant if, and only if, it expresses something which is definitely confutable by experience," as well as something verifiable. It is this other side of verifiability that Antony Flew has popularized in his 'falsification principle'. In his article "Theology and Falsification" he writes, "Now it often seems to people who are not religious as if there was no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of

Based on Ayer's article on "Gods" (1944)

which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be sufficient reason for conceding 'There wasn't a God after all' or 'God does not really love us then'. . . . What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or of the existence of, God?"<sup>31</sup> The implications of this 'falsification' principle are just as destructive to cognitive statements about God as was Ayer's 'verification' principle. Since, as Flew would have it, "if there is nothing which a putative assertion denies then there is nothing which it asserts either: and so it is not really an assertion."<sup>32</sup> And since there seems to be no conceivable situation or event that religious people would count against the existence and love of God (not even death by cancer), then it would follow that assertions about God are not really 'falsifiable' and therefore not really meaningful. The only recourse a Believer has is to qualify his assertions and then it is ". . . so eroded by qualification that it was no longer an assertion at all,"<sup>33</sup> a process which Hare called "death by a thousand qualifications."

The empirical dilemma of the Believer was stated well by R. B. Braithwaite when he said, "If there is a personal God how would the world be different if there were not? Unless this question can be answered God's existence cannot be given an empirical meaning."<sup>34</sup>

Despite the attempts made by Believers to broaden the principle of verification (these will be discussed later), so that religious statements may be meaningful, the 'acognostics' apparently have not been convinced. Frederick Ferre' summed up the situation well in his volume Language, Logic and God (1961), when he said, "The analysis of factual meaning which verificational analysis supplies has effectually blocked every attempt at

making significant assertions about 'the supernatural' or about a transcendent 'God.'"<sup>35</sup>

'Acognosticism' Leads to Semantical Atheism

The apparent failure to find a cognitive meaning for religious language has led one of the 'God is Dead' theologians, Paul van Buren, to assert that the term 'God' no longer has any meaning in the modern world. Such a view can scarcely be called friendly to theism, for how can the affirmation that the word most basic to a Believer has no sensible significance, and hence, should not be used--how could such a view possibly be viewed as a friend to him? Van Buren admits that he was led to this conclusion because of empirical considerations. "The empiricist in us finds the heart of the difficulty not in what is said about God, but in the very talking about God at all. We do not know 'what' God is, and we cannot understand how the word 'God' is being used." "Simple literal theism is wrong," he says, "and qualified literal theism is meaningless." "Today, we cannot even understand the Nietzschean cry that 'God is dead!' for if it were so, how could we know? No, the problem now is that the word 'God' is dead".<sup>36</sup>

Acognosticism Akin to 'Demythology'

Akin to the semantic atheism of van Buren is the view that, since religious assertions cannot be taken 'literally,' or 'cognitively,' they must be viewed as a 'myth' or 'parable'. Bultman's view here, carried out even more radically by Ogden (Christ Without Myth), is also a form of 'acognosticism.' The biblical stories are not to be taken in a straight forward, literal fashion. They are to be taken seriously; they are 'true' but not factually so. They must be demythologized of any

literal cognitive meaning; deobjectified of their 'mythological world-picture' to discover their non-objective reality.

MILES

T. R. Miles (Religion and the Scientific Outlook) refers to this non-cognitive, religious language as "parables". "The appropriate religious policy," he says, "is one of silence qualified by parables. Instead of 'Do you believe in the existence of God?' we should substitute, 'Do you accept the theistic parable?'. . . . Parable assertions are not equivalent either to factual or moral assertions, but factual and moral considerations can influence our choice of parable. Acceptance of the theistic parable involves conversion and a change of outlook."<sup>37</sup>

HARE

R. M. Hare called religious assertions 'blik's<sup>38</sup> a word he coined to signify a fundamental attitude or commitment to view the world in a certain way, in contrast to a factual assertion. Whatever one calls it, 'blik,' 'parable,' or 'myth,' they are all non-cognitive in nature and, therefore, leave no significant contentual knowledge of God.

Conjectural,  
Not Proven

CROMBIE

I. M. Crombie, for example, frankly confesses that a 'parable' only speaks from "within the framework of admitted ignorance, in language we accept because we trust its source. . . we do not know how the parable applies, but we believe that it does apply. . . ."<sup>39</sup> If this is so, then to speak 'mythologically' or 'parabolically' about God seems little more than a hopeful (or hopeless) attempt to say something meaningful where nothing meaningful can be said. In which case 'acognosticism' has returned us to Wittgenstein's 'silence,' which is hardly a satisfactory position for religious communication.

#### Acognostics Admit Affinity to Atheism

Furthermore, Crombie admits that this view agrees closely with the

atheistic position: "Much of what I have said agrees very closely with what the atheists says about religious belief, except that I have tried to make it sound better. The atheist alleges that the religious man supposes himself to know what he means by his statements only because, until challenged, he interprets them anthropomorphically; when challenged, however, he retreats rapidly backward toward complete agnosticism".<sup>40</sup> It is true that he tries to qualify this affinity saying that "the Christian under attack. . . falls back upon the person of Christ, and the concrete realities of the Christian life."<sup>41</sup> But what can these 'concrete realities' be? Do they have any factual or cognitive significance? If so, then complete acognosticism is repuriated. If not, then, as Crombie admits, this position is difficult to distinguish from an atheist's position.

As a matter of fact, when one locates meaning solely within a 'revelation' without any factual or cognitive meaning (as many modern theologians are prone to do) he may find that he has no concrete meaning at all. As Eric Mascall observed in his recent book, The Secularization of Christianity (1965), "It is, however, ironical to reflect that the extreme revelationalism of the Barthians, for whom God was everything and man was nothing, should have led to the Christians' atheism for which the man Jesus is everything and God is nothing. . . ."<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps this would explain Karl Barth's interest in the atheist, Ludwig Feuerbach. Compare, for example Barth's recommendation of Feuerbach in the introduction of Feuerbach's book, The Essence of Christianity (Harper paperback, 1957). In the forward of this book, H. Richard Niebuhr explains Barth's introduction and recommendation of the book. "Barth recommends Feuerbach to students of theology in order that



Feuerbach

they may see what the outcome is bound to be of every theology that begins with man's subjective states. . . . Theological statements resulting from such an inquiry are bound to be anthropological statements . . . ."<sup>43</sup> In other words, apart from a starting point in Divine revelation, Barth would be an atheist just like Feuerbach. He could then say with Feuerbach, "Theology is anthropology, that is, in the object of religion which we call Theos in Greek and Gott in German, nothing but the essence of man is expressed."<sup>44</sup> Of course, the question is not whether there is a revelation at the basis of the Christian's experience, but rather, whether or not there is any factual, contentful, meaningful way to verify that revelation. An unverifiable, 'acognitive' revelation is no better than Hare's 'blik,' Mile's 'parables' or Bultman's 'myths.'

#### A QUESTIONABLE FRIENDSHIP

Now that the pros and cons of 'acognitive's' relation to religion have been discussed, what can be concluded: are they really friends or foes? In order to answer this question properly, we must distinguish between religion and theology. For the experience of a religious reality (or <sup>the</sup> reality of a religious experience) is not the same as an expression or statement about that experience, and neither are identical with factual or verifiable bases of those experience and statements.

#### Regarding Religious Experience--Only An 'Apparent' Friend

With regard to religious experience the 'acognitive' has left the door open. Wittgenstein did indeed acknowledge that mystical things "make themselves manifest" to us. McPherson argued cogently that to view religious experiences as inexpressible, whether by 'positivist' or 'mystic,' is to rightly stress what is unique about religion. And in

emphasizing this, the agnostics are apparently not unfriendly to religious experiences. However, whether or not the limitation of religious meaningfulness to inexpressible experience will in the end prove helpful to religion is problematic. In any event, it is instructive, in this regard, to read the rest of the quote from Ayer when he admits the possibility of mystical knowledges. He writes, "We do not deny a priori that the mystic is able to discover truths by his own special methods. We wait to hear what are the propositions which embody his discoveries, in order to see whether they are verified or confuted by our empirical observations. But the mystic, so far from producing propositions which are empirically verified, is unable to produce any intelligible proposition at all. . . . The fact that he cannot reveal what he 'knows,' or even himself devise an empirical test to validate his 'knowledge,' shows that his state is not a genuinely cognitive state."<sup>45</sup> R So the real questions are: (1) Can a view which permits one to have experiences but not to express them be considered a 'friend,' or is it in effect a long range 'enemy' of religion? Does not such a view so cripple the understanding and communication of those experiences that it has actually rendered a disservice to them? At best, 'agnosticism' is only an 'apparent' friend of religion and may prove in the long run, to be a real enemy. (2) Is not the real reason for consigning religion to silence that such religious experience has no factual, verifiable basis to support it? As long as religion remains silent, it will be suspect that its basis is not significant or meaningful. For if it were meaningful, it would be expressible. And, conversely, if it is not expressible, then it probably is not meaningful.

Regarding Theological Assertions--A Problematic Friend

It is apparent from Ayer's original assertion (and even the later modification) that any statements about one's religious or mystical experience are probably not going to be verifiable, and therefore not meaningful. Therefore, since Ayer, and particular since John Wisdom's article on "Gods" (Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 1944), there has been a considerable attempt made to modify the verifiability theory of meaning so that it can account for theological statements.

The Search for Verifiable Basis for Religious Meaning

Since verification in its literal empirical sense (as proposed by Ayer) was not useful to theology but rather is exclusive of theology, it was only natural that modifications would be made on it in order that it could include theological assertions. As McPherson noted, "Another, and a preposterous, kind of linking of positivism and theology is possible, and has been tried. This linking takes the form of an acceptance of the verification principle of the Vienna Circle--that a statement (unless it is analytic) 'has sense,' 'is significant,' 'is meaningful,' only if it is amenable to verification by sense experience--and issues in an attempt to bludgeon theological statements to make them meet this prescription. This is a forlorn hope, and it is a dangerous thing to do."<sup>46</sup> Having generally agreed on this point, religious analysts have endeavored to modify meaningfulness in other than a literally empirical way. Some of these approaches will be briefly sketched now.

'Mystical' Meaning.--David Cox in his article "The Significance of Christianity" (Mind, LIX, 1950), extends the concept of verification to include 'Christian experience' as well as empirical experience. He speaks

Cox

of a 'meeting with God,' which contains a self-verifying but unpublic encounter with the Divine.

'Religious' Meaning.--Ian Ramsey seeks meaning for religious assertions in the characteristically 'religious situation,' which he defines as one involving both 'discernment' and 'commitment' which go beyond the empirical facts.<sup>47</sup>

HARE

Pre-Cognitive, 'Faith' Meaning.--Hare's famous 'blik' is an attempt to find meaning in a pre-cognitive disposition or attitude toward experience.<sup>48</sup> This he calls 'a significant article of faith,' against the meaningfulness or significance of which nothing can count. A 'blik' is in fact the predisposition to and presupposition of all meaningfulness.

MILES

'Parabolic' Meaning.--According T. R. Miles,<sup>49</sup> meaning is to be found in "silence qualified by parables." These non-cognitive religious assertions are neither factual nor moral, although the later may influence one's choice of a 'parable.' I. M. Crombie also speaks of an 'authorized parable' based on the authority of Christ. Meaning is found only 'within the parable.'<sup>50</sup>

BRAITHWAITE

'Moral' Meaning.--R. B. Braithwaite seeks meaning from the 'use' of religious statements. "The meaning of a religious assertion," he writes, "is given by its use in expressing the asserter's intention to follow a specified policy of behavior."<sup>51</sup> Religious assertions are not merely moral, however, since they contain a propositional element in their 'story' (called 'myth,' 'parable,' 'fable' etc. by others), which need not be a matter of empirical fact.

~~'Eschatological' Meaning.--Some religious analysts, as I. M. Crombie and John Hick<sup>52</sup> contend that the meaning of religious statements can be~~

~~experientially verified in a future life. Thus by extending 'empirical' to 'experiential' and 'here and now' to 'there and then' verification, religious statements can be considered as 'meaningful.'~~

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These by no means exhaust the attempts to find meaning for religious statements in terms of some kind of verifiability but they do suggest some of the main, non-cognitive attempts.<sup>54</sup>

#### Modifications of Meaning are Unsatisfactory

The seeming endless attempts to found religious meaning in an 'agnostic' way point up the utter frustration of this approach. The common problem with <sup>most</sup> ~~all~~ of these 'modifications' of meaning is that they are all non-cognitive views of meanings. They provide neither a satisfactory method nor a sufficient factual basis for religious assertions.

The Believer Makes a Cognitive Claim.---The difficulty with viewing religious assertions as 'agnostic' is that this is apparently not what Believers mean when they make religious assertions. The mistake is telling the Believer what he must mean and not listening to what he does mean. Flew was right when he responded to Hare's non-cognitive 'blik' by saying, "If Hare's religion really is a blik, involving no cosmological assertions about the nature and activities of a supposed personal creator, then surely he is not a Christian at all?"<sup>55</sup>

One of the most constructive philosophical analyses of the positivists' position has come from Herbert Feigl who was one of the 'Vienna Circle' but has since repudiated it. In his excellent article, "Logical Positivism After Thirty Five Years" (Philosophy Today, Winter, 1964), Feigl says, "As I understand it, to believe means to hold something true. The believer makes a cognitive claim. Now as philosophers we ask what the grounds are

for this claim. Theologians will differ on their responses. But they should beware! . . . If we de-mythologize completely, does anything remain in the theology but the moral message of religion?"<sup>56</sup>

Cognitive Claim is Necessary for Verification.--If religious claims are truly 'bliks,' then they are not subject to truth or falsity, and there is no grounds to justify them other than pragmatically. That is, if one's 'blik,' or 'myth,' or 'parable,' works for him, then it is meaningful. Feigl hit on the central difficulty with this approach when he said, "But if we put absolute impossibility of confirmation or disconfirmation into the very definition, if this is packed into the very concept of the unknown, if it is in principle made unknowable, there is danger. Then we remove all responsibility for justification of acceptance or rejection of our ideas or hypotheses or beliefs of this kind."<sup>57</sup>

Cognitive Content is Necessary for 'Meaning'.--In another very forceful passage, Feigl warns against qualifying away or negating all the content from religious assertions.

"Here is a gentle warning for those theologians who are too modernistic in whittling away, by the via negativa, the attributes that are ascribed to the Deity. If we really fully take away with one hand what is given with the other, nothing is left! I prefer a good stark theologian who really believes something. I look askance at those who modernistically try to make their peace with the scientific spirit and de-mythologize to the bitter end. If we modernize in this way, nothing is left but the moral message of the scripture. . . such are The Sermon on the Mount, the preaching of Isaiah, the teaching of the Buddha, etc. These are moral messages and they can be accepted equally by the humanists and by the atheists."<sup>58</sup>

To carry on from where Feigl left off, we may add, if there are no experiential 'pegs,' no factual 'grounding' of statements, then there can be no experiential or factual meaning? Of course, one can always make

recourse to Hare's 'blik,' Crombie's 'parable' within the framework of admitted ignorance, etc. But all of these are retreats to some sort of 'revelation' or presuppositional starting point, and how is one to decide which 'revelation' or presupposition is best?

Problem with 'Revelational' Meaning.--Furthermore, a recourse to revelation as the basis for all meaning does not solve the problem of meaning. Eric Mascall (in The Secularisation of Christianity, 1965) stated the issue correctly when he wrote, "If the cognitive attitude to theological language is rejected, all assertions about God must vanish, even those that purport to speak about the God of revelation, and they are indeed in worse case even than those of natural theology. For the latter claim at least to say something about the empirical realm, since they assert that God is its creator, while the statements of the pure revelationist claim to speak about God in total disconnection from all human experience."<sup>59</sup>

Austin M. Farrer (Finite and Infinite, 1943), arguing for a cognitive approach, summed up the revelationalist's problem very well. "There is a superstition among revelationalists that by declaring themselves independent of any proof of God by analogy from the finite world, they have escaped the necessity of considering the analogy or relation of the finite to the infinite altogether. They are completely mistaken. For all their statements about God must be expressed and are plainly expressed in language drawn from the finite world."<sup>60</sup> The reason for this is obvious. "The entire vocabulary of religion is based upon the perception of analogies between the material and the spiritual worlds. Words which now bear an immaterial and spiritual significance were originally used to denote visible

and tangible objects."<sup>61</sup>

The Need for Cognitive Approaches to Meaning.--This does not mean that the door is to be closed on all approaches to 'meaning.' The problem with traditional positivism is they had too narrow a sense of meaning. On the other hand, the most of the contemporary religious approaches have too broad a sense of meaning or, rather, no (cognitive) sense of meaning at all. There is a need then to find a cognitive sense of meaning that evades these two extremes. Feigl summed up the present situation well when he said: "The Positivists, the Neo-Wittgensteinians (Norman Malcolm, for instance), revive a narrow verificationism here. They have a phobia toward indirect verification. I just fail to see what's wrong with analogical inference!. . . . But I maintain that even if we could translate everything into sense-data language, these facts would have to be utilized and can be utilized for an analogical and inductive argument as to the independent existence of physical objects. I maintain the same thing holds for the assumption concerning other minds. The positivistic fear of unverifiable conclusions, such as those of the analogy arguments of the other person's feelings, emotions and thoughts--that fear was based on the narrow meaning criterion that demanded direct verifiability."<sup>62</sup>

Some 'Cognitive' Attempts to Meaning.--Feigl clearly points up the need to establish some firm ground for a cognitive and factual approach to religious meaning. Now there are some contemporary religious writers who claim to have a 'cognitive' signification to their religious language, but when pressed fall back on non-cognitive situations.

(1) Verification Based in Future Life.--I. M. Crombie, for example, contends that ". . . when we speak about God, the words we use are intended in their ordinary sense (for we cannot make a transfer, failing familiarity with both ends of it), although we do not suppose that in their ordinary interpretation they can be strictly true of him."<sup>63</sup> However, when he



explains this 'ordinary sense,' it turns out to be only an 'authorized parable,' which is based on the 'authority of Christ.' And, furthermore, the 'ordinary sense' of meaning is only within the 'parable.' "If we try to step outside the parable," he says, "then we must admit that we do not know what the situation about which our parable is being told is like." We can only talk "within the framework of admitted ignorance, in language we accept because we trust its source."<sup>64</sup> So then, what in the beginning appeared to be a cognitive claim, in the end has no cognitive content. When pressed for a verification outside of the parable, the best Crombie can offer is an eschatological hope that the truth of his religious parable can be verified in a future life. The basic problem with Crombie's position is not difficult to find: How can I verify the truth of religious statements now. It will be too late then, either to give present assurance to the believer or to provide evidence for the non-believer. What is needed is a method of verification that will work in the present.

(2) Verification Based in Present Experience.--It is in this sense that Ian Ramsey's attempt to establish a theory of religious meaning is more commendable than Crombie's. In Crombie the meaning could only be verified at some future date. Ramsey builds meaning out of present situations. He contends against a purely 'mythological' approach and for retaining what he calls the 'historical' and 'objective' element of the 'existential' situation. He quotes with approval John Macquarrie's book, (The Existentialist Theology, S. C. M. Press, 1955) which says, "We must protest at the tendency here to exclude the objective-historical element altogether."<sup>65</sup> What Ramsey does is an attempt to build religious meaning

out of present empirical situations.

Now the problem is not so much his basis as it is Ramsey's procedure. For, in the end, an event (and language about it) is religious only because it is 'odd.' The real 'meaning' is not in the empirical situation, even though it arises out of an empirical situation. The meaning is not empirically derived; it is only empirically occasioned. It is out of an empirical situation that a "disclosure-commitment" situation arises when, as Ramsey puts it, the "ice breaks," the "light downs" or the "penny drops." He summarizes his view in these words, "But I am saying that a useful antidote to the craze for straightforward language might be found in suitable doses of poetry or greater familiarity with the curiously odd words thrown up in scientific theories. Such doses would at any rate begin to suggest to us that there is an important place for odd language; that odd language may well have a distinctive significance, and we might even conclude in the end that the odder the language the more it matters to us."<sup>66</sup> One is inclined to say that Ramsey is not far from the cognitive kingdom. In fact he begins in it, but unfortunately is willing to leave it at the "drop of a penny." As soon as the empirical ice begins to melt Ramsey is ready to leap to the 'agnostic' shore, where the other religious analysts stand.

(3) Verification Based in Historic Fact.--An approach to religious verifiability that apparently has escaped the philosophers and most of the modern theologians is to seek the grounds for religious truth in the primary historical facts of Christianity. John Warwick Montgomery articulates this position in his work on the Death of God theologians. Readily conceding the validity of a verifiability principle, he writes:

more here

"Contemporary analytic philosophy, in arriving at this principle, has made an inestimable contribution to epistemology. . . and we find the Flew-Wisdom parable of striking value in illustrating the technical meaninglessness of numerous God-claims made in the history of religions and by many religious believers today. . . ." "The New Testament affirmation of the existence of God (the Divine Gardener in the Flew-Wisdom parable) is not a claim standing outside the realm of empirical testability. Quite the contrary: the Gardener entered his garden (the world) in the person of Jesus Christ, showing himself to be such 'by many infallible proofs' (Acts 1:3). . . . The Resurrection accounts. . . provide the most decisive evidence of the empirical focus of the biblical affirmation that 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself.' In I Corinthians 15, the Apostle writing in A.D. 56, explicitly states that the Christian God-claim, grounded in the Resurrection of Christ, is not compatible with anything and everything and therefore meaningless; after listing the names of eyewitnesses who had had contact with the resurrected Christ (and noting that five hundred other people had seen him, most of whom were still alive), Paul says: If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. The early Christians were quite willing to subject their religious beliefs to concrete, empirical test. Their faith was not blind faith; it was solidly grounded in empirical facticity."<sup>67</sup>

Montgomery acknowledges that this kind of verifiability is an indirect kind, depending on the authenticity of the biblical documents and original eye-witnesses, both of which he feels can be established beyond reasonable doubt by applying the principles of historical research to the extant manuscripts.<sup>68</sup>

Granting the broader interpretation of the verifiability principle, as suggested by Feigl, there seems to be no way to rule out the validity of Montgomery's approach of grounding the verifiability of the Christ assertions about God in the past empirical experiences of the eyewitnesses of the Incarnate Christ. Whether or not there is a more direct approach to verify religious assertions in the present is an open question. Certainly none of the positions examined above are adequate for the task.<sup>69</sup> It appears

imperative, however, that if there is to be a meaningful ground for religious assertions in the present it will have to be a cognitive one. Religious 'agnosticism' will not do.

## NOTES

1. A. J. Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1946).
2. Ibid., p. 115.
3. "Religion as the Inexpressible," New Essays on Philosophical Theology, ed. Anthony Flew, p. 134.
4. Ibid., p. 142
5. "Tertullian's Paradox," op. cit., p. 190.
6. Op. cit., p. 139.
7. Tractatus 6.522
8. Ibid., 7.
9. Flew, op. cit., pp. 132, 133.
10. P. 11.
11. Ibid., p. 215.
12. Ibid., p. 13.
13. "The Significance of Christianity," Mind LIX, 1950.
14. Ramsey, op. cit., p. 216.
15. Wittgenstein, op. cit., 6:51.
16. An Analytic Philosophy of Religion (Abingdon Press, 1966), p. 17.
17. Wittgenstein, op. cit., 6:44. Cf. 6.42.
18. Ibid., 6:432.
19. Ibid., 6:522.
20. Ayer, op. cit., p. 31.
21. Ibid., p. 47.
22. Ibid., p. 79.
23. Ibid., p. 114.
24. Ibid., p. 41.

25. Ibid., p. 35.
26. Ibid., p. 10. In fact, in his recent book, The Problem of Knowledge (Macmillan, 1956), Ayer embraces a kind of critical realism. Cf. pp. 47, 139.
27. Ibid., p. 16.
28. Ibid., p. 15.
29. Ibid., p. 16.
30. Loc. cit.
31. Flew, op. cit., pp. 96-99.
32. Ibid., p. 98.
33. Loc. cit.
34. R. B. Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief," The Existence of God, ed. John Hick (Macmillan, 1964), pp. 229-252.  
op. cit.
35. P. 35.
36. The Secular Meaning of the Gospel (Macmillan, 1963), P. 100-83-84.
37. P. 179.
38. Flew, op. cit., pp. 99-102.
39. Ibid., p. 127.
40. Ibid., p. 128 (Emphasis mine).
41. Loc. cit.
42. P. 105, n. 2.
43. P. viii.
44. P. xv, as quoted from Feuerbach's Essence of Religion by Barth.
45. Ayer, Logic, Truth and Language, pp. 118, 119.
46. Flew, op. cit., p. 142.
47. Ramsey, op. cit., ch. 1.
48. Flew, op. cit., pp. 99-105.

49. T. R. Miles, op. cit., p. 179.
50. Flew, op. cit., pp. 122-129.
51. R. B. Braithwaite, op. cit., p. 239.
- ~~52. Ibid., p. 239.~~
53. Van Buren, op. cit., pp. 100, 103, 84 respectively.
54. Compare John Wisdom who speaks of the functional use of directing attention to certain "patterns" in the universe, or S. Toulmin who says religious language helps to calm man before the unknown and heartens us in our moral duties (The Place of Reason in Ethics, 1950), W. Zuurdeeg, op. cit., who refers to religious language as "convictional language," or to Leslie Dewart's inevident empirical experience of God, The Future of Belief.
55. Flew, op. cit., p. 108.
56. P. 242.
57. Loc. cit.
58. Ibid., p. 235.
59. P. 64.
60. P. 2.
61. G. C. Joyce, "Analogy," Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, ed. James Hastings, 1955, p. 416.
62. Feigl, op. cit., p. 244.
63. Crombie, op. cit., p. 122.
64. Ibid., p. 127.
65. Ramsey, op. cit., p. 121.
66. Ibid., p. 54.
67. The 'Is God Dead?' Controversy (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), pp. 50-52.
68. Montgomery is the author of a major work on historical method entitled Shape of the Past: An Introduction to Philosophical Historiography (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1963). On the historical validity of Christ and His claims to Deity see Montgomery's series on "History and Christianity," His, Magazine of the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, December, 1964--March, 1965 (available as a His reprint).
69. Jerry H. Gill addressed this problem in his dissertation, Ian Ramsey's Interpretation of Christian Language (University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, 1966).