A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation of the Christian Revelation and modern research
Mr. Luhman gives us a bird's eye view of what some academic philosophers have been saying about theology and its claims. He outlines in particular some of the discussion which has been going on about whether and in what sense it is meaningful to talk about God.

Do Statements about God have Meaning?

Believers in God claim that the concept of God has meaning. Yet it is precisely this claim that many philosophers challenge. The challenge goes back to the work of the Logical Positivists in the 1920s and 1930s, popularised in this country by A.J. Ayer. These philosophers divided meaningful assertions into two categories, analytic and synthetic. Analytic assertions are those particularly applicable to the disciplines of logic and mathematics. Synthetic assertions are found in the sciences. Analytic assertions are independent of sense experience, are necessarily true and tell us nothing about the 'real' world. Synthetic assertions are known only as the result of sense experience, can be true or false and when true convey factual information.

An example of an analytic assertion is 'All bachelors are unmarried males'. To verify this it is not necessary to ask unmarried males if they are bachelors. Indeed if someone were to say, "I have just found out that Mr. Jones is married but yet is certainly a bachelor", we should conclude that the speaker does not know the correct use of the words 'married' and 'bachelor'. On the other hand to test a synthetic assertion like, 'It is raining' one needs to do something, like putting one's head out of the window.

The logical positivists found difficulty with religious assertions. Statements like, 'God loves us like a father loves his children' are not analytic assertions but, according to the logical positivists, they are not synthetic either because they
cannot be verified or falsified. They were therefore classified as nonsense assertions. The test that was formulated to detect meaningfulness was called the criterion of verifiability. Ayer puts it like this — "We say 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 true or reject it as being false".¹

Philosophers were not slow to point out that this criterion of verifiability suffers from the very defects that religious assertions were said to possess. If the criterion is classified as analytic then it merely defines terms and cannot tell us anything about actual sentences: therefore there is no good reason for using it. On the other hand if it is synthetic it arises from sense experience. But this too is impossible for the criterion rests upon a logical distinction. It is inconceivable that any one will ever prove or disprove it as a result of a sense experience. At best, then, Ayer's statement is — to quote Professor Wisdom — "a useful bit of nonsense", assuming, that is, Logical Positivism is to be taken seriously.

The trouble with the logical positivists was that they failed to recognize that language is far more complex than they gave it credit for. As Ferre observes, "To say of a given sentence that it can be verified is not to say anything about the meaningfulness of the sentence, but to characterize it as being a sentence of a particular type, namely, an empirical sentence".²

A more sophisticated version of the challenge is found in an article by Anthony Flew which initiated the university discussion that has been described as "the most important body of writing that has so far appeared on the subject". Flew adapted a parable of John Wisdom's in which two people come upon a long-neglected garden.¹¹ Among the weeds they find some surprisingly healthy plants. One of them insists that a gardener must have attended to the garden before their arrival, but the other points to the weeds and the fact that no gardener has even been seen as contrary evidence. Flew uses the parable to illustrate the attitudes of religious believers and unbelievers. The religious believer will not allow any evidence (here the weeds stand for evil) to count against the existence of a loving Creator (the gardener in the story). (One might suppose that both participants in the discussion would agree that the garden is a garden and that gardens do not make themselves: a gardener, therefore, existed in the past, even if he is not active today. However Wisdom and Flew seem to overlook this point. Ed.) Assertions like, 'God created the world' or 'God loves us like a father loves his children' look like synthetic, empirical assertions, but if they
are, says Flew, then they must be verifiable or falsifiable. He writes, "...if the utterance is indeed an assertion, it will be equivalent to a denial of the negation of that assertion. And anything that 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 that assertion. And 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". 3

However, in a later article Flew admits that this argument cannot be accepted without qualification 4. What he had failed to do was to draw the important distinction between something that 'counts against' the truth of a given assertion and what is logically incompatible with it. Thus the problem of evil might 'count against' God's love, but is not thereby incompatible with it. He argues that theists are in danger of lapsing from using a synthetic assertion into using a pseudo-synthetic one because the earlier statement is so eroded by qualification that it is no longer an assertion. It has died "the death by a thousand qualifications". He concludes by asking, "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... the simple central question, 'What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or the existence of God?".

Theistic Statements as Non-Cognitive

Before discussing the replies made to Flew's questions and their implications, we must ask if he is right in thinking that when theists make statements about God they are talking cognitively (that is making statements of fact). Several attempts have been made to show that theistic assertions are non-cognitive. A well known example is that of Professor R.B. Braithwaite who argues that, "The primary use of religious assertions is to announce allegiance to a set of moral principles". By giving his allegiance to Christianity a man is showing his intention to follow the agapeistic (loving) way of life. Braithwaite regards the doctrinal contents of religious as 'stories' which may or may not be believed but which afford psychological support for following the religion. He writes, "It is an empirically psychological fact that many people find it easier to resolve upon and carry through a course of action which is contrary to their natural inclinations if this policy is associated in their minds with certain stories. And in many people the psychological link is not appreciably weakened by the fact that the story associated with the behaviour policy is not believed. Next to the Bible and the Prayer Book the most
influential work in English Christian religious life has been a book whose stories are frankly recognized as fictitious — Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. For Braithwaite religions differ only in the 'stories' they entertain. Thus he believes that religions do not need to combat the challenge of verification because they do not assert anything factual.

This account is open to at least three damning objections:

(a) The 'stories' he mentions are of logically diverse types which include historical statements as well as beliefs. It is only the former that fit into his category, but it is chiefly the latter, beliefs like 'God was in Christ reconciling the world', that impel men towards an agapeistic way of life.

(b) The ethical theory on which he bases his account is that moral assertions are expressions of an intention to act in a specified way. This would mean that the assertion, 'lying is wrong' means 'I never intend to lie'. According to this view it would be logically impossible to intend to act wrongly. One would not be able to say, "Lying is wrong, but I intend to tell a lie". But clearly one can say this and therefore Braithwaite is wrong.

(c) He believes that beliefs about God provide man's behaviour with psychological reinforcement. However, it would be equally plausible to argue that the ethical significance of certain beliefs consist in the way they render a particular way of life attractive and rational. Hick writes, "This view would seem to be consistent with the character of Jesus' ethical teaching. He did not demand that people live in a way which runs counter to their deepest desires and which would thus require some extraordinary counterbalancing inducement. Rather, he professed to reveal to them the true nature of the world in which they live, and in the light of this, to indicate the way in which their deepest desires might be fulfilled".

Another prominent writer who has presented religion as non-cognitive is D.Z. Phillips who argues for what has been described as the 'picture' theory of religious language. For Phillips the question as to whether God exists or not is inseparable from the question of what it is to have the concept of God. He writes, "What (the believer) learns is religious language; a language which he participates in along with other believers. What I am suggesting is that to know how to use the language is to know God". Thus atheism for him is "not knowing what sense to make of religious language and practices". He thus takes theistic assertions outside the realm of fact to where they cannot be attacked by problems of verification. He
thinks that, "The whole conception...of religion standing in need of justification is confused. Of course epistomologists will seek to clarify the meaning of religious statements, but, as I have said, this means clarifying what is already there awaiting such clarification... It is not the task of the philosopher to decide whether there is a God or not, but to ask what it means to affirm or deny the existence of God". He believes that the difference between believers and non-believers is not over matters of fact, "...it is a question of the possibility of sense and nonsense, truth and falsity in religion".

This surely cannot be so, because sense and nonsense, truth and falsity can exist in religion whether God exists or not. An example of Phillips' approach can be seen in his analysis of the concept of love. "My purpose", he says, "in discussing the concept of love was to show how coming to see the possibility of such love amounts to the same thing as coming to see the possibility of belief in God". For Christianity, "to know God is to love Him" thus "Love is the real object of the relationship". But how can this be? The object of any personal relationship is the other person; if he loved the other person for the sake of love the relationship would be thereby impoverished. Phillips is in danger of reducing the assertion 'God is love' to the trivial assertion that 'love is love'.

Perhaps the last word in this section ought to go to John Hick who observes, "...the non-cognitivist is not offering an objective analysis of the language of faith as living speech (which Phillips obviously believes he is doing) but is instead recommending a quite new use for it ... [his] negative premiss is that religious language cannot mean what its users have in fact meant by it". The view I wish to maintain here is the traditional one, namely that theistic utterances are meant to refer to an objective reality.

The Religious 'World-View'

Of those who replied to Flew's challenge there was one who did not think that there was a case to answer. His point was not that religious statements are non-cognitive, but that it is the nature of religious beliefs to be held in such a way that nothing can count decisively against them. R.M. Hare coins the word 'blik' to describe an unverifiable and unfalsifiable interpretation of an experience. The example he gives is of a lunatic who believes all professors at his college are intent on murdering him. It is pointless trying to allay his suspicions by introducing him to kindly professors for he will interpret their kindness as devious cunning. There is no way he can be dissuaded from his conviction because he has a 'blik' or 'a thing' about professors. Hare believes there can be good and
bad 'bliks' and the attitude of a believer to God is an example of a good one. Such a view cannot be accepted if only for the reason that if 'bliks' are unverifiable and unfalsifiable there is no way of distinguishing a good from a bad one.

But Hare draws attention to an important aspect of the problem. The believer claims to see the world in a way that is different from the way the non-believer sees it. This was obvious in the original interpretation of John Wisdom's parable. Of the two men who discussed the garden, both saw the same things but drew different conclusions. Wisdom compares this with a similar situation in which two people look at the same picture. "One says, 'Excellent' or 'Beautiful' or 'Divine'; the other says, 'I don't see it'. He means he doesn't see the beauty. This reminds us of the theist who accuses the atheist of blindness and of the atheist who accuses the theist of seeing what isn't there. And yet each sees the same physically real picture the difference is not one as to the facts. It cannot be removed by one disputant showing the other what so far he hasn't seen. As with music, to settle whether one piece of music is better than another, we must listen again — with a picture we must look again. Referring specifically to religious disputes Wisdom continues:

If we say... that when a difference as to the existence of a God is not one as to future happenings then it is not experimental and therefore not as to the facts, we must not forthwith assume that there is no right and wrong about it, no rationality or irrationality, no appropriateness or inappropriateness, no procedure which tends to settle it, nor even that this procedure is in no sense a discovery of new facts. After all even in science this is not so. Our two gardeners even when they had reached the stage when neither expected any experimental result which the other did not, might yet have continued the dispute, each presenting and re-presenting the features of the garden favouring his hypothesis... The differences as to whether God exists involves our feelings more than most scientific disputes and in this respect is more like a difference as to whether there is beauty in a thing.

Wittgenstein introduced the concept 'seeing-as' now widely adopted by philosophers of religion, to illustrate what Wisdom was describing. Wittgenstein's instances of 'seeing-as' were the Jastrow duck-rabbit and the cube-box. These figures can be seen in alternative ways; at one time a duck, at another a rabbit; at one time a glass cube, at another time an open box. He believed all seeing-as is both aspectral and interpretative. Aspectual change is when we see something different. When a new
aspect dawns it is accompanied by a shift of interpretation so that the same arrangement of lines is interpreted in a new way. Sometimes when one has seen the lines in a particular way it is difficult to see them in any other way, although it may be equally difficult to get someone to see the lines as a particular object in the first place. This parallels the problems which Wisdom's gardeners discussed. The one representing the believer saw the situation as exemplifying God's existence whereas the non-believer could not see it in that way at all.

John Hick develops Wittgenstein's 'seeing-as' as 'experiencing-as'. He argues that all our perceptions are like this. He writes, "To recognise and identify is to be experiencing-as in terms of a concept; and our concepts are social products having their life within a particular linguistic environment". He instances a situation where someone is caught at the foot of a cliff with the tide coming in. There is nothing in the situation other than features which can be described in purely physical terms. Yet the situation can be experienced-as one constituting a moral claim on the observer to summon help. Religious faith is like this. It is a particular response to events which can be given a purely naturalistic interpretation, but which to the believer evoke a sense of God's presence. The religious interpretation is neither inferred from the events, nor superimposed upon them, but the events are experienced-as the activity of God.

Both Wisdom's analogies and Hick's 'experiencing-as' have been criticised for failing to take account of the fact that the different overall views held by the believer and unbeliever cause them to have different experiences. For the believer certain things about the world will produce reactions and responses that are not available to the nonbeliever. This means that an essential element in seeing the world as the sphere of God's activity implies that one already believes in God. Is this not then a case of special pleading? In a sense it is, but then so are all our deductions from inferences. Hughes Cox writes, "Any metaphysical inference presupposes in a priori fashion the root metaphor that it defends...a theistic argument is a proof only for a theist. But then any materialistic metaphysical proof is a proof only for the materialist... If the materialist is not guilty of special pleading in his proofs, then neither is the theist in his".

Logical Positivists, and Empiricists of whom Flew is representative, make much of the contrast between science and religion but philosophers of science have emphasized that the scientist no less than the theologian comes to his investigation 'theory-laden'. T. Kuhn argued the following:
1) There are no bare uninterpreted data in science. In science, as in other disciplines, expectations and conceptual commitments influence perceptions.

2) All data is theory-laden; all measurements and calculations are dependent on theoretical assumptions.

3) Discordant data do not necessarily falsify a theory, for even if a deduction is not confirmed experimentally one cannot always be sure which assumption is in error. Where disagreements occur, auxiliary hypotheses can be introduced to remove the discrepancy or a recurrent discrepancy can be set aside as an unexplained anomaly.

4) Paradigms (particular theories of great generality) usually dominate in normal science and they are not usually abandoned in favour of an alternative theory just because of conflicting data. Kuhn argues that 'scientific revolutions' consist of 'paradigm shifts' which he compares to 'conversion' or 'gestalt switch' which is similar to Hick's 'experiencing-as'.

Kuhn writes as follows,

Though each (scientist) may hope to convert the other to his science and its problems, neither may hope to prove his case. The competition between paradigms is not the sort of battle that can be resolved by proofs... Before they can hope to communicate fully, one group or the other must experience the conversion that we have been calling a paradigm shift. Just because it is a transition between competing paradigms it cannot be made a step at a time, forced by logic and neutral experience. Like a gestalt switch it must occur all at once or not at all.16a

What is true of science is also true of other disciplines such as literature and history. Basil Mitchell observes of the latter, "To the historian, at least, it makes little sense to suggest that verification is establishing the agreement of fact with theory. All historically significant theories have agreed with the facts, but only more or less... [what] makes a good deal of sense [is] to ask which of two actual and competing theories fits the facts better".17

In his reply to Flew, Mitchell readily admitted that certain facts, such as the existence of suffering, do count against the hypothesis that God loves mankind, but that the believer will not allow it to count decisively against the hypothesis because he has already made a religious response. This is a bit like the scientist refusing to let any evidence overthrow his theory because he is already committed to it. Mitchell illustrates his point by a further parable in which God is represented by 'the Stranger' who in time of war in an occupied country claims to be
the head of the resistance movement. The stranger makes a deep impression on the partisan who is prepared to believe in him not only when he is seen to be helping members of the resistance but also when he appears in police uniform handing over patriots to the occupying power. Of course the stranger's behaviour causes him to question, but he continues to trust him because he believes in him. Mitchell concludes, "'God loves men' resembles 'the Stranger is on our side'... in not being conclusively falsifiable. They can both be treated in at least three different ways: (1) As provisional hypotheses to be discarded if experience tells against them; (2) As significant articles of faith; (3) As vacuous formulae (expressing, perhaps, a desire for reassurance) to which experience makes no difference and which makes no difference to life. The Christian, once he has committed himself, is precluded by his faith from taking up the first attitude: 'Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God'. He is in constant danger, as Flew has observed, of slipping into the third. But he need not; and, if he does, it is a failure in faith as well as in logic'.'

One important question presents itself as a result of this discussion. If we grant that the believer, because of his prior commitment to a belief in God, sees the world in a different way to that of the unbeliever, must it therefore follow that there is an unbridgeable gulf between them? I do not think so. Perhaps the way that the gulf can be spanned can be illustrated by comparing religious awareness with musical and artistic appreciation. There is no doubt that different people do see different things when they look at a work of art and have differing responses to a piece of music. This does not necessarily mean that the person who sees 'more' in the work is thereby wrong, or just letting his imagination run away with him. In fact, education in art and music proceed on the assumption that it is possible to teach people to see and hear 'more' than they would do without guidance.

It seems that appreciation of a work of art is aided by prior knowledge of the intention of the author. It is possible with a comparatively straightforward piece of literature to test one's subjective responses evoked by the poem, novel or whatever by reference to the text. Greger raises this point with reference to Blake's poem, 'The Sick Rose'. She recognizes the large place that knowledge of the author's intention influences our interpretation by her reference to Britten's 'Serenade' (opus 31) based on the poem. If we did not know the relationship between the two we should be tempted to interpret the music in terms of a concrete past or of 'abstract' feelings like alienation.

One objection to comparing aesthetic with religious experience is that, whereas the latter claims to give us knowledge about the ultimate nature of reality and the force
responsible for the experience, the former does not give us information beyond the experience itself. This objection is not valid for, although it can be said, 'The music speaks for itself; it is not evidence for something else', yet it is still possible to ask questions about the composer and his ideas, intentions and creative powers. With more complex art forms, like an abstract painting, it is possible to ask how far our knowledge of the original intention of the artist can legimately influence our understanding and equally how many additional insights and interpretations other than those intended by the artist are allowable.

It would seem therefore that Wisdom was right in his analysis of the theological dispute. But how is it possible to get the unbeliever into a position where he can see the state of affairs 'through the eyes' of the believer? In a very perceptive article H.B. Price outlines how this can be done. To enter into this position the sympathetic agnostic must first entertain theistic propositions, take them seriously and consider what it would be like if they were true. Gradually he will be able to adopt a role in which he can empathize with the believer. The problem that remains unsolved by all this is the basic question of whether the God, whom the believer claims is behind the religious experiences, in fact exists. Is there any way by which theistic statements can be verified? It is to this question we must now turn.

The Verification of Theistic Statements

Does the ordinary faith of the believer admit of verification? Denis Sullivan answers in the affirmative. By ordinary faith he means faith uncluttered by sophisticated theological notions: like talk of an infinite, eternal, omnipotent God. Such notions may certainly feature in the language of the believer but they would be evaluative rather than informative. This faith has a central element, namely belief in special divine interventions not just in the moral and spiritual sphere but in the realms of finance, politics, meteorology etc., etc.

A characteristic of this faith is its vagueness. It is not unlike the fortune-teller's pronouncement that this month a great event will take place. Because of its vagueness it cannot be falsified; it is compatible with an infinite number of possibilities. Thus a pastor can assure someone of God's help without specifying just how and when God will help. So far this looks very much like Flew's description of the theologian's case, but unlike Flew's examples this vague assurance cannot die the death of a thousand qualifications because, being vague, it needs no qualification. It can also be distinguished from nonsense statements by the pragmatic expedient of distinguishing habits of
conduct which belief in the proposition entail from those involved in the negation of the belief. Thus a belief that God will help and never let the believer fail irredeemably implies that he will never give up, the position adopted by the partisan in Mitchell's parable.

Sullivan argues that the vague assertion we have mentioned is factually meaningful because a believer can look back at the wonderful ways by which God has helped him in the past, for example, by answering a prayer for healing. With such experiences behind him, the believer knows the meaning of God's care and love. However, the existence of God is not objectively verified, because outsiders may suggest other possible interpretations - a point freely conceded by Sullivan.

Positivist philosophy allows for verification in principle and this is the basis of the now famous 'eschatological verification' proposed by John Hick. Hick claims that in our present experience of life there is nothing that decisively counts for or against belief in the existence of God. However, on the assumption of an afterlife the situation could be totally different with the possibility of God's existence being verified by post-mortem experiences. As a child looking forward to adulthood only knows what being an adult is really like when he is one, so is the Christian with regard to God. Of course it may be that such verification is only available to the believer. In Hick's words, "It may well be a condition of post-mortem verification that we are already in some degree conscious of God by an uncompelled response to his modes of revelation in this world". The suggestion depends on the possibility of an afterlife for which Hick argues at length elsewhere. The mere fact of survival would not be sufficient to verify the existence of God, although if there were an afterlife without God it would falsify it.

But what if there were an afterlife where evil predominated and where those who had lived the most virtuous lives, the saints, received the worst treatment? Would this not falsify eschatological verification? Such a logical possibility was considered by Gregory Kavka. He proposed the existence of a resurrection world ruled by Satan where newcomers are told that the historical Christ was an agent sent by Satan to raise in good people false hopes of eternal salvation. He argues that the satanic resurrection world might constitute 'a conclusive falsification' of Christian theism, but Donald Gregory points out that even such a world need not destroy faith in God. Believers might expect the evil resurrection world to be overthrown by God. Gregory concludes: "If evil and innocent suffering do render Christian theism irrational, then they do so whenever they occur, whether in this world or in Kavka's... And if it is possible to reconcile evil and innocent suffering
with Christian theism, then it is possible to do so whenever they occur, whether in this world or in Kavka's.

Hick's argument has been criticised by Kai Nielsen largely on the ground that it presupposes what is to be proved — that there is a God: he also stresses the difficulty of conceiving of God. We shall not attempt to outline the niceties of the arguments, and Hick's replies here. Suffice it to say that according to Hick the Christian believer has eschatological expectations which will either be fulfilled, or not fulfilled — no assumption of fulfilment is necessary. We may note, too, that Hick does not suggest that the existence of God for the believer is a tentatively held hypothesis awaiting eschatological fulfilment. He thinks that the believer has immediate knowledge of God in this life which does not need, but equally does not exclude, further verification in the life to come.

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