

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

The Philosophical Analysis of Religious Language

Ruben L. Habito, S.J.

Philippine Studies vol. 17, no. 3 (1969): 530–555

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

Surveys

The Philosophical Analysis of Religious Language

RUBEN L. HABITO, S.J.

THE question of God has always plagued men of every era. Contemporary currents in Britain, Continental Europe and the United States, attest to the lively interest this question has generated in academic circles, though admittedly it cannot be confined to these circles alone. Feeding largely on movements from abroad, academic circles here in the Philippines have been influenced by the revival of interest in this question. On another level, however, the question of God is being asked in the local scene with a new awareness of its import.

The Philippines has been a Christian country for four hundred years, and it has held the Christian traditions handed down by the Spanish missionaries as part of its own. But lately, as segments of the Filipino people have become more conscious of the need to forge a communal identity, these traditions, have been more critically scrutinized. Christian institutions have not been exempt from this scrutiny. At the same time, a revivalist movement has been creating some ferment in the middle and upper classes, leading them to a new realization of a need for faith, a realization that has aroused a questioning concerning the meaning and implications for the Filipino consciousness of the Christian Faith.

These stirrings therefore touch certain problems with which academicians are concerned, and their work may have some bearing on areas which extend beyond the strictly academic. A recent article in this journal¹ explored the relevance of "proofs" for God in answer to certain questions posed on a non-academic level. In this article I will approach the question of God in the light of methods provided by a movement which originated in Great Britain but which at the moment exercises great influence in academic circles of other English-speaking countries. These methods are proving fruitful towards clarifying the issues involved in certain problem areas, beginning with the insight that our uses of language have a lot to do with our way of approaching conceptual problems.

Outsiders often consider "linguistic analysis" as a cut-and-dry method of philosophizing that reduces philosophical problems to "problems of linguistic usage," a method which either ultimately dissolves these by exposing their meaninglessness, or engages in hair-splitting with its grammatical and semantic distinctions. A closer look into recent developments, however, will reveal that in the area of the philosophical analysis of religious language (among others) both professed theists and non-theists have come up with fruitful insights and discussions. It can hardly be maintained therefore that the problem of religious language or talk about God has been dissolved.²

Linguistic analysis is a philosophical method aimed chiefly at clarifying the meaning of statements. Subsequent developments have modified its original conception, but its central aim, which is the *search for meaning* as a corrective for philosophical confusion, continues to be recognized. For the

¹ Joseph Roche, S.J., "Is 'Proving God' Still Relevant?" *Philippine Studies*, 16 (1968), 246-277.

² A new journal devoted to this field has recently appeared. *Religious Studies*, published by Cambridge University Press, provides a "means of sustained discussion on the issues that have been sharpened by the course of recent philosophy and by the new findings of the historical and comparative study of religions."

analysts' main concern of philosophy is with the *meaning*, not with the *truth*, of statements.³ To clarify this distinction, John Wilson offers us an illustration. Imagine a situation where a man makes a statement, and his hearer either understands him but disagrees with him or else says, "What in the world are you saying? I don't understand you." In the former case the first speaker may bring forth evidence to support his statement against his listener's objection. In the latter case, no evidence will avail unless the original statement is first understood, i.e. unless he explains the meaning of his original statement.⁴

But first some clarification must be made concerning linguistic analysis or "analytic philosophy." It is neither grammatical analysis nor semantic analysis, both of which are subsumed under the science of linguistics and are not properly classed as philosophical disciplines. The first analyzes linguistic structures of utterances in the light of various rules that govern them; the second studies the lexical meaning of words. The utterance, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog", may be grammatically analyzed, its various components considered and their function within the utterance as well as their inter-relationships determined. The utterance, "The bill is large", may be an interesting piece for semantic analysis: one may outline the various senses of "bill" and "large" to point out the ambiguity involved in the utterance. But neither example presents a properly philosophical problem. One that *does* present a problem of this type is: "Man has both mind and body". In saying "Man has both mind and body," one presupposes that there are two entities which make up the human organism, i.e., "mind" and "body," — and in so doing, one is liable to make certain philosophically misleading conclusions

³This conception of the task of philosophy sets it in sharp contrast with traditional ones which regard philosophy as "reflection on the nature of reality," with a view to arriving at certain truths concerning this reality.

⁴John Wilson, *Language and Christian Belief* (London, 1958), pp. xi-xii.

concerning the concepts of mind and body relative to man.⁵ The task of linguistic analysis in this case is to clarify those underlying presuppositions in order to point out possible errors. As one linguistic analyst has put it, the task of analysis is to expose the *category mistake* involved in certain statements.⁶

It is also important to note that linguistic analysis is not to be identified with "logical positivism." The latter is a well-defined philosophical position which developed within the analytic movement in the late twenties and early thirties under the influence of the members of the Vienna Circle. Its central thesis is the Verification Principle which may be stated thus: "The position is thus marked by the particular criterion for meaningfulness it imposes on statements, i.e., the criterion of verifiability. But the development of the linguistic analysis has brought to light other criteria for meaning beyond this strict Verification Principle."⁷

In this article we will consider three interrelated areas inevitably touched in the linguistic analysis of religious discourse: first, the question of how religious statements are to be considered meaningful (if at all); second, the question of whether, or how, religious conviction may have "rational" grounds; and third, the sense in which we may say that there is such a thing as "religious knowledge."

⁵This is the problem that Prof. Gilbert Ryle tackles in his classic work, *The Concept of Mind* (New York, 1949), i.e., how to avoid misleading conclusions in conceiving the relationship between body and mind.

⁶Ryle, *Concept of Mind*.

⁷The movement of linguistic analysis has undergone three distinct phases. The first, roughly placed in the 1920's, was characterized by the prevalence of Bertrand Russell's and the early Wittgenstein's ideas, which advocated rigorous criteria for determining the meaningfulness of utterances. The second phase, covering the late 1920's and early thirties, saw the dominance of the ideas of the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle, which gave the position of primacy to scientific statements that fell under their verifiability criterion of meaning. The third phase came about with the liberalization of the criteria for meaning mainly through the influence of the ideas of the later Wittgenstein, contained in his posthumously-published *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1963).

HOW IS RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE MEANINGFUL?

In its first stages of development, the proponents of linguistic analysis dismissed religious language as a meaningless form of verbiage that arises from the imagination of unscientific men. Bertrand Russell, for instance, considered as meaningful only those statements that could be reduced to a simple subject and a simple predicate, both understandable in terms of direct experience. The basic form of all meaningful statements for him was, "This is red," the meaning of which could immediately be grasped, and the truth of which could be verified simply by a look at the referent of the subject "This" (where the speaker may point out directly what he means by "this") to see if it matched the predicate "red". Statements about abstract principles with no direct referents easily fell under his axe, and so did religious statements.

In the same vein A. J. Ayer held not only that "there can be no way of proving that the existence of a God, such as the God of Christianity, is even probable," but that the very proposition, "God exists," is nonsense.⁸ The term "God", according to Ayer, is a metaphysical term, i.e., not derived from sensible experience, and consequently, a nonsensical term. Ayer gives mock comfort to the theist by admitting that although the statement, "There is a God," is nonsensical, its contradictory statement, "There is no God," is equally senseless. As we have seen, the logical positivists' criterion bestowed the label of "meaningful" only on empirically verifiable propositions, ruling out practically all statements in metaphysics, ethics, and theology. Many statements, however, were classed as "emotive," significant only in so far as they gave indication of the feelings or moods of their speaker.⁹

The Verification Principle, which was the cornerstone of the logical positivists' philosophical stand (to which Ayer subscribed at least in a stage of his career), later suffered serious criticism and subsequent modification. In the meantime a new

⁸ Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (2nd Edition, New York, 1946), pp. 115-116 of the Dover paperback edition.

⁹In fact "emotive" was the label given to practically every utterance that did not state empirically verifiable facts.

climate was beginning to settle in analytic philosophy mainly through the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein.¹⁰ It was characterized by a dissatisfaction with the restrictive criteria for meaning hitherto recognized among the philosophers of the analytic stream. With it also came a new understanding of the tasks of philosophical analysis: not the discrimination of meaningful from meaningless statements based on imposed criteria, but the elucidation of various types of meaning that different utterances are used not only to state facts, but also to express moods or intentions, to give commands, to express adherence to certain creeds or policies, etc.

A result of this new climate was the revival of interest in fields previously ruled out from the sphere of meaningful discourse, for example, ethics, metaphysics and philosophical theology.¹¹ The last concerns the critical examination of the meaning and the implications of theological language, i.e., language concerning "God" and other terms used in religion.

What kind of meaning does religion have? Is it to be classed in the same category as propositional language, language used to state empirically verifiable factual propositions? If the answer is affirmative then what kind of evidence will support the factual propositions of religion? An affirmative answer again would imply that religion is a cognitive enterprise, a field that somehow widens our knowledge of the world of facts and events. What then does religion add to our knowledge?

One of the classic positions on this issue is represented by Anthony G. N. Flew. In his famous Gardener Parable he likens God to an Invisible Gardener who "tends a plot" in the middle of the forest, and whom a believing hunter asserts as "really

¹⁰Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* enumerates different uses of utterances, and warns that instead of seeking *meaning*, philosophers should inquire into these.

¹¹"Philosophical theology" here is not in the same sense as used in other circles, i.e. a theological kind of speculation that makes use of philosophical concepts, as opposed to "kerygmatic theology." Analytic philosophers use the phrase in the sense of a "philosophical examination of theological statements."

there" although no evidence may be mustered to convince his sceptical fellow-hunter.¹² Flew shows the barrenness of the theist's position by pointing out that statements about God, like statements about the Invisible Gardener, can have no directly verifiable or falsifiable consequences.¹³ Religious statements are factually meaningless and valueless in so far as their capacity to add to our knowledge is concerned. The believer may state all sorts of things about his god, but, according to Flew, since these statements have no bearing on states of affairs in the world, i.e., cannot be judged true or false on the basis of possible events in the world, he may as well be speaking non-sense words.

Flew's position has been taken as a "challenge to theists,"¹⁴ and has triggered off answers from those who up-hold religious language as meaningful even if on a level different from that which Flew challenges. R. B. Braithwaite, invoking a recent principle that the meaning of a statement may be found in its *use*, points out that religious language is not like propositional language, that rather, it is to be likened to ethical statements by which the speaker makes no factual assertions but expresses commitment to a certain ethical idea. For Braithwaite, religious statements are "primarily declarations of adherence to a policy of action, declarations of commitment to a way of life."¹⁵ For example, to say "God is love" is to declare one's commit-

¹² Anthony G.N. Flew, "Theology and Falsification," in A. Flew and A. MacIntyre, eds., *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London, 1955), pp. 96-99.

¹³ "Falsifiability" is a modification of a requirement for testing factual propositions introduced by Karl R. Popper in his *Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York, 1965). Whereas in a great number of cases propositions need an unlimited amount of relevant data for their *verification*, they may need only one instance of a specified event to serve for their *falsification*.

¹⁴ See William Blackstone, *The Problem of Religious Knowledge* (Prentice Hall, 1963), pp. 74-76.

¹⁵ R. B. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge University, 1955). An excerpt from this work is reprinted in John Hick, ed., *The Existence of God* (New York, 1964), pp. 228-252.

ment to an agapeistic way of life, to regard love as the primary value in one's life.

R. M. Hare holds a view similar to Braithwaite's. He concedes with Flew that religious statements are not to be taken as factual assertions. They are expressions of an individual's *blik*, a view of the world independent of particular events or states of affairs in the world. Hare gives the example of a certain lunatic who is convinced that Oxford dons are conspiring against him. For this lunatic the kindly behaviour of certain dons towards him will not convince him that his *blik* is false. He will merely consider it as a part of the general plot against him. Similarly, the religious believer has a *blik* about the world as "created by God", as "evolving towards some good purpose." Even though particular events seem to contradict his *blik*, these will not convince him that it is false. He will consequently maintain, in the face of the apparent rule of chance in the world and in the face of evil, that his *blik* is nevertheless true.¹⁶

Hare's example and its application to the religious believer may have its merits, but to some it may seem to do religion a disservice to compare it to a lunatic's *blik*. Another example which perhaps may avoid this disservice is provided by John Hick in his parable of the two travellers. Two men are travelling along a road. One of them believes that it is a road that leads to a Celestial City where a great king is waiting to welcome them. The other thinks that the road does not lead anywhere at all, but he takes it since it is the only road there is. The believing traveller regards all the pleasures and hardships encountered as prepared by the king for travellers to heighten their anticipation of the Celestial City, but the other traveller takes these as they come and attributes them to chance.¹⁷ Each has his *blik* concerning the road, concerning the meaning of particular events he encounters.

While Hare and Braithwaite concede that religious statements have no direct factual significance, i.e., they may be made

¹⁶R.M. Hare, in an answer to Flew's "Theology and Falsification," in Flew and MacIntyre, eds., *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*.

¹⁷John Hick, "Theology and Verification," in Hick, ed., *The Existence of God*, pp. 252-274.

compatible with any possible event or state of affairs, some would qualify this stand, and say that these statements *will* eventually have implications for the world of facts. In essence Hick, Mitchell, and Crombie hold that future events will ultimately decide the case for or against religious statements, when eschatological events, for example, the coming of Christ's kingdom and the experience of the Beatific Vision, finally settle the issue.¹⁸

There is a proposal that combines the good points of the positions I have just described. Willem Zuurdeeg argues that the term "*emotive*" is insufficient to describe the attitude of the believer. He suggests instead the word *convictional*. "We take the term 'conviction' to mean all persuasions concerning the meaning of life; concerning good and bad; concerning gods and devils . . ." ¹⁹ Whereas mathematical and scientific certitude persuade the mind, convictional attitude moves the whole of life.²⁰ One's convictional attitude is the framework out of which religious utterances arise. When one makes the statement, "God loves us and has a plan for us," he is not saying something at all similar to "Mr. Laya loves his own son and has a plan for him." Religious statements, unlike propositional language, may not be subjected to tests for verification or falsification.

The convictional attitude is similar to Hare's *blik*, but it incorporates Braithwaite's suggestion that religion is a matter of personal commitment. It, however, avoids certain glaring inadequacies in the other two. Convictions are not arbitrarily chosen attitudes; they may be evaluated according to their ability "to convince". The religious believer is *convinced* of his belief not in the same way that the lunatic is convinced that Oxford dons are plotting against him; the believer points to grounds which assure him in his belief and which serve as the

¹⁸See Blackstone, *Problem of . . .*, pp. 108-124.

¹⁹Willem F. Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, (New York, 1958), p. 68.

²⁰See William Hordern, *Speaking of God: The Nature and Purpose of Theological Language* (New York, 1964), p. 68.

basis for his certitude, grounds which, he thinks, may also be appreciated by others if they knew where or how to look.

If religious statements are not subject to the tests of verification and falsification as factual propositions are, the "evidence" for them must differ from the evidence for assertions of fact. In what then does this evidence consist?

RELIGIOUS CONVICTION AND RATIONAL ARGUMENTS

The problem of the presence of religious convictions in men has been variously approached. It has been considered, for example, in terms of the psychological make-up of individuals, as in Freud and William James.²¹ It has also been examined relative to sociological factors involved in the formation of religious groups, as in Durkheim, Malinowski and others.²² Another approach, the phenomenological one, studies the phenomenon of religion "in essence and manifestation," attempting in no way whatsoever to *explain* the origin or cause of the phenomenon.²³ These approaches are scientific and somewhat detached. They provide us with facts concerning the religious behavior of men. They do not, how-

²¹Sigmund Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*, tr. by W.D. Robson-Scott (New York, 1961); William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, 1902) are two classic works in this area.

²²Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York, 1961 paperback edition); Joachim Wach's *Sociology of Religion* (Chicago, 1962); Bronislaw Malinowski's studies of the life and culture of South Sea Islanders, are works that may be mentioned in this area.

²³Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York, 1958) as well as his countless other works, serves as a sample of a study that makes use of this "phenomenological approach." G. van der Leeuw's *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 2 Vols., tr. by J.E. Turner (New York, 1963), and W. Brede Kristensen's posthumous *The Meaning of Religion*, tr. by John Carmana (The Hague, 1960) also make use of this approach. Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, tr. by John W. Harvey (Oxford, 1923) is one classic work which has influenced subsequent works in the phenomenology of religion. Robert A. McDermott in his "Religion as an Academic Discipline," *Cross Currents*, XVIII (Winter, 1968) 11-33, lays down some methodical procedures which could define a scientific and interdisciplinary study of religion, for which he suggests the name "religiology."

ever, explicitly ask the question in a way that suggests the questioner's own personal involvement. The question, "what are the grounds which believers offer for their beliefs?" should imply another: may *I* accept those grounds and assume the beliefs for my own? In other words, is there a sound basis for me to believe in God, in some form of afterlife, etc.?

Philosophy of religion is the critical discipline that examines the rational bases offered for religious belief, a discipline which traditionally dealt mainly with the so-called "proofs" for God.²⁴ In the framework I have mapped out in this article, the philosophical analysis of religious statements requires the study of the philosophy of religion because it leads to the recognition that meaning must be sought in the ability of statements to express the convictional attitude of individuals concerning the "meaning of life, the meaning of reality." What are the grounds for this convictional attitude? How does it differ from a non-religious convictional attitude, the conviction, for example, of a partisan who believes his cause to be the "right" cause?

We may begin by considering whether or not there are "proofs" for God, in the ordinary sense of rational arguments, by which one may conclusively establish that "God exists." We jump to an answer by pointing out that since Kant, few have held that logical or speculative proofs for God, may be established with certitude.²⁵ But not a few have gone around

²⁴William A. Christian, in "Three Kinds of Philosophy of Religion," *Journal of Religion*, XXXVII (1957) 31-36, distinguishes three kinds of philosophy of religion: there is an analytic philosophy of religion concerned with the analysis of the meaning of religious beliefs without deciding on their truth or falsity; there is a constructive philosophy of religion which offers non-religious grounds for religious belief; and finally there is religious philosophy, which presents a view that includes decisions and proposals about the truth of certain religious beliefs backed by religious reasons. Not one of Christian's three kinds corresponds with this description we give. This description follows that given by Frederick Ferre in *Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion* (New York, 1967), pp. 108-116.

²⁵Immanuel Kant shattered the force of the ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments in his monumental *Critique of Pure Reason*, showing how the conditions of possibility of human knowledge make us unable to know anything which lies outside the conditions of space and time.

Kant's "disproofs." They have tried to show how religious belief in God may be rationally based.²⁶ Let us now look into this possibility.

Before all else, perhaps the question must be asked: how does the religious question come up for serious consideration at all? What about human life leads a man to inquire whether or not there is a God?

Existentialists frequently refer in their works to the question of "the meaning of life," "the meaning of Being." They are clearly not asking what the meaning of the word "life" is. Neither are they looking for the meaning of the word "Being". Their questions rather are understood as pointing at a dimension in a man's life which presses him to ask, "Is there a point to all this? Is there a meaning or value to my activities, my goals, *my existence as a whole*?" This kind of questioning may be related to the question of "why anything exists at all,"²⁷ the question which Prof. I. M. Crombie links to the sense of contingency, "the conviction that people have, it may be in blinding moments or it may be a permanent disposition of a man's mind, that we, and the world in which we live, derive our being from something outside us."²⁸ This sense of contingency, in Crombie's estimation, along with other human experiences, e.g., the moral experience, or the experience of beauty and order in nature, or even that "abnormal" experience some people have called religious or mystical experience, could evoke a certain attitude in man, by which he "knows" *where* the term "God" may apply, i.e., within the dimension these experiences seem to indicate.

The God-question is not like the question about whether or not life exists in another planet, a question which one may

²⁶The whole point of the article by Fr. Roche on "Proving God" (Note 1, above) is to show how this is possible.

²⁷Prof. J.J.C. Smart ends one of his articles by linking this question with the origin of religious belief. Asking what sort of question this could be, he replies that ultimately he does not know. See his "The Existence of God," in Flew and MacIntyre, eds., *New Essays...*

²⁸I.M. Crombie, in answer to Flew's "Theology and Falsification," in Flew and MacIntyre, eds., *New Essays...*

ask in a detached manner. It is intimately linked with the very value of man's life, the very meaning of his existence. The affirmation that there is a God (properly understood) is a value-affirmation that gives one's life a perspective, a vision, an orientation. The question of God is consequently never merely a question asked by academes; it is one that comes into every man's life sooner or later, in one form or another.

To see the God-question in this light is to come closer to an understanding of what theists mean when they try to present "proofs" for God. These proofs are not to be taken as logical arguments leading to indubitable conclusions, but as considerations which invite the listener to the affirmation of God. These considerations may be approached thus: I can reflect on the world, for instance, or on my existence, in this manner. I see how things come about in the world, how particular effects may be traced to particular causes. This table did not come about by itself. It was put together by a craftsman using certain materials. Those trees were once seeds which in turn had come from trees. This chicken was once an egg that had come from a chicken and so on. Pushing this trend of thinking further, I may raise a different question: whence does *everything*, *anything*, come from? I may then be struck by a certain light and may thereby see somehow that I cannot go on asking about the cause of particular things, moving in series from one particular cause to another. Somehow *all* these things must be grounded in a Something which is itself independent of particular causes. This "certain light" reveals to me a dimension that leaps beyond the spatio-temporal limits of the world, a dimension I can indicate to others only by using negative words, "infinite," "transcendent."

Ian Ramsey would call this "certain light" a cosmic "disclosure" something which occurs in a moment of insight that reveals the dimension relative to which the term "God" may have a proper application. The metaphysically-inclined may give different names to this dimension: "the Absolute," "the Ground of Being," "Being itself" etc. They may go on to build metaphysical frameworks around it as indeed many great thinkers of the West have done. If we may be permitted to be

presumptuous in a way, we may even say that it was the experience of such cosmic disclosures that inspired the Eastern mystics to articulate their mystical philosophies.

Not everyone who examines these considerations is struck by that "certain light". Some may formulate in syllogistic arguments the steps involved and admit that the premises are not watertight. "Things that come to be, come to be due to cause. One cannot go on indefinitely looking for particular causes. Therefore there is an Uncaused First Cause." In this formulation one may challenge not only the major premise, but the minor as well. Further, one is not shown how the Uncaused First Cause of the conclusion is to be identified with the God whose existence the theists try to prove. Indeed, as Kant showed, the deductive or speculative arguments for God (which he summarized as the ontological, the cosmological, and the physicotheological or teleological) cannot lead man to a certain conclusion concerning God's existence. Logical argumentation of itself is not the basis of religious faith.

These logical steps are nevertheless merely the explicitations of an insight already there from the start, a way of seeing under that "certain light" described a moment ago. They remain merely verbal formulations of a way of seeing which the theist wishes to communicate; he consequently does not present the arguments as logical proofs but as an introduction to his way of seeing under that certain light.

Ramsey points out that religious language is in fact meaningful only in the proper context of this "certain light", in situations of disclosure when one glimpses a dimension that is *beyond and more than* what is directly sensible.²⁹ All our language about God is rooted in these situations of disclosure, and the reference range of "God" must be sought within these contexts. Situations of disclosure in turn are what lead to the convictional attitude we have been considering.

²⁹See Ian Ramsey, *Religious Language* (New York, 1957). An article that bases itself on Prof. Ramsey's insights is W.A. de Pater's "Sense and Nonsense in Talking About God," *St. Louis Quarterly*, VI (March, 1968), 7-48.

Taken by itself, however, a disclosure of the sort described is not sufficient to ground an actual religious conviction. At best it may only lead to what Pascal called "the God of the philosophers and savants," not the living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It may perhaps be seen as the basis for the Platonic kind of God conceived as the Eternal Form in which every sensible form participates; or for an impersonal Unmoved Mover or Uncaused First Cause; or even for the Oriental Brahman; or a God described in metaphysical terms. The experience of this disclosure may perhaps lead some to formulate a systematic *religious philosophy* that would grant "metaphysical compliments to a mystery."

At this point, another element that grounds religious conviction must be included in the discussion. Crombie describes religious belief as having two parents: its logical "mother" consists in the sense of contingency, etc., an experience we may link with what Ramsey calls "disclosure"; its "logical father" consists in the interpretation of certain objects or events as manifestations of or a direct communication from the divine, to oneself or to men in general.³⁰ Mohammed's vision and Prince Gautama's mystic illumination under the famed Bo tree are examples of events that have led to religious interpretations and which have become grounds for religious convictions.

Christians, for their part, have interpreted the person himself of Jesus Christ as the direct manifestation of the divine to men. At the root of Christian belief is the acceptance of this interpretation concerning the person and the message of Jesus Christ, the one set by God the Father. Christian faith is the response one gives to the call of the person of Jesus Christ seen as addressed to oneself, a response which includes the total acceptance of all his message implies. "Jesus Christ is Lord Son of God," "Jesus is at the right hand of the Father," "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead," are formulations for some of these implications. Moral injunctions given by Christ and accepted on his authority are also included, e.g., "Love thy neighbor as thyself," etc.

³⁰Crombie, in answer to Flew (n. 28, above).

These formulations are unlike factual propositions which have empirically verifiable consequences. They are unlike the statement, "Jose is a tailor and the son of a craftsman," or "He sits at the right hand of his father", or "He will come again to take my measurements," etc. They must be regarded rather as statements that spring from the convictional attitude concerning the *meaning* of the events associated with the person of Christ, of a convictional attitude one "enters into" when one makes the response of faith. What accounts for this attitude is the *interpretation* given the meaning of the events, an interpretation that touches a dimension beyond the spatio-temporal world.

The parentage of religious conviction described by Crombie shows the senses of the word "rational" and "proof". The basis for religious conviction is not at all "rational" if by the word we mean "logical." Moreover, there are no proofs for God if by "proofs" we mean "conclusive deductive arguments." What is significant is that we must critically consider the elements which *ground* religious conviction, elements which as we have seen referred to as the parents of religious belief. "The search for proofs" and the "rational examination" of religious belief consist in the critical examination of its grounds, in the consideration of whether an act of faith is *reasonable*. For Ramsey, to present "arguments" for God is merely to offer others considerations that may evoke in them a religious disclosure. As such no argument can be compelling: the experience of disclosure must first elicit a response from an individual if he is to affirm its applications. Thus every "proof" must remain at one's doorstep, as it were, and wait for an invitation to come in, an invitation which every man is called to answer in one way or another.

The convictional attitude of the religious believer differs from that of the partisan for a cause in that the former involves a *total* attitude concerning life, concerning reality. The qualifier, "of utmost importance," or of "ultimate concern," may be used to differentiate religious convictions from other kinds.³¹

³¹See William Kennick, "The Language of Religion," *Philosophical Review*, LXV (1956), 56-71.

The next question that inevitably arises is: does the believer's conviction give him an advantage of *knowing* something which the non-believer does not? Put in this way the question is ambiguous in a manner that we shall now examine.

MEANING AND KNOWING IN RELIGION

That the believer and the non-believer "see" the world differently is fairly evident. Though confronted with the same factual data, the same external appearances, even similar subjective experiences (e.g., experiences of frustration of the sense of finitude, of what the existentialists call *angst*, experiences of hope and joy, etc.), their ways of interpreting these differ profoundly. At this point let us bring in again the parable given by John Hick about the two travellers. As we have seen, the man who believes that the road leads to the Celestial City regards all the pleasures and hardships along the way as having been prepared by the king to heighten one's anticipation of the City. The sceptical traveller, on the other hand, regards these as "merely there" to be taken for what they are. The conviction of the believing traveller gives him a sense of joy and of purpose, that the whole journey is meaningful; it gives him a sense of expectation of the good things to come when he finally arrives at the City and meets the king. But to the other traveller all these makes no sense.

The believer may make assertions which spring from his conviction: "There is a Celestial City ahead," "The king is anxiously waiting for us," "In the City are many mansions reserved for us," etc., but these statements are valueless to the other traveller except in so far as they indicate to him the attitude of his companion.

As they travel on, the believer is assured all the more strongly in his conviction as he sees certain marks along the road which he interprets as having been placed there on orders of the king. They may not be marks of an evidently contrived kind which would be recognized by any traveller and which would convince anyone about their origin. They may be of the kind rather that blends naturally with the road and with the

scenery, that only the eye already alert for them may discern. They could, for instance, be in the form of stones set in a peculiar pattern, or some arrangement of plants by the wayside, etc.

The religious believer will therefore tend to see within a unifying scheme elements that may otherwise appear as isolated and unrelated, the order in the physical world, for example, the complexity of the human organism, or the presence of a multiplicity of factors that make life on this planet possible: the right proportions of oxygen and other gases, the presence of water and other compounds necessary for life, the proper quantity of gravitation, etc. Moral experience, "miraculous" events, mystical experiences, the yearning for happiness or for immortality which leaves men dissatisfied with what life has to offer, etc. also constitute such elements. Others may challenge the whole pattern by pointing at such elements as appear to undermine it, e.g., the existence of evil in the world, the disorder in human affairs. The believer may agree, but for him other factors favor the pattern in general. Some believers have admitted having been shaken in their belief by particular experiences of evil and suffering. The problem of evil has always provided ammunition for non-theistic challenges of belief. Though it falls beyond the scope of this article, the Christian believer's answer may be worth mentioning, even if only in passing. It involves not so much a compromise in his belief as a placing of *trust* in a personal God whose ways he cannot fully understand, a God nevertheless who, he knows, loves men, and respects their freedom, and who will reveal his ways in the world to come.³²

Here a point must be made which should have been emphasized much earlier. The Christian convictional attitude is constituted not so much of an adherence to a set of "beliefs" as primarily a commitment to Someone, a living God who has spoken through his Son Jesus Christ. This is why in the attempt to understand fully the implications of Christian reli-

³² The problem of evil constitutes an entire area of questioning within philosophical analysis. One classic article that is often referred to is J. L. Mackie's "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind*, LXIV (1955), 200-212.

gious belief, analogies derived from interrelationships among human persons are helpful. The Old Testament narratives tell of the relationship between the Israelites and Someone who was concerned with their destiny, who demanded loyalty from them, who was "angered" by their unfaithfulness. In a similar vein the parables given by Christ as narrated in the Gospels portray God as having personal characteristics: he is a king who has prepared a feast on the occasion of his son's marriage, a Father who knows the needs of his children, an owner of a vineyard who has left his field in the hands of unfaithful caretakers, etc.

All these considerations lead us to the distinction we wish to make: religious conviction does not give new *factual* knowledge; it gives *meaning* to the world in the light of God.³³ When the believer speaks of God and of his attributes, he is not speaking of what he "knows" in terms of *direct* experience, as for example, someone would, who knew the President of the Philippines. Since the term "God" applies to a dimension in human experience which is opened to one in moments of religious disclosure, it can not refer to any particular object among objects. God is not a *word* that corresponds to an object; it is a *name* that man utters to allude, to point to, Someone who responds to a dimension in human experience that may not be fully conceptualized.³⁴ One does not "know" God, or "experience" God univocally in the same manner as one knows or experiences the company of another human person.

But if one does not "know" God, how can one speak about Him at all? To answer this question, we must try first to discover how believers have been able to "know" God and about God.

In answer, we have often resorted to the threefold way of knowing traditionally claimed by Christian thinkers since medieval times, the triple way of affirmation, negation, and "su-

³³Eugene Fontinell, in "Reflections on Faith and Metaphysics," *Cross Currents*, XVI (1966), 15-40, makes this helpful distinction.

³⁴Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*, Revised Edition (New York, 1966), pp. 221-236.

per-affirmation." By the first step of affirmation, one predicates of God all the perfections found in creatures. Since man occupies the summit among God's creatures, one may best have a glimpse of God's perfections through man, for "man is the image of God."³⁵ The second step involves a negation of every creaturely attribute so far predicted of God, for in this *Via Negativa* the religious man realizes the total otherness of God who is not to be likened to creatures. With this negation in mind, one then takes the third step, re-applying to God the perfections of creatures, understanding them however in a "non-creaturely" sense. God is then said to be known only *analogically*, on the basis of what may be discerned from His creatures.³⁶

Analytic philosophers have pointed out certain shortcomings of this threefold way. Because it describes God in terms of human attributes, the affirmation step succeeds only in fashioning an anthropomorphic image of the deity. God no longer creates man in his image; rather man creates God in his. The negative step, denying the applicability of every creaturely attribute to God, will leave one beholding the "naked face of God", which really amounts to . . . nothing.³⁷ It consequently is no different from agnosticism.³⁸ Moreover, the analogical way of knowledge, which may be expressed in the following formula,

$$\frac{x \text{ (goodness of finite being)}}{y \text{ (finite being)}} = \frac{X \text{ (goodness of God)}}{Y \text{ (God)}}$$

³⁵The early fathers of the Christian Church thoughtfully reflected on this point, seeking what in man is the image of God. Two studies on Patristic thought on this point at hand are James J. Meany, S.J., *The Image of God in Man According to the Doctrine of Saint John Damascene* (Manila, 1954), and Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., *The Image of God in Man According to Cyril of Alexandria* (Woodstock, Md., 1957).

³⁶See E.L. Mascall, *Existence and Analogy* (London, 1949), pp. 92-121.

³⁷Hordern, *Speaking of God*, p. 66.

³⁸See Frederick Ferre, *Language, Logic and God* (New York, 1961), p. 67.

leaves two elements unknown, i.e., Y, God, affirmed as Mystery Wholly Other, and X, the purported attribute of God analogous to the creatures. There is thus nothing added to what we already know concerning finite being.³⁹

In all these, the ambiguity inherent in our initial question concerning what the believer *knows* in the light of his conviction becomes manifest. The criticism of the "threefold way" reveals an understanding of "knowledge" in the sense recognized since Kant, i.e., the constitutive knowledge of objects within spatio-temporal limits, like the "proper knowledge" of the Thomists, the mind's knowledge of an object's determination. It is clear, however, that speaking of God concerns a dimension not confined to the spatio-temporal order. God is not an object in the spatio-temporal world; hence this sense of "knowledge" may not be used in God-talk. To say, we *cannot know God* is to say that constitutive or proper knowledge cannot extend beyond spatio-temporal limits. To claim therefore that the religious believer can have some "knowledge" of God is to understand "knowledge" in an altogether different sense. The original meaning of "knowledge" is extended to include what can be *validly affirmed* concerning things without necessarily "comprehending their determinations."

Thus Prof. Ramsey provides us with an explanation of how human assertions about the divine, assertions basically about Mystery, may be valid and meaningful.⁴⁰ He suggests that these statements share with various disciplines the need to use models. Models are devices employed to render wide varieties of phenomena intelligible and manageable. Using a study of Prof. Max Black concerning models and metaphors, Ramsey names two kinds of models.⁴¹ The first kind is called the "scale" or picture model which provides a replica of the object to be represented. Bohr's model of the atom, scale models of airplanes, picture illustrations of the human anatomy, etc., are examples. The second is the "analogue" model which Ramsey also calls

³⁹Mascall, p. 120.

⁴⁰Ian Ramsey, *Models and Mystery* (Oxford, 1964).

⁴¹Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Cornell University, 1962).

the "disclosure" model. It is constructed on the basis of certain structural similarities between the model and the specified aspects of the object or field to be represented. Its function is to lead to disclosures concerning the phenomena being studied, or to help one specify certain aspects of phenomena otherwise complicated and unmanageable. An example is the phrase "powerhouse of learning" used to describe a library. Certain similarities may be mapped out between the model "powerhouse" and what actually happens in a library. Another example is the model of the four seasons used to reveal insights into the span of human life; the "spring" of youth, the "summer" of achievement and passion, the golden years of "autumn," the "winter" of old age.

In science, Ramsey explains, the universe of phenomena to be examined has been recognized as something that eludes full conceptualization and description. The complexities of the universe as revealed in recent scientific discoveries drive home the fact that the range of phenomena may no longer be pictured in terms of simple scale-models. The universe is now considered a field that can only be made manageable if man were to concentrate on certain aspects which will disclose themselves through "analogue" models. In other words, it is a field which includes a dimension which can only be described by the word "mystery"⁴²

⁴²"Mystery" here is no longer understood in the sense that pre-scientific man conceived it, as the element of the unknown in an unpredictable universe apparently ruled by caprice (personal or impersonal). The scientific method has given man a way of correlating the various elements in our universe of phenomena, to a point where man now possesses mastery over nature in that he can predict and control phenomena. With the scientific method that element of the unknown has greatly diminished. Yet the recognition of the limits of scientific discovery brings home to man the realization that he still lives in a world with basic uncertainties. It is in this sense that the universe is said to have a realm of "mystery." Michael Polanyi, in "Science and Reality," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* XVIII (1957), 177-196, suggesting that the notion of "reality" be brought back within the realm of scientific investigation, describes "reality" as that field which science attempts to make intelligible to man by means of its methods. This notion of reality is thus

So in theology. The religious believer is confronted by the need of articulating intelligible utterances about a dimension that escapes any satisfactory conceptualization. He must resort to using models that really capture only limited aspects of the domain, models which will serve to evoke in one who considers them a disclosure concerning certain aspects of Mystery. To say then that "God is all good," that "He loves all men as sons," that "He has plan for us," etc., is to try merely to disclose something about God to man, something about His "goodness," "love" and "plan" which may not be taken as direct equivalents of human goodness, etc.

In another book, Ramsey analyzes in greater detail how qualities and models may be applied to God.⁴³ He explains how attributes of God, for example, "First Cause," "Infinitely wise," "Infinitely good," "Creator *ex nihilo*" may properly be used and also understood in the context of religious disclosures.

In sum the "problem of religious knowledge" may be approached in a misleading way unless the two possible senses of "knowledge" are distinguished. Religious belief brings no knowledge in the sense of additional or special data concerning God, but it gives a meaning, an orientation, a sense of value to man's life. The believer is said to "know" and consequently to speak about God in the sense that he employs language to point at a dimension of religious disclosure, in a way that the scientist can use analogue models to render certain aspects of his field of phenomena manageable.

As a footnote, a third possible sense of "know," as used by the believer, may be mentioned. When the religious man claims to "know" that there is a God, that the eschatological kingdom will come, etc., he is expressing his subjective certitude, as opposed to a mere "opinion." This is similar to the

something which includes an open field, an area broader than what is actually made intelligible by scientific methods. Reality is "an unlimited range of unspecifiable expectations" (p. 117). Polanyi's words are brought in at this point to point out their similarity with what Ramsey calls "mystery."

⁴³Ramsey, *Religious Language*.

case of the man who says of his friend, "I know that he will keep his word." A subjective certitude not based on verified scientific data is here present, a certitude based on grounds more intimate to the speaker.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

1) We live in an age when the death of God is proclaimed even by some of those who profess to be on His side. Those who see beyond epithets and slogans, however, will recognize that this proclamation is less a cry of despair than a cry of liberation from inadequate conceptions of God. It is an indication of a search on a deeper level for better ways of expressing a dimension vital to human existence.

The question of the death of God, as a *Time* essay put it, represents a summons to reflect on the meaning of existence.⁴⁴ The day has come when man is becoming more and more conscious of his autonomy and tends to reject whatever stands in the way of its exercise. Consequently, the God traditionally conceived as a Grandfather in the Sky, who filled certain gaps in man's life, is a God who is now dead for many. In the words of Bishop John A. T. Robinson, that God is "intellectually superfluous, morally intolerable, and emotionally dispensable."⁴⁵ It has been suggested that the word "God" be dropped from the religious vocabulary to avoid the idolatrous or superstitious connotations which have often accompanied the use of the word, and Hurvey Cox suggests that the term "God" not be used as a word that refers, but as a *name* that calls out, to someone who answers deeper stirrings in man.⁴⁶

In the light of findings made through the philosophical analysis of religious language, we have come to see that the proper use of the term "God" depends on its context. Apart from situations of disclosure, the term is an empty word that either admits of a variety of uses hardly religious, or is mis-

⁴⁴ "Is God Dead?" *Time* Cover Article, April 8, 1966, pp. 48-53.

⁴⁵ John A. T. Robinson, *A New Reformation?* (New York, 1967), pp. 106-122.

⁴⁶ Cox, *The Secular City*, pp. 211-236.

leadingly taken as a particular object or concept. Meaningful talk about God springs from a convictional attitude concerning the ultimate meaning of reality, a convictional attitude bolstered by the experience of disclosures.

2) The insights derived from the philosophical analysis of religious language will inevitably be significant also in theology. If theology (as Christians understand it) is the discipline which elucidates the implications of faith in the person and message of Jesus Christ, then philosophical analysis of religious language can be an indispensable prerequisite for the theologian. As has been pointed out, "since Christian Faith is by nature a communicating faith, it needs to understand the nature of the language it uses."⁴⁷ Otherwise, the gap of understanding between philosophers and theologians will remain. It is reassuring to know that mutual attempts at dialogue are being undertaken from both sides.⁴⁸

A feature of analytic philosophy leaves theologians somewhat uneasy about fully accepting it: it seems to go about its business without bringing in metaphysical language altogether, the kind of thinking and language which have for centuries been presupposed in theological investigations and doctrinal formulations. The question of the relationship between metaphysics and religious belief remains an unsettled one, but mainly because the word "metaphysics" may be taken in at least two senses. Many religious believers today will readily grant that faith does not at all depend upon any particular metaphysical framework, e.g., Thomistic or Whiteheadian, etc. (though in fact terminology derived from particular metaphysical frameworks may be found in many doctrinal formulations of the Christian faith.) The term "metaphysical" may also be used to mean a kind of attitude towards the world, towards life and reality, which a man must inevitably have as he reflects upon his existence. Every man who comes into the world and reflects upon his situation inevitably arrives at some way of re-

⁴⁷Hordern, *Speaking of God*, p. 14.

⁴⁸James Martin, Jr., *The New Dialogue Between Philosophy and Theology* (New York, 1966) surveys the ground for the current dialogue which has been made possible because of analytic philosophy.

garding the world, i.e. "reality as a whole." He may view everything — the universe, human life, etc. — as "gratuitous" or "just there" and accept his lot. Or else he may see the world as revealing a dimension that is "transcendent" or beyond. In either case his attitude is a metaphysical one.

Some voices today echo a point made by Auguste Comte in the nineteenth century that scientific man has outgrown theology and metaphysics, and that man no longer asks the "why" of things but their "how". What Comte meant by theology is rather a kind of outlook associated with superstition and mythology, not that to which analytical philosophers refer when they analyze religious or "theological" language. Moreover, although it must be granted that the temper of scientific man seems to be veering away from the kind of thinking that is given to metaphysical speculation, it is far less easy to admit that man no longer asks the "why" of things, i.e. that man can ever avoid having this kind of attitude we have described as "metaphysical". We venture to say that it is perhaps a disease of our age that this question of the "why" of things, a question that cuts through the meaning and value of man's life, is often taken for granted—that men dismiss this question too hastily from their lives, without realizing its import.