R.S. LUHMAN

GOD-TALK IN THE ACADEMIC COMMON ROOM

Mr. Luhman gives us a birds
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

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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' looke 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".[5]   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[6a]

        (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 th   ight of this, to indicate
        the way in which their deepest desires might be
        fulfilled".[6b]

        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".[7a]   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".[7b]   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".[8a]

     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".[8b]   For Christianity, "to know
God is to love Him" thus "Love is the real object of the relation-
ship".   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.[9]
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".[10]   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[3b] 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.[11,3b]   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[12], 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 aspectual 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".[6,13]   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.[14]   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".[15]

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[16]

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".[3c]

     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[18] 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.[19]   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 legitimately
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.H. Price outlines how this can be done.[20]   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[21] 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.[22]   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 be 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 after-
life for which Hick argues at length elsewhere.[23]   The mere fact
of survival would not be sufficient to verify the existence of
God, although if there were an after-life without God it would
falsify it.

    But what if there were an after-life 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.[24]   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[25] 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.   Greogory 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[26] 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.[27] 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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