

# Does God-Talk Make Sense Today? Facing the Secular Challenge

by Richard Rice

**T**he experience of a young Seventh-day Adventist woman living in southern California illustrates how Christians are finding that they are making sense to fewer and fewer people.

I have a neighbor, a lady whom I consider to have more of those qualities of “Christian goodness” than most of us have or could hope to have. I greatly admire her for her gentleness, sincerity and genuine concern for the troubles of others. But she does not believe in God—any God.

I usually avoid becoming involved in discussions of religion because I have so little real education concerning my beliefs. But somehow we began discussing the existence of God. My first question was, “If you don’t believe in God, what do you believe in?”

She answered, “I believe in goodness.”

I then asked, “What for?”

She said, “Because I believe in Mankind, and I know that whatever I do for my fellow man is not wasted, but helps us to move forward to a time when man will be all that he is capable of being and all that he should be.”

Not knowing how to approach her, I then asked, “What do you feel caused our existence—why are we here? If God didn’t create us, who or what did?”

She answered, “I don’t know that we were ‘created.’ And neither does anyone else. They’re all just guessing and I have no faith in guesses. I am not sure that there are not many

worlds of thoughtful beings. There are many things of which I am not sure—but Man and his potential are real.”

I told her that I believe in God because I know that our intricate and complex world is not an “accident of nature,” but that it has a master plan and there is a purpose in the universe. And I said that I believe in Jesus Christ because I believe in God Himself. “There is no valid reason,” I said, “not to believe in Jesus, if one does believe in God. Who can say that it is too strange a thing for a God who made the heavens and the earth, to send His Son to the earth to help us? And who can deny the beauty and ultimate goodness of Jesus’ life?”

“Yes,” she replied, “that is reasonable to assume or believe, if there is indeed a God. But you base your beliefs on a faith in your heart. When you say, ‘I know,’ what makes you know? You see, I have no faith in what I do not know, but I do know that there is man—and I have faith in man. Does that seem reasonable to you?”

I tried to illustrate my faith in God by saying, “Love is a real thing but we cannot see it. Yet, we have faith in its existence. I know I depend on love daily—on my husband’s love, and on God’s love. God’s love is as real and tangible as my husband’s love for me and my love for my family. It’s there and I am very sure of it, even though I can’t touch or see it. Reason teaches us what we see, but faith teaches us the existence of that which caused the things that we see.”

She said to me, “I respect your faith, but there is only one thing I can be sure of—that life is a reality, that it can be beautiful, meaningful and important, or very ugly, depending

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on how we live it. What man is depends on man; he can be just an intelligent animal, self-satisfying and living only for the moment, or he can be beautiful, having all the qualities that separate 'higher existence' from that of animals—those qualities of kindness, justice, desire for knowledge and love for fellow man.'

The conversation went on, but I found that I did not have words for this intelligent, articulate lady. I wanted to share my awareness of God with her—to prod her into some doubt of her beliefs, hoping at least to make her question enough to seek more answers. But I failed. What could I have said besides "I believe" and "I know"? What could I have done to open the door for further discussion? We had no "working assumptions" or common ground on which to meet. How can I "teach" someone to have faith? What should I have said?

This conversation illustrates how difficult it is to communicate religious commitment to people who object to beliefs once accepted by nearly everyone. Our society has undergone a change in religious outlook and this poses problems for Christian faith both numerous and complex. This article concentrates on one of these problems: the challenge to belief in God. It will examine the features of contemporary society which give rise to this challenge, the most forceful philosophical expression of this challenge, and finally, the various responses formulated to this challenge by representative Christian theologians. It should be emphasized that this article undertakes, not to resolve the problem, but to explore how the problem might be resolved, given the resources currently at hand.<sup>1</sup>

No aspect of the religious outlook of contemporary society represents a more formidable challenge to Christian faith than the widespread absence of belief in God. For the reality of God stands among the most important of Christian beliefs, and, in the eyes of some, represents the very basis of any Christian affirmation whatever. One Christian thinker argues that the problem of God is not just one problem among several others, but really the only problem there is.<sup>2</sup> He believes that any attempt to provide a logical account of the contents of Christian faith is

doomed from the outset unless the essential religious idea—the idea of God—makes sense. Christianity, then, finds itself called upon to justify its very existence. Nothing can be taken for granted; nothing within the contents of Christian faith can be tacitly assumed as true.

Just why is the reality of God a problem today? The briefest possible answer to this question is one word—"secularism." One Adventist theologian, Fritz Guy, has made secularism an object of his own reflection. In a recent article entitled, "How 'Secular' Should Adventist Theology Be?"<sup>3</sup> he identifies four main ingredients in contemporary secularism. The first is a conception of reality as limited to what exists in space and time. The real world is the world we can explore either directly with our senses, or by extending our sensory experience through the use of refined scientific equipment. The second ingredient is the assumption that knowledge is a matter of empirical fact. According to the secular mind, truth is what is capable of scientific verification, the final court of appeal. And what is incapable of scientific verification is not false, but simply meaningless.

Any supersensory or transcendent reality is excluded. Man is left very much on his own to solve his problems or attempt to find meaning

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for his life. Thus, the third ingredient in secularism is a particular view of man. It is the notion that human beings seem to have almost infinite capabilities. The accomplishments of technology within our own lifetime seem to support this optimistic assessment of human ability. Man's successful ventures into space no doubt provide the most obvious examples. Finally, secularism assumes that value is entirely relative, centered in the immediate future with no reference to something beyond this life or world.

"This, then, is the picture of contemporary secularism in North America," Guy writes, "a combination of naturalism, humanism, and relativism."<sup>4</sup>

Having these essential characteristics, modern secularism expresses itself in both optimistic and pessimistic moods. In the absence of transcendent reality, some interpret man's situation as one of awesome loneliness, with the world an empty stage or a bleak, windswept wilderness. Others speak of man's liberation. Having rid himself of enslavement to mythical higher powers, he is free at last to explore and exploit the possibilities for fulfillment that the world provides. Thus, man's release from the transcendent has been both celebrated and bemoaned. In quite general terms, pessimistic secularism prevails in Europe, and optimistic secularism is more dominant in America.

If the contemporary view leaves man utterly on his own in a reality limited to what his senses perceive, then it is not hard to see why the idea of God seems irrelevant, and language about God so out of touch with our experience as to be incomprehensible.<sup>5</sup>

The contemporary spirit responds to talk about God not by saying "I disagree," but by saying, "I can't make any sense out of your words. When you speak of God, I have no idea what you are talking about. I hear arrangements of familiar syllables, but they have no intelligible content, so I find your utterances meaningless." The most forceful challenge to Christian faith today is not whether Christianity's claims are true or false but whether they even make sense.

**B**oth the general intellectual outlook we have described and the particular challenge this outlook poses to theological language have received expression within a trend of modern thought called "analytic philosophy." In both its "logical positivist" and "linguistic analyst" branches, this philosophical movement is concerned about clarifying language and rejects any attempt to construct speculative philosophical or metaphysical systems. Instead of describing the nature of ultimate reality, analytic philosophers attempt the more modest task of analyzing our use of words. They talk carefully about the way we talk.

Ever since the movement originated about the

turn of the century, one of its major objectives has been to establish a criterion of meaning by which to tell whether sentences are genuine assertions. Do they convey information, or only appear to do so? One important attempt to formulate such a criterion is Antony Flew's principle of falsification.<sup>6</sup> According to this principle, a meaningful assertion, that is, one that actually conveys information, implicitly denies something; it is incompatible with some conceivable state of affairs. In other words, a sentence has cognitive meaning only if it is possible to conceive of some sensory experience that would count against it. The crucial question in determining whether a purported assertion is meaningful is to ask, What counts against it? Under what circumstances would the statement be false? If it turns out that nothing counts against it, that it is compatible with every conceivable experience, then it is meaningless; it really tells you nothing.<sup>7</sup>

Flew illustrates what happens when the principle of falsification is applied to statements about God in the famous parable of the gardener.<sup>8</sup> Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, "Some gardener must tend this plot." The other disagrees, "There is no gardener." So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. "But perhaps he is an invisible gardener." So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet, still the believer is not convinced. "But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves." At last, the skeptic despairs, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?" Finally, the statement, *There is a gardener*, turns out to be meaningless. It dies the death of a thousand qualifications.

According to Flew, the same thing happens to theological utterances about God. At first glance, statements like *God loves the world* or

*God has a plan* appear to be assertions about the universe. But when you ask what these statements *mean*, you have a hard time getting a clear answer. Those who make such statements allow nothing to count against them, not even the massive presence of evil in the world. As a result, there is no difference, discernible by sense-experience, between saying, There is a God who loves the world, and saying, There is no God who loves the world. Since statements involving God thus appear to be compatible with any state of affairs, Flew, epitomizing the reasoning of analytic philosophers, concludes that all talk of God is meaningless; it has no cognitive content.

The responses of Christian theologians to this major philosophical challenge have been widely varied. In the 1960s, a small group called “death of God” theologians more or less capitulated to the view that it is meaningless to speak of God and formulated theological proposals that avoided such language.<sup>9</sup> These theologians attracted widespread attention and created an immediate stir in the popular press, but generated no enduring theological movement. Indeed, one wonders how they could have, since the announcement that God is dead seems more a form of theological *hara-kiri* than an invitation to constructive theological dialogue. At any rate, their views were subjected to devastating criticism, and passed swiftly from serious considerations.

Nevertheless, “death of God” theology did set in bold relief the formidable challenge of secularism. The prevailing intellectual climate not only obliges Christian theology to establish the intelligibility of theistic language, but also imposes strictures on any such attempt. Specifically, it rules out as question-begging any appeal to the contents of privileged experiences as grounds for the meaningfulness of God-language. It will not do to appeal to “revelation” or to “personal religious experiences” to establish the meaningfulness of talk about God, because the reality of God is necessarily presupposed as the source of such revelation and as the object of such experiences. The meaning of affirmations concerning the divine reality is precisely the point in question. Consequently, the challenge can be effectively met only by appealing to common human experience and by

demonstrating that God-language illuminates a dimension of reality as every human being encounters it.

In recent years, a number of Christian theologians have undertaken this task. We shall look briefly at the arguments of two of them, not to assess the relative success or failure of their proposals, but simply to analyze how their arguments proceed, and thus see how the challenge to theism is currently being met.

Langdon Gilkey and Schubert M. Ogden, two American Protestant theologians, share the conviction that an adequate understanding of human experience must include the recognition of a religious dimension as essential to human existence. Experience cannot be restricted, they say, to the deliverances of the senses. They argue for the meaningfulness of God-language by (1) calling attention to significant human experiences, (2) showing that these experiences disclose certain essential characteristics of human existence, (3) demonstrating that these essential characteristics point or refer to a transcendent reality, identifiable as God, and (4) concluding that God-language is meaningful if it gives expression to fundamental aspects of human experience. Both maintain that a careful examination of ordinary human experience in the world reveals that some of its essential characteristics have no explanation unless they are interpreted as referring to a dimension of reality that can be ultimately identified as God.

The first step in the central argument of Langdon Gilkey’s major theological work, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language*, is to examine carefully certain phenomena in which the essential nature of human experience is vividly illuminated. Take, for example, the phenomenon of birth, “the concrete experience,” in Gilkey’s words, “in which the power and wonder of existence and of life have most directly manifested themselves to mankind.”<sup>10</sup>

At the birth of a child, particularly that of one’s own child, a person is acutely aware of the wonder and power of life. This experience of power and vitality has its negative counterpart, Gilkey observes, in the universal fear or anxiety that we could lose our existence, our power to be and to continue in being. In other words, we are also all aware that our existence is radically contingent, an awareness so basic to our experi-

ence that contingency represents an essential element of human nature.<sup>11</sup>

In similar fashion, Gilkey identifies three other essential structures of human experience; relativity, temporality and freedom. He then attempts to show that each points to a dimension of what he calls ultimacy. He argues, for example, that human contingency is felt by us against a background or horizon of ultimacy, and is thus inexplicable unless the reality of the ultimate is affirmed. The same holds for the other essential characteristics of experience. Gilkey insists that this dimension of ultimacy finds expression only in religious language, and concludes his argument by describing such language as "an essential and creative aspect of secular culture."<sup>12</sup>

It is Gilkey's position, then, that religious language is meaningful, indeed indispensable, to secular self-understanding, because it alone expresses a dimension of reality to which all the essential structures of human existence refer. It is, therefore, evident that the dimension of reality to which Christian faith assigns the word "God" is intimately related to our secular life and all its essential elements.

In spite of his rigorous argument that religious discourse is meaningful within the context of secular human experience, Gilkey declines, in the end to identify the dimension of ultimacy he so carefully describes as God. This explicit identification, he feels, lies beyond the point where he has successfully advanced the argument, and this is why he describes his proposal as a "prolegomenon" to theology proper.

**S**chubert M. Ogden also argues that common human experience, particularly the lived experience of contemporary secular man, is unintelligible unless seen against a background of ultimacy. But he insists that this background cannot be understood as anything other than God. Ogden's rather striking claim is that "for the secular man of today, . . . as for any other man, faith in God cannot but be real because it is in the final analysis unavoidable."<sup>13</sup> In other words, there is a sense in which everyone, whatever his explicit intellectual position, at the level of his deepest personal experience ultimately exhibits faith in God. Such faith is unavoidable, in his view, because the idea of God represents

"the most adequate reflective account we can give of certain experiences in which we all inescapably share."<sup>14</sup> To understand Ogden's position, we must determine what these experiences are and how the idea of God serves as their most adequate reflective account.

Following the work of Stephen Toulmin, an analyst of religious language, Ogden observes that each fundamental human activity gives rise to certain peculiar questions which it is itself incapable of answering. Moral inquiry, for exam-

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ple, can suggest answers to a great variety of questions concerning how human beings ought to act, but no moral inquiry will provide a satisfactory answer to a question such as, "Why should I keep my promises, anyway?" or "Why be moral at all?" even though such a question naturally arises at the limits of man's activity as a moral agent.

Similarly, one might suggest, the various healing professions undertake to answer questions as to how man's physical well-being in all its aspects can be promoted and safeguarded. A reflective examination of such endeavors leads naturally to the question as to why, precisely, health is better than disease, or why life is better than death, and yet this is a question to which no strictly medical answer can be given.

Analysis of religious assertions reveals that their function is precisely that of answering "limit questions" such as these; questions which naturally arise at the limits of man's activities as moral actor and scientific knower. Religious statements respond to these limit questions by providing essential reassurance that man's moral and scientific activities are really worthwhile. Religious assertions measure man, Ogden further argues, because they re-present, or give expression to, a fundamental confidence that human

existence is meaningful.<sup>15</sup> Basic to Ogden's argument, then, is the conviction that all human activity ultimately presupposes and, therefore, inevitably testifies to something religious language expresses, namely, "an underlying confidence in the abiding worth of our life."<sup>16</sup>

In the second phase of his argument, Ogden analyzes the idea of God in terms of this basic trust in the meaningfulness of life. The function of the word "God," as he puts it, is to "refer to the objective ground in reality itself of our ineradicable confidence in the final worth of our existence."<sup>17</sup> In other words, "God" refers to what it is in reality that justifies our confidence in the worthwhileness of life.

Now, notice what follows from this line of reasoning. If, as Ogden has sought to demonstrate, all human experience proceeds ultimately from an unavoidable confidence in the final worth of our existence, and if the word "God" denotes what it is in reality that grounds this confidence, then there is an important sense in which everyone has faith in God. "At the deeper level of our actual existence," Ogden argues, "belief in God's reality proves to be inescapable."

Consequently, because all men believe in God on this fundamental level of their experience, any interpretation of human existence which ignores the idea of God is bound to be incomplete, and any such attempt which rejects the idea of God is bound, in the final analysis, to be self-contradictory. Thus, even an atheist believes in God, for his denial of this belief is contradicted by the deeper levels of his own experience.

Despite the differences between them, the arguments of Langdon Gilkey and Schubert Ogden exhibit an important similarity. Each defends God-talk by appealing to the phenomenon usually invoked to deny that talk about God makes any sense, namely, ordinary human experience. At the very least, their proposals demonstrate that it is possible today to argue for the basic claims of Christian faith in such a way as to demand a serious hearing even within a secular climate.

Recalling the conversation reported at the beginning of this article, we may ask what practical contribution this discussion makes. Chris-

tians who want to communicate their religious commitment today may learn at least two important points.

First, the challenge which the contemporary spirit presents to faith is unavoidable. Christians may not encounter it in a technical philosophical form, but they are bound to meet the view that belief in God really doesn't make sense for a thinking person in the modern world.

Second, Christians need not feel at a complete loss in facing this challenge. They may appeal to experience shared by believers and unbelievers alike to support their belief in God. They may argue, in effect, that the unbeliever's denial of God is contradicted by his own experience, and that the actual way he lives his life in the final analysis affirms the reality of God.

It is, of course, doubtful that such an approach will, by itself, effect conversion. But it will certainly show that belief in God can be argued for, rather than simply asserted, and that the question of God's reality is far from closed even within the prevailing intellectual atmosphere.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. In a later article, or articles, I hope to demonstrate not merely how effective arguments for the meaningfulness of religious discourse and for the reality of God *might be* formulated, but that and how such arguments indeed *can and ought to be* formulated.
2. Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), p. 1.
3. *The Ministry*, October 1974.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
5. Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969), p. 61.
6. For the best-known attempt, see A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (2nd ed.; New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1952).
7. "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), p. 98.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 96, 97.
9. See, for example, Paul M. van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel Based on an Analysis of Its Language* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1963).
10. *Naming the Whirlwind*, p. 317.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 319.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 365.
13. *The Reality of God*, p. 21.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 37.