DISCUSSED | theology, philosophy, Death of God, empirical investigation

When Philosophy Killed God: *Analytic Philosophy and the Death of God—What the Sixties Have to Tell Us* | BY RICHARD RICE

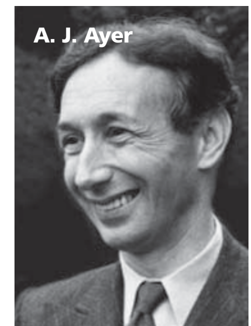
"Is God Dead?"

The most famous cover in the history of *Time Magazine* appeared on the issue of April 8, 1966, just a few days before Easter. In huge red letters, against a stark black background, screamed a three-word question, "Is God Dead?" The effect was sensational. The striking cover—and the article, which described the suggestion that we eliminate the word "God" from religious discourse—elicited thousands of letters to the editor, aroused impassioned commentaries and inspired countless sermons. An Adventist evangelist on the verge of retirement, for example, said it was that cover that made him determined to keep going. "What had the world come to," he asked a class of seminarians, "when the very people entrusted with defending the Gospel were actually trying to get rid of God?"

The article itself recounted the growing challenge theologians faced when they applied contemporary philosophy to traditional religious language. It also featured the relatively small number of theologians who had taken the position that it was not only necessary, but possible and even desirable, to dispense with God-language in their efforts to express the meaning of religious faith.[1]

The Quest for Cognitive Meaning

The back-story of the God-is-dead, or radical theology of the sixties, as it was known, lies in analytic philosophy—in particular, in logical positivism. Analytic philosophy was the dominant stream of philosophical reflection among Anglo-American philosophers during the twentieth century. One of its most important features was the quest for a criterion of cognitive meaning. What, exactly, its practitioners persistently asked, qualifies as a meaningful assertion? When do sentences actually communicate information and when do they only purport to do so? The quest moved through several stages—from empirical verification, through empirical verifiability, to empirical falsifiability[2]—but all of them presupposed that putative assertions must satisfy empirical standards of meaning.


A. J. Ayer

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The quest for a criterion of cognitive meaning led a number of philosophers, such as A. J. Ayer (*right*), to conclude that all meaningful discourse, that is, cognitive discourse, could be placed in two

categories: tautologous statements and assertions capable of empirical verification.[3] As Ayer formulated the "verification principle," "all propositions which have factual content are empirical hypotheses…. [A] statement which is not relevant to any experience is not an empirical hypothesis, and accordingly has no factual content." The implications of this conclusion for other forms of philosophy, in particular for metaphysical speculation, were profound. In Ayer's words, "as tautologies and empirical hypotheses form the entire class of significant propositions, we are justified in concluding that all metaphysical assertions are nonsensical."[4] The problem is not that metaphysical theories are wrong, it's that they have no meaning. The response of the analytic philosopher to the metaphysician is not, "I disagree with you," or "I think you are mistaken," but "I don't know what you are talking about." "You may be using familiar words, but you are not saying anything comprehensible."

Though analytic philosophy was particularly interested in the mistakes of traditional philosophy, its criticisms had profound implications for theology as well. Note the memorable title of Malcolm Diamond's article, "The Metaphysical Target and the Theological Victim."[5] The impact of this development on theology came to a head in the famous symposium, "Theology and Falsification." Here Antony Flew (*right*) observed that believers characteristically refuse to specify any factual conditions that would lead them to deny that God exists. Since an assertion is meaningful precisely to the extent that it specifies what would refute it, he insisted, God-language is meaningless.[6] An utterance like "God loves the world" sounds like a vast cosmological assertion, but it doesn't really say anything. It may express subjective attitudes or aspirations—as R. M. Hare and Basil Mitchell suggest in their responses to Flew—but it conveys no information.

Antony Flew

Flew drove this point home with his famous parable of the gardener.

> *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?"*

In this parable [Flew concludes] we can see how what starts as an assertion, may be reduced step by step to an altogether different status. A fine brash hypothesis may thus be killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications.

Now it often seems to people who are not religious [he continues] as if there was no conceivable event or series of events, the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people, to be a sufficient reason for conceding "There wasn't a God after all" or "God does not really love us then." What would have to happen not merely to tempt us but also to entitle us to say "God does not love us" or even "God does not exist"?

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The Secular Meaning of the Gospel

One of the radical theologians who embraced this critique of religious language was Paul M. van Buren. In *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel Based on an Analysis of Its Language*, he ventured

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an interpretation of Christianity that dispensed with God-language entirely and focused instead on the figure of Jesus. According to van Buren, the principal problem facing contemporary Christian theology is the possibility of meaningful theological discourse.[8] The problem arises from the fact that the world we live in today is secular, and Christians are very much a part of it. "Being a Christian" does not deny one's involvement in the secular world—believers are not distinguished from "unbelievers" by a different sort of logic. So, the question facing contemporary theologians is not "How can the Christian communicate the Gospel to the secular unbeliever?" but "How can Christians who are themselves secular understand their faith in a secular way?"[9]

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According to van Buren (*below*), secularity is simply a given for people today. It is not something we may or may not choose to embrace; it is part of what we are. So, the choice facing modern Christians is not whether or not to be secular. It is whether or not they can find a meaningful understanding of their faith within.

Paul M. van Buren

Our interpretation of the Gospel must be "secular this perspective. Their choice is either a secular Gospel or no Gospel at all," because modern thought is grounded in the "empirical attitudes" that characterize believers and unbelievers alike.[10] In order to identify the secular meaning of the Gospel, theologians must find a way to interpret the faith that conforms to the empirical canons of meaning embraced by secularity.[11] The specific difficulty our secularity poses is that of finding any meaningful use of theistic language. As we have seen, the empirical attitudes of contemporary secularity call into question the logic of any use of the word "God."[12] In a word, "the word 'God' is dead."[13] So, unless we can find a way to interpret Christian faith that dispenses with the word, there is no way to make Christianity intelligible to secular people today, including ourselves.

While acknowledging their perspective as secular persons, believers must also remain faithful to the kerygmatic core of traditional Christian witness,[14] and this is where the Gospel comes in. Since the figure of Jesus is central to Christianity, Christology must be central to any Christian theology. Since Christian faith has always had to do with the New Testament witness to Jesus of Nazareth and what took place in his history, Christology must be central to theology, and the norm of Christology must be Jesus of Nazareth as the subject of the apostolic witness.[15]

Van Buren's objective is thus a theological formulation which will both satisfy secular criteria of meaning and reflect the characteristically Christian interest in the history of Jesus of Nazareth. As he sees it, there is no conflict between these two concerns; if anything, they are mutually reinforcing. On the one hand, empirical interests lead us to focus attention on the history of Jesus. On the other, loyalty to the intention of the apostolic message leads us to bring the assertions of apostolic preaching and the Chalcedonian Christological formulations into conformity with empirical standards of meaning.[16] The primary resource in this endeavor is linguistic analysis, which determines the meaning of words and statements by logically analyzing how they are used.[17] Recognizing that different kinds of language function in different ways, appropriate to different situations, the "modified verification principle" does not immediately rule out all religious language as meaningless, as does the more narrowly conceived verification criterion of logical positivism.[18]

The "secular meaning of the Gospel" emerges with a careful, functional analysis[19] of the language of the New Testament, the Fathers, and contemporary believers.[20] While it rejects both literal and qualified literal theism, such analysis finds meaning in the language of faith, not as a set of cosmological assertions, but as the description of a particular way of life, as an expression of a certain basic conviction.[21] When we look at the New Testament documents, we see that Jesus of Nazareth was a unique individual, whose most

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distinctive characteristic was his personal freedom—a freedom manifested both in his conduct and in the content of his teaching. On the negative side, he was remarkably free from external authorities, domestic, civil, and religious, and on the positive side, he was uninhibitedly free for service to his neighbors.[22]

In addition to historical knowledge of Jesus, Christian faith also depends on "Easter," an event which stands between every believer and the figure in whom he or she places faith.[23] Indeed, the essence of the Gospel is the Easter proclamation concerning Jesus of Nazareth.[24] The language of this proclamation, however, reveals nothing definite about a physical return to life. Instead, it reflects a dramatic transformation in the way Jesus' disciples looked at him.[25] Easter was something that happened to them, not something that happened to Jesus.

In the unique perspective that Easter represents, the distinctive freedom that Jesus displayed was experienced as "contagious."[26] The disciples were caught up in something like the freedom of Jesus himself. To speak of Jesus as risen, therefore, is to express the fact that one has experienced the liberating effect of his freedom. The function of the language of the Gospel is to express, define, and commend this particular historical perspective.[27] The fundamental expressions of these attitudes are meaningless as straightforward empirical assertions,[28] but as expressions of a historical perspective having far-reaching consequences in a person's life, the utterances of faith do meet the verification principle of meaning.[29] To summarize "the secular meaning of the Gospel," as van Buren describes it, "A Christian who is himself a secular man may understand the Gospel in a secular way by seeing it as an expression of a historical perspective."[30]

The short-lived attention radical theology received, animated though it was, suggests that it was but a passing episode in the history of twentieth century theology,[31] but the phenomenon has something of lasting significance to say about the relation between theology and philosophy, and about God-language in particular.

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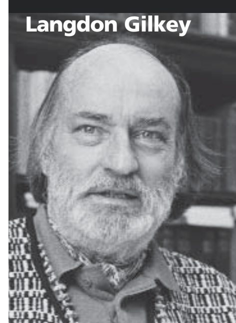
Langdon Gilkey on Radical Theology

Along with the furor surrounding the Death of God theologians in the popular media, their proposals also generated a good deal of serious scholarly discussion. Two of their contemporaries were Langdon Gilkey (*below*) and Schubert M. Ogden, professors at the University of Chicago Divinity School and, according to Gary Dorrien's history of American liberal theology, important contributors to twentieth century religious thought.[32] Both men subjected Death of God theologies to rigorous criticism, and both formulated constructive treatments of religious language in direct response to the challenge that radical theology posed.


Langdon Gilkey

They also take specific issue with van Buren's project, arguing in different, but somewhat complementary, ways, that his attempt to salvage the Gospel by dispensing with God-language is ill-conceived and unsuccessful. As they see it, van Buren's elimination of God-language leaves dimensions of human experience inadequately accounted for. The perceived meaninglessness of statements containing the word *God* is due, not to something inherently nonsensical about the notion of God, but to an inadequate concept of cognitive meaning, and behind that to an inadequate understanding of human experience. So, the basic problem with so-called secular versions of the Gospel, or attempts to interpret Christian faith without any reference to God, is not that they rely on empirical criteria of meaning. It is that the concept of experience operative in such attempts is far too limited.

In what may be the most important of his numerous books, Langdon Gilkey subjected radical theology to a thorough critique, and developed an extended case for the possibility of religious discourse in a secular age.[33] As Gilkey

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analyzes it, "the central theological problem of radical theology" is the inconsistency of affirming two contradictory lordships: secularity and Jesus.[34] Although van Buren accepts the empirical attitudes of modern secularity, the great importance he attaches to the historical Jesus raises some serious questions. To begin with, there is an incompatibility between the Lordship of Jesus and radical human autonomy. If we are truly autonomous, and therefore without God, why and in what sense are we dependent on the strange figure of Jesus?[35] Indeed, if we are truly autonomous, why should we need a lord at all? Why not dispense with Jesus as well as with God? If Jesus is essential for our authenticity, then we are not truly autonomous. If Jesus is not really essential, then he is not truly Lord, but merely one of numerous available historical examples of human potentiality.[36] So, either Jesus is Lord and we are not autonomous, or we are autonomous and we don't need Jesus. We can have it one way or the other, but not both.

The choice facing modern Christians is not whether or not to be secular. It is whether or not they can find a meaningful understanding of their faith within.

Gilkey also finds problems with van Buren's notion of contagious freedom. For one thing, van Buren fails to show just how "freedom" avoids his objections to the word "God" and meets the criteria which "God" fails to meet. He simply dismisses "God" as incompatible with empirical attitudes, and counter-asserts the category of "freedom." Similar questions arise with regard to his use of the word "contagious." How does it satisfy the criterion of empirical verifiability?[37] What is it that guarantees the contagion of Jesus' freedom? What makes the influence of this historical figure unique, apart from all others? If there is no guarantee, then it is difficult to see why Jesus should be called Lord, rather than any historical figure bearing admirable characteristics.

Then, too, the freedom which characterized Jesus may just as well represent an unattainable norm as a genuine possibility, for how can the mere knowledge that one man was remarkably free have the effect of setting another free? Unless there is some factor to account for its transmission, the remarkable freedom of Jesus, instead of liberating others, only serves to condemn those unable to achieve it in their own lives. In that case, Jesus becomes a Lord of Law, rather than the Lord of grace who sets other people free.[38] On the other hand, if there is something which guarantees that Jesus' freedom sets other men free, what exactly is it? How can it be conceived except in categories at odds with the empirical assumptions van Buren commits himself to?

Van Buren's affirmation of Jesus' Lordship encounters further difficulties in connection with what can be known of him historically. The picture of Jesus that historical scholarship suggests refuses to fit the requirements of a godless, religionless Christianity. How can someone who proclaimed the soon coming of God's kingdom in thoroughgoing eschatological concepts provide a model for activity in a world which has lost all sense of the transcendent? Moreover, the whole notion that Jesus's life is one to be imitated is problematic. The central purpose of his life was to make his listeners aware of the reality and activity of God in the world. Even if Jesus is regarded as a historical paradigm for the activity of contemporary secular men and women, the value system of the present world is at odds with the love, service, and self-giving which the Lordship of Jesus implies. So, a theology built around the ethical requirements of Jesus is every bit as unsecular as any based on the transcendence of God.[39] "If intelligible Christian language is to be used at all," Gilkey concludes, "God-language is necessary,"[40] and it is important that theology demonstrate why this is so.

There are two general ways of pursuing this objective, both of which move toward the same conclusion. One begins by analyzing certain constitutively human experiences, demonstrating that they presuppose, as a condition of the possibility of their being what they are, a certain background of ultimacy or transcendence. Then, on further analysis, it shows that this background exhibits characteristics of such a nature as to justify its identification with what theists mean by the word "God." Another way is to first clarify the concept of God on a formal, logical basis,

and then demonstrate that the content of certain experiences is such that they cannot be adequately understood except as referring to what analysis reveals the concept of God to entail. Perhaps we could designate the first the phenomenological, and the second the metaphysical, resolution of the problem of the meaning of *God*. In both cases, the conclusion is the same: human experience includes a dimension in which the referent of the word "God" appears, and from this it follows that the word "God" is meaningful and that theological discourse is possible.

In *Naming the Whirlwind*, Gilkey takes the first approach, describing his study as "a phenomenology of religious apprehension within secular life,"[41] which provides an "ontic" analysis of lived experience.[42] His analysis of secular experience carefully examines disclosive experience, such as birth, and uncovers certain "ontological" structures which are constitutive of human existence.[43] They are contingency, relativity, temporality, and freedom. Further inspection reveals that these structures point beyond themselves to another dimension or context of experience—a region identifiable as "ultimacy" or "unconditionedness." This dimension of experience is always present in human life as its source, ground, horizon, and limit; it is the presupposition of all we are and do.[44] Because it deals precisely with this range of ultimacy, which all human experience presupposes, religious language is meaningful after all.[45] Because it dismisses transcendent references as meaningless, a secular self-understanding is incoherent. It is contradicted by the true character of secular experience, which inherently presupposes this background of ultimacy.[46]

Gilkey maintains that his proposal takes things only so far. If successful, it demonstrates that various constitutively human experiences presuppose, and thus serve as indicators of, a background of ultimacy or transcendence. However, to identify this background specifically with God lies beyond the point where he has advanced the discussion. For this reason, he describes his endeavor as "an ontic prolegomenon to theological discourse." Its purpose is to prepare for theological discourse by delineating an area of experience within which religious discourse makes sense and communicates. But this is quite different from a full-fledged theology or metaphysics that speak explicitly of God.[47]

Schubert Ogden on Radical Theology

In contrast to Gilkey's carefully circumscribed "prolegomenon to theological discourse," Schubert Ogden (*below*) responds to the challenge of radical theology by arguing that only explicitly theistic language does justice to the essential concern of Christianity.[48] Ogden credits van Buren with providing a clear statement of the empiricist challenge to religious discourse. As we have seen, van Buren advocates an interpretation of Christianity according to which "the statements of the Christian gospel are in no sense to be taken cognitively as assertions about a divine reality, but should interpreted instead as expressions of a certain human stance or attitude."[49] Since our secular consciousness is shaped by the language of modern science, which defines the scope of all meaningful cognitive discourse, "the outlook typical of men today makes any meaningful assertions about God impossible."[50]

Schubert Ogden

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Like Gilkey, Ogden rejects van Buren's version of Christianity as inadequate to the language of the Gospel. He argues that "theology neither can nor must be non-objectifying, if that means wholly non-cognitive, and so lacking in all direct objective references to God and his gracious action."[51] Going beyond Gilkey, however, Ogden responds that theistic language is not merely a plausible option for those who seek a contemporary interpretation of Christian faith, it is an absolute necessity. "However absurd talking about God might be," he exclaims, "it could never be so obvious-

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ly absurd as talking of Christian faith without God."[52] For the Gospel to have any meaning at all, therefore, secular or otherwise, a case must be made for the reality of God.

Ogden develops his argument for the reality of God in two stages. First, he seeks to show that the idea of God is the most adequate reflective account we can give of certain experiences human beings inescapably share. Then he proposes a concept of God that is consonant with these experiences. Both moments display a sensitivity to empirical concerns, the recognition that language makes sense only in relation to human experience. "The only way any conception of God can be made more than a mere idea having nothing to do with reality," Ogden asserts, "is to exhibit it as the most adequate reflective account we can give of certain experiences in which we all inescapably share." Indeed, "no assertions can be judged true, unless, in addition to being logically consistent, they are somehow warranted by our common experience, broadly and fairly understood."[53]

The crucial question, then, is what human experience, or what dimension of human experience, requires the idea of God in order to be understood? In a word, the answer is *faith*. The thesis of Ogden's alternative to the noncognitivist interpretation of religion is this: "For the secular man of today, as surely as for any other man, faith in God cannot but be real because it is in the final analysis unavoidable."[54] We all live by faith, because this is the only way human beings can live, and when adequately understood, God is the only conceivable object of this faith.

According to Ogden, human beings live by faith in the sense that everything we do expresses an original and underlying confidence in the meaning and worth of our existence. In other words, we all exhibit a "basic existential faith." Every human enterprise, particularly moral thought and action, rests on an original and inescapable trust in the nature of reality. Even self-destructive actions, one could argue, reflect a confidence that these actions "make a difference," that reality is patient of our efforts. Such existential faith is the necessary precondition of human selfhood.

The next step in Ogden's response to the secularist challenge is to argue that the word "God" refers primarily to whatever it is about the whole, of which we experience ourselves as parts, that calls forth and justifies this original and inescapable trust.[55] What concept of God could adequately account for this basic existential faith? What qualities must God have to serve as the ever present object of our trust in the final worth of our existence?

An examination of this confidence reveals two essential characteristics by which God's nature must be defined. As the ground of our secular faith in the ultimate worth of our lives, God must be relative to our life in the world; indeed, God must be the supremely relative reality and therefore capable of real internal relations to all our actions. At the same time, God's relatedness to our lives must itself be absolute, for unless the ground of life's significance exists absolutely that significance itself could not be ultimate or permanent. Consequently, the only view of God which explicates both elements in a secular faith in the ultimate worth of our life, is dipolar. It conceives of God as both supremely relative and supremely absolute.[56]

Ogden finds the necessary conceptual resources to formulate a Christian theism precisely along these lines in the work of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. Their view of God as both absolute and relative, both changing and changeless, provides a way of conceiving God's reality that does justice to modern secularity. It provides a ground for our confidence in the ultimate significance of our lives, an object of our basic existential faith. Unlike van Buren's secular interpretation of the Gospel, Ogden maintains, his own secular interpretation, resting as it does on a broadly empirical basis, is at once appropriate to the essential claims of the Bible and understandable in the present situation.[57]

Broad versus Narrow Empiricism

In constructing alternatives to radical theology, Gilkey and Ogden offer empirical responses to empiricist challenges to Christian faith; in particular, to the meaning of theistic discourse. Their approaches are not empirical in the narrow sense which van Buren and his radical colleagues employ—one that depends on sensory or scientific data—but in the sense of finding confirmation in more generous conceptions of human experience. They find experiential evidence for the conclusion that religious language generally, and in Ogden's case, straightforwardly theistic language, is meaningful. It gives coherent expression to profound dimensions of human experience.

The contrast between these two perspectives directs our attention to the crucial issue that lies behind Death of God theology. What, exactly, is the scope of our experience? What does human experience include?

In restricting the scope of meaningful assertions to those capable of empirical verification, Death of God theologians like van Buren assume that the only areas of experience capable of meaningful assertive representation are those accessible to sense-experience, or to the extension of sense-experience through scientific instruments. But there are other, much more expansive, views of human experience. A. N. Whitehead, for example, regards "perception in the mode of presentational immediacy" (which is roughly, though not strictly, synonymous with sense-perception), as only one mode of perception.[58] Although this mode of perception is most easily recognized, since "we habitually observe by the method of difference,"[59] we also enjoy another mode of direct experience, namely, the mode of "causal efficacy."[60] For example, we are intuitively aware that the present conforms to the immediate past—an awareness we share with all organisms, and one that is particularly evident in lower grade ones.[61] Because epistemologies such as that of Hume, who regarded relations between presentationally immediate entities as the only type of perceptive experience,[62] are unable to account for this phenomenon, their portrayal of human experience is inadequate.

However, if direct experience comprises more than sense-perception,[63] then language that does not meet the criterion of empirical verification is not necessarily devoid of cognitive meaning. So, even if van Buren and his radical colleagues are correct in concluding that theological utterances are not empirically verifiable, this does not mean that they are meaningless. (With rare exceptions, no one maintains that God is a directly observable entity alongside others in the sensorily perceptible world.)[64] The criterion of experiential verifiability is more generous than that of empirical verification. So, if human beings experience the referent of the word "God" in some mode other than presentational immediacy, God-language has cognitive meaning, whether or not it meets empiricist criteria. This is what Ogden in effect argues for. Because we experience God as the object of our basic existential faith, as a permanent element in our experience as human beings, God-language is meaningful, even though God's presence is not empirically verifiable.

Radical Theology in Retrospect

Granted, neither Gilkey nor Ogden presents himself as an analytic philosopher, so neither clearly exemplifies the linguistic turn in theology, but their efforts show how influential analytic philosophy and logical positivism were in twentieth century religious thought. When philosophy killed God in the mid-sixties, they were among those who responded to the challenge by seeking to bring God-language back to life.

There were, of course, numerous discussions of religious language following Death of God theology and its precedents in the theology and falsification debate. As Terrence Tilley's overview from the late seventies indicates, most of them took a tack similar to Flew's original respondents—R. M. Hare and Basil Mitchell—who maintained that we might be able to salvage God-language to some degree if we construed it

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as expressing certain human perspectives or emotions, but conceded that it lacked any discernible cognitive or assertive power.[65] Few of the considerations of theistic language offered arguments as robust as Ogden's. (Even Gilkey—despite his rigorous critique of van Buren—demurred from the claim that his prolegomenon does more than map out a place in human experience where God-language might find a home.) But once in a while the potential metaphysical import of theistic discourse got some recognition from analytic philosophers. In a widely read discussion of religious language that appeared in the early sixties, Frederick Ferre brings the final chapter, "The Manifold Logic of Theism," to a close by tentatively suggesting that theistic language may—just may—have cognitive significance.

"If language literally based on certain models of great responsive depth found within human experience is capable not only of synthesizing our concepts in a coherent manner but also of illuminating our experience," wonders Ferre, "we may ask *why* this happens to be the case." "And if some models," he continues, "are capable of providing greater coherence and adequacy than others, we may begin to suspect that this tells us something not only about the models but also about what reality is like…." And then, finally, this statement: "Theism is founded on the belief that reality is such that the metaphysical models of personal activity will best survive any tests which may be demanded."[66] More of a concession than a ringing affirmation, it is at least a recognition that God-language could make sense of our experience.

In pursuing a metaphysical route to the affirmation of God-language, have we abandoned the linguistic turn? I think not. Instead, I believe, we have discovered that the linguistic turn can lead to a road much broader than we may have realized.

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Lessons from the Sixties

What, then, do the sixties have to tell us? At least two things.

For one, they show that we cannot avoid the thought-world in which we live. Both proponents and opponents of the Death of God recognized the inherent secularity of the modern mindset. Like it or not, our view of the world is largely framed by science. As John Herman Randall notes, science was more important than any other factor in shaping the modern mind.[67] The reason science is so influential is the fact that it is so effective. Let's face it—science is the most reliable and generally accepted means we have of acquiring knowledge, and in one way or another we all enjoy its benefits. As Ian Barbour states at the beginning of his Gifford Lectures, "The first major challenge to religion in an age of science is the success of the methods of science."[68] This challenge may not be obvious to everyone. Indeed, it may not be obvious to anyone…for a while, that is. But sooner or later the underlying perspective of an age—and its philosophical expression—comes to shape the general outlook of all who inhabit it.

Linguistic analysis in the form of logical empiricism expresses a deep seated and widespread conviction that the scientific method provides a reliable, indeed privileged, access to truth. So effective is science in accounting for the world around us that it seems natural to conclude that the world accessible to science—the world accessible through the senses, or the instrumental extension of the senses—is the only world there is. It is not a major step for those steeped in science to reach the conclusion that the only sort of utterances that make cognitive sense—that actually communicate reliably about the world—are those that are accessible to empirical verification.

The sixties also tell us that theology cannot ignore philosophy. Whether or not we accept philosophy as the final arbiter of truth, we must take seriously philosophy's attempt to represent the best of human reflection and formulate standards of responsible belief. When philosophy challenges religious belief, we must rely on philosophy to solve the problems that philosophy creates. Analytic philosophy in its various forms focused attention on the function of all language, religious language included, and an effective expression of religious faith, in the intellectual

environment where analytic philosophy prevails, must take the nature, scope, potential vulnerability, and inherent resources that religious language provides.

The response of the theologians whose work we have noted to Death of God theology was not to deny the validity of scientific method, nor the secular perspective to which it naturally leads. It was to show that scientific language is not the only language that makes sense. There are facets of human experience and corresponding dimensions of reality which are not accessible to scientific inquiry, that is, to empirical investigation, and whose claims are not appropriately adjudicated by scientific examination. Nevertheless, by a broadly construed understanding of "empirical," one based on a wider range of experience than scientific inquiry involves, they offer impressive arguments for the conclusion that religious language, in particular the locution "God," indeed satisfies experiential criteria of meaning and truth.

For some in the sixties, it looked like philosophy had killed God, but for others, God is very much alive, and someone we can still talk about. More important, perhaps, God is someone we can still talk to. ■

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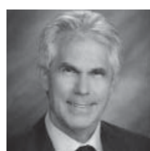

References

1. They included Thomas J. J. Altizer, William Hamilton, Gabriel Vahanian, and Paul M. van Buren.

2. According to Karl Popper, it is "not the verifiability but the falsifiability of a system [that] is to be taken as a criterion of demarcation." "It must be possible for an empirical scientific system to be refuted by experience" (*The Logic of Scientific Discovery* [Harper Torchbooks, 1959, 1968], 40, 41; italics original).

3. For a helpful review of various expressions of and approaches to the empirical challenge to God-language, see the anthology, *The Logic of God: Theology and Verification*, eds. Malcolm L. Diamond and Thomas V. Litzenburg, Jr. (Bobbs-Merrill, 1975).

4. Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (2nd ed.; Dover, 1946, 1952), 41.

5. *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 46, no. 3 (July 1967).

6. "To know the meaning of the negation of an assertion, is…to know 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." (*New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds. Anthony Flew and Alisdair MacIntyre [New York, 1955], 98).

7. Flew and MacIntyre, 96–98.

8. Paul M. van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel Based on an Analysis of Its Language* (London, 1963), 4.

9. Van Buren, 2, 4.

10. Ibid., 20, 79, 84.

11. Ibid., 156. Van Buren describes this aspect of his concern as coincident with that of the theological left, whose objective is to think through Christian faith in light of the critique of modern thought (170).

12. Ibid., 84.

13. Ibid., 103.

14. Ibid., 156.

15. Ibid., 8, 156. Van Buren regards this aspect of his concern as coincident with that of the theological right (169).

16. Ibid., 79, 158–59.

17. Ibid., 14.

18. Ibid., 15.

19. In formulating his method, van Buren incorporates the conclusions of four students of religious language: R. M. Hare's interpretation of theological utterances as noncognitive expressions of a "blik," a fundamental attitude achieved independent of empirical inquiry, rather than as assertions (85); I. T. Ramsey's elaboration of Hare's blik concept in terms of discernment and commitment (91); T. R. Miles' description of the way of silence qualified by parables (91); and R. B. Braithwaite's thesis that religious assertions declare an intention to act in a certain way, accompanied by the entertainment of stories associated with this intention (96).

20. Ibid., 19.

21. Ibid., 100–101.

Let's face it—science is the most reliable and generally accepted means we have of acquiring knowledge, and in one way or another we all enjoy its benefits.

22. Ibid., 121–24.

23. Ibid., 126.

24. Ibid., 197.

25. Ibid., 127–128.

26. Ibid., 132.

27. Ibid., 158. This view of the language of faith bears a close resemblance to Hare's interpretation of theological utterances as the expression of a blik. Because of its non-cognitive character (97), the language of a blik does not consist of statements of fact or explanations of states of affairs (143). Although the blik conception of the language of faith is fundamental to his proposal, van Buren modifies it somewhat by insisting that the Christian's blik is related decisively to a specific segment of secular history (143).

28. Ibid., 154.

29. Ibid., 199.

30. Ibid., 193.

31. Within a few years, another cover appeared on *Time Magazine* bearing the question "Is God Coming Back to Life?" (December 26, 1969).

32. See Gary Dorrien, "Theology and Modern Doubt: Langdon Gilkey, Schubert M. Ogden, James M. Gustafson, Gordon D. Kaufman," Ch. 5 in *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity 1950–2005* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

33. Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (New York, 1969). Note the titles of the major sections: "Part 1: The Challenge to God-Language," and "Part 2: The Renewal of God-Language."

The sixties also tell us that theology cannot ignore philosophy.

34. Ibid., 148.

35. Ibid., 150.

36. Ibid., 157.

37. Ibid., 126.

38. Ibid., 160–62.

39. Ibid., 152, 153, 155.

40. Ibid., 166.

41. Ibid., 413.

42. Ibid., 275.

43. Ibid., 317–319.

44. Ibid., 296–97.

45. Ibid., 365.

46. Ibid., 363.

47. Ibid., 413, 416. The way Gilkey carefully limits his objectives in *Naming the Whirlwind* stands in rather striking contrast to the concluding chapter of his book *Shantung Compound* (New York, 1966), published just three years earlier. There he argues explicitly that it is only in God that we find the fulfillment of two fundamental human needs, viz., our need for an object of loyalty that transcends all finite interests, and thus makes genuine morality possible, and our need for a source of meaning in a time of social chaos.

48. Schubert Ogden, "The Reality of God" in *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York, 1966).

49. Ibid., 85.

50. Ibid., 14.

51. Ibid., 90.

52. Ibid., 14.

53. Ibid., 20.

54. Ibid., 21.

55. Ibid, 34, 36–37.

56. Ibid., 47–48.

57. See Ibid., 66–67.

58. Alfred North Whitehead, *Symbolism* (New York, 1959), 21.

59. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York, 1969), 7.

60. Whitehead, *Symbolism*, 17.

61. Ibid., 41.

62. Ibid., 34.

63. In an article on Whitehead's generalizing power, Charles Hartshorne identifies both memory and sense perception as experiences of the past—in the case of sense perception the immediate past—and argues that memory is the more inclusive of the two ("Whitehead's Generalizing Power," in Whitehead's *Philosophy: Selected Essays 1935–1970* [Lincoln, Nebraska], 129–39).

64. Cf. Gilkey, 266.

65. Terrence W. Tilley, *Talking of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis of Religious Language* (Paulist Press, 1978).

66. Frederick Ferre, *Language, Logic and God* (Harper Torchbooks, 1961), 164–65.

67. John Herman Randall, Jr., *The Making of the Modern Mind: A Survey of the Intellectual Background of the Present Age* (New York, 1977), 164.

68. Ian Barbour; *Religion in an Age of Science: The Gifford Lectures*, 2 vols. (San Francisco, 1990, 1993), 1:3.