# The Problem of Religious Language (Part 1)
*By Dr. Greg Bahnsen*

Is God-talk Even Meaningful?

In philosophical circles during much of the twentieth century, two issues which have dominated discussions in philosophy of religion - and thus two of the most popular polemics against the intellectual credibility of Christian commitment - have centered on the meaningfulness of religious discourse.

Religious discourse involves *talk* about God, immortality, miracles, salvation, prayer, values, ethics, etc. To speak of the existence or attributes of God, for example, is to make religious *utterances*. All religions which are promulgated publicly must in some measure use religious discourse. And Christians in particular engage extensively in utterances concerning God and their faith; after all, Christianity is preeminently a religion of verbal revelation from God and personal profession of faith. Thus Christians are always talking "religiously" - in sermons, prayers, confessions, didactic lessons, catechisms, personal testimonies, songs, exclamations, counsel and encouragement, etc.

The challenge made by many modern philosophers has been that talk of this kind is not really meaningful (in any cognitive sense), even if it has the deceptive appearance of being so. For years and years and years it may have seemed that when Christians used language about God and salvation, it was possible to make pretty good sense out of what they were saying. Not everybody believed that what Christians would utter was *true,* of course, but the God-talk of believers was at least thought to make (or entail) assertions which carried rationally intelligible, if not also spiritually intoxicating, meaning. But not so, according to many philosophers of recent vintage.

Worse Than False

The magnitude of the charge which has been made against the intelligibility of Christianity must be appreciated by believers. When philosophers claim that God-talk is *meaningless,* they are saying something far stronger and far more devastating than that talk about God is *false*. Their criticism is that religious utterances do not even qualify to be false (or true) because they do not

amount to talk that makes cognitive sense - that aims to convey information - in the first place. (Think about it this way: it is one thing to criticize the Chicago Cubs for not *winning* the 1991 pennant, and altogether another thing to charge that the Cubs were not even a *baseball team* to begin with.)

Thus religious language, many would charge, is simply meaningless. "It snowed in Dallas last summer" is a sentence which is meaningful, but false. It makes a cognitively meaningful claim which happens to be in error. However, "Sum last dallies snow" makes no intelligible claim at all, but is simply meaningless (on any ordinary reading), conveying nothing which could be true *or* false.

Many critics of Christianity claim that its utterances, similarly, are not subject to being either true or false. They make no significant claims about the world (or about the world of human experience anyway). Thus they are cognitively meaningless, in one of the following ways.

The utterance of an exclamation like "Ouch!" is neither true nor false (it does not claim that anything is the case), but merely *expressive* in linguistic function. Many have maintained that religious language should be interpreted in the same way, as emotive talk rather than informative.

Others have gone further. For them, talk about God makes absolutely *no practical difference* to a person's observations of, or operations upon, the physical world. That is, the claims made by religious believers and the counterclaims made by their opponents have no distinct, conflicting cash-value in the public domain. Believers and unbelievers perceive and do the very same things. Accordingly, their respective interpretations or explanations of what they perceive and do are taken as quite meaningless - a difference which "makes no difference." Empty talk.

Others have gone even further than that. Religious discourse is for them simply unintelligible, like *superstitious gibberish* which cannot be rationally translated. When people talk about God, the after-life, miracles or salvation, they are engaging in a kind of linguistic ritual which is learned by imitation and passed along without cognitive understanding. That explains why the uninitiated - unbelievers - cannot have religious utterances "put in their own language," do not "catch on," do not feel intellectually compelled to affirm what believers say, and indeed care very little about it anyway. It is just meaningless babble.

(1) Verificationism

As indicated above, the meaningfulness of religious language has come under attack in philosophical circles in *two ways* during this century. We need to look at each one of them. The first can be designated the "verificationist" challenge to religious discourse, and the second designated the "falsificationist" challenge. Neither has proven successful.

In the earlier part of this century a school of thought known as logical positivism zealously promoted empirical science and disparaged any kind of metaphysics. According to the positivists, any proposition could be tested for meaningfulness by applying to it the "verification principle."

Logical positivism acknowledged two different kinds of meaningful sentences. Certain sentences in a language will be known to be true simply by means of analyzing them logically and linguistically (for instance: "all bachelors are unmarried" can be verified by reference to laws of logic and semantic definitions). However, such truths (called "analytical") are devoid of significant information about the world of experience or observation, and thus are trivial. For a sentence to tell us something interesting or have a factual component to it, its truth must be verifiable by looking beyond logic and meaning to one's observations or experiences in the world. Thus a significant (non-trivial) sentence is meaningful, according to the verificationist, only if it can be empirically confirmed; its truth or falsity would make a difference in our experience of the world. Meaningful sentences should be translatable either into observation terms alone (descriptions of immediate experience) or into a procedure used to confirm the sentence empirically.

The effect of applying the verification principle, the positivists concluded, would be the dismissal of all metaphysical claims (including theology) and all ethical claims as non-sense from a scientific standpoint. Since the religious language of Christians is filled with terms which are not taken from observation (e.g., God, omnipotence, sin, atonement) and claims for which there is no empirical means of confirmation (e.g., God is triune, Jesus intercedes for the saints), logical positivism's verification principle seemed to rule out the meaningfulness of what Christians said.

What's Sauce for the Goose is Sauce for the Gander

As it turns out, though, the effect of applying the verification principle of meaningfulness was much different than what the logical positivists had envisioned and intended. The result of applying the verification criterion across the board was, in fact, more than embarrassing to the critics of religious language.

You see, the logical positivist - just like the Christian - holds a particular view of the world, man, and reality as a whole. And this outlook leads the logical positivist - just like the Christian - to endorse and follow certain standards or rules for human behavior and reasoning. For the logical positivist, there is no supernatural reality, and man is simply one more random component of the physical world (though amazingly - almost miraculously! - complex). Given this outlook, men are obliged to live and speak in a certain way. Talk about persons, things or events which transcend the physical world must be forbidden; such talk must not even be countenanced as meaningful.

On the other hand, the Christian - as we have indicated - also has convictions about the nature of reality (e.g., God is a spirit who created the world) in terms of which men are obliged to live and speak in a certain way (e.g., offering praise to their Maker for all things, not talking as though there is anything more certain or authoritative as Him, etc.).

The logical positivist and the Christian both have worldviews, to put it briefly. Now, is it possible that the verification principle could disqualify the meaningfulness of the Christian's worldview as a worldview and *not do equal damage* to *the positivist's* worldview *as a worldview* as well? Not at all. As strictly empirical as the logical positivist may wish to be (sticking close to observational particulars), even he cannot escape using philosophical notions or abstract principles in his reasoning and theorizing.

The key component in the verificationist challenge to religious language was naturally the verification principle itself. This standard or rule was crucial to the worldview of the logical positivist. Accordingly, the Christian apologist must ask whether the verification principle itself is either (1) a trivial truth of logic and semantics, or (2) a sentence which can be empirically confirmed. Clearly, the answer is no to both options - in which case, the verificationist challenge to Christianity undermines *itself* (if it undermines anything).

This reply to the verification principle, used as a weapon against religious language and the intelligibility of Christianity in particular, reveals that verificationism was nothing but a rationalization of religious prejudice. And this prejudice against God-talk was so openly foolish that it self-destructed; it ruled out *its own* meaningfulness along the way.

The Dedicated Faith of the Positivist

For all his intellectual hostility to religion and Christianity, the verificationist was clearly just as "religious" in his devotion to his underlying presuppositions as was any devotee of Christianity.

For logical positivism, the practice of natural science, with its impressive results, was perfectly acceptable just the way it is; its authority and supremacy were taken for granted - in the same way that the Christian takes the Bible's ultimate authority for granted. Natural science did not call for critical appraisal and possible correction or reform, any more than the Christian thinks the Bible has errors to be rectified. Instead, according to logical positivism, the only thing natural science required was to have its empirical basis elucidated - which the verification principle attempted to do. Likewise, the Christian simply feels that the Bible needs to be elucidated and explained, for its value and truth should be obvious to any honest hearer.

Logical positivism was, ironically, very much like a religious faith - a faith in natural science (which might be called "scientism"). This became very apparent when the positivist attempt to elucidate the strictly empirical foundation of natural science came to grief over the self-refuting character of the verification principle. When the elucidation failed, the logical positivist did not relinquish his original faith in natural science at all. He acted like a "true believer." He held on to that commitment to science, regardless of its philosophical problems.

Of course, this dedicated faith of the logical positivist in natural science had not been acquired through the rigorous application of anything like the scientific method. Commitment to the foremost authority of natural science was not scientifically founded. It was a personal leap of faith.

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# The Problem of Religious Language (Part 1 Cont.)
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Too Restrictive While Too Inclusive

The other embarrassing thing about using the verification principle to challenge the meaningfulness of any language about metaphysics, theology or ethics was that the principle was simultaneously too narrow *and yet* too broad!

First, it was too narrow or restrictive because it ruled out sentences which any reasonable man, even positivists, would be willing to assert as meaningful (such as "There is a past," "Every person has a mother").

Moreover, the verification principle would have resulted in judging the intended result of natural science - the darling of the logical positivists! - to be meaningless. It is characteristic of natural science to aim to make universally quantified statements (such as "All whales are mammals") or to generalize laws which are likewise universal in character (such as "In all cases, water expands upon freezing"). Because of their universal character, however, no such statement can be fully verified by any finite person or finite group of researchers. In that case, scientific generalizations would fall into the limbo of meaninglessness.

It also proved impossible for dedicated logical positivists to successfully reduce even the simplest observation sentences completely to reports of sense-data. "An apple is on the table" became something akin to "A set of qualities [a, b, c...] is at x;y;z [three-dimension specifications] at t [temporal specification]." Even Rudolf Carnap's famous efforts to perform this kind of reductionistic translation were left encumbered with the language of logic and math (e.g., "sets") and language about location (e.g., "is at") which were undefined and alien expressions which did not express sense-data.

Thus the verification principle did not in the end prove friendly to those advocating it since it ruled out expressions and generalizations they would have wanted to retain as meaningful. Logical positivists have a dedicated faith in natural science, and yet their own verification principle would have rendered the program, procedures, and results of natural science meaningless. In a conspicuous way, the verification principle became unreasonably restrictive for the positivist.

On the other hand, though, there was a sense in which the verification principle proved embarrassingly open-ended, allowing *too many* expressions the privileged status of qualifying as meaningful. This rendered it unreasonably inclusive.

A. J. Ayer was perhaps the best known logical positivist in the English world. In the first edition of his famous book, *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer maintained that a sentence is meaningful when, in conjunction with other premises, an observation statement can be deduced which could not have been derived from the other premises alone.[1] This was entirely unhelpful. With a little imagination, a logician could use this criterion and show that *any* statement whatsoever can pass the test[2] - in which case Ayer's criterion of verifiability allows *all* statements to count as meaningful!

Keeping the Faith

It will not surprise the reader that Ayer attempted to remedy this situation by *revising* the verifiability criterion in the second edition of his famous book. This maneuvering reveals that Ayer was not a disinterested scholar, seeking in some neutral fashion to follow the evidence wherever it happened to lead. He had a particular conclusion in mind from the outset, thus desiring to shape and revise his espoused principles until they would (hopefully) prove what he originally wanted. Unbelievers are not very subtle about letting their own religious prejudices or presuppositions show. *They too* "keep the faith"!

Ayer now allowed for statements to be verified *either* directly or indirectly. But more importantly, he further prescribed that *the premises* which are conjoined with any test statement to deduce a further observation statement must include only observation statements, analytical truths, or independently verifiable statements.[3] This did not help. On Ayer's revised approach, a clever logician can still show any test statement whatsoever or its negation to be verifiable (directly or indirectly)[4] - thus rendering *all* statements once again meaningful.

What we find, then is that "verificationism" simply could not state its own position cogently. The verification principle of cognitive meaning was self-defeating; further, it was simultaneously too restrictive and yet too inclusive. Accordingly, verificationism was never in a position to successfully challenge the meaningfulness of religious discourse.

(2) Falsificationism

The second way in which unbelieving philosophers have attempted to criticize the meaningfulness of religious language in the twentieth century can be called "falsificationism." The falsificationists were dedicated to the authority of natural science, just like the logical positivists. However, the falsificationists were painfully aware of the failure of the logical positivists to formulate cogently, or save themselves from the fatal application of, the verification principle of meaning.

Still, they wanted to guard the honorific position of natural science and distinguish it clearly from disreputable ways of thinking, such as superstition, magic, metaphysics and religion. The language of religion (etc.), according to the falsificationist, does not belong to the domain of "genuine science." Science is tied to an empirical basis or procedural commitment which does not characterize religion. Upon analysis, the falsificationist said, the religious talk of believers was ultimately meaningless.

For the falsificationist, what makes genuine science "scientific" is that the theories which it will affirm are in principle *falsifiable* by means of empirical methods. This is a necessary condition for a truly scientific approach to what rational men will believe. Accordingly, if some theory or claim is not empirically falsifiable, this defect alone is sufficient to dismiss it as being cognitively meaningless. A meaningful claim in science must be, according to the falsificationist, subject to refutation (in theory). This does not mean that scientific claims must be refuted in order to be "scientific" (which would make all scientific claims false by definition!) - but that they must be empirically *refutable* in some conceivable circumstance.

The great advantage of taking this approach, if you advocate the supremacy of natural science and its procedures, is that the generalizations after which the scientist aspires (e.g., "all planets rotate around an axis") are not ruled out as meaningless by virtue of their not being fully verifiable. The generalizations of natural science, even those which are true, will always be open to refutation or falsification (e.g., just in case we ever find a planet that does not rotate around an axis). No longer is the incompleteness of induction a strike against the meaningfulness or scientific character of an empirical generalization concerning the natural world.

Flew's Famous Challenge

Perhaps the best known critique of religious language in the second half of the twentieth century came from the witty pen of the English philosopher, Antony Flew, and attacked the meaningfulness of religious discourse from the perspective of falsificationism. Flew made his point by rehearsing a parable once told by John Wisdom, then commenting upon the defect of theological utterances which the parable illustrated:

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 every 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 Sceptic 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?'

Having told the story, Flew continued with his commentary in sharp criticism of religious language:

Someone may dissipate his assertion completely without noticing that he has done so. A fine brash hypothesis may thus be killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications.

And in this, it seems to me, lies the peculiar danger, the endemic evil, of theological utterance....

For if the utterance is indeed an assertion, it will necessarily be equivalent to a denial of the negation of that assertion. And anything which 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 the negation 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.[5]

Flew was suspicious of religious discourse because he noticed that believers tend to hold on securely to their convictions, even when they are aware of apparent counter-evidence to those beliefs. They qualify and defend, then qualify and defend some more. It begins to look as though they would guard their theological claims against any and all objections or rebuttals. But if so, that would make religious convictions impervious to falsification - would render the religious language compatible with every conceivable state of affairs in the world. Since God-talk would not amount to denying anything, there would be nothing intellectually at stake in theological utterances. And thus, being unfalsifiable, they would not amount to genuine or meaningful assertions in the first place, suggested Flew. This is the problem with religious language.

[1] A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Press, 2nd. ed. 1952), p. 39.

[2] Any test statement whatever (T) can be conjoined with the premise "If T, then O" (where O stands for an observation statement). Notice that the premise just stated does not by itself logically imply the observation statement (O); nor does the observation statement follow directly from the test statement (T). Yet when T is taken with the premise suggested here, the observation statement (O) can indeed be deduced.

[3] *Language, Truth and Logic* (2nd ed.), p. 13.

[4] Alonzo Church briefly but devastatingly demonstrated this in his review of the second edition of Ayer's book (*Journal of Symbolic Logic* v. 14 [1949], p. 53). Where $O^n$ stands for an observation statement, any test statement whatever (T) can be conjoined with any observation statement ($O^1$) and the following complex premise: [(not-$O^1$ and $O^2$) OR ($O^3$ and not-T). When we do so, not-T passes the test of being *directly* verifiable (by disjunctive syllogism), whereas T can be joined with the complex premise given here to pass Ayer's test of being *indirectly* verifiable.

[5] Antony Flew, "Theology and Falsification," *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds. Antony Flew & Alasdair MacIntyre (New York: Macmillan Co., 1964 [1955]), pp. 96, 97, 98.

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# The Problem of Religious Language (Part 2)
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Are Strong Convictions As Such Non-cognitive?

Many subsequent writers who have reflected upon Flew's criticism of the meaningfulness of religious discourse have observed in one way or another that he failed to distinguish adequately between a *proposition* logically resisting falsification and the *person* who believes that proposition psychologically resisting its falsification.

A proposition or linguistic claim which is *logically* compatible with any and all states of affairs could, indeed, be said to resist falsification; as Flew properly observed, in theory nothing could

then conceivably contradict the proposition. It should be judged to be vacuous. But a person can resist being *persuaded* that his belief has been falsified by counter-evidence, *even when* the proposition he believes logically contradicts (rules out) certain states of affairs. He should be simply judged to be tenacious.

Flew confused a characteristic of human behavior (diligently defending one's beliefs) with a conceptual characteristic of some linguistic utterances (logically never needing a defense). And in so doing, he apparently did not notice that his polemic against "religious" discourse was in fact a polemic against all "committed" discourse - the utterances and linguistic responses of people who maintain certain beliefs dogmatically.

If we think about it for a moment, it is obvious that people can and do hold strong convictions about a number of things, not simply religious topics (narrowly understood). Sometimes beliefs about historical events are fervently propounded and defended (for instance, that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in assassinating President Kennedy). Sometimes beliefs about scientific matters are zealously championed (for instance, that silicone breast implants do not cause cancer, etc.). Just about any kind of belief can be held tenaciously and defended at great lengths - from auto mechanics to family honor. Part of what it means to say that people hold their convictions "strongly" is precisely that they *resist* having those convictions refuted. Does that imply the conviction must be non-cognitive?

Now then, scientists often display intellectual stubbornness with respect to their theories about the natural world. They can be quite committed to the conclusions they have reached and published. When evidence or reasoning is urged contrary to their views, they defend or qualify those views, and many times "dig in their heels" against refutation.[1] This is *not* usually taken as a mark that their scientific theories must be vacuous of any significant claim about the world - thus, being cognitively meaningless. It is usually just taken as a mark of a deep-seated belief about which they are strongly persuaded (or at least personally motivated). The logical status of the belief in question is not affected by the personal demeanor of the individual propounding or defending it (that is, the degree of his readiness to abandon the belief).

Since natural scientists - and anybody who has strong convictions about anything at all - behave the very same way that religious believers do, then Flew's criticism of the cognitive meaningfulness of religious language would, in fairness, need to be applied to the language of natural science as well. Scientific discourse which resists refutation, as it often does, would be consigned to the status of cognitive meaninglessness. That is not what Flew intended to accomplish! Indeed, in terms of any subject matter at all, the *only* "meaningful" discourse, according to Flew's line of thought, would be the discourse of those who are tentative, doubtful, or unsure of themselves - which is surely an unreasonable assessment.

The One-By-One Myth

Antony Flew's commentary upon the parable of the invisible gardener gains its persuasiveness from the myth that the beliefs held by people are accepted or rejected against the empirical evidence in a one-by-one fashion. That is, it is thought (erroneously) that we observationally test and rationally evaluate only one individual belief at a time. Supposedly the scientifically directed scholar takes a single proposition as *isolated* from every other proposition he would assert to be true, and then compares it to the empirical evidence which is available (as though the relevance and strength of such evidence are independently and indisputably established in advance).

This is, however, not at all an accurate description of the way in which people actually come to beliefs or test them against the empirical evidence. Moreover, from a conceptual standpoint, the picture of one-by-one scrutinizing of beliefs for empirical falsification is entirely artificial and impossible.

The beliefs which people hold are always connected to *other* beliefs by relations pertaining to linguistic meaning, logical order, evidential dependence, causal explanation, indexical and self conceptions, etc. To assert "I see a ladybug on the rose" is to affirm and assume a *number* of things simultaneously - some rather obvious (e.g., about the usage of English words, one's personal identity, a perceptual event, categories of bugs and flowers, physical relations), others more subtle (e.g., about one's linguistic, entomological, and botanical competence, the normalcy of one's eyes and brain-stem, theories of light refraction, shared grammar and semantics, the reality of the external world, laws of logic, etc.).

The network of *all* these beliefs together encounters the tribunal of any empirical experience.[2] When a conflict is detected between this network of beliefs and empirical experience, all we know is that *some kind* of adjustment in one's beliefs will need to be made to restore order or consistency. But there is no way to determine in advance *what specific change* a person will choose to make in order to eliminate the conflict within his thinking.

If Sam says that he saw a ladybug on the rose, but his friends all say that they saw no ladybug, which of his beliefs will he surrender? There are any *number* of possibilities. Maybe his friends do not know the difference between aphids and ladybugs. Maybe there was a spot on his glasses. Maybe the lighting was not right. Maybe he does not understand the use of the English word "rose." Maybe his friends are on drugs. Maybe they were looking at a different rose. Maybe the ladybug quickly flew away. Maybe he is dreaming. Maybe our senses deceive us. Maybe only the "pure of heart" can see gentle ladybugs, and his friends are perverse.... There are so many possibilities for correcting previous assumptions, ranging from what will seem reasonable to what seems to be fanatic or extreme. The point is simply that it is ambiguous or unclear just what the counter-evidence to Sam's remark will turn out to falsify.

Remember the story of the psychiatrist who was treating a man who believed that he was dead. Counseling the poor man about his neurosis seemed to get nowhere. Finally one day the psychiatrist decided to use an empirical test to convince the patient of his error. He asked the man whether dead men bleed, to which the man said no. At that point the psychiatrist pricked the man's finger with a pin and told the man to look and see: he was bleeding, so he could not be dead. To

this the patient responded that he must, then, have been wrong: dead men *do* bleed after all! The psychiatrist in this joke mistakenly thought that the bleeding finger would be counter-evidence that would falsify one particular belief of the patient (viz., that he was dead), when in fact it was equally possible that it falsified a related belief instead (viz., that dead men do not bleed).

Since empirical experience or evidence never decisively falsifies any particular belief within a person's network of convictions, it turns out that it is possible (even if it seems unreasonable to others) that a person can choose to treat *any* of his beliefs - about anything whatsoever - as central convictions relative to which any other belief should first be surrendered when counter-evidence is offered. That is, given the fact that a whole network of beliefs, rather than isolated individual beliefs, meet the test of observational evidence, then any belief *may* be treated as unfalsifiable. This is a characteristic of all beliefs. Falsifiability is not inherently a feature of any specific belief or a belief on any specific subject. It is as true of "religious" beliefs (narrowly understood) as it is of beliefs about the natural world.

The falsificationist does not successfully relegate religious language to the disgrace of meaninglessness, unless it is at the cost of consigning *all* discourse to the same disgrace. While there may be something wrong or fanatical about the particular *way* in which a believer guards his convictions from refutation, that fact still does not impugn the meaningfulness of his religious *language*. It is simply the language of strong conviction and firmly entrenched belief - the language of presupposition.

Flew Too Has His Presuppositions

Every thinker grants preferred status to *some* of his beliefs and the linguistic assertions which express them. These privileged convictions are "central" to his "web of beliefs," being treated as immune from revision - until the network of convictions itself is altered.[3] These central beliefs have cognitive significance (i.e., are not simply stipulated truths in virtue of definitions and logic), and yet they resist empirical falsification to one degree or another (depending on how fixed and central they are in the system).[4] The reality of human nature and behavior should be recognized: our thoughts, reasoning and conduct are governed by presuppositional convictions which are matters of deep personal concern, which are far from vacuous or trivial, and to which we intend to intellectually cling and defend "to the end."

As irreligious as Antony Flew is as a person, he too has fundamental commitments to which he "religiously" adheres. He attempts to bring his thinking and living into line with these personal presuppositions - which means that, when faced with what appears to be counter-evidence, he will qualify and defend the language by which he expresses those presuppositions. He treats utterances about them as unfalsifiable! As pointed out by John Frame, "both Flew and the Christian are in the same boat." Each have their presuppositions for which they believe there is extensive evidence, and each would make extensive changes within their respective systems of thought to guard those presuppositions - those heart commitments and life-governing convictions - from refutation.

Frame illustrates this by means of a clever parody which reverses the point of Flew's famous parable:

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. A man was there, pulling weeds, applying fertilizer, trimming branches. The man turned to the explorers and introduced himself as the royal gardener. One explorer shook his hand and exchanged pleasantries. The other ignored the gardener and turned away: "There can be no gardener in this part of the jungle," he said; "this must be some trick." They pitch camp. Every day the gardener arrives, tends the plot. Soon the plot is bursting with perfectly arranged blooms. "He's only doing it because we're here - to fool us into thinking this is a royal garden." The gardener takes them to a royal palace, introduces the explorers to a score of officials who verify the gardener's status. Then the sceptic tries a last resort: "Our senses are deceiving us. There is no gardener, no blooms, no palace, no officials. It's still a hoax!" Finally the believer despairs: "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does this mirage, as you call it, differ from a real gardener?"[5]

Like the challenge of the logical positivists, Flew's falsificationist challenge to the cognitive meaningfulness of religious language was a failure. In attempting to discredit the worldview of Christian faith, he (like the positivists) ended up discrediting the meaningfulness of all language, including the language of science and discourse about *his own* most cherished convictions. Self-refutation is the most painful refutation of all.

So we may conclude our response. The allegation of "problems" with the meaningfulness of religious language which have been advanced by both verificationists and falsificationists in this century have disclosed, rather, the religious prejudices and inconsistencies of Christianity's critics.

[1] Cf. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970 [1962]).

[2] "Our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body." This was observed and discussed by Willard Van Orman Quine in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 41.

[3] This does not imply that theory of knowledge is ultimately relativistic or voluntaristic. It does point to the necessity of transcendental argumentation in apologetics - showing how the Christian's presuppositions provide the preconditions of intelligibility (in science, logic, ethics, etc.) and doing an internal critique of competing philosophies of life to demonstrate that they do not.

[4] Presuppositions are not the only factor in the development of one's system of beliefs. Because of different secondary commitments, social influences, personal experiences, criteria of rationality, intellectual abilities (etc.), two people with shared presuppositions may nevertheless generate differing "networks" of belief.

[5] John M. Frame, "God and Biblical Language," *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. J. W. Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), p. 171.