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Theological Discourse and the Problem of Meaning

In the thirteenth century St. Thomas, with a certain amount of equanimity, declared that philosophy was one of the handmaidens of the science of sacred doctrine. History has shown that the handmaiden has not always been a docile servant. Indeed, in contemporary times she has apparently devised a more serious threat to her mistress than ever before and with more powerful weapons. She no longer attacks merely the truth of her mistress' key claims but also their meaning. In some cases she attempts to consign the mistress' discourse to the garbage heap of nonsense.

It is well known that God-talk was excluded from the realm of meaningful disclosure by most of the so-called logical positivists or logical empiricists, with their emphasis upon the verifiability criterion of meaning. Yet this criterion itself was plagued with a host of difficulties and went through many revisions, until in its most liberal form it amounted to the claim that, with the exception of analytic and tautological statements, no statements have meaning unless it is logically possible to secure some publicly observable evidence which would count for or against the truth of the statement. This revision, however, did not remove all the difficulties. Even in its most liberal form the criterion itself was not confirmable, and for many seemed to be somewhat of an arbitrary rule which was too narrow in scope to serve as an adequate general criterion of meaning.

Thus a number of philosophers have argued that an adequate general criterion of meaning is to be found by looking beyond the verifiability criterion to the actual functions performed by language. That is to say, sentences are seen to perform a number of roles in our language. As long as they are used according to the formal and informal rules governing their roles, so that no puzzles incapable of resolution or dissolution are created, they can be said to have meaning. In general, to know the meaning of a sentence is to know how to use it. To be sure, we know how to use sentences to make statements which are in principle verifiable, but we also know how to use sentences to make commands, to ask questions, to utter threats, to perform actions, etc. The verifiability criterion, then, is seen as a sub-set within the more general criterion of use or function.[1]

Analysis of the actual language situation reveals that language may serve many functions at once, and that there are important relations between these functions. That is not to say that sentences performing conative-emotive func-

1. Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), pp. 8e, 11e, 12e. See also G. J. Warnock, 'Verification and the Use of Language,' in P. Edwards and A. Pap (eds.), *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Free Press, 1965) pp. 715–25.

tions logically entail sentences performing an assertive or cognitive function. Questions, commands, performative utterances, and the like are neither true nor false, while assertive sentences express propositions which are either true or false. There is, nonetheless, an important relation between these types of functions. For example, J. L. Austin has shown that for performative utterances to be appropriate certain statements must be true.[2] That is, the rules governing the appropriate use of performatives 'presuppose' or 'imply' that certain states of affairs are the case. Similarly, in the case of other types of conative-emotive utterances it could be argued that they function properly only on the presupposition or implication that certain statements are true.

If this is so, we cannot dismiss the question of the assertion status of theological utterances, and claim as some have done that all such discourse serves only a noncognitive function.[3] There are some sentences, such as 'There is a God,' which believers have intended as straightforward assertions about reality. The logic of these utterances is not the same as that of the several types of noncognitive utterances, and to try to force them into the mould of noncognitive utterances is somewhat like trying to play a game without observing the rules of that particular game. Further, the appropriate use of the noncognitive utterances presuppose, as Austin indicated, that certain other sentences function as assertions. It makes little sense to say, 'My wife is more valuable than my dog,' unless I can formulate some descriptive sentences about my wife and my dog. Otherwise, how could anyone, including myself, know what I was evaluating?

Inquiry, then, as to whether or not there are some theological sentences expressing descriptive or cognitive meaning is of no little importance. Arguments supporting the claim that some theological sentences such as 'There is a God' have descriptive meaning have generally taken one or the other of two approaches. Either they have attempted to show that certain theological sentences label states of affairs which are in principle confirmable, and thus pass the test of the verifiability criterion, or they have tried to show that the key religious claim, 'There is a God,' is a necessary proposition asserting a necessary state of affairs. There are formidable problems confronting either approach. Obviously an exhaustive study of the many attempts to solve these problems is impossible within the scope of this paper. Instead, I shall attempt to present a brief critical discussion of a significant representative of each approach.

One of the interesting arguments in support of the cognitive status of religious utterances on the ground that they pass the verifiability test is that of

2. Cf. J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962) pp. 14f., 45–55.
3. Cf. W. T. Blackstone, *The Problem of Religious Knowledge* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1963), ch. VI, for a summary of the positions of a number of philosophers who make this claim. See also Paul Van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1963). Van Buren claims to accept the 'blik' theory of R. M. Hare.

John Hick.[4] For Hick a religious claim such as 'There is a God' is not verifi-
able with respect to the experiental data of this life. Since theism and
atheism represent total world-views, there are no data of this life which render
theism any more probable than atheism. There need be no difference between
the theist and atheist with respect to their expectations concerning these data.
Yet the issue between them is a real issue, because there is in principle the
possibility of eschatological verification. That is, it is logically possible to have
experiences after death of such a kind that they confirm religious faith and
indirectly confirm the key theological claim, 'There is a God.' Thus, this claim
is established as having cognitive status.

In order to make a case for eschatological verifiability as providing a
cognitive status for religious claims, Hick must resolve three important issues.
First, he must be able to show that what he describes as 'verifiable' is able to
do the job he wants it to do without violating the commonly accepted funda-
mental meaning of the concept. Secondly, he must be able to show that the
claim, 'There is continued personal existence after death,' is a verifiable
assertion. Thirdly, he must be able to show that it is possible to formulate
relevant, conceivable truth-conditions which, if they held in the afterlife,
would guarantee beyond a reasonable doubt the truth of the claim, 'There is a
God.' If this claim has no assertive status, then evaluative utterances concern-
ing God and utterances concerning God's evaluations fail to function appro-
priately.

With respect to the first issue, Hick apparently understands the verifiability
criterion in terms of confirmability, for he affirms that removal of grounds for
rational doubt is the central meaning of verification There is a certain amount
of unavoidable vagueness here, but this move is necessary if, for example,
sentences concerning past or future are to be actually assertive of past or
future states of affairs. The nature of the subject matter determines what must
be done to verify a proposition; and generally 'verifiable' means that in
principle everyone could perform this operation, although it does not follow
from this that everyone has performed, or ever will perform, such an opera-
tion. Further, Hick maintains that 'verifiable' and 'falsifiable' are not correlative
terms. While with respect to most propositions there is a symmetrical relation
between verification and falsification, there are some propositions which are in
principle capable of verification but not of falsification One example of such a
proposition is: 'There are three successive sevens in the decimal determination
of π.' Concerning this proposition Hick says: 'So far as the value of π has been
worked out, it does not contain a series of three sevens, but it will always be
true that such a series may occur at a point not yet reached in anyone's calcula-
tions. Accordingly, the proposition may one day be verified if it is true, but
can never be falsified if it is false.'[5] The claim that we shall experience per-

4. Cf. John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957);
Philosophy of Religion (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1963) ch. VII; John Hick (ed.), *The
Existence of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1964) pp 253–74.
5. Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God*, p. 258.

sonal existence after death exhibits a similar kind of asymmetry. If true, it will be possible to verify it after death. However, it will be logically impossible to falsify it for we cannot experience ourselves as having no experiences.[6] In short, then, Hick means by verifiability, confirmability, and confirmability does not necessarily involve falsifiability.

Even if this understanding of the verifiability criterion is acceptable, there still remains the issue as to whether or not the afterlife claim is indeed verifiable. If to make such a claim is to utter a self-contradiction, then the state of affairs expressed in the claim is logically impossible, and thus not verifiable. This is a very difficult and complex issue, concerning which not even the positivists themselves have been in agreement.[7] It would seem that the crux of the issue lies in the meaning of person-words such as 'I' and 'you' and the problem of personal identity. Is it the case that Antony Flew's slogan is correct, namely, that, 'People are what you meet,'[8] and nothing more? In this sense, can a person meet himself? Can other people meet him when he is asleep and dreaming? Are states of consciousness nothing but the activity of physical organisms? Do words such as 'sensations,' 'consciousness,' and 'thoughts' function in precisely the same way as words designating aspects of bodily behaviour? Is it not the case that memory-traces, as well as some degree of bodily continuity, provide one with a sense of personal identity, and that neither one alone exhausts the meaning of personal identity in ordinary usage?

On the basis of our present empirical knowledge it seems clear that neural brain-processes are a causally necessary condition for the occurrence of states of consciousness. But if A is a necessary condition for B, A and B are not one and the same thing; A could hardly be a necessary condition for itself. If B is causally dependent on A, then it follows that there are two things, A and B. In terms of empirical possibility, it seems that consciousness is utterly dependent on brain activity, but to say this is by no means to say that consciousness *is* brain activity. While it may be empirically impossible, it does not follow that it is logically impossible for my states of consciousness to occupy the body of my family's cat or to occur without a physical body at all. Thus H. H. Price has argued for the logical possibility of an imagery afterlife, in which there could be a spatial relation of a sort not related in any way to physical space, a personal identity in terms of memory-traces and image-shapes, and a meeting

6. Cf. *Ibid.*

7. Cf. Virgil C. Aldrich, 'Messrs. Schlick and Ayer on Immortality,' in H. Feigel and W. Sellars (eds.), *Readings in Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949), 171–74.

8. A. Flew, 'Can a Man Witness his own Funeral?' *Hibbert Journal*, 54 (1955–56), 249. See also the 'Introduction' to A. Flew (ed.), New York: *Body, Mind, and Death* (Macmillan, 1964) p. 8. For interesting responses to Flew cf. Ian Ramsey, 'Persons and Funerals: What do Person Words Mean?' *Hibbert Journal*, 54 (1955–56), 330–38; William H. Poteat, ' "I will Die": An Analysis,' *Philosophical Quarterly*, 9 (1959), 46–58; and H. H. Price, 'Personal Survival and the Idea of another World,' in John Hick (ed.), *Classical and Contemporary Readings in Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1964) pp. 364–86.

of persons in terms of telepathic communication and telepathic apparitions.[9]

Similarly, I fail to see any self-contradiction in Hick's argument that imme-
diately upon death a 'replica' of the person with the set of memory-traces
which he had before death could come into existence It could be, says Hick,
'composed of other material than physical matter and ... located in a resurrec-
tion world which does not stand in any spatial relationship with the physical
world.'[10] Thus I think that Hick's description expresses a state of affairs which
is logically possible, and that his description is verifiable.

While Hick's view of the assertion status of the afterlife claim may be sound,
the third issue involved in his view – namely, that of formulating relevant,
conceivable truth conditions that must obtain in the afterlife if the assertion
status of the sentence, 'There is a God,' is to be guaranteed beyond a reason-
able doubt – poses the most serious threat to the soundness of his position.
Obviously an afterlife is a necessary condition for the verification of the theistic
claim in this 'next life,' but it is certainly not a sufficient condition. The after-
life might simply be a natural fact and theistically as ambiguous as this life.
Hick admits that we cannot give a precise description which would remove this
ambiguity completely. Yet he thinks that we can give a description sufficient
to remove grounds for rational doubt, at least for the man of faith. This
description would point to two possible conditions. The first would be 'an
experience of the fulfillment of God's purposes for ourselves, as this has been
disclosed in the Christian revelation,'[11] and the second would be an agape-
centered communion with the Christ in the kingdom of God. While these two
conditions would not provide direct evidence for God as creator and infinite
being, they would provide indirect evidence. On the basis of experiencing these
two conditions we could accord authority to Christ's teaching concerning God
as transcendent being.

At this point Hick's thesis encounters at least three difficulties. First, since
it is the assertion status of the theistic claim which is at stake, to use as con-
firming statements certain sentences in which the term God appears is like
pulling ourselves up by our own boot straps. As Kai Nielsen has indicated,
'Hick's possible verifying experiences (God's purposes for ourselves being
fulfilled and communion with God through Christ) already make reference to
the very conception whose factual intelligibility is in question.'[12] Now it may
be possible to redescribe the possible confirming experience in such a way that
the concept of God is not logically entailed, and still do the job that Hick
wants done. But as the description now stands it does seem to involve a
question-begging technique.

A second difficulty with Hick's thesis lies in his final appeal to trust in the
authority of Christ concerning God as transcendent being, the acceptance of
this authority arising out of our post-mortem experience with Christ in the

9. Cf. H. H. Price, 'Personal Survival and the Idea of Another World.'
10. Hick, *The Existence of God*, pp. 265f.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
12. K. Nielsen, 'God and Verification Again,' *CJT*, 11 (1965), 137.

kingdom. The issue still at stake is the assertion status of the sentence, 'There is a God,' meaning by 'God' creator and infinite being. In the Introduction to *Faith and Knowledge,* Hick affirms that 'faith as trust (*fiducia*) presupposes faith (*fides*) as cognition of the object of that trust.'[13] But is it not the case that, in the last analysis, Hick reverses the position of these two types of faith and ultimately appeals to afterlife trust in the authority of Christ in order to justify the assertion status of 'There is a God'? Again, a criticism by Kai Nielsen seems well-taken, namely that 'the question of what is meant by X cannot be settled by faith and trust.'[14] Meaning is a matter of syntactics and semantics as well as pragmatics.

A third difficulty raised by Hick's thesis concerns the nature of sentences which pass the test of the verifiability criterion. No verificationist has ever claimed that such sentences could do anything more than assert contingent states of affairs. If a sentence passes the verifiability test, then it is a label for a state of affairs which may or may not be the case and thus expresses a contingent statement. But do we want to affirm that the theistic claim expresses a contingent statement and labels a contingent state of affairs? Bowman L. Clarke has put the problem in the following way: 'Even if it were possible that one could ... formulate truth conditions for the sentence (There is a God), the sentence would be a contingent statement, and the existence of God, a contingent fact. Since these truth conditions are such that they may be found to hold or they may not be found to hold, this means that God may exist or he may not have existed. In fact, according to this theory, the world could have existed and God at the same time not have existed. This does violence to one of the key notions in the concept of God – that of Creator. If it means anything it means that the world could not have existed without him.'[15]

In the face of the three difficulties just discussed, it seems to me that Hick's appeal to the possibility of eschatological verification fails to provide the most crucial theological utterance, 'There is a God,' with assertion status. While it may perform a useful function with respect to the cognitivity of some other theological utterances, it does not do the job with respect to this key claim.

Let us turn now to a representative of the second general type of approach mentioned earlier in this paper, namely, that 'There is a God' is a necessary statement asserting a noncontingent state of affairs. In his book *Language and Natural Theology,* Bowman L. Clarke has presented a careful and skilful argument in support of this position.[16] I can present here only a brief and perhaps overly truncated summary of his position.

It seems to me that there are three fundamental foci in Clarke's argument. First, there is the attempt to define clearly what is meant by necessity and to

13. Hick, *Faith and Knowledge,* p. xii.
14. K. Nielsen, 'Eschatological Verification,' *CJT,* 9 (1963), 274.
15. Bowman L. Clarke, *Language and Natural Theology* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966) p. 43f.
16. I believe that this is one of the most significant books of recent times in philosophy of religion.

show that necessary statements may provide us with information concerning something more than linguistic conventions. Secondly, there is the attempt to show that a formalized linguistic framework may be developed in such a way that 'There is a God' becomes deducible from the rules of the language. Thirdly, there is the attempt to show that necessary statements are significant and useful, rather than trivial.

With respect to the first point, Clarke contends that necessary statements are those concerning which no particular occurrences or events would be considered as relevant to the determination of their truth or falsity because the logical rules and definitions are sufficient in determining their truth values.[17] It does not follow from this, however, that these statements merely express linguistic conventions and convey no information about the world, as the positivists, followed in this case by John Hick,[18] have claimed. According to Clarke, this claim concerning necessary statements is quite ambiguous. One could interpret it to mean that necessary statements express no contingent facts; but in that case it would be trivial, since no one would question this. It might be taken to mean that necessary statements are dependent on conventional rules and definitions, while contingent statements are not, but clearly this would be wrong, since contingent statements are dependent upon the very same rules and definitions as well as upon extralogical facts. Again, this claim might be taken to mean that necessary statements assert something about terms only, rather than about extralinguistic entities. Positivists often assert, for example, that the meanings of the conclusions of inferences are contained already in their premises. But how could one demonstrate that the conclusion of the inference, 'if Chicago is north of Atlanta and Atlanta is north of Miami, then Chicago is north of Miami,' is a part of the premises? It is certainly not a part of either premise by itself, since in that case both would not be needed, and it is hardly divisible into two propositions, one of which is a part of the first premise and the other of the second. To be sure, the conclusion follows from the premises in such a way that to assert the premises and deny the conclusion would be self-contradictory, but 'follows from' and 'be part of' are not synonyms. There is additional meaning in the conclusion which is not a part of the premises, and since this is true in the case of our particular example, it would follow that the positivists' claim is at least questionable.

Further, is not the claim that necessary statements are about words only a confusion of metalanguage and object language? As Clarke puts it: 'Take, for example, the assertion that the statement, "Socrates is mortal," is either true or false. Such an assertion is clearly about a linguistic entity, namely, a statement, and such an assertion would be in our metalanguage. On the other hand, the assertion, "Socrates is mortal or it is not the case that Socrates is mortal," is clearly a statement about a non-linguistic entity, namely, Socrates. If [the positivists] are maintaining that necessary statements are solely about linguistic entities, then they are quite wrong.'[19] Certainly necessary statements, unlike

17. Cf. Clarke, *Language and Natural Theology*, pp. 68, 70.
18. Cf. Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, p. 10.
19. Clarke, *Language and Natural Theology*, p. 67.

contingent statements, add nothing to our contingent knowledge of the world. The necessary statement in the above quotation does not add to our knowledge concerning Socrates, but it does reflect the way reality is. Thus Clarke argues that if, as almost everyone would agree, it is intelligible to say that a logically indeterminate statement asserts a contingent state of affairs, then it also seems intelligible to say that a logically false statement asserts an impossible state of affairs and that a logically true statement asserts a necessary state of affairs.[20]

Perhaps the most important focus in Clarke's argument is his attempt to develop a formalized linguistic framework of such a character that 'There is a God' becomes deducible from the rules of the language. There are at least four stages in his argument on this point. First, the criteria to be used in the development of a formalized language are designated. These are the Whiteheadian criteria of logical consistency, coherence, applicability and adequacy.[21] If these criteria were observed, the linguistic framework would be such as to allow for the formation of any descriptive statement, true or false, that we wish to assert about the empirical world. That is, it would be descriptive of 'the common world declared to us in experience.'[22] Secondly, the linguistic framework, if it is to be one in which we can talk about every area of experience, must be able to furnish an adequate basis for classical mathematics.[23] Thirdly, the word 'God' is to be thought of as the name of an individual, for which a consistent definite description can be given in terms of the primitive predicates – that is, the predicates used in describing the empirical world. The traditional attributes of God follow from the definite description[24] and are definable in terms of the linguistic framework. Fourthly, the statement, 'There is a God' is deducible from the rules of the language. Clarke gives an illustration of how this can be done even in terms of Nelson Goodman's nominalistic linguistic framework.[25]

In working out his complicated argument, Clarke has been primarily concerned with the issue of the assertion status of the theistic claim. The result of his system is that 'There is a God' is shown to have cognitive meaning on two counts. First, it is necessarily true in the system – i.e., deducible from the rules of the system alone. Secondly, the name 'God' is given a definite description of the type already mentioned. Further, since it is a necessarily true statement in the system, it is implied by any kind of statement which can be formulated in terms of the rules of the language.

The objection might be raised that Clarke's argument is simply the old ontological argument warmed over. But this is not the case, for Clarke is not attempting to predicate existence to God or to argue from the concept of God to the object. Rather, he has argued that the statement, 'There is a God,' is necessarily true because it is deducible from the rules of the linguistic framework. Yet this is not just an uninterpreted statement, for the name of the individual 'God' is defined in terms of primitive predicates which also characterize the empirical world.

20. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 69.   21. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 124–27.   22. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 72, 123f.
23. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 132–42.   24. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 88–122.   25. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 152–69.

With respect to the third major focus – namely, the significance of necessary statements – Clarke argues that, if the axioms of a linguistic framework characterize what is meant by the common world disclosed to us in experience, then 'to accept a necessary statement as true is to use the syntactical and semantical rules of that framework in investigating and describing the common world disclosed to us in experience.'[26] Obviously, this is methodologically significant. Further, while this system of what Clarke calls 'natural theology' in which 'There is a God' is a necessary statement is religiously empty, in the practical sense of failing to indicate how a man should live his life, it is, nevertheless, of very great significance in providing a foundation for the meaningfulness of religious language. This 'natural theology,' as Clarke sees it, is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for revealed theology.[27] Revelation has to do with the manifestation and activity of God involving 'particular people' and 'particular communities,' and revealed theology has to do with 'statements about God's evaluations of the world.'[28] But revelation and revealed theology are meaningless unless the natural theologian is able to give descriptive meaning to the term 'God' and to the notion of God's evaluation of the world. So Clarke says: 'If the task of natural theology is an impossible task, then the verbal expressions of revealed theology, as well as the verbal expressions of natural theology become questionable. In this way revelation is dependent upon natural theology – that is, for its meaningfulness.'[29] Further, it is through natural theology that 'religion can find its connection with the rest of the intellectual life of the community.'[30]

As far as I can see there can be no question concerning the logical validity of Clarke's total argument. However, questions may be raised concerning the adequacy of the extra-logical axioms – viz. the statements descriptive of the common world disclosed in experience, and the rules in terms of which the conceptual scheme or linguistic framework is operative. As Clarke admits, the value of his definite description and deduction of 'God' is 'relative to the linguistic framework in which it was formulated [and other] metaphysical languages with different primitive terms and postulates are no doubt possible.'[31] But Clarke challenges the critic to produce the criteria of his own linguistic framework, so that the discussion may be carried on at this level. If the critic agrees that logical consistency, coherence, applicability, and adequacy are appropriate and reliable criteria for evaluating frameworks, then a fruitful discussion of the various frameworks can take place. If no criteria are agreed upon, there is, of course, no solution to the problem, and for that matter no dispute.[32] Certainly some criteria are required if there is to be any meaningful language at all. Those used by Clarke seem to demonstrate a pragmatic type of validity in that they enable him to construct a linguistic framework descriptive of the common world disclosed to us in experience. I fail to see what other

26. *Ibid.*, p. 174.   27. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 176.
28. *Ibid.*   29. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 81.   31. *Ibid.*, p. 168; cf. p. 128.
32. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 165.

justification can be given for any criteria of linguistic frameworks. The criteria are not subject to proof, any more than are the principles of logic, but they are necessary if there is to be any meaningful language and communication. Thus Clarke's argument is founded upon as strong a base as is possible for any argument.

In conclusion, it seems to me that while both Clarke and Hick have understood clearly that the most serious challenge posed for theology by contemporary philosophy is the problem concerning the assertion status of the sentence, 'There is a God,' Clarke's proposed solution is more successful in answering this challenge in terms of the meaning of the word 'God' as it has been understood generally in the Christian tradition. This is not to say that Hick's position is without merit. If, indeed, the afterlife is an intelligible concept, it will make sense to appeal to the possibility of eschatological verification in support of the assertion status of such claims as 'Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead,' or 'I shall experience in the afterlife an unambiguous agape-centered communion with Jesus in the kingdom,' or 'the New Testament claims concerning the fulfillment of personal and communal life will be realized unambiguously in the afterlife.' If the cognitive status of 'There is a God' is already established, through its being shown that it is a necessary statement asserting a necessary state of affairs, then it will make sense to claim that such verifiable experiences would provide clues to the nature and activity of the deity and that these sentences have assertion status. Together with the theistic claim as assertive, they will form a foundation in the light of which these and other types of religious sentences may perform appropriately other functions, such as the performative and the ethical. I am suggesting, then, that both positions might be combined in certain ways in answering the challenge of contemporary philosophy. Thus theology could gain a warrant of confidence in being discursive about the content of faith.