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**CHRISTIANITY AND MODERN
EMPIRICISM**

By

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THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE

22 DINGWALL ROAD, CROYDON, SURREY

CHRISTIANITY AND MODERN EMPIRICISM

By BASIL MITCHELL, M.A.

SYNOPSIS

It is possible to discern three stages in the attitude of empiricist philosophers to Christianity. The first (represented by Hume) takes the form of an attack on traditional metaphysical *arguments*, including the proofs of the existence of God. The second (represented by the "Logical Positivists") impugns the significance of theological *statements* on the ground that they cannot be verified empirically. The third (here called "Logical Empiricism") poses a dilemma: *either* theological statements are empirically verifiable *or* they are not *assertions*. If they are not assertions, they may still possess meaning, but of a non-factual sort.

In the face of this third challenge three positions are possible: (1) to accept the dilemma and admit that theological statements are not, strictly speaking, assertions; (2) to accept the dilemma and maintain that they satisfy the criterion of an assertion; (3) to try to escape between the horns of the dilemma.

The paper examines an answer of the first type, viz. the theory that theological statements express attitudes; and an answer of the third type, viz. the theory that they express "presuppositions" which are more fundamental than assertions. It finds neither of these answers satisfactory and suggests that theological statements are assertions couched in analogical language.

I

I was asked in the first instance to read a paper on "Christianity and Logical Positivism." For reasons which will, I hope, emerge in the course of the paper, I emended the proposed title to the one which now appears.

The sort of modern philosophy which I have called "Modern Empiricism" is by no means the only kind of philosophy alive to-day. But it is dominant at Oxford and Cambridge and its influence is increasingly felt elsewhere. Very few contemporary philosophers in this country or America could claim to have been entirely untouched by it.

There are two things about "Modern Empiricism" which make it worth while trying to explain its bearing on Christian theology. The first is that very little has been published by its exponents, and most of that has been in technical journals, so that recent developments are unfamiliar to the educated world at large and are in some danger of being misunderstood. The second is that it is often thought that such philosophy

is inherently anti-religious and should, therefore, be deplored by all right-minded men. There is doubtless some justification for this impression. I shall not presume to decide the question, but will endeavour to make clear what the fundamental issues are. Inevitably the account will have to be simplified; one can only hope to indicate trends, bearing in mind that this is not a well-defined "school" of philosophy, but a general way of approaching philosophical problems.

There has been a change in the relation between philosophers and theologians which may conveniently be represented in a parable¹ :—

Fifty years ago, in the heyday of British Idealism, theologians and philosophers thought they understood one another pretty well. They might disagree—indeed they frequently did—but each thought he understood what the other was up to. The theologian asserted, interpreted and defended certain doctrines about God and the world. The philosopher was also concerned with fundamental questions about the nature of things, and he too put forward assertions about reality—propositions which he undertook to demonstrate. Thus there could be, and were, controversies between them about the nature of God: was He an Impersonal Absolute, as some Idealists maintained, or was He, as Christians believed, in some sense Personal?

Thus the theologian and the philosopher occupied rival pulpits. The philosopher was a scarcely less venerable figure than the theologian, and he was expected to have something to say about the meaning of life. Perhaps, even, his was a somewhat superior position, in that *he* undertook to prove what he said, whereas the theologian was compelled to resort to obscure concepts like "faith" and "revelation."

Then, one day, without warning, the philosopher put his lecture notes aside, got down from his pulpit and announced that he was going to devote himself to mathematical logic and to the analysis of science and common-sense. It was, he now said, no part of his business to discover truths about God and the universe. He possessed no means not open to other men of discovering the nature of things. His job was simply to examine the meaning of statements.

This, it must be admitted, was disconcerting to the theologian, who was inclined to regard his colleague's actions as frivolous and irresponsible, but so far no impediment was offered to his own preaching. But some little time later, the philosopher looked up from his new pursuits and pronounced, in a perhaps unnecessarily provocative tone, that the theologian was talking nonsense. Let him go on preaching by all means, but he must not suppose that there was any meaning in what he said. "Metaphysical propositions" were meaningless pseudo-propositions, and propositions about God were metaphysical. For his (the philosopher's) researches into the meaning of meaning had led him to rule out any proposition as meaningless if it was not empirically verifiable—verifiable, that is, by sense-experience.

¹ This is reprinted from an article, "Christianity and Modern Philosophy," which appeared in *The Socratic*, published by Blackwell, 1951.

It now seemed that the philosopher's apparently harmless (if irresponsible) preoccupation with the analysis of meaning was more dangerous than it had looked at first sight. And the theologian's anxiety was not entirely allayed, when, as sometimes happened, the philosopher came and sat beneath his pulpit and murmured assent to his propositions (or, at least, quasi-assent to his quasi-propositions). "For," said the philosopher, "though these utterances of yours are not, of course, strictly *true*, because not, of course, strictly *meaningful*; yet they have a certain use and a certain value. They are nonsense, yes, but *profound* nonsense."

This rather frivolous parable serves to illustrate the change that has come over philosophy in this country during this century and has altered the whole question about the relation between philosophy and Christianity. Where the parable is misleading is that it gives the impression that the *whole* of this development is relatively recent; whereas, as I hinted earlier, it has its origin in the traditional English Empiricists.

There are, perhaps, three phases in this development, and I hope you will bear with me, if I try to sketch them briefly.

1. The first phase, which culminated in David Hume, took the form of an attack upon traditional metaphysical *arguments*—including, of course, the traditional proofs of the existence of God. These proofs, as they appear, for example, in Aquinas, purport to be strict demonstrations. The Ontological proof started with the definition of God as a perfect being and argued that a being so defined must exist: for if he did not exist, he would be less than perfect. The Cosmological proof started with the existence of finite being and argued in different ways to the existence of God. These are typical metaphysical proofs in that they purport to show that something or other exists—*must* exist—given that something else exists. This has been the method practised by all speculative philosophers (or at least the method they claimed to practise).

Against this sort of argument Hume forged a weapon aptly termed "Hume's Fork." About any piece of reasoning Hume asks, "Is it a piece of abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?" or "Is it a piece of experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?" It must, he thought, be one or the other. If the first, then it is capable of strict demonstration, but cannot prove the *existence* of anything. If the latter, then it can establish facts, but cannot be strictly demonstrated; it can only be shown to be more or less probable.

Hume was, in fact, drawing a sharp distinction between deductive reasoning and inductive reasoning; the first being the sort of reasoning appropriate to logic and mathematics, the second the one appropriate to the experimental sciences.

Now the sort of metaphysical reasoning represented by the traditional proofs fell into neither class and seemed to be a cross between the two—an illegitimate cross. The point cannot be more trenchantly put than in Hume's own words:—

"When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make! If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, 'Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning

quantity or number?' No. 'Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?' No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion" (*Enquiry*, Section XII).

Into the flames then, if this argument is correct, go the traditional proofs of the existence of God. For of these, the Ontological argument, which starts with a definition and purports to prove that that which is defined *exists*, cannot in fact to do more than show that God, *if* He exists, must exist necessarily; it cannot show that He *does* exist: the Cosmological argument implies that to assert that anything at all (this paper, for example) exists and to deny that God exists involves a logical contradiction. But this is surely not the case.

At this point I shall ask leave to state dogmatically that Hume was right (as most contemporary philosophers would, I think, agree). But I would not admit that the traditional proofs are therefore worthless. It is, I think, a mistake to regard them as strict demonstrations.

This attack was a serious one; but it bore almost entirely on natural or rational theology—on attempts to *prove* God's existence. It was still open to Christians to base their beliefs, not upon proof, but upon faith. And this was the course Hume himself recommended. "The truths of our religion," he said, "find their best and most solid foundation in Faith and Divine Revelation."

2. The second phase of the empiricist attack threatened even this position. In this country it was, perhaps, first formulated explicitly by Professor A. J. Ayer in his *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936). Ayer presented what has come to be known as the "Logical Positivist" thesis in its simplest and boldest form. Significant statements fell into two classes—analytic (or *a priori*) and empirical. Analytic statements included those of logic and mathematics and definitions of all kinds. These did not, strictly speaking, convey information, although they sometimes appeared to do so. They simply expressed our determination to use words or other symbols in certain ways. They told us nothing about the world. Empirical statements were any statements that could be verified by the senses. Such statements, and only such statements, were factual, i.e. imparted knowledge about the world.

It will be seen that this weapon of Ayer's resembles Hume's Fork very closely; it was an up-to-date version of this instrument specially sharpened by modern logic (we might call it Ayer's Axe). The important difference is that, whereas Hume's dichotomy was of two sorts of *reasoning*, Ayer's was of two sorts of *statement*.

The effect of this difference can be seen if we attend to the uses to which the two weapons were put. Hume's Fork, as we saw, was fatal to natural theology, but spared "Faith and Divine Revelation." Ayer declared that the propositions of metaphysics, ethics and theology were nonsensical pseudo-propositions: strictly speaking they had no meaning, and this went for revealed truths as well as the rest. It was, therefore, no defence against the positivist attack for theologians to say that they did not attempt to *prove* their doctrines, but based them solely upon faith and divine revelation, because what was being challenged was not the *truth* of these statements, but their *meaningfulness*.

Ayer summed up his position in the famous verifiability principle. "A sentence has meaning if, and only if, some conceivable sense experience is relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood." This, he thought, enabled one to dismiss as nonsensical the propositions of theology, metaphysics and ethics. For they were none of them capable of being verified in sense experience. If this contention could be made good, considerable economies could be effected in philosophy, which would be shorn of metaphysics and ethics and virtually restricted to logic and epistemology.

Certain consequences followed as to the nature of philosophy itself. For if only empirically verifiable statements were meaningful, then, unless the statements of philosophers were empirically verifiable, they too were meaningless, as opponents of Positivism were quick to point out. The paradox, however, had already been embraced by Wittgenstein, in his influential *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922). "The result of philosophy is not a number of philosophical propositions, but to make propositions clear." "The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts—philosophy is not a theory but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations." Philosophical statements were not in any ordinary sense statements. They were not, that is, statements about the world, about things. Philosophy was "talk about talk," as distinct from science, which was "talk about things."

It is, I think, helpful to an understanding of "Logical Positivism," to realize that its exponents were primarily philosophers of science. They sought to discover a formula which would distinguish clearly between scientific statements and all other statements. They thought they had found this in the verification principle. The only accredited methods for finding out about the nature of things were scientific. The traditional notion that philosophers could—just by thinking and without experiment—discover facts about the world was in their opinion (as in Hume's) a mistake.

Thus, broadly speaking, the only meaningful statements (with the exception of definitions, etc.) were those that were empirically verifiable; i.e. scientific statements. All other statements, although their grammatical form might be similar, were in fact nonsense. So a division of labour was arranged between philosophy and science. It was the function of science to distinguish between what was true and what was false; it was the function of philosophy to discriminate between the meaningful and the meaningless.

"Logical Positivism" was thus a very simple doctrine (and this simplicity proves a great attraction to undergraduates, for whom it promises a welcome reduction of the problems they need take seriously). But its simplicity was achieved at the cost of a certain air of paradox, as often happens. (Philosophy seems to progress through the mutual irritation of radical, distorting minds and sensible, synoptic ones.) For it led one to class as nonsense all sorts of things that people were constantly saying—not only philosophers and theologians, but plain ordinary

people. To this the reply was made that "nonsense" was being used in a very strict sense that was not necessarily pejorative. Some kinds of nonsense might be very useful, even necessary. Some religious talk, for example, might be remarkably *profound* nonsense. And ethical talk was nonsense of high pragmatic value.

3. Through the raising and answering of objections of this kind "Logical Positivism" began to alter its character, and the empiricist attack on religion entered its third phase—a phase in which it ceases largely—perhaps altogether—to be an attack.

Strictly speaking, I suppose, a "Logical Positivist" is one who regards the verification principle as the sole criterion of meaning. In this sense of the word there are few Logical Positivists in the field to-day (Ayer is, perhaps, still true to the orthodox position). I think it is worth making this clear, since it is often said that philosophy at Oxford and Cambridge is "Logical Positivist." In fact, very few Oxford or Cambridge philosophers would call themselves "Positivists." But they have all, it is fair to say, been greatly influenced by "Logical Positivism."

The "Logical Positivists" were, in spite of their views on the nature of philosophy, something of preachers. They not only distinguished science from metaphysics: they wished to eliminate the latter. Indeed, the word "metaphysical" became the rudest word a philosopher could apply to another philosopher's views; as indeed it still is. Ayer *campaigned* against metaphysics and theology in a holy war against cant and obscurantism. "Logical Positivists" drew their recruits from amongst the hard-headed and the tough-minded. The elimination of theology and metaphysics was not just a consequence of the Positivists' reflection upon the nature of meaning: it to a large extent guided that reflection. So that one can almost see the verifiability principle being amended and adjusted in such a way as to preserve as meaningful all that the Positivist approves, e.g. science and commonsense beliefs, while eliminating all he objects to, e.g. theology and metaphysics. It proved in practice unexpectedly difficult to find, as it were, the correct setting.

The difficulty of the project suggested that it might be mistaken. Instead of looking for a clear-cut criterion for distinguishing between the meaningful and the meaningless, it might be more profitable to recognize different sorts of meaning. Thus, for example, rather than embrace the paradox that moral judgments were meaningless, philosophers began to suggest that they were indeed meaningful, but that the sort of meaning they possessed differed from that of straightforward factual statements. It might be called "emotive meaning;" so that although people who differed on a moral matter could not be said to disagree in *belief*, they could be said to disagree in *attitude*. Another suggestion was that moral principles were best understood as neither statements of fact nor expressions of emotion, but rules; and, as such, were rather like generalized commands or imperatives. On this view the *interesting* question was, "How do you justify moral rules or principles? What form does moral reasoning take?" A recent book on Ethics has the title *The Place of Reason in Ethics*.

This is, you will have noticed, a very traditional title. And the book itself, although written by a "Post-positivist" philosopher, is largely concerned with the traditional themes. This represents a considerable development from the dogmatic Positivism of *Language, Truth and Logic*. It is tempting, then, to say that we are now back where we were, on the right lines, and that "Logical Positivism" was an unfortunate aberration. But this would, I think, be a mistake. The Positivist distortion of Ethics served to bring out more clearly the respect in which moral judgments differed from statements of fact. It concentrated attention on the *logic* of Ethics. Moral philosophers had often tended to treat moral judgments as if they dealt with matters of fact which were yet not matters of *observable* fact; and this led them to talk about "the world of values" as if it existed in some supersensible sphere.

I have taken Ethics as a convenient illustration, but what has happened in Ethics has happened in other departments also. Philosophers who adopt this approach (they are sometimes called "Logical Empiricists") differ from the "Logical Positivists" in this characteristic way: in place of the dogmatic *assertion* that those statements alone have meaning which are empirically verifiable, they ask the *question*—of any class of statement—"What is the logic of statements of this kind?" that is to say, "How are they to be verified, or tested, or justified?" "What is their use or function, what job do they do?"

The task of the philosopher, on this view, is not himself to discover truths about the world—such discovery will fall within some particular science or discipline—but to examine these sciences and disciplines with a view to understanding how each works and how it is related to the rest.

Now, to return to our main theme, how will philosophers of this sort approach theology? Three things are, I think, clear:—

- (1) They will not, as the Idealists did, put forward a world-view or philosophy of life, which might conflict with Christianity; because they regard the construction of such world-views as no part of the philosopher's business.
- (2) They will not rule out theological statements from the start, on the ground that they are meaningless, as the "Logical Positivists" did.
- (3) They will ask the same sort of question about theological statements as they do about statements of other kinds, viz. "How are they verified?" "What sort of arguments or observations tend to confirm or refute them?"—in short, "What is their logic?"

It will, I hope, be apparent why I hesitated to call this third phase of Empiricism an *attack* on theology at all. The asking of such questions is, or purports to be, an entirely neutral undertaking; an attempt to understand, not to refute.

II

My main object in the first part of my paper has been to convey, if possible, the trend, the tone or atmosphere of contemporary Empiricism. I want now to indicate what seem to me to be the problems it raises for

Christian Faith. For this purpose I think it is important to concentrate on what I have called "the third phase," rather than on "Logical Positivism" in the strict sense. It does not help to concentrate your fire, as, e.g., Dr Joad does in his *Critique of Logical Positivism*, on views which are no longer widely held.

I have said that this latest phase is not confessedly anti-religious. One reason for this is that it has become—at least in Oxford and Cambridge—the *orthodox* position, and that means that the people who adopt it, i.e. who practise the method—are no longer only those who are positivists by temperament—the hard-headed and the tough-minded; they include people of all temperaments. Nor are they all agnostics; there are plenty of Empiricists who are Christians.

So we ought to beware of assuming from the outset that the whole movement is by nature anti-religious and to be deplored by all right-minded men. Indeed one might go further, and say that it has introduced greater sensitiveness and flexibility into philosophical discussion: and greater readiness to look for significance in unlikely places.

But—with this foreword—it is time to consider the sort of answers such philosophers are in fact inclined to give to their question: "What sort of statements are theological statements?" or "What is the logic of statements about God?"

I said that they no longer regarded the verification principle as the sole criterion of meaning. They do, however, largely accept it as being in some form the criterion of *factual meaning*. That is, they regard a sentence as expressing an assertion (as distinct from, e.g., a command, exclamation, attitude, etc.) if and only if it can be verified in sense experience; or rather, because very few statements can be *conclusively* verified, if and only if it can be conclusively *falsified*. Thus, to take the text-book example, "All swans are white" cannot be conclusively verified, because we cannot observe all swans. But when black swans were discovered in Australia that did conclusively *falsify* the generalization.

Actually this is still too simple, because there are many statements, which are undoubtedly assertions, which cannot be conclusively falsified either, e.g. statements about other people's feelings and intentions. But—and this is the final formulation—in the case of all these statements we know—or "have some idea"—what counts as evidence for or against them. So that the criterion of an assertion or factual statement becomes this: a sentence expresses an assertion if and only if some possible sense experience could constitute evidence against it. If a statement fails to pass this test, it will not be dismissed as nonsensical in the fashion of the Logical Positivists, but it will not be classified as an assertion.

This looks at first sight like a trivial, purely verbal question. What does it *matter* whether statements about God are regarded as assertions or not? But it is not, I think, simply verbal. The point is this: can we be said to be making an assertion, that is, saying something which could be true or false, *if no conceivable evidence could tend to prove or disprove it*? Can we be said really to understand an assertion, unless we have some idea

what would constitute evidence for or against it? To understand a statement implies being able to recognize what it would be like for it to be true, and what it would be like for it to be false; or, failing that, what would, at least, *count* for or against its truth.

Now many, perhaps most, empiricist philosophers do not see how statements about God can pass this test. They complain that Christians, when asked what they would allow to count as evidence against their belief in God, protest that nothing *could* count as evidence against it. Suppose we take the statement, "God created the world." We clearly are not in a position to compare God-created worlds with non-God-created worlds and to recognize in ours the marks of a God-created world. No conceivable experiment could test the issue—which is, therefore, not an empirical one; not a question of fact. Or take "God loves mankind." (I quote from a recent article¹ by A. G. N. Flew.)

"Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are reassured. But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his heavenly father reveals no obvious signs of concern. Some qualification is made—God's love is not a 'merely human love' or it is 'an inscrutable love,' perhaps—and we realize that such sufferings are quite compatible with the truth that God loves us as a father (but, of course . . .). We are reassured again."

But, Flew argues, to say "God loves" and then to make these qualifications is to take away much of the meaning from the word "love." It is, in his expressive phrase, "to erode the analogy." And if sufficient qualifications are made, the analogy is entirely eroded and the sentence ceases to make any assertion at all.

In face of the Empiricist's question, there are three possible positions:—

- (1) To accept the criterion and claim that theological statements satisfy it: and are, therefore, assertions.
- (2) To accept the criterion and agree that theological statements are *not* assertions but are something else: expressions of attitude, perhaps, or policies for living, or presuppositions.
- (3) To reject the criterion.

Now most Logical Empiricists, including some of them who are Christians, would take the second position. They would argue that theological doctrines have the *form* of assertions or statement of fact, but really are not. And the interesting question for them becomes: what sort of statements, then, are they? Some more subtle (e.g. Professor John Wisdom), would boggle at so sharp a dichotomy between assertions and other uses of language. They would say, "Well yes, in a *sense* they are assertions, but not in the ordinary sense": or "they are illuminating—they reveal to us what in a sense we didn't know before, although, of course, they don't provide us with information; don't introduce us to any new facts."

III

Let us then consider these alternatives:—

- (1) To accept the criterion and claim that theological statements satisfy it.

¹ *University* (published by Basil Blackwell), vol. i, No. 1.

The difficulty here is that Christians, however much some of them may say that their doctrines are "hypotheses," are not prepared to treat them as the scientist treats *his* hypotheses. Elijah on Mount Carmel was prepared to submit his God to empirical tests, but religious people nowadays are more sophisticated and do not recommend experiments on the efficacy of prayer. Christians, in fact, refuse to let anything count against their beliefs. But if the doctrines of theology are compatible with any state of affairs whatsoever; if, that is, there is nothing which they deny, which they rule out: then what can they possibly be asserting?

The theologians' traditional answer to the question, "How can we talk about God?" is "by analogy." Our language must be stretched to do it. Thus if we say, "God loves mankind as a father loves his children," we are saying that God's attitude to us is analogous to a human father's love for his children. But we cannot hope to know fully what it is for God to love. Sometimes the inadequacy of the comparison is so evident that it seems more proper to say that God's love is utterly different from man's love. But if we insist on this, then we can no longer justify the use of *this* word about Him rather than any other. Unless the analogy holds, however tenuously, we might as well say God hates as that He loves.

It is just this danger about analogy that the empiricist philosopher notices. It is frightfully easy for an analogy to get cut off from its base. You will remember Flew's statement of this (quoted on p. 90).

But to say "God loves" and then to make these qualifications is to take away much of its meaning from the word "love;" it is to "erode" the analogy.

If this danger is to be avoided, the theologian must be prepared to make a stand somewhere; to say that this or that, if it happened or had happened, would count against his belief. But this, apparently, is just what he will not do. He is not prepared to admit that anything at all could count against his beliefs. This being so, the empiricist is compelled to say that these beliefs are not, although at first sight they appear to be, *assertions*.

These are some of the objections to the *first* position. Whether they are conclusive, I do not propose to consider at this stage. Certainly a good many philosophers—including some who are Christians—regard them as conclusive.

(2) To accept the criterion and agree that doctrines about God are not assertions, but something else in a misleading grammatical form—attitudes to life, policies for living, or presuppositions.

The first two—attitudes to life, policies for living—should perhaps be considered separately from the third—presuppositions. For the view that religious doctrines are presuppositions calls in question the dichotomy between assertions and expressions of attitude in terms of which the empiricist dilemma is often couched: and it is, perhaps, misleading to try to fix it on one or other horn of the dilemma.

(a) Expressions of attitude. This answer accepts the contention that Christian doctrine is not concerned with matters of fact: that it does not comprise primarily a set of assertions (although the Creed, of course, *contains* assertions, e.g. "crucified under Pontius Pilate"). Rather is

it a comprehensive attitude towards life. Dogmatic formulae, although they *look* like assertions, are not really such, but serve to express a distinctive emotional attitude towards the world (or, if the "policy" view is preferred, a *resolve* to treat the world in a distinctive way). The best representatives of this general position would insist on both aspects. As a speaker in a recent broadcast symposium said, "Whenever people outside religious tradition talk about religion, they nearly always assume that the essential element is one of feeling. If you're going to classify it, it's much more a matter of the will."

This does not mean in the least that they are not important. Nothing could matter more than a man's whole attitude to life. To classify religious dogmas in this way is not to degrade them. It only seems so to us because we habitually overrate the descriptive, fact-stating, use of language. Nor must we suppose that they are like poetry, which we may accept or reject as we please. For there is no other language which will serve this unique purpose. After all, religious conversion is not primarily a rational process of assent to propositions; it is of the nature of a critical decision or commitment, where personal example counts for more than intellectual conviction. We should note also the place of ritual observances in the religious life. The Creed itself is normally said as part of a ritual, and what the worshipper then says is "I believe in God," not "I believe *that*. . . ."

Now—I have never seen this theory about the nature of Christian doctrine thoroughly worked out, but it is clearly the readiest answer for the anti-metaphysical philosopher who is impressed by the claims of Christianity (and it is important to remember that the number of these is increasing, and that their sincerity is beyond dispute).

But I am convinced, nevertheless, that it will not do. It comes near to defining God in terms of human attitudes. This is not the God to whom we pray as "Maker of all things, Judge of all men."

Yet it serves as a reminder that Christian belief is closely bound up with the whole life of the believer and intimately affects his attitudes and policies; so that, if a man professes to believe, but makes no attempt to live the Christian life, we may properly doubt the genuineness of his belief.

(b) A second possible answer is that given by Mr Hare in the *University* symposium and, if I understand him aright, by Professor Hodges in his *Christianity and the Modern World-View*. They accept the contention that the doctrines of Christianity are not, in any ordinary sense, assertions. They are *presuppositions* (Hare invents the word "blik"); and these are more fundamental than assertions in that they provide the framework within which assertions are made and tested. They are, in fact, so fundamental that we often do not know we have them, and become touchy when they are questioned. Other people's presuppositions we call "prejudices."

This answer seems to escape between the horns of the empiricists' dilemma; for presuppositions by their very nature are such that nothing can count against them. They determine what for any man shall count as "counting."

Is it equally clear that nothing can count for them? It is tempting to say that a "blik" is known by its fruits. But, of course, the "blik" will itself determine what value to set on the fruits. There can be no question of assessing them independently. The argument is circular. But, then, perhaps this sort of argument always is circular? Perhaps you have to make a "basic acceptance" before you can argue at all. Professor Popper's "irrational faith in reason"¹ is relevant here. You can only persuade a man to be reasonable in so far as he is already reasonable; so you cannot rationally persuade a man to be reasonable. In the same way you can find evidences for God, if you start by believing in Him; but until you believe you will not admit them to be evidences. This is incisively expressed by Karl Jaspers. "A proved God is no God. Accordingly, only he who starts from God can seek him. A certainty of the Existence of God, however rudimentary and intangible it may be, is a premise, not a result of philosophical activity" (*The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, p. 36).

This is a position of great power, and no one who has heard Professor Hodges develop it can fail to be impressed by it. It does seem to reflect a fundamental type of Christian experience, and it draws attention to an important feature of all Christian witness. To be a Christian *does* involve a basic acceptance, and the Christian clearly is not (and ought not to be) prepared to treat the articles of his Faith as provisional hypotheses to be set aside as soon as experience begins to tell against them. Moreover, this position provides the apologist with a telling rejoinder. He can now say to the critic: "You too have presuppositions, which you cannot justify: only I know what mine are."

It has, moreover, from the philosophical point of view the advantage that it deals in one and the same move with the objection that statements about God cannot be proved and the objection that they cannot be regarded as assertions. For it says that they are more fundamental than assertions and that they are logically prior to all proof.

Does this theory, then, give a satisfactory philosophical account of the nature of religious belief? (Remembering that to be satisfactory any such account must not only be philosophically acceptable, but must represent the way faith actually operates.)

Before we can attempt an answer to this question we need to examine more closely what having a presupposition or a "blik" is like. Mr Hare found it necessary to invent the word "blik" to express what he had in mind; so that one must be cautious about supposing that it is equivalent to "presupposition" as used by Hodges. Hare defines "blik" by giving examples. His most detailed example is that of a lunatic who thinks all dons want to murder him. No matter how harmless-seeming a don may be, this man will explain his behaviour as so much clever camouflage of his murderous intentions. The lunatic has a "blik" about dons. Another example would be if a man believed that everything happened by pure chance. In neither instance could anything count against the "blik;" which, however, remains significant because, in

¹ K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. ii, p. 218.

each case, it is the contradictory of sane beliefs which clearly *are* significant.

Professor Hodges takes as his example what he calls "the Peter Wimsey type of argument" :—

"In Dorothy Sayers' book *Strong Poison* we begin with Harriet Vane in the dock and a strong case against her. The police, having no prepossessions in her favour, argue thus: all the known facts are against her, therefore she is guilty. Lord Peter Wimsey, who has a prepossession in her favour, argues thus: all the known facts are against her, but she is not guilty: therefore the known facts are not *all* the facts. And then he considers what the other facts must be, and seeks them out and finds them."

These two cases have one thing in common. Both the lunatic and the lover refuse to allow anything to count against their beliefs. It is, therefore, concluded—in terms of the empiricist's dilemma—that these beliefs do not constitute assertions. In this respect also they resemble the faith of the Christian, for he will allow nothing to count against his beliefs. It seems reasonable, then, to classify all these as "presuppositions."

But consider what this implies. It implies that these beliefs are so fundamental that *nothing could constitute evidence against them*. It is not that there just *happens* to be no evidence; there *could* be none. Presuppositions are not the sort of thing about which it *makes sense* to talk of there being evidence for or against them. The whole notion of "evidence" is here inappropriate.

But in the case of religious faith, is this so? Does the Christian maintain that the fact of evil does not count against the proposition: "God loves men as a father loves his children"? Surely not: for it is this very contradiction which generates the most intractable of theological problems, the Problem of Evil. It seems to me that the Christian does not deal with this problem, as Flew suggests, by so modifying the meaning of "love" that there is no longer any contradiction between "God loves mankind" and "God permits undeserved suffering." Still less does he deny the point, the relevance of the unbeliever's objection. He is likely to feel its force all too poignantly himself. It seems to me that what lends conviction to this talk of "presuppositions" is the feeling that, come what may, a Christian must not allow his faith to be sapped.

The Christian has, indeed, made a decision and is committed; but this is not to say that there are no reasons for his decision and no grounds for his commitment. It seems to me that the thinkers I have been considering have been so deeply impressed by this fact of total commitment that they have been led to represent a fact about the believer's attitude, as if it were a fact about what he believes. In this way, the articles of the Christian creed come to be regarded as instances of a peculiar class of statements which are inherently immune from the test of experience.

I think this becomes clear if we turn again to the examples, the lunatic and the lover. The striking thing about them is how different they are; as the sane from the insane. Hare's lunatic *means* what you or I would mean if we said that all dons wanted to murder us. His expectations are what ours would be and he takes the precautions we should take. But he has no *grounds* for his assertion. His trouble is that, where dons are concerned, he can no longer assess the value of evidence. But Lord

Peter Wimsey *has* grounds for his faith in Harriet, and he admits that the police evidence is, so far as it goes, evidence against her. If he said in Court, "Nothing *could* constitute evidence against Harriet. The notion of 'evidence' simply doesn't apply here," the court would be unimpressed. What he in fact does is set to work to get evidence. But he seeks the evidence because he has faith in Harriet.

There is this further consideration. Kierkegaard (and many others) have wished to emphasize that the venture of faith calls for a risk. "Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty."

Now if what is believed has the status of a presupposition and as such is proof against any empirical test, there can be no risk. The risk depends on the "objective uncertainty." This means that (if I am right) we must go back to the answer first suggested: to accept the criterion and claim that statements about God can satisfy it. I do not myself see how we can *reject* the criterion.

At this point I ought, perhaps, to remember that I am, in Kierkegaard's phrase, an "existing individual" and give you frankly my own opinion, so far as I have been able to form one. My object hitherto (and it remains my chief object) has been to present a kind of report on the present state of the question.

It seems to me that the Empiricist's question is a pertinent one and that traditional theologians have been more aware of it than many philosophers think. For, as we have seen, the traditional answer to the question, "How can we talk about God?" is "by analogy." This seems to me to be the right answer. But, if we give it, we must recognize the danger that Flew calls attention to—the danger of "eroding" the analogy.

The typical articles of the Christian creed are, I believe, assertions, but assertions couched in "analogical" language. The believer does indeed take a risk in accepting them, for they cannot be demonstrated. Instead there is "objective uncertainty." There is a great deal that counts against Christian belief about God—notoriously, the facts of evil. But the believer does not allow these things to shake his faith. The Christian bases his belief in the existence of a loving God on the life and death of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels and interpreted in them and in the tradition of the Church. If these things had not happened, or had happened otherwise, his faith would have lacked its main foundation. But, this given, he continually finds further evidences. This is not to deny that all these events can without contradiction be interpreted differently. If a man is in doubt which interpretation to adopt, he can only go through the story again and ask himself which interpretation is the more consistent with itself and with his whole experience of life.

In drawing this analogy between faith in God and faith in a person, I must not seem to overlook the essential difference: which is the reference of Christian thinking to a Transcendent Being.

It is this reference which calls for the use of analogy. It is, perhaps, less misleading to talk, as Dr Farrer does in *The Glass of Vision*, of "images." We have reason to believe that the "saving events" of the Gospel are interpreted from the beginning; and we find them interpreted in terms of certain dominant "images" or "analogies"—the Son of God, the Good Shepherd, the Father, the Suffering Servant, the Prodigal Son.

It may be misleading to talk here of analogy, because that suggests that we are in a position to state what the analogy is—i.e. to indicate the respects in which the analogy holds and those in which it does not hold. But this is just what we cannot do. When we say that God is "just" or "merciful" or "loving" or "active," we know that His justice, mercy, love and activity are not the same as ours; but we cannot indicate with any precision what the differences are. We are thrown back on the Gospels and the Gospel parables. These we accept with their simple and direct meanings. I cannot, I think, do better than quote from a recent article by I. M. Crombie:—

"We do not know how what we call the divine wrath differs from the divine mercy (because we do not know how they respectively resemble human wrath and mercy): but we do know how what we *mean* when we talk about the wrath of God differs from what we mean when we talk about his mercy, because then we are *within* the parable, talking within the framework of admitted ignorance, in language which we accept because we trust its source. We know what is meant *in the parable*, when the father of the prodigal sees him coming a great way off and runs to meet him, and we can therefore think in terms of this image. We know that we are here promised that whenever we come to ourselves and return to God, he will come to meet us. This is enough to encourage us to return, and to make us alert to catch the signs of the divine response: but it does not lead us to presume to an understanding of the mind and heart of God."