CHAPTER I

THE MEANING OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

How does one understand or even talk about the transcendent, such as God and the like? This question has not always been obvious or so it seems; however, it became more obvious during the time of the Enlightenment and even more so to contemporary philosophy. Philosophers came upon this problem almost through what could be called the "back door". What seems to have preoccupied the philosopher's mind was how does one come to understand reality or acquire knowledge at all. In the pursuit of that question and the desire to acquire formal "nonsense" detectors they increasingly sought to understand the meaning of religious language.

Traditionally, theology answered all these questions; men like Aquinas and Descartes felt they had the answers pretty well locked up, with natural theology and reason providing the key. The Enlightenment, however, led men to think about how one comes to know, and philosophy has never been the same since. While the roots of this philosophical movement began somewhat earlier, the writings of British empiricist David Hume became a major watershed on many of the issues. Hume, reared in a Calvinist home, discarded the faith in his teens and began a career of independent study and writing that has deeply influenced the thinking of Western philosophy. His immediate influence was to appreciably enhance the role of skepticism in mundane affairs in a broad sense, and in particular skepticism's role in dealing with supernatural claims. Though dead by 1777, his writing had an impact on German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who increased the damage to the rational foundation of religion and Christianity in particular. More will be written on Kant in the second half of this thesis.

What in particular did Hume see that affected the philosophy of religious language? In his classical essay, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume notes:

> If we take into our hands any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, <u>Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?</u> No. <u>Does it contain any experimental reason concerning matter of fact and existence</u>? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it contains nothing but sophistry and illusion.[1]

It was clear that Hume was skeptical of religious claims: he classified them as sophistry and illusion. Hume's distinctions, now called analytic (abstract reasoning concerning quantity and number) and synthetic (experimental reason concerning matter of fact and existence), left theological statements in their own category, the meaning of which was "up for grabs".

<div align="center">Logical Positivism</div>

A. J. Ayer followed this lead in his book *Language, Truth, and Logic* by clarifying the following: ". . . that not only from a tautology nothing but a further tautology can be validly deduced, but also that the existence of a god (such as the God of Christianity) has no way of ever being probable." Note the following excerpt:

> What is not so generally recognized is that there can be no way of proving that the existence of a god, such as the God of Christianity, is even probable. Yet this also is easily shown. For if the existence of such a god were probable, then the proposition that he existed would be an empirical hypothesis. An in that case it would be possible to deduce from it, and other empirical hypotheses, certain experiential propositions which were not deducible from those other hypotheses alone. But in fact this is not possible. It is sometimes claimed, indeed, that the existence of a certain sort of regularity in nature constitutes sufficient evidence for the existence of a god. But if the sentence "God exists" entails no more than that certain types of phenomena occur in certain sequences, then to assert the existence of a god will be simply equivalent to asserting that there is the requisite regularity in nature; and no religious man would admit that this was all he intended to assert in asserting the existence of a god. He would say that in talking about God, he was talking about a transcendent being who might be known through certain empirical manifestations, but certainly could not be defined in terms of those manifestations. But in that case the term "god" is a metaphysical term. And if "god" is a metaphysical term, then it cannot be even probable that a god exists. For to say that "God exists" is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false. And by

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[1]Selby-Bigge, L. A. *Hume's Enquiries*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 165.

the same criterion, no sentence which purports to describe the nature of a transcendent god can possess any literal significance.[2]

Ayer's first statement on tautology is the line of argument used against the ontological argument (*a priori* argument). Ayer's argument against the probability of theological claims is aimed at the conclusion of the *a posteriori* arguments (teleological, moral, and cosmological).

This classical statement of the position of the Vienna Circle of philosophers is more prominently known as logical positivism. From these distinctions, it was thought a rule of verifiability of meaning could be constructed. It came to be known as the verifiability principle of meaning. This principle says that a statement is literally meaningful just in the case it is either analytically or empirically verifiable.[3] The empirically verifiable aspect was thought to include propositions that had the logical possibility for some person to have sense-experience that would help determine if the statement was true or false. It then sees all metaphysical statements as neither true nor false since they cannot be empirically verified. In effect, they are stating that religious metaphysical statements literally say nothing at all about the world. They are not meaningful.

Geisler is aware of both the historical process at work here and the philosophical implications at hand. In his book *Philosophy of Religion*, he states:

> Much of contemporary religious language is concerned with the adequacy of empirically grounded language models that are appropriate to religious discourse. The background of this interest is traceable to David Hume, the later Vienna Circle of philosopher in the early 1900s, and the views of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

He further remarks:

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[2]A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952), pp. 114-15.

[3]Ibid., Introduction, p. 5.

Granted this twofold categorization of meaningful statements, one could prognosticate the future of theology without too much difficulty. It, too, is destined for the "the flames."[4]

Before looking at Geisler's answers to this problem, we need to examine some ideas of the philosopher Wittgenstein in order to see what may appear to be an attractive solution to the theologian's problem. Ludwig Wittgenstein's analysis of language connected the meaning of words with their use. To understand a sentence is to understand a language and to understand a language is to understand life. The meaning of an expression should then be understood in its context as part of a life form. These "language games", as they are referred to, seemed to be an out for the theologian. As one philosopher put it, why should we relegate God-talk to the language game of science and find it wanting? Why not try to understand religious language as another language game based on another form of life--religious?[5] However, this distinction does not answer the objection of the positivists because it only avoids their rule of empirical verifiability; it does not answer it. What needs to be found, from a theist's point of view, is an error or problem with the verifiability principle itself.

One question that was raised was whether the verifiability principle of meaning passes its own test for being literally meaningful. The answer is "No". This is an embarrassing development for the dogmatic and intolerant views of Ayer and other positivists, one from which they may have never recovered.[6] Of course, some technical maneuvers were tried to escape this logic, but they, too, proved unfruitful. The most noteworthy was the attempt to place the

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[4]Norman L. Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), pp. 290-291.

[5]Benjamin Tilghman and Steven Trammel, "The Meaningfulness of Religious Language", philosophy of religion debate sponsored by Manhattan Christian College at the Forum Theater, Kansas State University, 5-6 April 1978.

[6]William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc., 1978), p. 100.

verifiability rule in a class of definitional (rational reconstruction).[7] But, as Elton Trueblood comments on this:

> Sometimes, when hard pressed on this point, the positivist says he is not making a dogmatic statement about reality, but is merely giving a definition. But in that case, all of the revolutionary results, which are supposed to follow from the method, disappear. A man cannot eliminate whole areas of human experience merely by a definition of his own making.[8]

Furthermore, revisions of the principle could not improve the fortunes of logical positivist substantially because it either was so restrictive it did not allow what many positivists wanted to accept in the scientific realm, or too broad as to allow literal meaning to any statement.[9]

Geisler is aware of some of these problems. He refers to it in Christian Apologetics in his chapter on agnosticism and in Philosophy of Religion in his chapter on model religious language.

In Philosophy of Religion Geisler writes:

> The problem with Ayer's strict view of meaning became apparent: his principle of verifiability was neither purely tautological nor empirically verifiable. It, too, was meaningless on his own grounds.[10]

Again he comments in Christian Apologetics:

> Reply to Ayer's Acognosticism. As has already been noted, the principle of empirical verifiability as set forth by Ayer is self-defeating. For it is neither purely definitional nor strictly factual. Hence, on its own grounds it would fall into the third category of non-sense statements. Ayer recognized this problem and engaged in recovery operations by way of a third category for which he claimed no truth value but only a useful function. Verifiability, he contended, is analytic and definitional but not arbitrary or true. It is meta-cognitive, that is, beyond verification as true or false but simply useful as a guide to meaning. This is a classic but ill-fated move for two reasons. First, it no longer eliminates the possibility of making metaphysical statements. Rather, it admits that one

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[7]Carl G. Hemple, The Empiricist Criterion of Meaning, in Logical Positivism, ed Alfred Jules Ayer (New york: The Free Press, 1959), p. 125.

[8]Elton Trueblood, *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1957), p. 197.

[9]Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 100.

[10]Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion* p. 292.

cannot legislate meaning but must look at meaning of alleged metaphysical statements. But if it is possible that some meaningful statements can be made about reality then we are left with complete agnosticism and acognosticism. Second, can cognitive restrictive meta-cognitive statements be made without self-stultification? It seems not, for to restrict the area of what is meaningful is to limit the area of what could be true, since only the meaningful can be true. Hence, the attempt to limit meaning to the definitional or to the verifiable is to make a truth claim that must itself be subject to some test. It cannot be tested, then it becomes an unfalsifiable view, a "blik" of its own.[11]

Geisler is saying in effect that when they construct a new category, they actually (1) sneak their own metaphysical (meta-cognitive) statements in the back door while closing the front door on religious statements, and this is not fair; and (2) if one does test the third category by itself, the rule self-destructs; and if one does not test the rule by itself, then it is unfalsifiable and therefore not a meaningful assertion of fact on its own grounds. Geisler is correct.

Presumably, Geisler leaves it at that and does not point out the other objections such as (1) the arbitrary limitation of experience bearing on the refutation or confirmation of a statement (which could have been included in his chapter, "Testing the Reality of Religious Experience" in Philosophy of Religion); or (2) the problems of reshaping the rule so that it could neither rule out too much or two little. One must assume that Geisler felt one fatal blow was enough. This reply, however, did not prove enough to extinguish the still-nagging doubts of many philosophers as to the cognitive status of religious language. The shifting of the discussion followed along the lines of falsification rather than verification.

The question that these analytical philosophers ask of religious statements is whether there is any evidence that would weigh decisively against theism. If not, then are these statements factual assertions at all? It should be noted that for some reason philosophers seem to enjoy using parables to illustrate the force of their arguments. This discussion begins with Antony Flew's recapitulation of John Wisdom's tale to illustrate the problem of theology and falsification:

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[11]Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), p.23.

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. (For they remember how H. G. Well's <u>The Invisible Man</u> could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movement of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet the Believer is not convinced. 'But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.' At last the Skeptic despairs, 'But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?'

Flew's point, of course, is that what begins as an assertion ("some gardener must tend this plot") ends up eroded with so many qualifications that it no longer seems to be an assertion at all. He sees theists as having the same problem and concludes with this question for theists: "'What would have to occur or have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or of the existence of, God?'"[12] In other words, statements like "God loves like a father loves his children," or "God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life,"[13] conclude with countless qualifications such that they end up not being assertions at all.

This question has powerful force when one considers that theists claim that God loves us, and yet, that Christians have endured incredible pain and apparent injustice in this life. Does this count as evidence against the statement, "God loves us and offers a wonderful plan for our lives"? The answer, from a theist's perspective, is usually "No", but then the theist must justify this. There are at least two ways that theists have replied to this problem. R. M. Hare responded with his own parable:

A certain lunatic is convinced that all dons want to murder him. His friends introduce him to all the mildest and most respectable dons that they can find, and after each of them

[12]L. Miller, ed., *Classical Statements in Faith and Reason* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 222.

[13]Bill Bright, *Four Spiritual Laws* (San Bernardino, CA.: Here's Life Publishers, 1967), p. 2.

has retired, they say, 'You see, he doesn't really want to murder you; he spoke to you in a most cordial manner; surely you are convinced now?' But the lunatic replies, 'Yes, but that was only his diabolical cunning; he's really plotting against me the whole time, like the rest of them; I know it I tell you.' However many kindly dons are produced the reaction is still the same.

Now we say that such a person is deluded. But what is he deluded about? About the truth or falsity of an assertion? Let us apply Few's test to him. There is no behaviour of dons that can be enacted which he will accept as counting against his theory; and therefore his theory, on this test, asserts nothing. But it does not follow that there is no difference between what he thinks about dons and what most of us think about them-- otherwise we should not call him a lunatic and ourselves sane, and dons would have no reason to feel uneasy about his presence. . .

Hare's conclusion is this:

Let us call that in which we differ from this lunatic, our respective bliks. He has an insane blik about dons; we have a sane one. It is important to realize that we have a sane one, not no blik at all; for there must be two sides to any argument--if he has a wrong blik, then those who are right about dons must have a right one. Flew has shown that a blik does not consist in an assertion or system of them; but nevertheless it is very important we have the right blik.[14]

To summarize:

1. Bliks are "interpretations" of the world, not assertions in the sense that they have any empirical evidence that could count against them.

2. Everybody has bliks.

3. Bliks are not adjudicated by reference to things that happen in the physical world.

4. Yet, one is sane and the other is insane.

From this one could conclude that Hare's interpretation of religious language is that it is not a factual assertion, but he alleges that everyone's interpretation of the world (though they may be agnostic or atheistic) is a blik, too. However, this leaves us with the problem of how to determine who is sane and who is not sane! Flew responds to this position with the following two points (summarized):

1. Hare's position would be entirely unorthodox.

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[14]Miller, *Classical Statements in Faith and Reason*, p. 223.

2. Christian statements thus interpreted would fall short of being statements of fact, for example,

"You ought because it is God's will" asserts no more than "You ought. . ." Basil Mitchell

illustrates another type of response to Flew's argument in the following parable:

> In time of war in an occupied country, a member of the resistance meets one night a stranger who deeply impresses him. They spend that night together in conversation. The Stranger tells the partisan that he himself is on the side of the resistance--indeed that he is in command of it, and urges the partisan to have faith in him no matter what happens. The partisan is utterly convinced at that meeting of the Stranger's sincerity and constancy and undertakes to trust him.
>
> They never meet in condition of intimacy again. But sometimes the Stranger is seen helping members of the resistance, and the partisan is grateful and says to his friends, 'He is on our side.'
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> Sometimes he is seen in the uniform of the police handing over patriots to the occupying power. On these occasions his friends murmur against him; but the partisan still says, 'He is on our side.' He still believes that, in spite of appearances, the Stranger did not deceive him. Sometimes he asks the Stranger for help and receives it. He is then thankful. Sometimes he asks and does not receive it. The he says, 'The Stranger knows best.' Sometimes his friends in exasperation, say 'Well, what <u>would</u> he have to do for you to admit that you were wrong and that he is not on our side?' But the partisan refuses to answer. He will not consent to put the Stranger to the test. And sometimes his friends complain, 'Well, if <u>that's</u> what you mean by his being on our side, the sooner he goes over to the other side the better.'[15]

Mitchell argues further that:

1. The Stranger's ambiguous behavior <u>does</u> count against what the partisan believes about the

Stranger, but not decisively once the partisan becomes committed to the Stranger.

2. The partisan's commitment will depend on the nature of the impression created by the

Stranger in the first place; and therefore, he has a reason to commit himself to the Stranger.

3. Whether or not the partisan's faith should be viewed as a vacuous formula or as significant

articles of faith will depend on the partisan's response to the Stranger's behavior. <u>Was it blandly</u>

<u>dismissed as of no consequence</u> to his belief? If so, the partisan may be thoughtless or insane.

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[15]Ibid., pp. 226-27.

Mitchell's point is that the theologian does recognize the fact of pain as counting against Christian doctrine. But it is true that he will not allow it or anything to count decisively against it, for he is committed by his faith to trust in God.

Flew's response to Mitchell may be summarized as follows: making the assertion about God's love and His plan for one's life while acknowledging the problem of pain results in relentless qualifications and a "failure in faith as well as in logic."[16] It is the old death by a thousand qualifications--nothing is left of the original assertion. Thus, if we are to accept Flew's premises and conclusion, religious statements taken either as bliks (Hare) or as assertions (Mitchell) with qualifications are meaningless.

This is indeed a bitter pill to swallow, but perhaps one which theists may not have to swallow. The dilemma may be contrived and illusory. Geisler's reply to Flew's contention is explained in the following two paragraphs:

> Two things must be said about Flew's principle of falsifiability. First, in the narrow sense of empirical falsifiability it is too restrictive. Not everything need be empirically falsifiable. Indeed that very principle is not itself empirically falsifiable. But in the broader sense of testable or arguable, surely the principle is alive and helpful. For unless there are criteria for truth and falsity, then no truth claims can be supported. Everything, including opposing views, could be true. But in this case nothing can be maintained to be true (as versus what is false), for no such distinction can be made.

> Second, not everything that is verifiable need be falsifiable in the same manner. As John Hick pointed out, there is an asymmetrical relation between verifiability and falsifiability. One can verify his own immortality, for example, if he consciously observes his own funeral. But one cannot falsify his immortality, for if he does not survive death then he is not there to disprove his own immortality. Nor could another person falsify one's immortality unless he were omniscient or God. For it is always possible that my existence could be somehow beyond his limited knowledge. But if it is necessary to posit an omniscient mind or God, then it would be eminently self-defeating to use falsification to disprove God. So we may conclude that every truth claim must be testable or arguable but not all truth claims need be falsifiable or disconfirmable. A total state of nonexistence of anything would be unfalsifiable, for example, since there would be no

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[16]Ibid., p. 227.

one and no way to falsify it. On the other hand, the existence of something is testable by experience or inference.[17]

Geisler's reply is devastating to Flew's position. To narrow meaningfulness to empirical falsifiability is too restrictive. Flew's principle itself does not pass that test. In addition, Geisler uses John Hick's point that some things may be empirically verifiable, but not empirically falsifiable. Finally, Geisler concludes that there must be criteria for truth or falsity or no truth claims can be supported (though the criteria are not given in the above passage).

Geisler does not comment on Flew's reply to Mitchell's parable. However, a theologian could answer in at least one way. Remembering Mitchell's parable of the Stranger and his ambiguous behavior counting against his claims, one can see a parallel in the problem of pain for the theologian. Mitchell argued that although pain does count against the theologian's belief in "God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for you life," he may not see it as counting decisively against it. Flew's response is that theological statements like "God loves you . . ." are in danger of dying a death of a thousand qualifications. The theist may reply that this is not so. To suggest that the statement "God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life" may be in danger of dying a death by a thousand qualifications is not the same as saying that it <u>does</u> die the death. In fact, the theologian may argue that this is precisely the case. "God loves you . ." may need to be qualified, but not endlessly as Flew supposes.

<u>Linguistic Analysis</u>

Returning to Ludwig Wittgenstein, we find another problem regarding the cognitive status of religious language:

> Wittgenstein subjected the network of assumptions about language embodied in logical positivism to withering scrutiny. In its place he offered a vision of language of such power that an ever-growing number of thinkers have been attracted to the task of giving a fresh look at the time-worn problems of philosophy from Wittgenstein's perspective.[18]

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[17]Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, p. 24.

[18]Trammel, "The Meaningfulness of Religious Language" debate.

However, his analysis presents a problem for the theologian. His analysis led him to believe that ". . . .how things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself <u>in</u> the world." And furthermore, he says, ". . . .what we cannot speak about we must consign to silence."[19] While God may be experienced (mystically), this experience could never be expressed. The limits of language limit our talk of God. This is a serious challenge to the theologian. The theologian may respond in a number of ways. He may check Wittgenstein's analysis and ask himself whether the issue is that God does not reveal Himself in the world or that He cannot reveal Himself in the world. Does it make sense that God could be experienced but not expressed? Has Wittgenstein erred in thinking that only univocal expressions are meaningful? Geisler's reply is adequate:

> Ludwig Wittgenstein engages in a self-stultifying acognosticism. He attempts to define the limits of language in such a way as to show that it is impossible to speak cognitively about God. God is literally inexpressible. And that whereof one cannot speak, he should not attempt to speak thereof. But Wittgenstein can be no more successful in drawing the lines of linguistic limitation than Kant was in delimiting the realm of phenomena or appearance; for how can one know that God is inexpressible without thereby revealing something expressible about God? The very attempt to deny all expressions about God is an expression about God. On cannot draw the limits of language and thought unless he has transcended those very limits he would draw. It is self-defeating to express the contention that the inexpressible cannot be expressed. In like manner even to think the thought that the unthinkable cannot be thought is self-destructive. Language (thought) and reality cannot be mutually exclusive, for every attempt to completely separate them implies some interaction or commerce between them. One cannot use the scaffold of language and thought about the limits of reality only to say the scaffold cannot be so used.[20]

Geisler successfully exposes Wittgenstein's attempt to place limits on language. On must transcend in order to limit, but then what sense does it make to assert thereafter that the limit

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[19]Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus *Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), pp.187-89.

[20]Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, p. 23.

cannot be transcended? The effort to establish the meaninglessness of religious language has been fruitless thus far.

Establishing Meaningfulness

This does not mean that the job of theologians is finished in the field of religious language. Theologians must elucidate as best they can what they do mean when they use transcendent language. In the present case, we can focus on Geisler's treatment of the subject. The more extensive treatment of the subject by Geisler comes in the third section of his book Philosophy of Religion, called "God and Language". The chapters included in this section are Chapter 10, "The Problem of Religious Language;" Chapter 11, "Negative Religious Language;" Chapter 12, "Positive Language About God;" and Chapter 13, "Model Religious Language." To begin with, Geisler states what he sees as the hazards of religious language:

> It must avoid verbal idolatry on the one hand and experiential emptiness on the other hand. If it is overly transcendent, it departs from an experiential basis for meaning. If it is completely immanentistic, it commits semantical atheism. The shape of the problem has caused some to despair of any answer between these alternatives.

In reference to this he says further:

> The adequacy of a theistic language will be measured by its ability to avoid these two extremes. For, since the god of theism is infinite, only the language that cannot avoid applying limiting concepts to God will be sufficiently descriptive of God. On the other hand, any god-talk so transcendent as to have no anchorage in human experience will be devoid of any human meaning. Hence, in order to be adequate, theistic God-talk must be both based in finite experience and applicable to the infinite nature of God.[21]

At the outset, Geisler has two points to make:

1. Not all uses of religious language are meaningful.

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[21]Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 234.

2. It is necessary to avoid the extremes of equivocal and univocal statements applied univocally to the transcendent.

Geisler then begins to survey various alternatives within the religious language field in order to lay a groundwork for "mapping out a general typology of possible solutions to the problem and a synthesis of them . . . ." He begins his survey by looking at negation as a qualifying factor for God-talk. We start with negation because of the early historical development of this method of philosophical thought. After surveying the negation theology of Plotinus and Moses Maimonides and comparing it to the theology of Thomas Aquinas, Geisler concludes:

> First, a totally negative God-talk is meaningless. Unless there is some positive knowledge of God prior to the negations, there is no meaningful way to know what to negate of God. Every negation implies a prior affirmation. Complete negation without any affirmation is complete skepticism about god. Second, without some kind of negation there is no way to preserve the transcendence of the theistic God. Unless all plurality, change, and finitude are eliminated from God, the theist falls into pure anthropomorphism or semantical idolatry. Finite, limited concepts cannot be applied descriptively to an infinite god without qualification. Hence, some form of qualification or negation is absolutely essential to meaningful attributions of the transcendent God of theism.[22]

At this point, Geisler seems to be on the right track. He sees both the need for qualification and the need for positive affirmation. This leads to his next point--that of mapping out positive information about God and yet avoiding the pitfalls of anthropomorphism or semantical idolatry.

If every negation implies a prior affirmation, the theologian must present some positive information about God. One philosopher, William Rowe, has put it this way:
> Clearly a major task for theologians and philosophers of religion is to develop a satisfactory theory explaining how predicates taken from human, finite realm can be meaningfully applied to an infinite, timeless, purely spiritual being.[23]

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[22]Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 230,266.

[23]Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 109.

Geisler realizes, of course, that negation without affirmation leads to skepticism. It is to the

affirmation that he now turns. First, Geisler analyzes John Duns Scotus and concludes,

"analogical God-talk seems to work only if there is in the analogy an identifiable univocal

element." He next moves to Aquinas who rejects both univocal and equivocal predication to

God-language. Geisler then uses a synthesis of Aquinas and Scotus and offers a solution to

religious language:

> The answer and reconciliation between Scotism and Thomism lies in the distinction
> between a concept and a predication. Scotus was right that the concept that is applied to
> both God and man must be univocally <u>understood</u>; but Aquinas was correct in arguing
> that this concept must be analogically <u>affirmed</u> of God and creatures. That is, the
> <u>definition</u> of the attribute to both God and creatures must be the same, but the <u>application</u>
> of it differs. For in one case, (God's) it is applied with limitations.

He restates this point elsewhere:

> In brief, Scotus was correct in insisting that our concepts must be univocally <u>understood</u>
> and defined. But Aquinas was right in insisting that any concept drawn from the finite
> world must be <u>predicated</u> of God in an analogous way.[24]

Finally, Geisler expounds on the causal basis for analogy between God and creatures. Taking his

cue from Aquinas, Geisler states:

> In summation, the analogy between creature and Creator based on causality is secured
> only because God is the principal, intrinsic, essential, efficient cause of the being and
> perfections of the world. In any other kind of causal relationship an analogical similarity
> would not necessarily follow. But in an analogy of being similarity must follow, for
> Being communicates only being, and perfections or kinds of being do not arise from an
> imperfect being. Existence produces only after its kind, viz., other existences.[25]

Thus, Geisler says that analogy is secured only under these conditions:

1. The perfections of the world resemble their principle Cause (God) but not necessarily their

instrumental causes.

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[24]Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 270-77, 280-81.

[25]Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 285.

2. There is an intrinsic relationship where both God and creatures possess the perfections properly, but each according to its mode of being.

3. Essential causes generate their own kind, for example, only being gives rise to being.

4. The effect would not be if the cause were not (efficient cause).

Then and only then would analogy be an adequate answer to the problem of religious language for Geisler.

It should be noted that Geisler feels that unless one establishes a metaphysical causal link or similarity between god and the world, "there is no basis in reality for the similarity between God-talk and the God about whom one is talking."[26] Taking into account these qualifications, Geisler feels that meaningful God-talk can be established. Please note that Geisler did not say that it is established. Geisler feels he has generally mapped out meaningfully descriptive religious language, but not exhaustively. He is correct. There is at least one problem that still exists. It is not that there are no answers to these questions, it is just that they have not yet been answered fully by Geisler. Note the following excerpt from Rowe:

> If God is eternal in the sense of being outside of time, what can possibly be meant by ascribing acting terms like "making" or "forgiving" to God? For surely the activities expressed by these terms take time for their performance. If someone has forgiven you, it makes sense to ask when he or she performed this act. But if God is timeless, it makes no sense to ask when he performed some act. The clear implication, then, of the idea that God is timeless is that action terms like "making" and "forgiving" cannot be used with their primary or literal meaning when they are ascribed to God. If so, then what do they mean when we ascribe them to God?[27]

What Rowe is asking could be summarized as follows:

1. God is outside of time.

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[26]Ibid., p. 300.

[27]Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 107.

2. Some actions of God (forgiving, making, etc.)seem to require a time frame in order to make sense.

3. How does one then use the terms "forgiving" and "making" when ascribing them to a God who is timeless?

Geisler has not answered this question fully, though perhaps Geisler could say that there is a confusion between God's timeless and changeless nature and his changing actions in time, here.

Before concluding this section on religious language, brief space will be given to other attempts to establish the meaningfulness of religious language. The first is Paul Tillich. It should be understood from the outset that Tillich takes a liberal interpretation or understanding of biblical authority. Consider the following:

> Yet history proves that there are not only natural myths but also historical myths. If the earth is seen as the battleground of two divine powers, as in ancient Persia, this is an historical myth. If the God of creation selects and guides a nation through history toward an end which transcends all history, this is an historical myth. If the Christ--a transcendent, divine being--appears in the fullness of time, lives, dies and is resurrected, this is an historical myth. Christianity is superior to those religions which are bound to a natural myth.

Elsewhere he states:

> The tool of repression is usually an acknowledged authority with sacred qualities like the Church or the Bible, to which ones owes unconditional surrender.

With this as his theological edifice, Tillich still sees "no substitute for the use of symbols and myths: they are the language of faith."[28] He then makes the distinction between unbroken myths and broken myths. Unbroken myths give an unbroken mythological world. They are religious myths which have not been demythologized. They are supported by authoritarian systems, religious or political. Tillich observes that groups or individuals often start at what he calls the

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[28]Paul Tillich, "Religious Utterances Are Symbolic (Metaphorical)", in *Readings for an Introduction to Philosophy*, ed. James R. Hamilton, Charles E. Reagan, and B. R. Tilghman, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976) pp.456-57

natural stage of literalism "in which the mythical and the literal are indistinguishable."

Eventually, the individual or group comes to the moment when their questioning mind breaks the

natural acceptance of the mythological visions as literal. The choice comes either to repress

these questions in lieu of the security the system offers, or to move on to a second stage of

maturity which Tillich calls the broken myth. One is left to suppose that the myths and symbols

of religious language are metaphors of our ultimate concern, but the symbols themselves convey

no cognitive content. This is so because the language of ultimate concern is still myth and

symbol.[29]

Geisler does some analysis of Tillich's position in *Philosophy of Religion* in Chapter 10,

"The Problem of Religious Language," but he does not offer a critique. However, he does

mention Tillich's type of position again in *Christian Apologetics*:

> In short, unless the theist can answer the challenge head-on, then it would appear that he
> must have what R. M. Hare called a "blik".[12] That is to say, he has an unfalsifiable
> belief in God despite all facts or states of affairs. It matters little whether the believer
> calls his "blik" a parable, a myth, or whatever; the fact remains that he is an agnostic
> believer with no meaningful or verifiable knowledge of God, and this is little or no
> improvement on Kant's traditional agnosticism.[30]

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> 12. Flew and MacIntyre, p. 100.

Thus, Geisler correctly points out the unorthodoxy of Tillich's acognosticism.

Another important answer to the religious language problem comes from R. B.

Braithwaite. The reason it is included is that some orthodox Christians adopt his position. This

is possibly true because of the reaction of some orthodox, fundamental Christians to modernism

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[29]Ibid., p. 456.

[30]Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, p.19.

and intellectualism in general. The Christian retreats to an unassailable position: this is what I

believe for me. Braithwaite might best be understood in this passage:

> A moral belief is an intention to behave in a certain way: a religious belief is an intention
> to behave in a certain way (a moral belief) together with the entertainment of certain
> stories associated with the intention in the mind of the believer. This solution of the
> problem of religious belief seems to me to do justice both to the empiricist's demand that
> meaning must be tied to empirical use and to the religious man's claim for his religious
> beliefs to be taken seriously.

Braithwaite connects religious belief with an intention to behave or live in a certain way

accompanied by certain "stories" as part of the intention in the mind of the believer. For

Braithwaite, these religious stories, such as the Atonement or Judgment, are not necessarily true.

Note the following:

> For it is not necessary, on my view, for the asserter of a religious assertion to believe in
> the truth of the story involved in the assertions: what is necessary is that the story should
> be entertained in thought, i.e. that the statement of the story should be understood as
> having a meaning.[31]

In fact, Braithwaite feels only unsophisticated Christians believe the "stories" to be true.

Well, if these "stories" are not to be believed, then what uses are left for them? The answer is,

nothing objective. Braithwaite answers this objection in the following passage.

> But if the religious stories need not be believed, what function do they fulfil in the
> complex state of mind and behaviour known as having a religious belief? How is
> entertaining the story related to resolving to pursue a certain way of life? My answer is
> that the relation is a psychological and causal one. It is an empirical psychological fact
> that many people find it easier to resolve upon and to carry through a course of action
> which is contrary to their natural inclinations if this policy is associated in their minds
> with certain stories. And in many people the psychological link is not appreciably
> weakened by the fact that the story associated with the behaviour policy is not believed.
> Next to the Bible and the Prayer Book the most influential work in English Christian
> religious life has been a book whose stories are frankly recognized as fictitious--Bunyan's

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[31]R. B. Braithwaite, "Religious Utterances Express Moral Intentions", in *Reading for an Introduction to Philosophy*, ed.
James R. Hamilton, Charles E. Reagan, and B. R. Tilghman, pp. 489,486.

Pilgrim's Progress; and some of the most influential works in setting the moral tone of my generation were the novels of Dostoevsky.

Of course, the "stories" have the propositional element of religious assertions (which satisfies those who want empirical grounding), but they are not to be believed in general; their function is psychological and motivational. This highly unorthodox view of religious language is seriously lacking in theological justification and leads to a morally relativistic ethic. Braithwaite concludes with this same thought:

> Whatever may be the case with other religions Christianity has always been a personal religion demanding personal commitment to a personal way of life. In the words of another Oxford philosopher, 'the questions "What shall I do?" and "What moral principles should I adopt?" must be answered by each man for himself.'[6] Nowell-Smith takes this as part of the meaning of morality: whether or not this is so, I am certain that it is of the very essence of the Christian religion.[32]

[6]P. H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (1954), p. 320.

We can conclude that:

1. Braithwaite is not theologically orthodox.

2. His position spawns subjectivity in epistemology and ethics.

3. He makes use of a common excuse of unorthodox philosopher-theologians, that of securing the faith from criticism, when in fact, they are undermining it.

Although it does not speak directly to Braithwaite's ideas, Geisler's system of apologetics does adequately refute the soundness of Braithwaite's approach to the problem of religious language.

Let us summarize Geisler's contribution to the understanding of religious language.

1. Geisler grasps the historical process that brought the problem of religious language to consciousness. He traces the development of the problem through Hume's distinction that was later treated by the logical positivists A. J. Ayer, Paul Van Buren, et al. Finally, he recognizes

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[32]Ibid., pp. 487, 490.

the threat that language analysis puts on the limits of meaningful language. Geisler is aware of the mainstream of historical criticism of religious language.

2. Geisler's rebuttal of both logical positivism and linguistic analysis, based on their self-stultifying position (distinguished from contradictory) is a sufficient answer to the problem which each discipline has advanced in regard to the cognitive status of religious language. However, he could add to this approach by including other "ammunition", especially speaking to the logical positivist's position as enumerated in the body of this thesis.

3. Geisler's answers to the problem of positive God-language are very helpful in mapping out the general way that theists may answer this question using univocal concepts predicated analogically. However, Geisler's answers may not yet be definitive for the following reasons:

      a. His use of analogy is only as good as the cosmological argument; many philosophers find the cosmological argument to be suspect.

      b. They are based on a causal relationship between Creator and creation and that may still be ambiguous to many.

      c. Although Geisler's answers to language problems are substantially broad, he has not answered or addressed all the hard questions concerning the use of analogy in religious language. Although he speaks to Ferre's objections to the use of analogy, his treatment of the subject as a whole is not exhaustive. For instance, these analogies in God-talk are not like ordinary analogies. There is positive content but still ambiguity; and there is the problem of using univocal expressions about God's acts in time and predicating them analogically to a timeless God.   Geisler has not published clear answers to date. The weight of these criticisms of Geisler's positive case will depend on future broadening of his apologetic system by him and further substantiation of his cosmological argument since it serves as a linchpin.

4. Geisler's approach to the problem of religious language is much less piecemeal than others. While it is true that some material that relates to religious language is not found in *Philosophy of*

Religion in the section on "God and Language," it is included in part of *Christian Apologetics*. Overall, Geisler endeavors to give a bold, biblically orthodox, systematic study of the philosophical problem of religious language.