*Three Theories of Religious Language**

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Religious language is both timely and timeless as a topic, but is particularly central in recent philosophy of religion and theology. Today writers on religion are pre-occupied at all levels by the question, "What do you mean?" Everywhere this semantic interest is manifest.

The question, of course, is not new. It was asked by the ancients in the Christian tradition, who developed the so-called allegorical method or fourfold method of interpreting scripture; also, by mystics who held that nothing can be said about God, and by classical theologians who held that discourse concerning God must be exclusively in either negative or analogical terms. One movement under the banner of "modernism" attempted a half century ago to turn religiously demanding prose into aesthetically satisfying poetry. Today several counter-trends are seeking anew to get at the foundations of religious expression.

What is dominant in our time is a definite trend toward a total abandonment of what has been called "literalism." Many theologians, philosophers and scientists have reached similar conclusions on this point. For some, the claim that religious expression is *non-literal,* leads to the abandonment of religion. For others, it opens new vistas of genuine religious participation.

In order now to give continuity to the discussion, I am going to use a model sentence. This sentence is at the core of Christian religion: "God sent His Son." Having stated the sentence I shall present briefly, as applied to it, three dominant theories of religious meaning. I am going to call these, for want of better terms: I. "Neo-positivism," II. "Neo-symbolism," III. "Neo-Thomism," a wing of naturalism, Protestantism, and Catholi-

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cism respectively. Under each type I shall focus on four central issues: 1. The use of the term "God." 2. The content of the phrase "sent His Son." 3. The translatability of the expression. 4. The verifiability of the expression. I will then derive from these theories four basic points of similarity and conclude by presenting certain logical criticisms of these.

I. *Neo-positivism* (Austin, Wisdom, Flew)

1. *The name "God"*

For the neo-positivist the term "God" has zero denotation. It is like "Zukor" or "Cerberus," terms which function in discourse but have no referent. Names usually arise as pointers for particulars. For the neo-positivists particulars are apprehended primarily through sense data. Names and phrases which are not reducible to sense data are rejected as either meaningless or without factual import.[1]

2. *The phrase "sent His Son"*

The predicate of our type-expression, "sent His Son," is analyzed by the neo-positivist in ways parallel to the name. It is a grammatically ordered pattern of words. But no deductive nor inductive process could render it verifiable or falsifiable. Hence, for most of these writers, the latter parts of the expression as well as the term "God" are not to be used in rational discourse.

A celebrated example from Antony Flew uses the expression, "God loves us." Flew argues that people who believe, first, that this is a genuine proposition and, second, that it is true actually will permit no evidence whatever, sensory or otherwise, no set of life experiences, to count against or falsify the statement. Its assertion as "true" is, for these people, compatible with every state of affairs, e.g. the suffering of an innocent child. Hence, its assertion is superfluous. Flew argues that for this reason, if for no other, the sentence has no scientific or philosophical point.[2]

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[1]Analysts distinguish "naming" and "meaning." "God" may carry meaningful connotations. But though it *purports* to name, it fails. Feigl's "Empiricism vs. Theology," *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy,* ed. by Edwards and Pap (Glencoe: Free Press, 1957), pp. 533-538.

[2]The original article by Flew, and essays in answer are contained in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology,* ed. by Flew and Macintyre, chap. VI, (New York: Macmillan, 1955).

A recent account of the falsification issue is by Brian Gerrish, "Some Re-

3. *Translatability*

Could the sentence be put in *other* terms which *are* meaningful? The answer is that, in order to justify the use of such an expression, one must change it into a sentence of a different sort, e.g. an historical proposition such as "A person named 'Jesus' lived in Palestine in 30 A.D.," or hold that it has a *function* without having any literal meaning. For example, (a) Vergil Aldrich argues that this expression is simply a kind of "concerted enactment in worship." We are *doing* something, viz., expressing a response to holiness when we use it. But we are not *saying* anything about the world of the past or future. We are not uttering a proposition.[3] (b) J. L. Austin has argued that sentences of this type are a sort of "performatory utterance." As when we say, "I christen this ship," or "I baptize you," we are not *describing anything.* We are simply performing an act, in this case, a core-Christian act, conventional in origin.[4] (c) Gilbert Ryle holds that this kind of sentence is a pretense sentence. It has meaning precisely as the sentence "Don Quixote attacked the windmill" would have if we presumed, for purposes of fictional dramatization, a certain context of narrative. But as soon as we come down, as it were, to reality, as soon as we face the world as it is, the sentence dissolves into insignificance.[5] (d) Kai Nelson argues that only the self-deceiving person goes on thinking such a sentence has cognitive meaning. Actually his own private ideology or value-system is being covertly expressed. Religious expressions are disguised ideologies with no factual or objective sense.[6]

4. *Verification*

The "verification" of such sentences is, of course, nonexistent. One cannot verify a sentence which is not a proposition. This is not a proposition; there is, therefore, no verifica-

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flections on Recent Linguistic Philosophy," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review,* XIII, No. 3, March 1958, pp. 3-11.

[3]Vergil Aldrich, "The High and the Holy," *Journal of Religion,* Vol. 32, 1953 (Cf. *Journal of Philosophy,* LI, 146 f.).

[4]J. L. Austin, "Other Minds," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* Supp. Vol. XX (1946), pp. 17-175.

[5]"If, So and Because," *Philosophical Analysis,* ed. by Max Black (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1950). Ryle's statements concern the use of language in fiction. My application to religion is an extrapolation.

[6]Kai Nelson, "On Talk About God," *Journal of Philosophy,* LV, p. 889 f.

tion. There may be justification of the *use* of such expressions such as that it is comforting, or inspiring, or rejuvenating, but no confirmation of fact.[7]

II. *Neo-symbolism* (Tillich, Niebuhr, Bultmann)

1. *The term "God"*

For the neo-symbolist, the term "God" does not refer, or denote in the usual sense of language. It points to that about which no descriptive language is possible. This group posits a radical dualism between the finite and the infinite, present and transcendent, particular beings and Being-itself, conditioned things and the Unconditioned, reality and the Ground of all reality.[8] The term "God" points in the latter direction of these couplets. This is the "essential mystery" of Tillich, the "beyond" of Niebuhr, the "transcendent" of Bultmann, the "ganders allers" of Barth and Brunner, the "infinite" of Kirkegaard.

2. *The phrase "sent His Son"*

The symbolist requires that we free ourselves of all literalism, and he means *all*. Everything about this phrase is symbolic. As soon as we ascribe to it anything literal, we have fallen into paradox and absurdity and, from a religious point of view, into idolatry.[9] The expressions here used, namely "sent" and "His"

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[7]The nature of such justification is treated with great subtlety by John Wisdom in his essay, "Gods" in *Logic and Language* (First Series), (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953).

[8]A summation of Tillich's theory is in "Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God," *Christian Scholar,* XXXVIII, No. 3, (September 1955). Also "Existential Analysis and Religious Symbols," *Contemporary Problems of Religion,* ed. by Harold A. Basilius (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1956). Much of Tillich's popular *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper's, 1957) deals with symbols.

Niebuhr has recently written: "I do not know how it is possible to believe in anything pertaining to God and eternity 'literally.'" "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," in *Reinhold Niebuhr, His Religious, Social and Political Thought,* ed. by Kegley and Bretall (New York: 1956), p. 446. Compare the discussion, "Can Theology Be Reduced to Mythology?" *Review of Religion,* January, 1940. Bultmann says in a basic statement: ". . . there are certain concepts which are fundamentally mythological, and with which we shall never be able to dispense—e.g. the idea of transcendence." *Kerygma and Myth,* ed. by Bartsch (S.P.C.K., 1953), pp. 102 ff. See also his *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner's, 1958).

[9]This view is a "Protestant principle"—the rejection of all specific forms for the religious, what Dillenberger calls "a religious perspective which rejects all finite claims to ultimacy." *Protestant Christianity,* (New York: Scribner's 1954), p. 318. The view opposes "sharply formulated dogmatic propositions" See Tillich, *Theology of Paul Tillich,* ed. by Kegley and Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 332.

and "Son," are rejected as literal terms; they are, rather, symbolic or mythical. To presume otherwise is to use finite categories, such as time and space and substance and causality. But that to which "God" points is *not subject* to any of these categories. Hence, *all* ordinary or literal connotations must be dropped or broken before the symbolic power of this expression is mediated.[10]

For Tillich the phrase, "God sent His Son" points, in a mysterious way to a dimension of life, the religious dimension, wherein we are overcome with a sense of dependence and concern. The expression does not say anything *about* this world or another world, nor does it diminish or remove the mystery of the ultimate. It is simply an expression, the classic Christian *expression,* of a kind of ultimate faith.

3. *Translatability*

The neo-symbolist holds the expression, "God sent His Son," to be untranslatable into literal terms. All such attempts rob the symbol of its role. Every person who finds some symbolic *power* (Note the shift from the question of *meaning* to *power*) in the Christian cross, or in our type-expression, undergoes a certain inward response and transformation. The expression functions as does a symphony, say Beethoven's Ninth, or a great painting, say of Picasso. When we listen to Beethoven's Ninth nothing is *said.* There is no *meaning* in the ordinary propositional sense. Yet something in us and in reality is opened up and somehow conveyed. The encounter leaves us changed, but defies propositional expression. It is radically unlike the percepts and concepts of scientific method. To take symbolic expressions and "translate" them into propositions results in quasi-assertions, which actually are not assertions at all, or if they are, are no longer genuinely religious.[11]

4. *Verification*

"Verification" for the neo-symbolist is primarily related to the power of symbols or "the word" to grip us in religious awareness. The Christ symbol e.g. has "efficacy in life process"

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[10]See *Systematic Theology,* Vol. I, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 238-247.

[11]"Genuine symbols can be overcome only by the other genuine symbols, not by criticism of their literalistic distortions" "Existential Analysis and Religious Symbols" *op. cit.,* p. 55.

or power to mediate grace or healing effects. These are indefinite and incomplete. There is no finality of any symbol or set of symbols.[12] If we say (as strictly, for these men, we should not) that symbols are "true," we must recognize that we say so precisely as we might say that a symphony is "true." It is adequate to a function in the depths of man. It calls out an inner response.[13] "God sent His Son" is *not* an historical judgment.

III. *Neo-Thomism* (Maritain, Copleston, Weigel)

1. *The term "God"*

For the neo-Thomist, "God" is a name for the metaphysical foundation of the universe, a Necessary Being, The Uncaused cause, the One whose essence is to exist. God is, as the Latin phrase has it, *ens realissimum,* the most real. This reality is metaphysical rather than physical.[14]

2. *The phrase "sent His Son"*

The neo-Thomist says this is not a literal phrase. (His word is "univocal.") Nor again is it utterally ambiguous. (His word is "equivocal.") It is, rather, and this is the key term, *analogical.* We cannot understand terms applied to the infinite in their literal bearings. Rather, again, this school posits a radical dualism between the finite or materiate order of reality, and the metaphysical, infinite, or immateriate level of reality.[15]

The analogies that are permitted to obtain in discourse about God are not analogies comparing two objects—for example, God to man—but rather proportional analogies in which there are at least four terms. The similarity obtains between the relationships of each *pair* of terms. For example, it would be legitimate for the Thomist to say, "God is to His Son as a man is to

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[12]Tillich, Niebuhr, and Bultmann all emphasize the *change* of concrete historical symbols. See "Religion and Its Intellectual Critics," *Christianity and Crisis,* XV, No. 9, p. 21.

[13]For neo-symbolic writers religious and aesthetic expression are rooted in something deeper—the depth-self. Linguistic and artistic symbolism are closely allied as modes of expressing this concern. See "The Nature of Religious Art," *Symbols and Society,* ed. by Bryson *et al.* (New York: Harpers, 1955), pp. 282-284.

[14]See Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941). Compare J. V. Langmead Casserley's *The Christian in Philosophy* (New York: Scribner's, 1951), Chapter II.

[15]A recent approach to the Catholic doctrine of analogy is E. L. Mascall's *Existence and Analogy,* (New York: Longman's, 1949). See also the expositional chapter in Dorothy Emmett's *Nature of Metaphysical Thinking,* (London: Macmillan, 1949), chap. VIII.

his son." A similarity obtains between the *relationship* God has to His Son and the *relationship* an earthly father has to his son. What is this similarity? Again it is not expressible in literal terms. It does not denote, for example, such finite notions as procreative power or parenthood. No. The relationship is pushed to its abstract limit, to the question of being. God is analogically the source of being.[16]

Of course, Catholicism (as likewise the neo-positivists and neo-symbolists) posits many levels of understanding and admits that in liturgy, in worship, and in prayer, we may use this expression in a way that is perhaps not properly analogized as a theologian would require.

3. *Translatability*

Literal translation is on this view again impossible. One cannot take analogical terms and translate them into univocal terms.

The Thomist (as the neo-symbolist tries to avoid mixing dimensions) tries to avoid two extremes. On the one hand, if he admits any literal similarity of Divine-human relationships, he ends with anthropomorphism, ascribing to God or to Christ attributes and characteristics which are finite and, on his view, blasphemous. On the other hand, if he rejects *all* similarities he cannot distinguish the Divine from nothing at all. The attempt to mediate this dilemma is the doctrine of analogy. Translation of analogical into univocal terms recreates the dilemma; hence it is forbidden.[17]

4. *Verification*

The "verification" of this sentence is primarily rational and authoritarian. The Thomist is convinced that rational consideration (e.g. the Five Ways) coerce the intellect into the admission of the First Cause, God. The "sent His Son" phrase is a result of revelation, primarily Biblical, though also sanctioned by sacred tradition.[18]

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[16]See Gustave Weigel's summary of contrasts between this view and the neo-symbolist's. *Gregorianum,* XXXVII, p. 52. Compare Raphael Demos in "Are Religious Dogmas Cognitive and Meaningful?" *Journal of Philosophy,* LI.

[17]See F. C. Copleston's statement, "there's bound to be a radical inadequacy in any statements about a metaphysical reality." Chapter 46 of *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy,* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1957), "Are Statements About God Meaningful?", pp. 609-614. See also his "Commentary on 'Five Ways' of Acquinas," same volume.

[18]See "Myth, Symbol and Analogy" by Gustave Weigel, *Religion and*

The Four Common Theses

Now though these three theories are often assumed to be mutually opposed, our brief survey has uncovered four points at which they may be said to agree:

First, that the term "God" points to something "Beyond"—for the neopositivist beyond "sense-experience" (indirectly to one's ideological commitments), for the neo-symbolist beyond everything finite to the "transcendent," for the neo-Thomist beyond the contingent order of reality to Necessary Being.

Second, that the apparently literal or descriptive connotations of religious language must be rejected.

Third, that the efficacy or significance of religious language is destroyed by translation into sense-language, or literal language, or univocal language.

Fourth, that the "verification" of religious expression is in no way comparable to the verification of perceptual or scientific propositions.

Let us call these theses respectively the Transcendence thesis, the Non-descriptive thesis, the Non-translatability thesis, and the Non-verifiability thesis.

We turn now to certain logical difficulties of these.

The Transcendence Thesis

The logical outcome of the transcendence thesis is either circularity or contradiction. The neo-positivist hides a judgment about the limits of reality within an overt judgment as to what shall count as meaningful language. As is widely recognized today this positivist restriction on language operates more or less fruitfully in science. But as a resolve or presupposition it cannot be justified *within* the framework of science. And to look for justification *outside* of science is to violate the resolve.

For the neo-symbolist the contradiction is this: To say that to which "God" points is beyond descriptive language is to assert a proposition which could only be validated by descriptive knowledge or belief. But this the theorists claim is impossible. On the other hand, if the "beyond" is totally unknown we are incompetent to use the term "God." We are forced to a non-committal "x." *Something* must be known about that to which

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Culture, Chap. 9, ed. by Leibrecht (New York: Harpers, 1959), pp. 120-130. Compare "Analogy, Symbolism and Linguistic Analysis," by William L. Reese in *Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. XIII, No. 3, March, 1960.

"x" points to justify the term "God" and a good deal more than "Something" to justify the implicit theological concepts of a Tillich or Niebuhr or Bultmann.

To put the point in more constructive terms: If *anything* (whether distinct from illusion or not) has intersected human experience, however "experience" may be defined, that something can be named and described, either with terms from our present vocabulary, or with terms which are created or stipulated for the purpose. In spite of the drastic contemporary emphasis on "Transcendence" I have yet to find an argument that has consistently shown this to be impossible.

The Non-Descriptive Thesis

This thesis rests on what might be called an "axiom of linguistic dualism," viz. that there are two sorts of language, one sort called by Wheelwright "Steno-language" appropriate to science, the other, "Depth-language" appropriate to religion.[19] Much ingenuity has been dedicated to distinguishing these two, and few doubt that there are important differences. But the direction of recent analysis, which is toward pluralism, tends to break down the old distinctions between cognitive and non-cognitive, factual and emotive, literal and symbolic, and even descriptive and non-descriptive. As regards religious expression it is increasingly apparent that instead of the functions ascribed to "literal" and "symbolic" language being uncombinable they are, in many instances, inseparable.[20]

But aside from debating possibilities in the abstract or historical actualities in the concrete (for it can be shown historically that the original users of the phrase "God sent His Son" both by intent and reference were speaking descriptively) let us simply ask the question: Have the proponents of this thesis themselves achieved what they say is essential and all-important? Have they succeeded in their own writings in purging religious expression of its literal and descriptive elements? The answer is that neither before nor after their laborious symbolic transformations do they obey their own strictures. Their books and

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[19]See Wheelwright's efforts to distinguish the two in his *The Burning Fountain* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1954).

[20]See the discussion "Cognitive and Non-Cognitive" in the volume, *Language, Thought and Culture,* ed. by Paul Henle, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958) written by W. K. Frankena, chap. 6.

articles assert and deny, interpret and relate, compare and contrast descriptive concepts derived from their "symbols," and "myths," in ways which show that they themselves ascribe to them descriptive and propositional status.

Examples of this sort of thing are legion, but let us select one case from the writings of each camp:

1. The neo-positivist argues that our type-expression is functional, and that its use must be justified on non-factual grounds. But having so insisted in theory, his own reductions and comparisons, e.g. to worshipful, ritualistic, fictional, or ideological expression reintroduce descriptive concepts. Suppose we accept Kai Nelson's translation. It is involved in description which revises both the subject and predicate of the sentence. It is, "I am committed to the Christian way of life," a statement about the self. Or, "I believe the Christian ideology has worthwhile effects," a statement both about the self and the effects of the beliefs of the self. Such assertions are true or false, whatever may be said about the process of verification. The neo-positivists, then, have not transcended descriptive usage but have substituted a self-reflexive for a theological interpretation.

2. Analyzing the type-sentence of this paper Tillich concludes ". . . all this if taken literally is absurd. If it is taken symbolically it is a profound expression. . ." Tillich devotes Volume I of his *Systematic Theology* to the question of God, and Volume II to the meaning of "Jesus as the Christ." Under criticism he revises his claim that all religious expressions are symbolic and that *no* literal statement about God is possible and, to avoid a kind of symbolic solipsism, introduces one unsymbolic statement, viz. "God is Being-itself."[21] The sentence in question, "God sent His Son" is "broken" or "deliteralized" of its finite connotations. Tillich claims that its implicit meaning is the one above. Its explicit meaning, paraphrased, is that the Christ-symbol (for the *event* of Jesus in history is religiously unimportant. Only the emergence of the Christ-*symbol* in which the New Testament community portrayed its ultimate concern,

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[21]See *Theology of Paul Tillich, op. cit.*, p. 335. Also the introduction to Vol. II of *Systematic Theology, op. cit.*, pp. 9-10, where he changes the position to say the only symbolic statement we can make about God is "the statement that everything we say about God is symbolic." Aside from being paradoxical, this is not a statement "about God" but a statement about language.

is relevant) "mediates," "expresses," "participates," or "opens up" healing effects in the depth-self of man.

Is this an escape from descriptivism? Hardly. It "translates" "God sent His Son" into two sorts of sentences: 1. "God is Being-Itself" the predicate of which Tillich elsewhere interprets variously as meaning "source," "ground," "creative abyss," inconsistently *denying* that *these* terms are "symbolic." 2. "The Christ-symbol has healing effects in my inmost self." Both of these are propositions, however obscure their meaning or validation in Tillich's system. The latter sentence is close in function to the sentence as analyzed by the neo-positivist. Examination of other phrases in Tillich's labyrinthine theology yields comparable results. And this inconsistent return to descriptivism in Tillich can likewise be found in Niebuhr and Bultmann.

3. As for the Neo-Thomists, an obvious use of univocal concepts and language is the official dogma that in a very real descriptive sense (however "mysterious" the explanation, it occupied much of the attention of the Scholastics and was and is sustained by Aristotelian categories) God not only *sent* but *now sends* His Son into the substantial form of the Eucharist. This is a literal belief, a proposition, non-scientific to be sure, but not simply the manipulation of analogical terms in the manner required by the prescribed theory of *analogia entis.*

The Non-Translatability Thesis

The three theories admit that there are ideological or symbolic or analogical synonyms of religious language and presumably, therefore, for our type-sentence. What they deny is that translation into descriptive, literal, or univocal terms is possible.

But, as the above examples illustrate, they themselves are involved in such translation. And one suspects that the thesis of non-translatability is introduced to protect their particular interpretations from alternative readings plausible or implausible.[22] Moreover, in many instances their procedures are based, not on strict textual or contextual fidelity to "original intent" or "or-

[22]The overall direction (with important exceptions) of the neo-positivist and neo-symbolic interpretation is toward naturalism. This may be the root of J. N. Findlay's comment, "I am by temperament a Protestant, and I tend towards atheism as the purest form of Protestantism." He adds that it is hard to be a theist without falling into idolatry with its attendant evils of intolerance and persecution. "Can God's Existence be Disproved?" *Mind,* 1948, p. 49.

dinary usage" but rather on principles of their own construction the assumptions and grounds of which are often remote from the documents interpreted.

In fact, of course, the phrase "God sent His Son" can be and has been put in other terms of descriptive significance. These are more or less synonymous, more or less abstract or concrete, expressively adequate, and denotatively precise. It is also obvious that the phrase can be taken as a kind of code-language for whatever the person who uses the terms wishes them to mean.

The Non-Verifiability Thesis

The denial, finally, that verification of religious language is in any sense parallel to the verification of perceptual or scientific judgments depends for its cogency upon the other three theses.

But if there remain, as we have argued, belief-ful descriptive elements in the most refined ideological, "symbolic" or "analogical" expressions, and if, as we have shown, "God sent His Son" for each theorist harbors assertional meaning, then this and other religious expressions are not excluded from the context of verification. As part of such context certain techniques may be appropriate to validation which are not simply matters of the positivist's "effects," the symbolist's "inward impact," or the analogist's appeal to "tradition and authority."

It may be added that many who overcome the problem of religious language by maintaining that the Divine (or the encounter with the Divine) is "ineffable" or "inexpressible" have yet insisted upon a path, or way or process whereby their insights might be gained or regained. In short, even the extreme mystic does not disregard the verifiability or religious *insight*, though he does of religious language.

These theorists, therefore, are in the strange predicament of maintaining against the mystic that discourse about God and the encounter with God is legitimate (if properly interpreted) while denying that such language is descriptive or verifiable. This is doubly paradoxical because their own practices of interpretation violate the denial. The mystic is more consistent. His ultimate position is silence.

It would be interesting to investigate the question: What

brought these three movements to conclusions which admit of such objections. Aren't there ground and motives for these theses which render such criticism irrelevant?

In partial reply it should be said that both this summation of the views in question and the criticisms posed are far less complex than full treatment would require. Other model sentences, for example, would have brought to light further facets of the theories and, as I believe, further difficulties.

But one major need or problem out of which these theories have arisen is as simple as it is ancient, and leads to our conclusion:

When an expression (which in ordinary religious language serves as a statement) "God sent His Son" is affirmed, but finds itself, as through the centuries it frequently has, challenged by contemporary beliefs, methods and attitudes, its advocate has three main alternatives:

1. Conclude the statement is false.
2. Defend the statement as true (whatever its meaning) regardless of its conflict with other assumed truths whether scientific, philosophical or religious.
3. Maintain that the expression is not a descriptive statement, not true or false in the usual sense, that it does not mean what it seems to mean, that it is non-literal, and is a performatory utterance, an expression of deep religious concern, or a statement of proportional analogy.

On the surface it is the third strategy that our theorists follow. And the result is that theological utterances are made palatable in an otherwise hostile environment. But for many in the Christian tradition this can hardly be thought a service. For often the theorists have actually taken the first position—the statement is false—and then introduced another meaning with the explanation that this is the real meaning, the deeper meaning, the genuinely symbolic meaning. When "interpretation" becomes substitution it is actually denial.

Aside, however, from matters of historical usage and original intent, the point of our analysis is that this projected "flight from the literal and descriptive" has proved impossible in practice for those most insistent upon it. It has involved them in contradictions and difficulties more serious, perhaps, than those

the theses were designed to avoid. The "Transcendent" is made immanent, the "literally undescribable" is literally described, the "untranslatable" is translated, and that which is "beyond belief and verification" is yet reintroduced into the context of belief and verification.

From this vantage, at least, the question is: Is it in any sense a gain to take a sentence which some believe incredible and transform it into sentences which all can know to be self-contradictory?