

The Language of Faith: A Review Article

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“**A**ND AFTER a while came unto him they that stood by, and said to Peter, ‘Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech betrayeth thee.’” Peter’s language clearly did communicate something. But what? To some, no doubt, the verbal content of his utterances signified merely that he was not acquainted with Jesus. For others, the phonetic quality of his speech indicated that he was from Galilee. Still others perhaps got the idea from the tone and volume of his voice that he was fearful of being accused, indignant at being interrogated, or that he was merely a volatile and uneducated personality. To the contemporary reader, Peter’s words might well communicate the breakdown of faith which has characterized at one time or another every man who has been asked to stand up and be counted.

The illustration serves to demonstrate the extremely complex nature and function of both spoken and written language. This should come as no surprise. Fourteenth-century scholars in the Christian West were keenly aware of the complexities of language and made great strides in analyzing it and the puzzles created by its use and abuse. The *Summa Logicae* of William Ockham, for example, is still in our own day a masterpiece of logical and linguistic insight and a testimony to the verbal precision exercised generally by the late Scholastic philosophers and theologians. The uninformed and impatient attacks of those who accused them of being logophiles who did nothing but split hairs, however, brought an untimely end to the linguistic analysis of Scholastic logicians and abruptly terminated the development of a useful metalanguage.

Today we are experiencing the feverish revival of a long-neglected discipline. In the last thirty years—less in America—linguistic analysis has affected every field of human endeavor at its roots and radically altered many, especially theology. The vaguely nominated “revolution in Biblical studies” has far less to do with recent manuscript discoveries than it has with the recent theories of language acts, meaning and reference. The three books reviewed here with critical comment are recommended as generally excellent

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It is also clear that for the author religious language does not convey factual knowledge as does the language of science. The latter contains assertions which are only probable at best, expresses concrete facts or causal explanations, and these are subject to objective testing procedures. None of this is true of religious language. Hence, it does not convey empirical knowledge.

The argument of chapter V attempts to show that the language of religion is not ethical. The argument hinges on the assumption that *all* ethical statements are prescriptive in character. Being a raw assumption this is the weakest claim in the book. The author also has some difficulty showing that ethical statements are genuinely descriptive. Even though one might grant this, it is not easy to see that he has proved it. At any rate, what is intended has been done better by others and need not be regarded as detracting from the main argument of the book.

In "The Meaning of Religious Statements", chapter VI, we meet that argument. According to Schmidt, the term "religious" when predicated of persons means that the person in question "possesses a pervasive pattern of behavior that is thought to be of positive value concerning human relations and the whole of nature and life" (p. 76). The source of such behavior is found in the person's attitudes, and these are caused by his beliefs. Schmidt argues that there is a genuine difference between "beliefs-in" and "beliefs-that" such that the former are a person's affirmations of an object, while the latter are his affirmations of a statement. This is the crucial point in the argument, for he goes on to define "religious faith" in terms of the distinction; it is "a set of beliefs-in about particular sorts of objects such that certain attitudes, that is, dispositions to behave, will be instilled in the believers" (p. 83). Once given this definition, very little stands in the way of arguing that religious language is attitudinal and that its primary purpose is to evoke certain attitudes in oneself and others. Moreover, all the science vs. religion controversies are seen to be meaningless because faith has to do with beliefs in an object while knowledge is concerned with beliefs that something is the case.

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The only ground that Schmidt provides for distinguishing between beliefs-in and beliefs-that is the allegation that when we believe *in* some religious object we never think that the nature of object can be exhausted by any set of beliefs that the object is of a certain kind. Hence, the two kinds of belief are not equivalent at least when the object believed in is a god. This distinction however, completely breaks down when it is seen that even beliefs-in scientific objects, which *are* held to be equivalent to a set of beliefs-that, are never such that the objects are exhaustively described by a set of believed, descriptive propositions. If this were the case, science would know *everything* about some or all of its objects whereas in fact there is no such completely known object in any science. It follows from Schmidt's failure to show a real distinction between them that a belief *in* something is nothing different from a belief *that* something is the case, because the former expression is merely an elliptical way of stating the latter. The proposition "I believe in God" is logically and semantically equivalent to "I believe that there is a God." It turns out then that a religious faith, on his definition, would have to be defined as a set of beliefs *that* certain sorts of statements are true, which beliefs produce certain attitudes which are in turn causally related to observable behavior. This has the effect of making religious language the basis of *knowledge* ("faith is connected with beliefs-in" p. 84) which is the very thing Schmidt set out to deny.

The thesis that religious assertions are "injunctions or commands to behave" is not a new one, but the author's way of presenting his case is both eminently clear and readable, and rather convincing in many ways. The remainder of the book examines the ways in which religious statements (as he defines them) might be just the role of religious experience ("it cannot provide religious knowledge"), and the need for training people to adopt rational behavior.

A thoughtful reading of *Religious Knowledge* will provide an excellent introduction to the serious and constructive effort of the modern analyst of religious language. By following the clearly expressed thoughts of one analyst, the reader will have given himself a firm starting-point for launching into the deep.

A book far broader in scope is Jules Moreau's *Language*

*Religious Language*². In it he traces the effect of the Hebrew-to-Greek transition on the theology of the Biblical and patristic writers, and the effects of linguistic philosophy, existentialism, and linguistic science on the modern view of the Bible. The thought is often involuted, complex, and challenging, but even the casual reader's interest will be sustained by the dedicated fervor with which Moreau writes.

The question of central importance for Moreau is not whether there is a God or what God we believe in, but how we who believe in the God revealed in Jesus Christ express our faith among ourselves and to those outside the Church. Moreau endeavors, therefore, to describe the character of Biblical and religious language as Christians use it in their corporate worship life and as they use it when addressing the world. More than this, he attempts to establish some normative principles by which the didactic and kerygmatic uses of religious language may be guided.

Moreau sets the stage for his principal contention with a fairly general review of the contributions to language analysis made by philosophical analysts of the more radical (positivistic) type. He then proceeds to contrast this with the philosophy of symbolic form (Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key*) and existentialism (Heidegger). The latter two thought-movements are used as clubs to beat an already dead horse (Vienna Circle positivism) and to provide the womb for the conception of a new kind of logic the author seems to think is needed for the task of translating the Biblical message for moderns.

There is a certain lack of perspicuity and perspiration in this part of Moreau's work. He has not bothered to study what is now being said by philosophical analysts. The important contemporary names are mentioned but their thought is not examined. And the great value lying implicitly in the work of the early logical empiricists is apparently not harvested, for if it were, the absurdity of his proposal in chapter IV would not have occurred. There he asserts that the "question at issue is whether or not the logic of expression involved in the religious vocabulary is the same logic as that which is assumed to govern mathematical inference or scientific generalization" (p. 107). Moreau, of course, denies that the logic is the same. He does not mean merely that Christians do not go

²Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961. 207 pages. Cloth. \$4.50.

around talking like computers, uttering first axioms, then postulate definitions, theorems, etc. This is a well-established fact and fortunate one, except when it happens in the theological classroom or in a theological treatise. What he means is that the *logic* of religious assertions is "such that it precludes translation without remainder into a language governed by the logic of nature" (p. 171). The logic of nature is clearly understood to be the kind we are taught when we study the subject. Now, since without this logic all assertions of every kind would be meaningless babble, it is hard to believe that religious language is not governed by it because people apparently do understand it, at least quite often. We shall return to this subject in connection with Moreau's main point.

Surely the philosophy of symbolic form has taken no "several league steps over the wall built around the knowable by logic and empiricism" (p. 60). Regardless of the shortcomings of that movement, the knowable must be set down in language; and if it can be set down, it is subject to the self-same categories of logic that are said to circumscribe the knowable. The appeal to symbolic form and the empirical science of psychology (which depends on the same logic for its value) as a way of justifying the central claim that Biblical language is mythical in character is about as useful as appealing to Khrushchev to help us pay our national debt. In fact, the philosophy of symbolic form itself is dependent for its intelligibility upon the very logic Moreau seems to think it rejects. You can repudiate logic, but no one will understand you.

Much the same may be said for the accolade Moreau directed toward the philosophy of Existence. Heidegger's thought is admitted to be in "impossible German." That should already start the warning flags waving. Insofar as existentialism does say something, and no one will any longer deny that, it is intelligible and therefore, logical. And what is not capable of being experienced or thought or said is usually uttered in an "impossible German" English, etc. Moreau says, "Into Heidegger's thought have appeared those aspects of reality which are not reducible to the clear and distinct language of scientific formulation" (p. 69). Those aspects may not be scientifically formulated, but if they cannot be expressed in clear and distinct language of any sort, then they cannot be regarded as aspects of *reality*. And an unknowable reality is, these days, not even academically interesting.

All of this has a direct bearing on Moreau's main point, namely, that theology is primarily concerned with historical fact. It sees God at the beginning and at the end of a historical process and it sees man in that process as God deals with him. Being primarily historical, theology is not a scientific discipline on all fours with physics or chemistry. It differs *logically* from all these. Hence, we need a new logic to deal with history in general and theology in particular. This fantastic proposal is expressed thus:

The historical events in which Israelites and Christians alike had been encountered by Yahweh were always expressed in singular propositions. The mythic statements by which Israel as well as the Christians oriented themselves to the world in terms of those singular historical events were also cast in the form of singular propositions. The logic of deduction cannot comfortably handle such propositions, nor can the logic of induction; therefore, unless they are pure nonsense, these singular propositions must exhibit a logic of their own. (p. 135)

Elsewhere it is affirmed that the problems of life are also incapable of being treated with the logic at our disposal (p. 137). Hence, they too must be treated by a new logic—a logic, significantly, which Moreau does not even pretend to give us. “The logic of historical inference is yet to be organized into canons, but this will have to be done by scholars who are prepared to deal creatively [logically?] with the singular proposition” (p. 138). The effect of this is to say that all of history and the problems of life are now, in fact, insoluble. No Christian can believe that and be consistent with his faith. But then, consistency is measured by the Law of Contradiction; and if one does not accept this logic, one might justifiably believe that *all* problems are insoluble. It is probably safe to say, however, that the future will go with men like Ockham who said, “All contradictions are equally repugnant.”

Moreau's fundamental claim that Biblical language is mythical and therefore requires a new logic for its proper understanding depends on the contention that logic, as we know it, cannot “comfortably” deal with singular propositions. There is no evidence offered for this assertion and no reason for a rational man to accept it. If Moreau does not accept logic, and hence the Law of Contradiction, then he will be forced to admit the truth of the contradictory of his own claim, viz., that logic *can* deal with singular propositions.

And if he does accept logic (writing an intelligible book presupposes that), then he cannot meaningfully propose to abandon the power of logic to treat singular propositions.

Despite repeated reference to the "mythic" quality of Biblical language, the reader should not take Moreau to be another Bultmannite. So far as Moreau is concerned, Bultmann is the perpetrator of a new kind of Gnosticism. Nor does Tillich come off much better. His concept of Being is said to fail to do "justice to the richness of the core of the creation-eschatology myth in which the Biblical message is cast" (p. 172). We might heartily agree with Moreau's criticism that the concept of Being (if there is such a thing) is too static to be used as a fundamental category which must include the vital and dynamic truths of ktiology, but the process philosophy of Whitehead which the author wishes to substitute for it is hardly a useful substitution, depending as it does on an idealistic (unrealistic) logic of internal relations.

Perhaps the most poignant section of the book is the descriptive analysis of the Apostles Creed. Every preacher will appreciate the insights given there into the timeless truth of the Bible. The major weakness is the author's insistence on under-rating, if not wholly ignoring, the ontological import of the credal statement "Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary . . ." is said to be not a biographical assertion but an evaluative utterance (p. 121). Surely the Creed must have *some* existential import if, as a language of commitment, it expresses commitment to *something*.

The redeeming quality of the book as a whole is the repeated demand that our edifying discourse within the church and our witness to the world must proceed from a thorough and intimate acquaintance with the Bible itself. This alone makes Moreau's work a helpful and enlightening essay for thoughtful Christians, pastors and linguaphiles.

The most outstanding and best of the three works here reviewed is the clear and exhaustive introduction to all schools of linguistic analysis written by Federick Ferré, entitled *Language Logic and God*.³

³New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961. viii and 184 pages. Cloth. \$3.5

By virtue of its careful reasoning and multitude of quotations from almost all the significant contemporary works on the analysis of religious language, it is not only a storehouse of indispensable information but the best introduction to the whole field of language analysis in English to date. Ferré starts at the beginning and meticulously but concisely works his way to the present moment in the life of the analysis of discourse. No important stone is untouched, no significant argument overlooked. And the temper of his judgment is almost always balanced and modest. The book is written by a Christian and a scholar, who demonstrates the fact that he is both in this work. He has eminently succeeded in making a great mass of technical data clear to the educated reader, and at the same time has made it both adventuresome and suspenseful. Except for its relatively small print, the book has all the material merits of a text book.

Although Ferré does not attempt to give a full-blown analysis of religious language of his own making, he does not hesitate in the last thirty pages to draw some implications from his foregoing study of the various analytical approaches. The greatest value, however, is to be found in the examination and criticism of the contending analytical schools themselves. In a limited review justice cannot be done to the wealth of detail in the work. It will have to suffice to give a general overview of its contents and commend it to the earnest study of every reader of these pages.

In the early chapters the author gives an incisive account of the radical positivistic attack on all sorts of metaphysical, theological and ethical language, and traces the development of meaning criteria by the modern Oxford school and its disciples through to the time the book went to press. The immodest claim that the meaningfulness of a proposition must be established by its empirical verification is carefully examined and the limitations of this criterion noted. There is a chapter (4) on "The Limits of Verificational Analysis," but none on the limits of what is called functional analysis. This betrays the author's own prejudices favoring the latter, but the reasons for his prejudice are clearly stated. He has not failed to indicate the arguments which he believes force one to adopt the functionalists' approach to the problems of religious language. However one may disagree with the Oxford dictum that the meaning of a statement is to be found in its use, Ferré's survey makes it

clear that it will not suffice merely to demur from assenting to the dictum.

The attempts to analyze religious discourse in terms of the doctrine of analogy (the Thomist preoccupation), and in terms of obedience and encounter are all given precise statement and penetrating criticism. The work of Torrance, Barth, Farmer, Braille and Campbell is considered and evaluated, and the efforts of many others are related to their tasks of attempting to show either that religious discourse expresses the faith of obedient living or that it is the result of a personal meeting of the I and Other. Analyses which hold theological language to be ethical, attitudinal or empirical in character are examined under the heading, "The Familiar Functions of Theological Discourse," and the work of Ian Crombie, on which Ferré builds his own views, is discussed under "The Unique Functions of Theological Discourse."

The most helpful, informative and critical portion of his work stops there. The remaining twenty pages of the text contain Ferré's synoptic view of the problem in which he distills what is of value from the contributions of each school and attempts to point out the direction future analysis of religious language must take. The chapter title indicates the author's belief that theism can profit from the insights of all the competing analytical views. It is called "The Manifold Logic of Theism." However, the repeated abuse of the term "logic" in the book is a result of the author's own previously mentioned bias, and though his favoritism is argued for, it is the cause of the weakness in the concluding chapter's reasoning.

In Ferré's view the laws of formal logic "do not apply *between* the utterances . . . of religion. The primary syntactic relationship for the language of living faith is that of equivalence, not entailment; and the primary application of this relationship is between the words of the believer and the 'given' paradigms of faithful testimony in the Bible (p. 151). In other words, the contradictory statements which might be heard in a prayer are not repugnant so long as each of the statements is logically equivalent to some Biblical statement. It is clear that contradictions do not much bother Ferré. The statement 'it is raining and it is not raining,' he says, "may be the best possible characterization of the day. If it is, it will be so merely because I use a form of words which seems to con-

dict itself but because the expression I use acts as an incentive to increased conceptual precision" (p. 153). No matter where Ferré lives, it is hard to see how his description could be the best for any conceivable climate. If it is conceivable, it is expressible in coherent language. Granted that certain verbal contradictions, when they become standardized in a vocabulary, are ways of causing the hearer or reader to perk up and think about the paradox, it is quite another thing to claim that contradictory statements *per se* make for conceptual precision. They may evoke a given response, or many different and unpredictable responses in the hearer; and the scientific study of the effects of visible signs and audible sounds belongs to the empirical science of psychology. But when the important question concerns the intelligibility of language, then ordinary logic must also be consulted. It certainly cannot be ignored or abandoned.

We can agree with Ferré that religious discourse "intends, at least, to refer to reality—to some state of affairs, to 'facts' of some kind" (p. 159). But it is extremely difficult to concur in his judgment that these facts are not *at all* like the kind dealt with by science, and that they must be treated with a unique kind of logic. There are a good many scientific "facts" which are equally as metaphysical as the "facts" which are the referents of theological discourse—"space-time", for example. And science uses no unique logic to deal with them. On the other hand, his belief that the semantic reference of theological discourse is to some sort of metaphysical fact is far more justified than the belief of those who deny the referenceability of such discourse entirely. Yet everything depends upon just what sort of fact a metaphysical fact is thought to be. Ferré's notion of a metaphysical system has much to commend it. It is, he says, "a construct of concepts designed to provide coherence for all 'the facts' on the basis of a theoretical model drawn from among 'the facts'" (p. 161). The test of the truth of such a system is whether or not the system helps us to understand the world better than we could with the help of any other competing system (p. 165). Ferré, however, does not seem to realize that pragmatic justification is vindicated only if rational certainty is impossible to achieve. Since this impossibility is undoubtedly the case, and since we believe that ultimately only God can set the mind at rest, the human side of the struggle to attain an understanding of mean-

ing and truth remains a perpetual quest. It seems, then, that the futility of the human enterprise is one of the best reasons that can be advanced for relying on faith alone to apprehend the truth and the comfort of the Biblical message.

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N. E. B. REVISION?

According to an announcement by the publishers of the *New English Bible*, the Joint Committee of the Churches which directed the new translation has accepted a recommendation of Dr. C. C. Dodd, the General Director, that any revision of the text of "The New English Bible: New Testament" considered necessary in the light of criticisms and suggestions (contained in published reviews of the work and in letters which have been received) should be carried out at or about the time of publication of the new translation of the Old Testament, a few years hence.

It has been agreed that revision should not yet be undertaken. The translators need to stand at a distance from their work in order to form a sound judgment upon the criticisms and suggestions. Without seeking to bind in advance those who will ultimately undertake any revision, the Joint Committee has accepted, also, the principle that changes should be minimal and made only for compelling reasons.

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