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FOUNDATIONALISM AND CHALLENGES

TO THE VALIDITY OF THEOLOGICAL BELIEFS

by

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Presented to the School of  
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## Introduction: Meta-Theological Skepticism and Foundationalism

Religious faith in general and Christian religious faith in particular have been the focus of a variety of critiques during this century. An influential critique within analytic philosophy of religion initiated by Alfred J. Ayer<sup>1</sup> and Antony Flew<sup>2</sup> maintains that putative religious and theological assertions about God are, unlike genuine assertions and despite appearances, cognitively meaningless. According to this critique, these assertions violate an empiricist theory of cognitive meaning. Religious and theological sentences are allegedly neither verifiable nor falsifiable in principle by any observable empirical state of affairs.

This critique poses a serious challenge regarding the beliefs involved both in a religious faith in general and Christian religious faith in particular. I refer to the challenge the empiricist critique of cognitive meaning presents as a version of meta-theological skepticism. Theological skepticism is the view that consists in the doubt or denial that a particular religious or theological belief is true. However, theological skeptics and believers agree that it does make sense to ask and pursue the question whether a religious or theological belief is true. Meta-theological skepticism emerges as a challenge to the views of theological skeptics and believers as a

consequence of reflection on a logically prior issue. Meta-theological skepticism maintains that the agreement shared among theological skeptics and believers is mistaken. In particular, meta-theological skepticism involves the doubt or denial of the contention that it does make sense to ask whether any particular religious or theological belief is true. Where theological skeptics would reject these beliefs, meta-theological skeptics would dispense with the question altogether.

Hence, if meta-theological skepticism is sound, it has two potentially damaging consequences. First, it implies that it no longer makes sense to ask whether any particular religious or theological belief is true or false. This is because theological sentences cannot be used to assert beliefs that can be either true or false. Second, meta-theological skepticism provides the theoretical justification for undertaking a critique of the genesis of the beliefs involved in a religious faith. In this context, a critique of genesis accounts for the persistence of religious and theological beliefs as a consequence of factors pertaining to their psychological or socio-political origins. For example, these beliefs are construed as symptomatic of a response to deep-seated and as yet unresolved human needs.

Since this critique is important and widespread among many analytic philosophers of religion, in this thesis I will examine and criticize certain pervasive epistemological presuppositions to which this type of critique and the challenge

of meta-theological skepticism owe their plausibility. In brief, the thesis I defend has two related components. First, I maintain that the empiricist critique of cognitive meaning is but one version of meta-theological skepticism. I argue that this first version in fact presupposes a second more powerful version of meta-theological skepticism. The second version is couched explicitly in terms of a general normative theory of the justification of our beliefs instead of a theory of cognitive meaning. The general normative theory of the justification of our beliefs at issue here I refer to as foundationalism. Second, I argue that both versions of meta-theological skepticism owe their plausibility to a commitment to this mistaken foundationalist theory of the justification of our beliefs. It is the tacit acceptance of foundationalism that is ultimately responsible for the potentially damaging consequences of meta-theological skepticism noted above.

In the conduct of my defense of these contentions, Chapters I - III and Chapters IV - VI form two related units. In the first three Chapters, I distinguish and discuss two versions of meta-theological skepticism directed against the intelligibility and rational justifiability respectively, of religious and theological beliefs. In Chapter I, I offer a brief survey of the literature of analytic philosophy of religion construed as a series of moves offered in response to the falsification debate. Following Raeburne S. Heimbeck<sup>3</sup>, I argue that the first version of meta-theological skepticism

fails to establish its case against the cognitive meaningfulness of theological sentences. The view that theological sentences must be verifiable or falsifiable in principle by some empirical state of affairs involves a confusion of criteria of meaning for sentences with conditions of evidence for assertions. The requirement that beliefs about God allegedly expressed by theological sentences must be checkable by recourse to some empirical state of affairs is at most a sufficient condition of cognitive meaningfulness. Since theological sentences have logical entailments and incompatibles, such sentences do satisfy those conditions that are necessary for cognitive meaning. Hence, theological sentences can be used to express genuine assertions. As such, the question regarding how it may be possible to justify the truth of these beliefs is now on the agenda for philosophical reflection.

In Chapter II, I examine Heimbeck's neglected proposal regarding the justification of theological beliefs about God. In brief, he maintains that theological beliefs about God that lack any direct empirical entailments and incompatibles are justifiable if they can be inferred from theological beliefs about God that do have some direct empirical entailments and incompatibles. In addition, Heimbeck maintains that these lower level theological beliefs such as the Christian resurrection claim, for example, are justifiable if they can be inferred in a process of reasoning from signs, as conducted in theologies upon the "data" recorded and preserved for instance in the Gospels.

I consider that Heimbeck is correct to distinguish between two types of theological beliefs in a system of such beliefs. But I argue that he is mistaken to hold that the justification of theological beliefs depends ultimately and straightforwardly on empirical fact. Against Heimbeck, I maintain that a system of theological beliefs is justifiable, if at all, only in the context afforded by an initial judgement of the significance of a participant's alleged experience of God. It is in terms of these judgements of significance that phenomena and experiences are construed by participants as signs warranting for them an inference to the truth of particular theological beliefs.

However, the recognition of this context-dependent character of the justification of theological beliefs can be interpreted in at least two ways. As I discuss in Chapter III, first it can be construed as suggesting that the justification of theological beliefs is a question regarding the epistemic right of believers to interpret and judge the significance of their alleged experience of God in a particular way and to infer on this basis to the truth of particular theological beliefs. Second, it can also be interpreted as evidence warranting an important objection. If theological beliefs are justifiable only within a context presupposing an initial judgement of the supposed religious significance of their experience, many philosophers may object that such beliefs cannot be considered rationally justifiable. I note that this manner of interpreting



the context-dependent character of the justification of theological beliefs is in fact a second version of meta-theological skepticism. Like the first version of meta-theological skepticism, this objection is levelled against the very possibility of justifying any particular religious or theological belief. But this second version does not contend that religious and theological sentences are cognitively meaningless. It contends rather that theological beliefs about God are not rationally justifiable because the manner in which these beliefs are allegedly justified violates certain conditions assumed to be characteristic of the justification of our beliefs generally. Hence, if this second version of meta-theological skepticism is sound, once again it threatens to block the point of considering seriously the question regarding the truth of religious and theological beliefs.

But I consider that this potential objection no less than the first version of meta-theological skepticism is mistaken. In fact, both versions of this type of critique, whether directed against the intelligibility or rational justifiability of theological beliefs about God, owe their plausibility to the unquestioned acceptance of foundationalism. It is this theory of justification that has provided the epistemological framework in which much analytic philosophy of religion has been conducted.

"Foundationalism" is a powerful and pervasive theory of the justification of any and all claims to knowledge regardless of their subject matter and regardless of particular

contexts of inquiry. It asserts first, that any purported knowledge consists of a system of beliefs which however much they can be said to support each other, are nonetheless thought ultimately to repose on epistemologically basic beliefs. Epistemologically basic beliefs are a class of beliefs that are intrinsically credible. Their justification does not presuppose any other less basic beliefs. Second, almost all versions of foundationalism stipulate general conditions of rational basicity that any belief must satisfy if it is to be considered epistemologically basic for a system of beliefs. If the beliefs considered to be epistemologically basic in a particular system of beliefs or their presuppositions are not justifiable in terms of a class of epistemologically basic beliefs that satisfy the requisite general conditions for rational basicity then neither these beliefs nor the beliefs they allegedly support can be considered rationally justifiable. Hence none of these beliefs, whether putatively basic or non-basic can be considered legitimately as candidates for the question regarding their truth or falsity.

The link between foundationalism and meta-theological skepticism is this. Whether meta-theological skepticism is couched in terms of a challenge against the cognitive meaningfulness of theological sentences or the rational justifiability of theological beliefs, both versions presuppose that it is legitimate to request that some theological sentences or beliefs must be justifiable in terms of a class of epistemologically

basic beliefs. Indeed, both versions of meta-theological skepticism can dispense with any question regarding the truth or falsity of theological beliefs and so pose the challenge they do, only if the theological sentences or beliefs at issue fail to be justifiable in terms of a class of beliefs that satisfy such conditions of rational basicity. But the view that the rationality of theological beliefs must be established in this way presumes that the structure of the justification of a system of theological beliefs is foundationalist. Again, the main objective of this thesis is to undermine the challenge posed by either version of meta-theological skepticism. I secure this objective by a critique of the presumption that the rationality of theological beliefs must be established by showing how these beliefs are justifiable in terms of a class of epistemologically basic beliefs.

Hence, in the next three Chapters IV - VI, I illustrate, examine and criticize the presence and impact of the foundationalist perspective presupposed by both versions of meta-theological skepticism. In Chapter IV, I illustrate the manner in which foundationalism has shaped and guided the conduct of a philosophy of religion. Basically it has done so in two important respects. First, it is responsible for sustaining the widespread view that what is central to the practice chiefly of the Christian, Jewish and Moslem faiths is a particular minimal set of theological beliefs about God. This set of beliefs constitutes the logical core presupposed by those beliefs

that can be regarded reasonably as epistemologically basic within these faiths; once their putative cognitive elements have been reconstructed on the foundationalist model. Second within our knowledge as a whole, it is clear that the belief, for example, "that there is a God" is hardly itself an epistemologically basic belief. Hence, if this presupposition is rationally warranted this must be established independently of the context of any particular religious faith as the subject of a properly philosophical inquiry. It is a consequence of the tacit acceptance of foundationalism that the following equally widespread view of the main aim of a philosophical reflection on the beliefs involved in the practice of a religious faith emerges. The philosopher's role is thought to consist largely in the critical analysis of this central core of theological beliefs and their alleged relationship to experience. The main objective of this study is to establish, neutralize or undermine doubts about the rational credentials of this theological presupposition. Only if logically central theological beliefs survive such scrutiny, are we entitled to conclude that they are legitimately presupposed by the surrounding matrix of religious and theological beliefs that together justify the rationality of the religious practices that presuppose them.

In Chapter V, I examine and criticize the foundationalist view shared by many apologists and meta-theological skeptics regarding the way this scrutiny is to be accomplished. I submit that both groups tacitly assume that the rationality of

theological beliefs about God must be established by showing how these beliefs are justifiable in terms of a class of epistemologically basic beliefs; beliefs that satisfy conditions of rational basicity allegedly valid independent of all contexts of inquiry. Given a foundationalist account of the structure of justification, I defend this contention by distinguishing between two possible strategies for establishing the rationality of theological beliefs. In addition, I show that it is the putative failure of either of these strategies that spawns each of the two versions of meta-theological skepticism distinguished above. In brief, I maintain that it is the foundationalist view of the structure of the justification of our beliefs assumed in both versions of meta-theological skepticism that is untenable. It is untenable because it is a mistake to suppose that the justification of our beliefs generally must repose on a certain special class of epistemologically basic beliefs. Indeed, given the recent powerful criticisms levelled against foundationalism, it is doubtful that there can be any epistemologically basic beliefs in the requisite sense.

Finally, in Chapter VI, I consider some of the implications of the collapse of the foundationalist theory of the justification of our beliefs for the rationality of theological beliefs. I submit that is an unreasonable request, because in principle unsatisfiable, to hold that the rationality of theological beliefs must be established in the foundationalist manner. Nor is there any legitimate philosophical reason

warranting the view that if the justification of religious and theological beliefs is context-dependent in the manner I allege, the structure of the justification of these beliefs is necessarily suspect. However, this does not imply that displaying the rationality of theological beliefs within the context of a particular religious faith is a matter readily resolved. In particular, I begin by arguing that though a believer's alleged experience of God does possess evidential value for the justification of his beliefs, it does not warrant the view that within the context of his faith, his belief in God can be regarded by him as epistemologically basic.

But in the absence of a foundationalist perspective, it is important to consider how the evidential value of such alleged experiences is to be construed. If foundationalism has been the tacitly accepted epistemological horizon in which philosophical reflection has been conducted on religious faith by apologists, skeptics and immunizers, it should occasion no surprise that to abandon it is potentially rich with consequences for the study of religious faith both by participants and observers. Toward this end, I offer a sketch of an alternative approach to our subject that may prove fruitful. In brief, it is an alternative that abandons the foundationalist presumption that compels us to reconstruct what is central to the practice of a particular religious faith as if this consisted in the adherence by its practitioners to the truth of a particular set of theological beliefs. The main defect of this view is

that it conceals the diversity of theological beliefs and interpretations that is characteristic, for instance, of the Christian religious faith at any particular time. The alternative I offer is an approach that construes particular theological beliefs and systems of theological belief as but one historically developing component among many others of the expressive body of a participant's religious faith. Such beliefs are better construed as the fallible human products of diverse often conflicting and intersecting theological research areas. These beliefs are designed to express, articulate and understand in all of its ramifications the meaning for human living of initial formative judgements of the significance of a religious community's alleged experience of God. For Christians, for example, it is their alleged experience of God, whose ultimate significance they judge to be discernible in Jesus Christ, that is central if anything is, for their faith.

In this respect, I think it fair to say that this thesis can be construed as a prolegomenon to an epistemology of religious and theological beliefs. I say this because throughout the emphasis consists in the removal of philosophical obstacles that threaten to obstruct the serious consideration of the question regarding the truth of religious and theological beliefs. Chief among these philosophical obstacles are the two versions of meta-theological skepticism and the foundationalist perspective they presuppose.

Recently we have been warned that "in fact the whole idea of foundations or grounds or justification here is without sense. Foundationalism is a philosophical mythology." In addition, we are told that "such philosophical foundationalism is not needed. It is not something the loss of which undermines our capacity to make sense of our lives"<sup>4</sup>. Perhaps so, I am also very critical of its impact upon recent analytic philosophy of religion. However, I maintain that this epistemological perspective is not senseless. It is importantly mistaken. Moreover, a critique and rejection of foundationalism implies only that this particular epistemological framework for understanding the justification of religious and theological beliefs is unacceptable. It does not warrant the radical fideistic conclusion that these beliefs are groundless or in any sense without "foundation". Nor does it warrant the conclusion that no acceptable account of the justification of these beliefs is available. In any case, once this foundationalist epistemological perspective is abandoned, I suggest that a more promising philosophical reflection on the practice of a religious faith and belief than has hitherto been possible may ensue.



Notes: Introduction

1. Alfred J. Ayer, Language Truth and Logic, 2nd ed., (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp. 151 - 158.
2. Antony Flew, "Theology and Falsification", rpt. in A. Flew and A. MacIntyre eds., New Essays in Philosophical Theology, (London: SCM Press, 1955, 1963), pp. 96 - 99.
3. Raeburne S. Heimbeck, Theology and Meaning, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969).
4. Kai Nielsen, "Religion and Groundless Believing", rpt. in M. Faghfoury ed., Analytical Philosophy of Religion in Canada, (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), pp. 117, 123.

## Chapter 1: Analytic Philosophy of Religion and Theological Beliefs

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### 1.1 Philosophical Inquiry and Religious Language

The relationship between philosophical reflection and religious faith has a long and complex history in our western tradition. Problems such as the status and validity of the proofs of the existence of God and the possibility, nature and limits of religious knowledge, to mention but two prominent examples, have preoccupied philosophers as diverse in their presuppositions and convictions as St. Augustine, St. Thomas, Spinoza and Kant. Yet the persistence of these apparently "perennial" issues should not be permitted to blind us to the fact that how these problems have been understood, let alone treated, has not remained everywhere the same throughout the course of this history. This is not at all to hold that historically situated philosophers can never be found to address the same problems. It is only a reminder that difficult and important issues such as these can and do undergo subtle shifts which, if unnoticed, can lead us to misunderstand the solutions proposed.

Today, it appears that the philosophy of religion, if it is to thrive at all, is required to exist on the charity of two wealthy donors: the rich and varied practice of religious life and philosophy that purports to be a clarifying reflection upon it. Yet the sustenance offered is but grudgingly given while the living granted seems less than respectable. So on the one hand, a philosophy of religion is sometimes suspected by other philosophers as an enterprise that is really a concealed theology or a form of apologetics conducted by philosophers who, despite whatever sophistication they can muster, have ceased to be rigorous.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, some believers may greet the philosopher of religion as an interloper. They may suspect that the philosophy of religion is a study performed by someone who is ill-equipped to understand what religion is. Besides, with some measure of justifiable indignation, believers may complain that it is not for the philosopher, however sympathetic, to tell them in what their religion consists or what it should be.<sup>2</sup>

These protests are not without warrant. They can be understood as expressions of two apparently irreconcilable traditions concerning what philosophy of religion is. So some contemporary philosophers may suspect a philosopher of religion of trying to develop a religious philosophy in disguise and in the tradition so long prominent in the west from the third to the eighteenth centuries. As is well known, the

tradition of religious philosophy, whether represented by Augustine or Aquinas, drew its content and inspiration from the life and practice of religious faith. Prominent among the objectives of religious philosophy was the attempt to understand and articulate systematically religious life and faith. In brief, this approach issued in a philosophy that reflects upon the practice of religious faith. Exponents of this tradition did not seek nor did they attempt to replace it. Indeed, many members of this tradition shared its theological project and accepted its theological presuppositions. Their aim was to clarify the presuppositions of religious faith and to provide a theory capable of guiding such a practice.

Believers are rightly suspicious of the philosopher of religion because, qua philosopher, such a person may well study religious faith in the light of a modern conception of philosophy that is inimical to any and all presuppositions let alone theological ones. In the tradition of modern philosophy, its most important task is now understood to be the critical assessment, establishment or rejection of our presuppositions. From this perspective, modern philosophy of religion, as introduced and developed since Kant, searches religious life and faith for those components which conform to the requirements of human reason. Here one filters and retains those elements of religious phenomena that are compatible with or foster the aim of introducing and sustaining

a form of rationality in the service both of human autonomy and universal undistorted communication. This project and its results need not necessarily be hostile to the interests of believers and their faith. But the danger of such a philosophy of religion is that it can lead and has on occasion led to a distortion of what religion is by making it conform to the interests and requirements of an external standard.

It is in the context of these brief historical remarks that I would like to discuss and assess the contribution made by analytic philosophers of religion to reflection upon the nature of religious faith. Since the publication of Alfred J. Ayer's Language Truth and Logic<sup>3</sup>, work by analytic philosophers of religion has increased steadily both in quantity and quality. Distinctive of this style of philosophical reflection has been an intense and prolonged preoccupation with what has come to be referred to as "the logic of religious language." This is not to suggest that previous philosophers have ignored inquiry into religious language. One thinks of the scholastic doctrine of analogy for instance. Nevertheless, analytic philosophers have stressed, more than anyone else, that philosophical issues raised by reflection on religious faith are best approached and understood in terms and within the context of an analysis of the meaning of religious language.<sup>4</sup>

This concern for the meaning of religious language

is of course an aspect of a broader understanding of the nature of philosophical inquiry itself. Such a stance tends to understand the main task of philosophy as concerned with the analysis of the language in which claims to knowledge, moral judgements, aesthetic values or beliefs and judgements involved in a religious faith are expressed. Its aim thereby is the clarification of the meaning of our concepts and the rules governing the uses of language in these contexts. The philosopher is not primarily concerned with the nature of human beings, the world or God as much as he or she aims to clarify the meaning of such claims. But consonant with the tradition of modern philosophy, this clarification is conducted with an eye to determining what they entail and how they might be assessed.<sup>5</sup>

Analytic philosophers of religion tend to focus on "talk about talk of God". But this starting point and focus should not be thought somehow to minimize the importance of this work especially for the philosophy of religion. After all, whatever one understands by religious faith or religious experience, such faith and experience must sooner or later find an expression in language. To be sure, one must resist the temptation to reduce such phenomena without remainder to this linguistic dimension, as if religious faith and experience were to be understood only in terms of its cognitive aspects to the exclusion of its moral and emotional aspects. Nevertheless,

religious uses of language have served and do serve important functions for believers in the context of their religious lives. On the face of it then, there is plausibility in the suggestion exploited by analytic philosophers that an appropriate, if not the best, way to interpret and understand religious faith and experience is to investigate it as it is expressed in language.

### 1.2 Three Types of Critique and the Falsification Challenge

A major preoccupation among many analytic philosophers of religion has been an empiricist critique of the cognitive or factual significance of the language of a religious faith. This critique in effect challenges the legitimacy of considering religious assertions as possible candidates for truth and falsity. Certainly this issue, or better this family of issues, does not exhaust the range of questions studied by analytic philosophers of religion. In addition, as yet no generally accepted set of conclusions has emerged from the discussion of it. What has emerged is a consensus that the questions focusing on the factual intelligibility of religious and theological language are of central importance.<sup>6</sup>

To understand the importance of this sort of critique, it is helpful to compare it to several other types of critiques that have been developed since the eighteenth

century. As is recognized on all sides, religious faith in general and Christian religious faith in particular, have suffered many crises. The message to which believers bear witness in their faith is often greeted with skepticism from those to whom they attempt to communicate it. It is a crisis because, though the message is intended as universal, many often fail to understand or appreciate the significance believers consider it to have. This skepticism has assumed three logically distinct but related forms.

First, skepticism may take the form of a simple denial or doubt about the truth of particular religious beliefs. This theological skepticism can be maintained for a variety of reasons. It may be a consequence of a critique based on certain scientific or ontological views about the nature of the world, such that any reference to causal agency of a creator, for instance, is an "unnecessary hypothesis". It may also be based on historical considerations that allegedly render suspect the value of the documents of a particular religious tradition as evidence for the truth of religious and theological beliefs. In either case, skepticism sustained by such a critique is derived as a consequence of the assessment of the truth or falsity of religious and theological beliefs. Hence, this type of critique, whether conducted by believers or skeptics can be referred to simply as a critique of the truth of the beliefs expressed in religious and theological language.<sup>7</sup>



Second, and more radical than theological skepticism, is a form of skepticism that can be described as meta-theological. This form of skepticism and the type of critique that sustains it is concerned with assessing the "validity" of theological language and beliefs. Certainly "validity" ordinarily refers to the assessment of arguments.' But in this context, it may be understood as applying to sentences and beliefs: a sentence or belief is valid only if it can be considered legitimately as a possible candidate for truth and falsity. Specifically, meta-theological skepticism addresses the logically prior question assumed in the conduct of a critique of truth. To perform a critique of truth at all assumes that it makes sense to ask, let alone affirm or deny, whether religious and theological sentences can be used to express genuine assertions or beliefs that can be either true or false. Meta-theological skepticism is the view that it does not make sense to ask this question about religious and theological beliefs. As I will demonstrate below, in fact there are at least two possible and related versions of the critique of validity. It can be performed either in the context of a general theory of knowledge or in the context of a theory of cognitive meaning that itself presupposes an epistemology. In either case, this type of critique is clearly more radical than a critique of the truth of theological beliefs. If it is successful and these sentences or beliefs are invalid, then there is no justification or rational

warrant even to raise the first-order question regarding the truth or falsity of these alleged beliefs.

Third and more radical still than any version of meta-theological skepticism is a form of skepticism that emerges as a consequence of a critique of the genesis of theological beliefs. In its most well known versions, exponents of the critique of genesis seek to account for the persistence of theological beliefs in terms of psychological or sociological-political factors whose operation is in either case hidden from those who still pursue the question of the truth of these alleged beliefs. This type of critique can be understood to arise as a consequence of the acceptance of the results of a successfully executed critique of validity. As is obvious, there are many sophisticated believers, skeptics and agnostics who persist in holding either that theological beliefs are true or false or that the evidence here is quite inconclusive. But if it were established that religious and theological sentences and beliefs are invalid, this persistence cannot but appear puzzling. The reason for this puzzlement is that to hold that these sentences or beliefs are invalid is to hold that they cannot be considered legitimately as candidates for truth or falsity. Hence, believers, skeptics and agnostics, who continue to refuse to recognize the invalidity of these beliefs and press their concern regarding the truth of these alleged beliefs, are not merely theoretically

mistaken. Their persistence in this obduracy can be construed as indicative of a failure of rationality that requires or prompts a need for some explanation serving to account for the fact that they mislead themselves and perhaps others in this way. To provide this explanation, that is unavailable to believers, skeptics and agnostics, some thinkers have developed and exploited the critique of genesis as the vehicle that poses and pursues the question of the origins of this persistence.

The critique of genesis, inspired by the work of the three "masters of suspicion", Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, is more radical than either theological or meta-theological skepticism. This is because it presses the accusation that all expressions of a particular religious faith are ideological. Be they doctrines, rites, rituals, etc., these expressions are ideological in the sense that they are held and practiced in order to conceal and justify interests and purposes whose real significance is hidden from those who espouse them. As such, the practice of the critique of genesis involves the decision that we can understand beliefs of this sort only if and when we can reconstruct their psychological or social-political genesis. These reconstructions serve to expose deep-seated needs located in the psychological or social conditions of human life that are as yet unresolved and manifested in distorted form by the persistence of religious and theological beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

This short sketch of three types of critique, truth, validity and genesis, is not meant to be exhaustive. But given this short sketch, it is worth noting that the second, the critique of validity, plays a pivotal role. With respect to the critique of truth, if the critique of validity is successful, we are assured that there is no point in asking after the truth of religious and theological beliefs because they cannot be true or false. With respect to the critique of genesis, if the critique of validity is successful, we are assured, despite the continued protests of believers, skeptics and agnostics, that these beliefs must be ideological. Conversely, if the critique of validity can be met, two important consequences follow. First, the question regarding the truth of theological beliefs is worth pursuing because there are no theoretical obstacles indicating that it cannot be resolved, (though practical obstacles remain of course). Second, the persistence of religious and theological beliefs is not necessarily indicative of a failure of rationality that requires a genetic explanation to decipher the "real significance" of these beliefs and account for the psychological and social mechanisms of delusion allegedly responsible for this persistence, (though in some instances it may be). It is for these reasons that I consider that an extended examination of meta-theological skepticism and its presuppositions is worthwhile.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, it is also clear that it is the second, the critique of the validity of religious and theological language conducted in the context of a theory of cognitive meaning, that has preoccupied many analytic philosophers of religion. In this form, the critique of validity invokes an empiricist theory of cognitive meaning that specifies the conditions that must be satisfied by the religious and theological beliefs these sentences purport to express, if they are to be considered legitimately as candidates for truth or falsity. As Kai Nielsen has put it:

...whatever it is that we are allegedly asserting if we are making a genuine factual assertion, it must be possible to show what it would be like for the assertion to be true or probably true and what it would be like for the assertion to be false or probably false. If that condition did not obtain, if God talk does not lay itself open to experiential confirmation or disconfirmation in this way ...it, no matter how emotively meaningful is without factual significance and makes no genuine truth-claim.<sup>10</sup>

Meta-theological skepticism, in this context, is the view that the sentences allegedly used to express religious and theological beliefs about God cannot be used as genuine assertions because they cannot be experientially confirmed or disconfirmed in this way. Hence, these sentences are invalid and so are not entitled to be considered as legitimate candidates for truth or falsity.

Without doubt, the most influential text stimulating the discussion of meta-theological skepticism in the context of a theory of cognitive or factual meaningfulness was the publication of a symposium entitled "Theology and Falsification", consisting in its anthologized form of contributions by Antony Flew, Richard M. Hare and Basil Mitchell.<sup>11</sup> As is well known, Flew introduces the discussion by means of a parable adopted from John Wisdom<sup>12</sup> about two explorers who chance upon a clearing in a jungle in which there are flowers and weeds. The question that pre-occupied them was whether or not there is a gardener who takes care of it. When it is observed that no one has seen a gardener, the explorer who believes that there is a gardener responds that the gardener is invisible and intangible, etc. The parable ends with the skeptical explorer suggesting that, in the final analysis, what the believing explorer says about the properly qualified gardener does not differ in any way from saying that there is "an imaginary gardener" or "no gardener at all". Dying a death by a thousand qualifications, the believer has dissipated all the content of his "fine brash hypothesis" such that it is really the expression of a "picture preference" and not an assertion at all.

Among the many jobs that sentences like "God loves all human beings" and "God is creator" may be intended to do, they are also meant to express assertions or beliefs that such

and such is really the case. But to assert that X is the case is equivalent to denying that X is not the case. As such, the practical import of this tautology is that if one is in doubt about what a person asserts in a sentence, one way to overcome the doubt is to find out what counts against or is incompatible with this assertion. As Flew put it, "to know the meaning of the negation of an assertion, is as near as makes no matter, to know the meaning of that assertion."<sup>13</sup>

This suggests that if there is nothing which would count against an assertion or which would be incompatible with it, then one must conclude that nothing has been asserted. In effect, if a sentence is to pass as an assertion it must be falsifiable. The challenge raised for theologians by this view is that if religious and theological sentences are to be cognitively or factually meaningful, theologians must indicate what, in principle, could count for or against their truth, (as in Nielsen's version of this challenge). If not, religious and theological sentences cannot be used to express assertions and are not cognitively meaningful, so that it makes no sense to ask whether or not they are true.<sup>14</sup>

Several points are worth noticing. First, unlike an earlier and considerably more exuberant positivism, this version of meta-theological skepticism focuses only on specific religious, or rather, theological sentences. For instance, it does not claim that any and all such language is unreservedly

meaningless because it is not empirically verifiable.<sup>15</sup> Mindful of the problems characteristic of verifiability as a universal criterion of meaning, both Flew and later critics direct their attention simply to the question whether or not theological sentences are cognitively meaningful. Can they be used to express genuine assertions or beliefs? For Flew, they can be so used only if they are in principle falsifiable. Actually Flew's point is admirably crude. Theologians maintain that "God loves all human beings" and "God is creator" express genuine assertions that are true. If so, Flew asks theologians to indicate in concrete factual terms, how these alleged assertions affect our views about the way things are.

Second, though Flew does not acknowledge whether this is so, the criterion of falsifiability may well have been borrowed from the work of Karl R. Popper on the philosophy of science. If so, it is used in a way that Popper himself did not intend. Popper suggested it as a proposal for demarcating within the realm of cognitively meaningful discourse those assertions that are to be considered as scientific from those which are not.<sup>16</sup> But to repeat, the issue, for this version of meta-theological skepticism, is a concern for the cognitive meaningfulness of religious language in the context of a test provided by falsifiability as a criterion of cognitive meaning. Flew and other meta-theological skeptics do not



propose falsifiability as a criterion of demarcation. Rather they invoke it as a means for distinguishing those sentences that have cognitive meaning from those sentences that do not.

Again, any sentence that is not in principle falsifiable does not express a genuine assertion that can be either true or false. Whatever meaning these sentences have it is not cognitive meaning.

Third, if Flew's case against the cognitive meaningfulness of religious and theological sentences is sound, it is devastating for the rationality of the beliefs of any particular religious faith. It threatens to obliterate an important distinction between the expressive and referential functions of religious and theological language. Religious language as used in prayer or during religious rituals and celebrations for instance, is mainly expressive and performative. In it believers express and bear witness to their attitude toward God, their understanding of themselves in their relationship with God and their commitment to live according to that relationship. Theological language is primarily referential. Here, believers attempt to determine who God is, not for themselves, but in Himself as far as this is humanly possible. This second-order largely reflective task is crucial in overcoming a constant danger inherent in the use of expressive language; namely, the idolatrous identification and consequent reduction of God to that of a function

perceived by them in their lives. But the execution of this theological task presupposes that theological sentences do have a legitimate referential function and so can be used to express genuine assertions or beliefs. But, if Flew's version of meta-theological skepticism is sound, no such distinction between the expressive and referential functions of religious and theological language can be made and all such language is without cognitive meaning.<sup>17</sup>

### 1.3 Four Responses to the Falsification Challenge

Since Flew initiated the debate, a variety of responses have appeared that have contributed to the clarification of the cognitive meaningfulness of religious language. These responses can be divided usefully into four types. As the literature here is immense, I propose to discuss each type briefly and to offer some critical remarks designed to highlight some of the ways they have enhanced the discussion of this issue.<sup>18</sup>

The first response is simply to admit that Flew is correct and unassailable on his own ground. Religious and theological language cannot be used to express assertions, and so cannot qualify as a candidate for truth and falsity. But theological sentences do serve other important functions that deserve to be retained. Among philosophers, Richard M. Hare, Richard

B. Braithwaite and Ronald Hepburn are prominent exponents of this position.<sup>19</sup> Braithwaite, for example, holds that theological sentences must be re-interpreted as referring to a moral commitment. To say that "God loves all human beings" is really to announce or express a person's intention to live his life as if love were the ultimate value. Further, all other components of religious discourse, parables, for instance, are to be understood as psychological aids for sustaining such a moral commitment. The strategy of this response is clear. A religious faith does not involve believing that a set of assertions are true. If we are not to reject this discourse outright, some other justifiable use for it must be found. Hence, Braithwaite suggests that "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."<sup>20</sup>

However much such a reductionist account may satisfy empiricist requirements, it cannot pass if the position is construed as a description of the meaning of all religious, including theological, language. Certainly, an important component of any religious and theological language is its moral or practical implications for living a fully human life. But participants in a religious faith do consider themselves able to inform us about important, indeed crucial, features of the way things are that are not and perhaps cannot be known in any other way. As Ian M. Crombie remarks:

Creation, Redemption, Judgement are not to be accepted as illuminating fables, but affirmed as faithful parables. That these parables deepen our understanding of the world is one of the grounds for affirming them; it is by no means the whole content of that affirmation. To believe these doctrines is not only to believe that they illuminate the facts which come within our view, but also to believe that they do so because they are revelatory of facts which lie outside our view.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, Crombie may well be mistaken about whether theological beliefs can successfully play this role. But before executing such a far-reaching theological surrender of the claims to truth made on behalf of theological beliefs, as Braithwaite in effect advocates, we would do well to consider other responses to the challenge that do not capitulate so quickly or so completely.

The second response is to argue that Flew's meta-theological skeptical challenge to theologians can be answered on its own terms. Religious and theological language can be used to express genuine assertions and so does qualify as a candidate for truth or falsity. Basil Mitchell, John Hick and Ian M. Crombie are important representatives of this response.<sup>22</sup> According to Hick, for example, religious faith is neither simply a matter of believing certain assertions to be true, nor simply a matter of living a certain kind of life, though no doubt it involves both of these components. More importantly, religious faith is a total interpretation

of the world that determines what is significant in it and prescribes a certain way of life. This is also true of atheism but the difference between them is "a real and not a merely empty or verbal choice".<sup>23</sup> It is more than a matter of our "picture preference". This is because believers hold a religious view of the world that predicts the occurrence of certain events that would, if they occur, count for or against the truth of the beliefs their religious interpretation involves. For instance, if it is true that persons will enjoy continued personal existence after death in communion with God in which the fulfillment of His purpose for them is experienced, then this circumstance would count for the truth of the religious interpretation of this life and against the truth of an atheistic reading, however ambiguous either interpretation is presently conceded to be.<sup>24</sup>

Though this doctrine of "eschatological verification" is not intended to establish that religious and theological statements are true, "but to show that they make factual assertions, and are accordingly true-or-false", it is not without its own problems.<sup>25</sup> Thus, for example, there are doubts about whether or not the concept of personal existence after death, presupposed by the notion of eschatological verification, itself is coherent. Further, should this be coherent, there is also some question as to whether or not Hick's argument is question-begging inasmuch as his description of

the Celestial City and the life to come appears to presuppose the very cognitive meaningfulness of the language about God that the doctrine of eschatological verification is introduced to insure. Now it may be possible to re-describe Christian eschatological expectations in non-theistic terms, but the question remains whether this or any other theological belief is falsifiable or not.<sup>26</sup> After all, perhaps it will be true that in a hereafter, we will directly perceive or encounter God in a transfigured world, but it is doubtful that even the most other-worldly Christian would consent to relegating the cognitive meaning of "God loves all human beings" and other such important theological beliefs wholly to a realm beyond all present experience.

The third response draws its inspiration from the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Represented among philosophers of religion by Dewi Z. Phillips, William D. Hudson and Anders Nygren, this response is referred to variously as Wittgensteinian fideism, conceptual relativism or the language-game view of religion.<sup>27</sup> For fideists, religious uses of language, in particular the assertion of religious and theological beliefs, constitute a distinctive set of language games that participants in this unique form of social life use whenever they engage in or give expression to it. Like other language games, whether those characteristic of the practice of science or the moral life, religious language games are

distinctive inasmuch as the criteria for cognitive meaningfulness are given within and are internal to the practice of this form of life itself. Hudson expresses the important thesis of this position making clear its strategy in response to Flew's challenge in this manner:

Religious belief can only be understood from within; and it is immune to charges of incoherence, unintelligibility, irrationality, or non-accordance with objective reality, from without, because like any other universe of discourse, it sets its own definitive criterion of coherence, intelligibility, rationality and reality.<sup>28</sup>

Flew's version of the critique of validity is rejected because it wrongly demands that religious discourse be evaluated by a criterion that is borrowed from but applicable in another language-game, science. To demand that religious beliefs, like the Last Judgement, be testable according to some criterion of falsifiability is to treat it as a scientific hypothesis and so misunderstand its nature and function.<sup>29</sup>

Fideists, generally, have been very sensitive to the wide variety of uses of religious language in religious life. They are right to insist that to understand the meaning of the language of religious belief, careful attention must be paid to the kinds of context, situations and experiences in which this language functions and which it attempts to illuminate. They are also right to be suspicious of the legitimacy of evaluating religious language according to criteria adopted

from another source, and to reject simple models for testing religious beliefs. In any philosophical reflection upon the nature of religious faith and belief, it is an extremely delicate question which domain is to provide the principles of evaluation. This is simply because religious faith apparently lays exclusive claim to open up dimensions of the real and of the significance of human experience that may remain wholly inaccessible without it. This is not at all merely a matter of supplying new factual information. It is rather to insist that such claims to truth must be understood on their own terms. As Paul Ricoeur suggests, religious claims to truth "imply that we do not yet recognize the truth value of this kind of language if we do not put in question the criteria of truth which are borrowed from other spheres of discourse; mainly the scientific one, whether we invoke a criterion of verification or a criterion of falsification."<sup>30</sup>

Saying this should not be thought to imply that religious beliefs cannot or do not require justification or that evidence for them is not relevant. At times, Phillips seems to hold this view. For instance, he writes that just because evidence may be relevant for some religious beliefs, "one cannot conclude that it makes sense to ask for the evidence or grounds of every religious belief". Using Wittgenstein's example of a belief in the Last Judgement, Phillips makes clear that he is warning against our interpreting



the meaning of such a belief as a hypothesis about some future event. Rather its meaning is to be understood in terms of "seeing how the belief regulates a person's life".<sup>31</sup> Phillips is doubtless right to issue this warning about treating religious beliefs as hypotheses, to be held tentatively, worthy only of that level of assent warranted by the available evidence. A danger with this sort of position is a temptation to reduce the meaning of religious language to the role it has in the lives of those who use it. This move creates the misleading impression that such differences as there are between skeptics and believers, not to mention differences among believers, is a difference really between those who are comfortable with religious uses of language and those who are not.

To say that religious language has this or that function in a person's life cannot be used as an excuse to immunize this discourse against questions about the legitimacy, propriety, value, justification, reasonableness or truth of these functions. Doubtless it is true that very often disagreements between skeptics and believers and among believers themselves are fraught with dangers of misunderstanding. But as Peter Donovan points out, especially in those cases where the skeptic in question is a person who formerly did believe and participated wholeheartedly in the language-game:

...the most obvious explanation of how the two parties differ is that the believer makes a favourable assessment of the things he takes as supporting his belief, while the unbeliever makes an unfavourable assessment, considering the evidence unconvincing and so rejecting the belief. This is not to say that the disagreement between believer and skeptic is a simple disagreement over a factual issue. It is much more complex than that; but the complexity arises from the obscurity of religious fact claims and the tests relevant to them, not from the parties to the dispute operating with totally different concepts of fact, evidence and reasonableness of belief.<sup>32</sup>

Though I am very sympathetic to fideism as an account of how the meaning of religious language, including religious and theological beliefs is to be understood, I think Donovan's point is well taken. To construe religious beliefs as attempts to say something true about the way things are and their significance for us is to stress a crucial feature of these beliefs that ought not to be ignored. His remark begins to suggest some important questions that I will return to below. In particular, just how does evidence relate to religious beliefs given the sorts of experience they claim to illuminate? How is evidence for these beliefs to be interpreted? What warrant is there for interpreting it in such a way that the truth or falsity of particular religious beliefs can be discerned. What is the relation between religious beliefs properly interpreted and evaluated to the religious faith they express?

The fourth and final type of response is to question directly the legitimacy of Flew's challenge in particular and this variety of the critique of validity in general. George Mavrodes, Alvin Plantinga, James Kellenberger and Raeburne S. Heimbeck are advocates of this strategy.<sup>33</sup> According to Heimbeck, the case for the sort of meta-theological skepticism espoused by empiricist philosophers within analytic philosophy of religion rests on two theses. The first is that "checkability", which includes verifiability or falsifiability, on empirical grounds alone is a necessary condition for the cognitive meaningfulness of sentences employing the word "God". The second is that these sentences cannot be used to express assertions which are either verifiable or falsifiable on empirical grounds alone. The importance of Heimbeck's work is indicated by the statement of his own aims when he says that he will argue:

...that checkability on empirical grounds alone is a sufficient but not a necessary condition for cognitive significance, that 'God' sentences satisfy those conditions that are truly necessary, and that at least some of them even satisfy the criterion of verifiability and falsifiability on empirical grounds alone.<sup>34</sup>

Not only does he claim to unpack the confusions present in this type of critique of validity, (thereby disposing of the first thesis of the meta-theological skeptic's case), more importantly, he begins the task of re-opening the question

regarding how theological beliefs may be justifiable by addressing the second thesis. Whatever one may think of Heimbeck's answer to the latter question, one thing is already clear. The question of the truth and justification of theological beliefs would remain closed if the empiricist critique of cognitive meaningfulness were permitted to stand. If Heimbeck, and the other philosophers who adopt some form of direct response to meta-theological skepticism are right, such a question can no longer be postponed.

According to Heimbeck, the first thesis of meta-theological skepticism is mistaken. Theological sentences need not be checkable in principle, (verifiable or falsifiable), on empirical grounds alone in order for them to be used to express genuine assertions. To hold that these sentences must be checkable in either or both of these ways is to confuse an important difference between criteria of cognitive meaning for sentences and evidence for or against an assertion. Criteria of cognitive meaning stipulate the conditions that must obtain if the assertion made by a cognitive sentence is true or false. Evidence refers to those conditions that must obtain if we are to know or have reason to believe that a particular assertion is true or false. To borrow Heimbeck's example, "having an embryo or foetus in her womb is the criterion (the truth condition) if the assertion made by the sentence "Mrs. Jones is pregnant" is true. While "positive

results of Mrs. Jones's rabbit and/or frog test(s) and an x-ray photograph revealing the presence of an embryo or foetus adhering to the wall of her uterus are evidence (verification-conditions) for her being pregnant."<sup>35</sup>

Certainly criteria or truth-conditions are related to evidence but that is not a reason for confusing semantic with epistemological considerations. In fact, that a sentence is checkable presupposes that such sentences are cognitively meaningful. In Heimbeck's idiom, verifiability or falsifiability constitute only sufficient conditions and not necessary conditions of cognitive meaningfulness. If a sentence is checkable it indicates that it can be used to express an assertion about what is the case. But it is not necessary that it be checkable for it to be cognitively meaningful. The conditions that are both necessary and sufficient if a sentence is to be used to express an assertion are that it have entailments and incompatibles.<sup>36</sup> Under these conditions, theological sentences are cognitively significant and therefore can be considered as candidates for truth or falsity. For instance, the sentence "God loves all human beings" is cognitively meaningful because it satisfies the appropriate conditions. Among other things, it entails that "God is aware of humans as existing beings, is interested in humans and their destiny, has a benevolent concern for human well-being, wills their well-being and happiness

(salvation)', desires to give something of himself toward that well-being" while it is incompatible with the sentence, "God wills the eternal damnation and misery of all human beings."<sup>37</sup>

The failure to draw a distinction between criteria of cognitive meaning and evidence manifests itself in Flew's version of the critique of validity of religious language in two ways. It prompts Flew mistakenly to assume that the "meaning of a sentence is equivalent to the empirical expectations of the statement it makes" and in his "identification of the 'counts against' relation with the 'is incompatible with' relation - the conflation of falsifiability and incompatibility."<sup>38</sup> Consider only the first way, for example, the confusion is expressed in Flew's claim that there is no difference in meaning between the sentences "an imaginary gardener tends a plot"; "an invisible gardener tends a plot"; and "no gardener tends a plot." There is no difference only if we tie the meaning of a sentence directly to the checking procedures and the expected results of such tests that would be invoked if we are to know or have good reason for believing it to be true. To do that is to confuse criteria of cognitive meaning with evidence. In fact, the first sentence has no cognitive content at all while the second and third sentences have different cognitive meaning because they have different entailments and incompatibles. The former sentence entails the affirmation of a causal hypothesis while the third

sentence entails the denial of a causal hypothesis.<sup>39</sup> To be sure, there is a connection between cognitive meaningfulness and checkability. But to repeat, the connection is that checkability, verifiability/falsifiability in principle is only a sufficient condition and not a necessary condition of cognitive meaningfulness.

#### 1.4 A Clue for the Checkability of Theological Beliefs

As I mentioned above, Heimbeck also addresses the second thesis of Flew's version of meta-theological skepticism, that theological beliefs are not verifiable or falsifiable on empirical grounds alone. Carrying out this second task is in no way necessary for the argument disposing of the empiricist critique of the cognitive meaningfulness of theological sentences. This latter job is already completed once it is recognized that it is not necessary that theological sentences be checkable for them to be considered as expressing genuine assertions or beliefs. It is enough that these sentences have logical entailments and incompatibles. This assures us that the assertions or beliefs these sentences express are legitimate candidates for the question of how their truth or falsity may be ascertained. But as Heimbeck notes, if it can be demonstrated that within any theological discourse there are some important theological assertions

which are checkable on empirical grounds alone, the case for the cognitive meaningfulness of theological sentences will be doubly secure. It will provide an additional reason for the claim that theological sentences can be used to express genuine assertions and this established on the meta-theological skeptic's own ground.<sup>40</sup>

Clearly, if any theological beliefs are to be conclusively verifiable or falsifiable on empirical grounds alone then some of them must have empirical entailments and incompatibles. For Heimbeck, in any system of theological beliefs, it is possible to distinguish between two types of theological belief. I will refer to this distinction as a distinction between category A and category B theological beliefs. Category A theological beliefs, (Heimbeck's "G<sub>2</sub> statements"), are those which have only other theological beliefs as entailments or incompatibles. In addition, though at some point certain empirical beliefs may be requisite as evidence for the truth of category A theological beliefs, nonetheless the direct evidence for the truth of these beliefs will be expressed only by other theological beliefs. Examples of category A theological beliefs are "Hear, O Israel, the Lord Thy God, the Lord is One", "God is one yet three, a Trinity in unity and unity in Trinity", "God the Holy Spirit proceeded from God the Father and from God the Son Together, not from God the Father alone" and "God loves all human beings".<sup>41</sup>



Category B theological beliefs, (Heimbeck's " $G_1$  statements") are those theological beliefs that have some empirical entailments and incompatibles. In addition, the evidence directly pertinent to establishing the truth of particular category B theological beliefs consists, according to Heimbeck, only of other empirical beliefs. The prime example of this type of theological belief, whose theological importance in a Christian context is clear, is the belief regarding the resurrection; "God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead near Jerusalem at time  $T_2$ ". It is formulated in this fashion because as it stands, it entails the truth of the following two straightforwardly empirical beliefs: "Jesus was dead near Jerusalem at time  $T_1$ " and "Jesus of Nazareth was alive and in the vicinity of Jerusalem at time  $T_3$ ". In addition, this example also entails the category A theological belief: "God is a causal agent", a non-empirical entailment. It is these second category B theological beliefs that provide the "empirical anchorage" for any theological system. They are also "logically central to the system of classical Christian theism" because these beliefs serve as the foundation for inferring to the truth of category A theological beliefs.<sup>42</sup>

Once this distinction is made the approach characteristic of many analytic philosophers of religion cannot but appear ironic as Heimbeck is quick to point out.. Much of the literature of the recent meta-theological discussion has dealt

exclusively with category A theological beliefs such as "God exists" or "God is a necessary being" or "God is creator" and the analysis of the "logically central" category B theological beliefs has been allowed to pass unnoticed, let alone analyzed. But if category A theological beliefs are themselves highly complex conclusions inferred from category B theological beliefs then the current trend in the literature should be reversed. As Heimbeck argues:

...if a difficult  $G_2$  statement Category A, such as the one made by 'God loves all human beings'... is backed in part by the statement expressed by 'God sent his son to die for the sins of the world' which in turn is backed in part by the statement made by 'The Word became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ,' which in turn is backed partly by the statement made by 'God raised Jesus from the dead', then the discussion of the checkability of G-statements should focus on the logical analysis of  $G_1$  statements, Category B.<sup>43</sup>

The overwhelming tendency among recent analytic philosophers of religion has been to assume that the appropriateness of religious interpretations of our experience and religious responses generally, depends upon the truth of the doctrinal beliefs they support. But if Heimbeck is correct, these doctrinal beliefs, largely consisting of category A theological beliefs, as found in the Apostle's Creed for instance, are better understood as complex inferences from and proposals for perspicuously representing the significance of that which is asserted in category B theological sentences as these in

turn are derived from the Gospels.

The failure to notice this distinction between two types of theological belief underlies the following objection offered by Kai Nielsen. It is recognized both by skeptics and believers that "God" does not name anything empirical or anything that could be construed as a logical construction out of empiricals. God is not now an object of direct observation readily available to all. So says Nielsen:

...it is logically impossible directly to confirm or infirm such central segments of nonanthropomorphic God Talk. But then it is also impossible indirectly to confirm or infirm them, for 'indirectly' could only qualify 'confirm' or 'infirm', if it had an intelligible opposite. But if it is logically impossible 'directly to confirm or infirm them', then 'indirectly confirm or infirm' is deprived of its putative intelligible opposite.<sup>44</sup>

Following Heimbeck, at most Nielsen's objection is applicable only to category A theological beliefs. But if these are inferred from category B theological beliefs and if these are conclusively verifiable or falsifiable on empirical grounds alone, then the objection collapses.

To consider falsifiability for instance, Heimbeck offers two ways in which category B theological beliefs can be falsified on empirical grounds alone.

If a G statement (category B), has a purely empirical entailment and if that empirical entailment is conclusively falsifiable on empirical grounds alone, then the entailing G statement (category B) is (on analogy with modus tollens)

ipso facto conclusively falsifiable on empirical grounds alone.

The second way is

...if a G statement (category B) has a purely empirical incompatible and if that empirical incompatible is conclusively verifiable on empirical grounds alone, then the incompatible G statement (category B) is (on analogy with modus ponendo tollens) ipso facto conclusively falsifiable on empirical grounds alone.<sup>45</sup>

To consider his example once more, the category B theological belief "God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead near Jerusalem at  $T_2$ " is conclusively falsifiable on empirical grounds alone because it implies the belief, "Jesus of Nazareth was alive and in the vicinity of Jerusalem at  $T_3$ " and it is incompatible with the belief "Jesus of Nazareth was not alive at  $T_3$ ". Hence contra Nielsen, since the truth of both this entailment and incompatible of this category B theological belief can be checked solely against what is given in experience, some theological beliefs can be directly infirmed. Further, if category A theological beliefs are inferred from category B theological beliefs then category A theological beliefs can be indirectly infirmed from that which is given in experience.<sup>46</sup>

Before critically examining Heimbeck's proposals for the verification of category B theological assertions a review of the discussion thus far may prove helpful. I have argued that analytic philosophers of religion have been

prominent exponents of the strategy of approaching Christian religious faith and experience as it is expressed in language. In doing so, many have focused their attention upon the analysis of a sophisticated expression of this faith as it appears in theology. The major preoccupation has been the family of issues raised concerning the cognitive or factual meaningfulness of theological sentences about the existence and properties of God. This concern is expressed in the thesis that theological sentences cannot be used to express genuine assertions because they are neither verifiable nor falsifiable in principle by any empirical state of affairs. Such sentences, it is alleged, are cognitively meaningless, and so cannot be considered as candidates for truth or falsity.

Given this challenge, no less than four distinct responses have been developed, "left-wing" reductionism, "right-wing" eschatological verificationism, Wittgensteinian fideism and the strategy of direct confrontation.<sup>47</sup> Each of these positions has contributed in various ways to the discussion of this issue. The fourth response is decisive in this context because it directly questions the legitimacy of this style of empiricist critique. As Heimbeck, for instance, has demonstrated, this version of the critique of validity rests upon a version of the checkability theory of meaning that can sustain the meta-theological skeptic's case only if a confusion between criteria of meaning and evidence is

permitted to stand. This means, in effect, that the claim that a theological sentence must be checkable by some empirical state of affairs in order to be used to express genuine assertions is mistaken. This requirement is at most a sufficient condition of cognitive meaningfulness. Because theological sentences have entailments and incompatibles, they do satisfy those conditions that are necessary and therefore they can be used to express genuine assertions.

If Heimbeck and the other analytic philosophers who have adopted this strategy are correct, then there is no longer any legitimate philosophical reason for evading or postponing the question how it may be possible to make out the truth or falsity of religious and theological beliefs. Theological sentences are cognitively significant and so are rightful candidates for the truth question. To accomplish the task of providing an account of the justification of theological beliefs Heimbeck has provided an important clue that will serve as a useful starting point. If one distinguishes between category A and category B theological beliefs, the former having no direct empirical entailments and incompatibles while the latter have some, it appears that category B theological beliefs can be shown to be falsifiable directly upon empirical grounds alone. Category A theological beliefs, which are conclusions inferred from category B theological beliefs, are falsifiable indirectly on empirical

grounds alone. But the truly important questions emerge in connection with demonstrating the possibility of verifying category B theological beliefs. Heimbeck maintains that these are also conclusively verifiable on empirical grounds alone. In examining his proposed solution to this question, two further questions will also be addressed. First, what is the relationship between category B theological beliefs and the phenomena, the experiences, they are designed to interpret? Second, can religious and theological language and the beliefs it affirms as a whole really be understood to depend ultimately upon empirical grounds alone in the manner Heimbeck proposes?

Notes: Chapter 1

1. Often underlying this attitude is the tacit assumption that religion is a mode of life that has been or is in the process of being replaced by some secular form of enlightenment. This latter mode of life is itself often considered due to the impact of modern science and critical philosophy. For a recent example see Kai Nielsen, Contemporary Critiques of Religion, (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 1.

2. See, for instance, Louis Dupré, who quotes with approval the following remark from Henry Duméry concerning the idea of God:

The philosopher encounters this idea; he is not the author of it. He must therefore seek to know what it signifies and what role in life can be assigned to it. But he is not to mold it as he pleases nor turn it to uses which do not answer to the fundamental aspiration of the subject. In these conditions, the God of philosophies is from the start a theft and a blunder. One pretends to believe that the idea of God is the property of philosophy, whereas it is borrowed from the religious life.

Louis Dupré, "Metaphysics and Religious Faith", reprinted in Robert E. Wood ed., The Future of Metaphysics, (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1970), p. 264.

3. Alfred J. Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971, 1st ed. 1936).
4. For a recent historical survey of the development of analytic philosophy of religion, see Norbert O. Schedler, "Talk about God-Talk, A Historical Introduction", in Norbert O. Schedler ed., Philosophy of Religion: Contemporary Perspectives, (New York: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 219-250.
5. Malcolm L. Diamond's comment captures well the attitude of many analytic or linguistic philosophers towards the traditional metaphysical concerns of earlier philosophers.



He writes:

The issues they deal with may be traditional, but they construe their task in a radically different way. They follow the positivists in rejecting the claim - characteristic of traditional metaphysicians - that philosophy can add to our knowledge of the world. In this domain they do not believe that philosophical conceptualization can supplement scientific inquiry. They regard their job as providing a clean conceptual framework for the knowledge we acquire through science and common sense, that is a framework that will be expressed in precise and controllable forms and one that will be free of the confusions of purpose and the turgid jargons that scarred the metaphysical systems of the past.

Malcolm L. Diamond, "Contemporary Analysis: The Metaphysical Target and the Theological Victim", Journal of Religion, 47(1967), p. 222. For short surveys of the history of the development of analytic philosophy, see Richard Rorty, The Linguistic Turn, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 1-39; and George J. Warnock, English Philosophy Since 1900, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 1969).

6. I note in passing that a study oriented towards reflection on the nature of religious language need not centre upon the family of issues described below as characteristic of the work conducted by many analytic philosophers of religion. As an example of such a different approach, see Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language", Journal of Religion, 54(1974), 71-85.

The sheer number of books and articles on this and related questions attests to this fact. See the extensive bibliographies in Malcolm L. Diamond and Thomas V. Litzenburg Jr., eds., The Logic of God/Theology and Verification, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), pp. 527-552; and Pierre Lucier, Empirisme Logique et Langage Religieux, (Montreal: Bellarmin, 1976), pp. 419-456.

7. This type of critique does not or need not necessarily issue in skepticism regarding the truth of religious and/or theological beliefs. It can and is performed in and for a particular religious faith itself. As I will argue

below, this type of critique is required in order to purify human expressions of a religious faith lest these be mistakenly identified with God Himself.

8. For a discussion of the critique of genesis generally, see Paul Ricoeur, Freud and Philosophy, An Essay on Interpretation, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 26-36.
9. Nielsen, for instance, is well aware that both of these consequences are entailed if the critique of validity issuing in meta-theological skepticism, is sound. See his Contemporary Critiques of Religion, pp. 1-2.
10. Kai Nielsen, Contemporary Critiques of Religion, p. 40.
11. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre eds., New Essays in Philosophical Theology, (London: SCM Press, 1955, 1963), pp. 96-108.
12. See John Wisdom, "Gods", reprinted in his Philosophy and Psycho-Analysis, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), pp. 154-155.
13. Antony Flew, op. cit., p. 98.
14. Flew's actual wording of his original "challenge" is this, "What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or of the existence of, God?'" , ibid., p. 99.
15. Ayer might be considered as a prominent exponent of this view. Alfred J. Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, pp. 151-158.
16. Commenting on his suggestion that falsifiability should be considered and construed as a criterion of demarcation and not as a criterion of meaning, Popper explains: "Falsifiability separates two kinds of perfectly meaningful statements: the falsifiable and the non-falsifiable. It draws a line inside meaningful language, not around it." Karl R. Popper, Logic of Scientific Discovery, (New York: Harper and Row, 2nd ed., rev., 1958), p. 40 and pp. 40-42.
17. I introduce this distinction between the expressive and referential functions of language as a useful way of illustrating the thrust of this version of meta-theological skepticism. If the case for this type of skepticism is

sound, it implies that, what for participants of a particular religious faith is a constant danger characteristic of the expressive or performative function of spontaneous religious language, in the absence of a legitimate referential function is an important clue about the real meaning of all religious and/or theological language. Were it the case that this language possesses no legitimate referential function and since believers are unaware of this, the function this language actually has in the regulation of aspects of their lives and its real meaning needs to be deciphered; if it is to be understood at all. I note in passing that, as Benoît Garceau has suggested to me privately, there is or may be a third distinctive sort of religious language that involves both a referential and an expressive function. This dogmatic language, as found in statements of the Apostle's Creed for instance, is a language primarily addressed to the members of a particular faith-community. It is designed both to express, articulate and clarify the cognitive implications of the judgement of the significance of their communities' experience of God that is formative for the faith members of it share. If pressed, I should think that this distinction between these functions of language in any particular case marks at most a difference in degree and not a difference in kind.

18. For more detailed discussions of these positions, see William F. Blackstone, The Problem of Religious Knowledge, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 73 - 124; and Peter Donovan, Religious Language, (London: Sheldon Press, 1976), pp. 25 - 35, 51 - 62, 91 - 99.
19. See Richard M. Hare's contribution to "Theology and Falsification" reprinted in Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre eds., New Essays in Philosophical Theology, pp. 99 - 103, Richard B. Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief", reprinted in Basil Mitchell ed., The Philosophy of Religion, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 72 - 91, and Ronald Hepburn, Christianity and Paradox, (London: Watts, 1958). Among theologians, Paul Van Buren in his The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, (New York: Macmillan, 1965), also adopts this view.
20. Richard B. Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief", reprinted in Basil Mitchell ed., The Philosophy of Religion, p. 89.
21. Ian Crombie, "The Possibility of Theological Statements", in Basil Mitchell ed., Faith and Logic, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957), p. 79.

22. See Basil Mitchell's contribution to "Theology and Falsification", reprinted in Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre eds., New Essays in Philosophical Theology, pp. 103-105, John Hick, Faith and Knowledge, (Glasgow: Collins 1974, reprint of 2nd edition, Cornell University Press, 1966), John Hick, "Theology and Verification", reprinted in Basil Mitchell ed., The Philosophy of Religion, pp. 53-71 and Ian M. Crombie, "Theology and Falsification", reprinted in Steven M. Cahn ed., Philosophy of Religion, (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 119-139.
23. John Hick, Faith and Knowledge, p. 176.
24. John Hick, "Theology and Verification", reprinted in Basil Mitchell ed., The Philosophy of Religion, pp. 58-60, 66-67.
25. John Hick, Faith and Knowledge, p. 195. For a more detailed discussion both for and against, see Kai Nielsen, Contemporary Critiques of Religion, pp. 71-79 and Terence Penelhum, Problems of Religious Knowledge, (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971), pp. 66-86.
26. Basil Mitchell, The Justification of Religious Belief, (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 12.
27. See Dewi Z. Phillips ed., Faith and Philosophical Inquiry, (New York: Schocken, 1971), William D. Hudson, Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Bearing of His Philosophy Upon Religious Belief, (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), Anders Nygren, Meaning and Method, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972). For a general discussion, see Maxwell J. Charlesworth, Philosophy of Religion: The Historic Approaches, (London: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 160-171.
28. William D. Hudson, "On Two Points Against Wittgensteinian Fedeism", Philosophy, (1968), p. 269.
29. See Dewi Z. Phillips, "Religious Beliefs and Language Games", reprinted in Basil Mitchell ed., The Philosophy of Religion, pp. 126-131, 138.
30. Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language", Journal of Religion, 54(1974), pp. 71-72.
31. Dewi Z. Phillips, op. cit., pp. 126-131. See also Dewi Z. Phillips and J. R. Jones, "Belief and Loss of Belief", reprinted in Malcolm I. Diamond and Thomas V. Litzenburg, Jr. eds., The Logic of God/Theology and Verification, pp. 341-348.

32. Peter Donovan, Religious Language, p. 94. For further discussion and criticism, see James Kellenberger, "The Language Game View of Religion and Religious Certainty", Canadian Journal of Philosophy, 11(1972), pp. 265-266; Kai Nielsen, "Wittgensteinian Fedeism", Philosophy, 42(1967), pp. 191-209; Patrick Sherry, "Truth and the 'Religious Language Game' (1)", Philosophy, 47(1972), 18-37; Roger Trigg, Reason and Commitment, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 27-42.
33. George I Mavrodes, "God and Verification", reprinted in Malcolm L. Diamond and Thomas V. Litzenburg Jr. eds., The Logic of God/Theology and Verification, pp. 223-229. Alvin Plantinga, God and Other Minds, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 156-168. James Kellenberger, Religious Discovery, Faith and Knowledge, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), pp. 155-170. Raeburne S. Heimbeck, Theology and Meaning, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967). In what follows I am indebted to the lectures and discussions I have enjoyed with Benoît Garceau who first drew my attention to the importance of Heimbeck's work. He discusses Heimbeck in his "Critique et herméneutique en philosophie de la religion", in Rationality Today, ed. T. Geraets, (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1979), pp. 373-380.
34. Raeburne S. Heimbeck, Theology and Meaning, p. 36.
35. Raeburne S. Heimbeck, ibid., pp. 48-49. On the same page, Heimbeck remarks that we acknowledge that this distinction is acceptable whenever we admit "that it is one thing for a statement to be true (or false) and quite another thing for us to know or have reason for believing that it is true (or false)."
36. Ibid., p. 56.
37. Ibid., pp. 71-92.
38. Ibid., pp. 78, 88. Flew has recently admitted to the second conflation of falsifiability and incompatibility. See his "'Theology and Falsification' in Retrospect" in Malcolm L. Diamond and Thomas V. Litzenburg Jr. eds., The Logic of God/Theology and Verification, p. 278.
39. Heimbeck, op. cit., pp. 78-87. In fact only the first sentence is cognitively meaningless. The second sentence entails the affirmation of a causal hypothesis while the third sentence entails the denial of a causal

hypothesis. For a discussion of the second way in which Flew's position involves a confusion of criteria of meaning and conditions of evidence, see pp. 88-90. As Heimbeck elsewhere puts the difficulty: "The problem inherent in the checkability theory of meaning will be shown to be the confusion between verification and entailment, between falsification and incompatibility, in short, between evidence and criteria of meaning." p. 37.

40. Ibid., p. 76.
41. For Heimbeck's discussion and his examples, see Theology and Meaning, pp. 171-173. Heimbeck refers to these as "G<sub>2</sub> statements" and "G<sub>1</sub> statements". I have chosen to replace these phrases by the less cumbersome "category A" and "category B" theological assertions respectively. Prima facie it may appear that the assertion "God loves all human beings" is not a category A theological belief because it entails the empirical belief that there are persons. This belief does qualify as a category A theological belief nonetheless because the direct evidence relevant and requisite for establishing the truth of this belief in fact consists of several other theological beliefs, see below note 47. As will become more apparent below, the point of noting this distinction is precisely to draw attention to and dramatize the fact that the justification especially of category A theological beliefs is actually quite complex.
42. Heimbeck, ibid., p. 174. By the phrase "empirical anchorage", Heimbeck has in mind "the connexion between certain G-statements /theological beliefs/ and statements about the external world." Conversely, Ian T. Ramsey has in mind by this phrase, "the connexion between each G-statement /theological belief/ and some statement or set of statements about present subjective experience". For Heimbeck's account of the difference between his view and Ramsey's account of his own view, see Ian T. Ramsey, Religious Language: An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases, (London: SCM Press, 1967), pp. 11-48.
43. Heimbeck, ibid., pp. 175-176..
44. Kai Nielsen, "Empiricism, Theoretical Constructs and God", The Journal of Religion, 54(1974), 203.
45. Heimbeck, op. cit., p. 167.

46. According to Heimbeck, the possibility of checking the empirical entailments and incompatibles of category B theological beliefs is assured because "the person, time, place and event all belong to the empirical order", ibid., p. 173.
47. The categories "left-wing" and "right-wing" are borrowed from William T. Blackstone's discussion in his The Problem of Religious Knowledge, pp. 75-76.

## Chapter 2: Theological Reasoning and the Justification of Theological Beliefs

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### 2.5 Addressing the Truth-Question

The central question I propose to discuss in this chapter is: how is it possible to make out or justify the claim to truth of the beliefs asserted in a theological discourse? I stress at the outset that I do not intend to establish the truth of any particular theological beliefs or system of theological beliefs. I am only concerned with focusing attention on the manner or process of reasoning that is involved in the justification of the truth of this sort of belief.

Toward this end, I begin with a critical examination of Heimbeck's discussion of this issue. In this context, I consider his work valuable for two reasons. First, he is one of the few analytic philosophers of religion who, having disposed of the first version of meta-theological skepticism that challenged the cognitive meaningfulness of theological language, recognizes that the truth-question is now on the agenda for philosophical reflection.<sup>1</sup> Second, his proposed distinction between two types of theological belief is a most



fruitful suggestion for exposing more clearly the sort of reasoning involved in the justification of particular theological beliefs. Indeed, it is central for coming to terms with his surprising thesis that some theological beliefs are conclusively verifiable on empirical grounds alone.

I will argue that Heimbeck is mistaken to contend that the truth of some theological beliefs can be understood to be in some straightforward sense justifiable on empirical grounds alone. The important result of a critical study of his proposals regarding this truth-question is to disclose the context-dependent character of the sort of reasoning that is involved in the justification of the beliefs advanced in this context. But this result is crucially ambiguous. As I will suggest below it can be interpreted in at least two ways.

First, the discovery of the context-dependent character of the justification of theological beliefs may serve as an important clue prompting us to ask the question regarding the truth of theological beliefs in a different manner. Second, this discovery might be construed instead as a fundamental challenge directed generally against the very project of providing an acceptable account of the justification of theological beliefs. As will become readily apparent below, a great deal turns upon which of the alternative readings we are to prefer.

## 2.6 Heimbeck's Account of the Justification of Theological Beliefs

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According to Heimbeck, the justification of theological beliefs that comprise the system of classical Christian theism is a two stage process. First, complex category A theological beliefs about the nature and properties of God are justified by inference from lower-level category B theological beliefs about the relationship and involvement of God with particular events in this world. Second, category B theological beliefs are themselves justified by inference from phenomena and experiences that have been recorded and preserved in the Christian religious tradition, construed as signs allegedly exhibiting a pattern indicative of divine agency.

But:

Because  $G_1$  statements [category B theological beliefs] have empirical anchorage and because they are logically central to the system of classical Christian theism, it may properly be said that the system rests on an empirical basis. . . This is tantamount to saying that the same system is grounded on empirical fact. (or claims to be) and that the primary or ultimate data for classical Christian theism as a system of beliefs is empirical fact.<sup>2</sup>

Heimbeck's thesis is that the justification of some theological beliefs, in particular category B theological beliefs, rests upon empirical grounds alone. As I said, this contention is surprising. If it can be sustained, it would mean, contrary to what many philosophers would have supposed, that even allowing

for the differences due to a theological context, the structure of the justification of theological beliefs is similiar to the justification of the beliefs characteristic of ordinary, historical or scientific contexts of inquiry.

To understand Heimbeck's account and the grounds for this thesis, several points mentioned in section 1.4 need to be retained. First, he approaches the question of the justification of theological beliefs as part of his general argument against the critique of the cognitive meaningfulness of theological sentences that I have referred to as the first-version of meta-theological skepticism. Against this version, Heimbeck had argued that checkability (verifiability or falsifiability in principle) is at most a sufficient condition of cognitive meaningfulness. Theological sentences satisfy those conditions that are necessary for cognitive meaningfulness because they have logical entailments and incompatibles. Since the checkability of theological beliefs in fact presupposes that theological sentences do make genuine assertions, if it can be shown that some of them are also conclusively verifiable on empirical grounds alone, an additional reason in support of his main thesis will be provided. His case will be all the stronger because, although it is not required, the cognitive meaningfulness of theological sentences can be established on the meta-theological skeptic's own ground.<sup>3</sup>

Second, to deal with the question of justification, Heimbeck offers a useful suggestion by distinguishing in any theological system between two types of theological beliefs that I have referred to as category A and category B theological beliefs respectively. Category A theological beliefs such as "there is a God" or "God is one yet three, a Trinity in unity and unity in Trinity" have no empirical entailments and incompatibles. In addition, the direct or basic evidence required to verify or justify them consist only of other category A or B theological beliefs. Category B theological beliefs such as "God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead at time  $T_2$ ", along with non-empirical entailments and incompatibles, also have some direct empirical entailments and incompatibles. Now if any theological beliefs are conclusively verifiable on empirical grounds alone, they must have either some direct empirical entailments and incompatibles or they must be inferred from those theological beliefs that do have them. Accordingly, for Heimbeck, it is category B theological beliefs that provide the "empirical anchorage" for any theological system of beliefs.<sup>4</sup> They also provide the foundation for inferring to the truth of category A theological beliefs that themselves can be said to be indirectly conclusively verified on empirical grounds alone.

This distinction and explanation indicates that the question regarding the justification of theological beliefs

should be formulated more carefully to focus attention on the justification of category B theological beliefs. Briefly stated, for Heimbeck, category B theological beliefs are themselves the product of a form of inference. These beliefs are inferred as conclusions from and upon the basis of experiences and phenomena that are understood as a "cluster of signs" signifying the presence in this data of a "G-configuration" which corresponds, (or fails to correspond), to a "model G-configuration" as this latter has been determined from within a particular theological tradition.

To explain, among other things, this claim depends upon acknowledging the propriety of reasoning from signs that are used in inferring to the truth of this type of theological belief. Conclusions of this type of inference are not entailed by nor are they incompatible with the premises involved. The pattern of inference in reasoning from signs moves from a cluster of signs to that which these signs are alleged to signify. As he describes it,

...the general inference-route in question takes as its data a cluster of signs, moves from there to the G-configuration by means of an inference-route or warrant that might be stated with deceptive simplicity as 'D (a cluster of signs) signifies C (some G-conclusion)', and backs this warrant by drawing attention to the way the individual signs in the cluster hang together in a pattern or configuration.<sup>5</sup>

Among the examples Heimbeck offers to illustrate the operation of this sort of reasoning, his comments on Flew's

parable of the clearing or garden in the jungle will serve nicely. It is worth noting he remarks:

...that the strength of the inference that an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener tends the plot increases in proportion to the vividness with which the garden pattern stands out in the plot itself (together with the failure of tests to locate an empirical gardener). A few scattered flowers growing among the weeds hardly warrants the inference. But neat, artfully arranged rows of healthy flowers which rotate perfectly with the seasons, a faultlessly functioning irrigation system, a perennially trimmed hedge; such phenomena together with the failure to detect a normal empirical gardener would be a very different matter for any rational mind to try to cope with and understand. For such a pattern in the plot would constitute a garden and a garden is a sign signifying the presence and effort of a gardener.<sup>6</sup>

As this last sentence should make clear, in arguing in this fashion to the conclusion that there is (or is not) a gardener who tends this plot, reasoning from signs is hardly merely a process of re-describing what is given. Such reasoning always involves initially a judgement to the effect that a set of phenomena, when considered together and in the appropriate context, needs to be construed as a sign-cluster of a certain sort that has the particular significance it does because of the pattern it forms. In judging that a set of phenomena, such as those mentioned by Heimbeck, is a sign or rather a sign cluster, and reasoning from this to the thing this cluster signifies, the presence of a gardener, one is offering an explanation for the pattern initially judged to be exhibited

in this data when it is construed in this way.<sup>7</sup>

Though Heimbeck considers that reasoning from signs plays an important role in theological work, he notes that this sort of reasoning is scarcely the exclusive preserve of theology. For instance, it is at work whenever we try to assess the credibility of a politician, impute moral responsibility to an agent, diagnose an illness, discriminate between murder and suicide to establish criminal liability and a host of other areas. In each use we are engaged in a process of reasoning that has two closely related stages. First, we are involved in interpreting as a cluster of signs whether verbal or non-verbal or both, be it the words and deeds of a candidate during an election campaign or a set of physical symptoms, congestion, sniffles, watery eyes, as exhibiting a certain pattern or configuration. This issues in a judgement to the effect that together these individual signs form a cluster constituting possible evidence of honesty or the lack of it or possible evidence of a head cold or merely feigning one. Second, this judgement is then invoked as a premise in an inference to the effect that the candidate in question is honest or our neighbor does have a head cold because these signs are present and because they do exhibit the pattern required to signify the particular conclusion.

Since these inferences depend upon interpreting what is given in our experience as a cluster of signs exhibiting a

pattern of a certain sort, this type of reasoning can never yield conclusions that are logically conclusive. In the case of category B theological beliefs, the most frequent objections would centre on the question as to whether or not there is a "G-configuration" present in a set of phenomena that has been construed as a sign-cluster from within a particular context. But if one were to banish the use of reasoning from signs as logically suspect for this reason, theology would be in very excellent company because one would also have to banish clinical medicine, history and the physical sciences. These disciplines also make extensive use of it in certain contexts of inquiry.<sup>8</sup>

In any case, sign-clusters that are used to infer to the truth of particular category B theological beliefs can be obtained from a variety of sources. Examples of such sources drawn from the context of Christian religious faith are personal religious or mystical experience, the detection of apparent design or order in the physical universe or the record of a set of historical events as witnessed by the testimony preserved in the Gospels. But in each case the structure or the way the inference to particular category B theological beliefs is accomplished is the same. To consider his historical example, the verification of the category B theological belief, "God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead at time  $T_2$ " can be accomplished by reasoning from the basic data contained in the Gospel record. This would consist of among many other things, Jesus' own predictions of his resurrection, on occasion



explicitly as a retroactive sign of his divine authority, his crucifixion, his actual death, the empty-tomb and the post-resurrection appearances. If this inference is justifiable, it is because this "data" can be taken as a sign-cluster suggesting that, indeed, God did raise Jesus from the dead.

Obviously, the initial step in such an inference is open to challenge. After all it might be wondered why interpret the recorded "data" as a sign-cluster indicative of divine agency? This question is quite legitimate. It indicates that the final success or failure of these inferences rests on what Heimbeck refers to as the "warrant-backing operation". The "warrant-backing operation" refers to the process by which our initial judgement in deciding to interpret a set of phenomena as a sign-cluster of a particular sort in the first place is defended. In the context of a defense of an inference to the truth of a category B theological belief such, a defense involves "the use of the model (normative) G-configuration for detecting a G-configuration in the data, which if successful, constitutes the data as a sign signifying some G-conclusion."<sup>9</sup> It is the presence or absence of this correlation that justifies or fails to justify our judgement that a set of phenomena, in this case, a record of alleged historical events, is a sign-cluster of the relevant sort signifying some category B theological belief as its conclusion.

To explain, a "G-configuration" is a pattern that is present or absent in the evidence or is contradicted by the pattern that is present there. Given a particular definition of God, a prescription for identifying God in thought as expressed in various confessional formulae, a G-configuration is the pattern one would expect a set of phenomena or experiences to display if they are evidence of an experience of the God so defined.<sup>10</sup> In the historical example, it is alleged that the events in question are not at all random signifying nothing. Rather it is alleged that they do exhibit a G-configuration. How this pattern is detected, if it is, is by recourse, to a "model G-configuration". A "model G-configuration" is a set of prescriptions for identifying God in experience. As Heimbeck explains, it is inferred from a concept or definition of God to "what any experience would have to be like if it were indeed an experience of God" as this concept of God has been determined by and developed within a particular theological tradition. According to Heimbeck, "the model G-configuration" for classical Christian theism, that functions as the norm for detecting and testing for the presence or absence of a pattern signifying divine agency in a set of phenomena, consists of the following family of characteristics: tremendous power, preternaturalness, numinousness, conscious intelligence, redemptive activity, morality or justice, and certain other contextual cues. Now, if the data in Heimbeck's

example, the historical record, can be seen to exhibit some number of these features, then one is entitled to hold that these data are really a sign-cluster of the relevant sort. They do exhibit a pattern signifying divine agency because these phenomena do constitute a pattern that corresponds to the model G-configuration as this itself has been inferred from a definition of God, developed within the theological tradition in question. As such, these phenomena can be taken as a sign-cluster signifying the appropriate category B theological belief as its conclusion.<sup>11</sup>

Hence, what Heimbeck refers to as "model G-configurations" can be understood to be a conceptual theory or proposal for recognizing a set of phenomena as being phenomena that can be classified under a certain concept.<sup>12</sup> The conditions for identifying God in experience that Heimbeck offers is an example of this sort of theory. But examples of non-theological conceptual theories are readily available. Without commenting on their merits, consider these: "A law is just if and only if it reflects the consensus of the majority." "An argument is valid if and only if it is impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false." "A piece of prose contains an argument if and only if reasons are involved that are designed to persuade us that a point of view is true." "A work of art is pornographic if and only if it offends the rich and powerful." In each case and in the appropriate context, conceptual theories such as these have an a priori

role to play. They permit us to distinguish and recognize the relevant patterns a set of phenomena can form from the extraneous. In theological sign-reasoning, it is "model G-configurations", conceptual theories for identifying God in experience, that perform this function enabling us to make out the truth of particular category B theological beliefs. Again, they are used to detect the presence or absence of actual G-configurations in a set of phenomena construed as signs drawn from any of the varieties religious experience may assume. It is these proposals which justify or fail to justify our initial judgement in interpreting this set of data as evidence, as a sign-cluster, that can be said to signify some category B theological belief as its conclusion.

Succinctly stated, therefore, the structure of Heimbeck's proposed answer to the question, "how is it possible to make out the claim to truth of the beliefs asserted in a theological discourse", comes to this. The truth of category A theological beliefs, that lack any direct empirical entailments and incompatibles, can be established, if they can be inferred from the truth of category B theological beliefs. The truth of category B theological beliefs can be established if they can be inferred as conclusions in a process of theological reasoning from signs. This type of reasoning involves the detection of the presence or absence in a set of phenomena of an actual "G-configuration", or pattern indicative of divine

agency. We are assured of the validity of this inference only if our initial judgement that the set of phenomena in question can be construed as a sign-cluster exhibiting an actual pattern indicative of divine agency is warranted. Assurance in taking this step is provided if the actual pattern can be detected by or is correlated with a model (normative) pattern of divine agency. This conceptual theory, stipulating a set of prescriptions for identifying God in experience, is itself obtained from a definition or concept of God bequeathed by and developed within a particular theological tradition.

## 2.7 Theological Naiveté

According to Heimbeck, it is possible to justify or make out the truth of some of the beliefs asserted in a theological discourse by inference based on empirical grounds alone. The validity or invalidity of these inferences depends upon the extent to which a "G-configuration" or pattern can be said to have emerged (or failed to have emerged) in a set of phenomena. It is this thesis, in conjunction with a similar thesis about the falsifiability of theological discourse, that lies behind Heimbeck's surprising contention, quoted earlier, that the system of classical Christian theism is or claims to be grounded on empirical fact. To be sure, his thesis about the justification of theological beliefs can be criticized in a variety of ways. But to his credit, Heimbeck successfully

anticipates several criticisms by addressing what he considers to be the "supreme challenge" to his proposal. This is a challenge "to the effect that the inference-route from sign-cluster to G-conclusion' is fallacious in principle and that therefore the criteria for separating those that are valid from those that are invalid are null and void."<sup>13</sup> Rather than re-work the same ground, in this section and the next, I will discuss two other questions that Heimbeck does not address directly which in their own way raise additional and important issues.

As I mentioned above, despite the care and comprehensiveness Heimbeck exhibits in the course of his examination of the cognitive meaningfulness of theological sentences, his work has to my knowledge received scant attention in the literature. One of the few analytic philosophers of religion who has commented upon it is Malcolm L. Diamond.<sup>14</sup> His major complaint is not directed against any specific details of Heimbeck's analysis. Instead, according to Diamond, Heimbeck's argument makes use of and depends upon a very naive fundamentalist understanding of theology. Fundamentalism is a position that takes literally all the material recorded in scripture and defends this approach by appeal to the final authority of the Bible as the record of the divinely inspired word of God. Given such a conception of theology, Diamond argues in effect that Heimbeck's discussion can be excluded from consideration

in the debate on the issue of the cognitive meaningfulness of theological discourse. After all, no one doubts the cognitive meaningfulness of fundamentalist theology. But this sort of theology is regarded by contemporary empiricists and sophisticated theologians, "as so hopelessly outmoded by the development of scientific standards of believability, that they do not bother to challenge the thrust of its factually meaningful statements."<sup>15</sup>

As Benoît Garceau has remarked<sup>16</sup>, this reaction is very significant. Heimbeck's defense of the cognitive meaningfulness of theological sentences, not to mention his proposals for the verifiability and falsifiability of the beliefs asserted by them, is rejected because of the theological system it allegedly presupposes as the object of analysis. His work is denied a hearing in the debate on the cognitive meaningfulness of theological discourse because it is alleged that he works with a conception of theology that fails to square with "the criteria of rationality developed by scientific thought". Such a response constitutes a decision to restrict the discussion to questions of the cognitive meaningfulness of theological language. It does so, however, not because we are uncertain or puzzled about whether it is cognitively meaningful. Instead, such a decision is recommended on the authority of a condition imposed externally and largely without argument on the nature of theology. The content of theology must conform

to the requirements of science if it is to warrant serious discussion. But this position simply ignores the fact that his defense of the cognitive meaningfulness of theological sentences does not rest on any peculiarities of the theological system he has selected as his starting point. As I have already shown, his rejection of this version of meta-theological skepticism rests on the confusions latent in the checkability theory of meaning this challenge presupposes.<sup>17</sup>

Theological language can be used to express assertions. Since it can be so used, one is entitled to ask how it might be possible to make out whether or not these beliefs are justifiable. Now, though many, and I number myself among them, may wish to dispute Heimbeck's solution to this problem, it cannot be denied that his work does raise questions about theology as a reflective enterprise that ought not to be ignored. In particular, three questions are uppermost. First, do the conclusions advanced in a theological discourse, especially category B theological beliefs, rest on an empirical basis obtained by inference in a process of reasoning from phenomena construed sign-clusters? Second, which of many possible candidates for a model G-configuration, that would function as a norm for identifying God in experience, is appropriate as an expression of Christian faith? Third, are the beliefs advanced and tested in accordance with some such conceptual theory true?



I think it is obvious that it is not within the competence of philosophers, qua philosophers, to provide answers for either the second or third of these questions. No philosopher need consider ~~it~~ his or her province to argue for or defend the truth of the particular beliefs made, in any specific system of theology. In addition, as an observer of religious life and faith, at least in the conduct of their philosophical reflection, it is hardly within their province, to determine or assess the appropriateness, as an expression of a particular religious faith, of any particular "model G-configuration".<sup>18</sup> Both of these issues are theological first and foremost. Nevertheless, the first question is not outside the scope of philosophical reflection. As Heimbeck suggests, even if it is true that the model G-configuration derived from the concept of God developed in classical Christian theism as he understands it, is ultimately rejected as inadequate:

...this possibility detracts nothing from the validity of my general thesis of theological sign-reasoning, which in type all systems of theological understanding must per force the nature of their subject-matter employ. We could replace the model G-configuration of classical Christian theism with a better one (or a worse) and the style of theological sign reasoning as a genre of argument would remain unchanged. It is for the acceptability of that style alone - not for any specific model G-configuration - that I plead.<sup>19</sup>

Heimbeck's point, I think, is well-taken. Theology, like any theoretical enterprise, does involve argument and modes of

reasoning that are legitimate candidates for philosophical thinking. This, I consider, is the principal task delivered over to philosophers by his work: the critical analysis of reasoning from signs as it is practised in a theological context of inquiry.

## 2.8 Reasoning From Signs in Theology

In this section, I undertake the task of examining somewhat more carefully Heimbeck's thesis about the sort of reasoning involved in the justification of category B theological beliefs. In particular, I am concerned with critically discussing his view that the conclusions of this type of reasoning in theology rest ultimately upon empirical grounds alone. According to Heimbeck, any theological system contains some foundational category B theological beliefs that have some direct empirical entailments and incompatibles. It is possible to make out the truth of these beliefs by inference from a set of empirical phenomena that, it is alleged, exhibit a G-configuration or pattern indicative of divine agency. This pattern, if it is present, is detected in the context of a model G-configuration, a conceptual theory stipulating a set of prescriptions for identifying God in experience. This conceptual theory has been derived from a particular concept of God as this has been developed within a particular theological tradition. Assuming for the sake of argument, that the

details of a particular set of empirical phenomena are known to be true, if it can be construed to exhibit clearly a pattern indicative of divine agency, then this set of phenomena does constitute a sign-cluster signifying some category B theological belief as its conclusion.

As I have pointed out above, success or failure in the conduct of this sort of reasoning depends on the reasoner's ability to detect the presence or absence of actual G-configurations or patterns indicative of divine agency in various groups of phenomena. Such a process involves an initial judgement to the effect that the significance of these phenomena, when considered together, is of a certain sort. A question that deserves rather more attention than Heimbeck devotes to it is this. What recourse is there in argument for those all too frequent cases where others fail to "see" any G-configuration or pattern in the data?

I think it is clear that "to see" in the phrase "to see a G-configuration in the data" is not a matter of seeing in any straightforward empirical sense.<sup>20</sup> In this context, I think this concept is better construed as equivalent to "interpretation". Interpretation refers to a process of reading in which one clarifies a meaning, in a text for instance, that is originally present there in a confused, puzzling or fragmentary form. To understand "to see" in this way does justice, I think, to his account of reasoning from signs. As

I mentioned above, reasoning from signs is a process in which a set of otherwise discrete phenomena are judged, when considered together, to exhibit a particular pattern of significance. In other words, reasoning from signs is akin to the process involved in the attribution of meaning to the individual words or sentences of a text that takes place when we read it. The result of this process of giving a reading can sometimes issue in a judgement of the significance of a passage by which we might attempt to communicate to another what it says.<sup>21</sup>

Hence, I can rephrase the question posed above as asking what recourse is there in argument in those cases where others fail to interpret, read or judge of the significance of a set of phenomena in the manner believers propose? In particular, how can we resolve disputes about whether a set of phenomena exhibits a pattern indicative of divine agency? According to Heimbeck,

If an inquirer presses for the backing for this inference from data to conclusion, he who professes the truth of the conclusion has no other recourse than to try to point up how the parts of the story fit together into a coherent pattern or configuration signifying divine agency ... Controlling all of his efforts, however, would be the necessity of showing his interlocuter that the data were more than a random collection of bits of information and in fact displayed a certain pattern which has been referred to before in this study as 'G-configuration'. That pattern which marks the data as G-significant and by means of which God is to be identified in experience.<sup>22</sup>

In cases where the legitimacy of the results of a particular piece of reasoning from signs in theology is challenged in this way, it appears that the best one can do is appeal to the success of our interpretation in clarifying other elements in the data, and urge that our reading makes the best or most complete sense of this available data.

To return to Heimbeck's main example, the verification of the category B theological belief, "God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead at time  $T_2$ ". Were this conclusion challenged, one can only appeal to other readings of the biblical record. One may begin with those predictions attributed to Jesus of his own resurrection, cite the evidence attesting to his actual crucifixion and death and then move on to discuss the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances. In referring to these details, we are trying to demonstrate that these components of the record are indicative of divine agency as this has been stipulated by a model G-configuration developed in the theological tradition of classical Christian theism. Our interpretation of these elements, if challenged, may be found to repose upon a further reading of the entire "Christ-event". This would contain potentially all of the available information we have about his birth, life, death, words and deeds. Ultimately, perhaps, it would rest upon our total interpretation of the Christian Bible including the Old Testament and its relation to the New Testament. But

throughout this process, we cannot escape appeal to a common understanding of the language and the historical-cultural context in which these details are expressed.

Theological reasoning from signs, like any reasoning from signs, I suggest, moves in a hermeneutical circle. In a piece of reasoning from signs in theology whose results are challenged in this way we are trying to establish that a set of phenomena, in this case various elements of the biblical record, exhibit a certain configuration or pattern of significance suggesting divine agency. But the grounds we appeal to in order to substantiate our interpretation can only be the interpretation of other elements of that record. As Charles Taylor remarks:

The circle can also be put in terms of part-whole relations: we are trying to establish a reading for the whole text, that the Biblical record exhibits an actual G-configuration, and for this we appeal to readings of its partial expressions for instance, the entire Christ-event or specific details such as the post-resurrection appearances; and yet because we are dealing with meaning, with making sense, interpreting a set of phenomena as a sign-cluster, where expressions only make sense or not in relation to others, the readings of partial expressions depend on those of others, and ultimately of the whole.<sup>23</sup>

Notice, to say that reasoning from signs in theology is irreducibly hermeneutical in this sense is really only the nether side of the admission that conclusions of this sort of

reasoning are never logically conclusive. To be sure, there is little doubt that our ability to convince a stubborn opponent of the propriety of our interpretation is somewhat enhanced to the degree that we are both participants in the same or a similar context provided by a shared theological tradition. But to be involved in a Christian theological tradition seems also to imply that we share its theological a priori belief to the effect that the world is in fact the creation of a loving God in which for participants of this faith, our relationship with God and all that this involves is best exemplified by Jesus Christ. Yet this theological a priori belief or "fundamental motif" is a belief whose content is itself to be fully explicated and articulated by inference from the truth of category B theological beliefs that are themselves inferred from sign-clusters recognized as such only within the context of significance that it provides.<sup>24</sup>

An important question raised by this discovery of the hermeneutical or context-dependent character of the justification of theological beliefs in a process of reasoning from signs is this. Perhaps it is true that category A theological beliefs can be inferred from foundational and empirically falsifiable category B theological beliefs. Nevertheless, must we not admit that category A theological beliefs are still not legitimate candidates for truth or falsity? After all, what assurance is there that the foundational category B

theological beliefs do not in fact express a preferred interpretation, that is but one of many other possible preferred interpretations, of a set of phenomena? This question is important because it appears that a set of phenomena is construed as a sign-cluster of the relevant sort only within the context provided by other presupposed category A and category B theological beliefs.

To illustrate the import of this question, consider once again Heimbeck's example of the structure of the justification of the category A theological belief: "God loves all human beings." For Heimbeck, this belief is supported by several other theological beliefs to the effect that "God sent His son to die for the sins of this world"; "The Word became Flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ"; and culminates in the category B theological belief: "God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead at time  $T_2$ ". Certainly, this latter belief has some direct empirical entailments and incompatibles and so is in principle empirically falsifiable. However, the question is why should this belief be interpreted in this fashion? For instance, regarding the post-resurrection appearance to eleven of the disciples, perhaps it is true that they witnessed something. Perhaps, in addition, they were even in agreement in their accounts about what they experienced. Nevertheless to interpret the record of that event as evidence for the resurrection by God of His only Son, presupposes the truth of



the category A theological belief that "God sent His Son to die for the sins of the world". But this is one of the assertions whose truth we are trying to infer in order to justify our inference to the belief that "God loves all human beings."<sup>25</sup>

The issue raised by Heimbeck's proposals for reasoning from signs in theology and the justification of category B theological beliefs is not merely that other naturalistic interpretations, not ~~to~~ mention rival theological ones and those characteristic of other non-Christian faiths, of the available phenomena are possible. Nor is this issue merely some sort of request for a "final set of meta-criteria for passing judgement upon the criteria which define validity for any inference-route and against which individual arguments within that inference-route are judged."<sup>26</sup> It involves both of these aspects. But, I think, it cuts deeper. The question raised by the context-dependent character of this sort of reasoning is this. Inasmuch as Christian religious faith receives a variety of expressions through various groups of verbal and non-verbal signs, what is the source of the judgement of significance that provides the criteria for the correct or right interpretation of these signs? By implication, of course, there is the further question about what these criteria are.

Before discussing this central question in greater detail, it is useful to point out two important consequences of Heimbeck's failure to give due attention to the context-

dependent character of reasoning from signs in theology in terms of which the justification of particular category B theological beliefs is accomplished. First, as regards the nature of theological argument itself, it is misleading to hold that the justification of particular theological beliefs can be accomplished in isolation from the other components of a particular religious tradition. Granted, Heimbeck's suggestion that we ought not to attempt to justify directly complex and large-scale category A theological beliefs is salutary. These beliefs are the conclusions of complex inferences, involving reference to lower level category B theological beliefs. Further, inasmuch as these latter foundational theological beliefs are themselves inferred from the interpretation of distinctive religious experiences, their justification depends in part on the way these beliefs can render perspicuous the meaning of other experiences in the life of believers and religious communities generally. The justification of a particular category B theological belief, drawn from formative historical events interpreted in the context of a judgement of their significance within a particular religious tradition, is itself supported and established if a believer can show how such a belief can illuminate and clarify other patterns of meaning latent either in personal religious experience or their experience of apparent design and/or creativity manifested by the natural universe. As the quotation

cited from Taylor suggested, the justification of any and all particular theological beliefs involves implicit reference to the whole religious tradition that embodies, expresses and preserves the community's fund of religious experience in all its variety.

Second, it is also misleading to hold that these conclusions, whether category A or category B theological beliefs, are justifiable on empirical grounds alone. . Rather, in a Christian context, they are justifiable, if at all, only on the basis of three sorts of interpreted experiences, personal, religious and/or mystical experience, the experience of apparent design or order in the natural universe and the experiences attested to and recorded in the form of particular historical events. Again, to refer to these experiences as "interpreted experiences" is, of course, a reminder that they are quite susceptible to rival interpretations. But more important in this context, it is also a reminder that it is apparently only within the context of a prior religious faith and its judgements of significance that these experiences can be interpreted as sign-clusters signifying some assertion expressing a theological belief as their conclusion. In effect, the believer claims the right to judge the significance of these experiences in a particular way and to infer on this basis to the truth of specific theological beliefs.

## 2.9 The Question of Truth and the Question of Interpretation

From the examination of Heimbeck's proposal for the justification of theological beliefs, it should be obvious that the question, "how is it possible to make out or justify the truth of the beliefs asserted in a theological discourse?", is hardly amenable to a straightforward solution. In the course of that discussion, I have argued that this question needs to be supplanted in favour of another question. "Inasmuch as Christian religious faith receives a variety of expressions through various groups of verbal and non-verbal signs, what is the source of the criteria for a correct or right interpretation of these signs?" I suggest this manner of addressing the truth-question as a consequence of the discovery of the context-dependent character of reasoning from signs in theology. This is a discovery that the truth of complex theological assertions or beliefs about God can be justified if at all, only within the context of a particular religious faith and its cumulative historical tradition. But as I will argue presently this result is ambiguous. There are at least two ways in which it might be construed. To show this and thereby indicate the direction for the ensuing discussion, I will begin with a summary of the argument thus far designed to demonstrate the link between the question of the truth of theological beliefs about God and the question of the interpretation of religious expressions.

I have arrived at this point from a critique of the empiricist critique of the cognitive meaningfulness of theological sentences. The contention that theological sentences must be checkable (verifiable or falsifiable) in principle by recourse to some empirical state of affairs, if they are to express assertions and so qualify as legitimate candidates for truth or falsity is mistaken. This contention rests on a confusion of the issue of providing evidence for and against an assertion and the issue of establishing criteria of meaning for sentences. Theological sentences can be used to express assertions because they satisfy those conditions that are necessary for cognitive meaningfulness. Such sentences have logical entailments and incompatibles. Hence, the empiricist veto, couched in terms of a critique of cognitive meaningfulness regarding the question as to how it is possible to make out whether the beliefs asserted in a theological discourse are justifiable, has been removed.

Granted that this truth-question can no longer legitimately be postponed, how is it to be addressed? In this chapter I explored in some detail, Heimbeck's neglected strategy for dealing with this question. Among the considerable merits of his effort is that his approach involves distinguishing between two types of theological beliefs, category A and B theological beliefs. He does so in terms of whether they have direct or indirect empirical entailments or incompatibles

and the sort of evidence requisite for justifying them. The novelty of this distinction consists in the fact that once it is made, it is readily apparent that a dominant preoccupation in the philosophical analysis of religious and theological beliefs ought to be revised. Instead of attempting to address directly the justification of such large-scale or complex category A theological beliefs as "there is a God" or "God is a Trinity of three persons", more attention deserves to be paid to the logical analysis of category B theological beliefs. This is because the truth of the former, within any particular theological system of beliefs, is established if at all by inference from the latter.

It is for this reason that Heimbeck suggested that, really it is category B theological beliefs such as "God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead at time  $T_2$ " and other similar beliefs that "record what are referred to in current theological idiom as 'the mighty acts of God in history'"<sup>27</sup>, that are foundational within the system of "classical Christian theism". He considers this sort of theological belief to be foundational because unlike category A theological beliefs, the former have some direct empirical entailments and incompatibles. Hence, the general question of the truth of theological discourse becomes a question of how it is possible that category B theological beliefs can be made out to be true. Such a proposal holds considerable promise because category B

theological beliefs have some direct empirical entailments and incompatibles. It implies that their truth or falsity can be checked by recourse to beliefs themselves justified upon empirical grounds alone.

But can category B theological beliefs be understood to be justifiable in this manner? According to Heimbeck, these beliefs are justifiable, if at all, only by recourse to a process he refers to as "theological sign-reasoning". Reasoning from signs in theology is a process of reasoning that involves interpreting a set of phenomena and experiences as a sign, or better a sign-cluster, that signifies some category B theological belief as its conclusion. This reasoning and its conclusions are supported by showing how the phenomena in question exhibit a pattern or configuration that corresponds to and is detected by a "model G-configuration", a conceptual theory for identifying God in experience, as this has been developed and preserved within a particular theological tradition. Such a view reminds us and reinforces the suggestion that the conclusions of theological work, the assertion of a set of category A theological beliefs such as the doctrine of the Trinity, for instance, is a highly theologically ramified, complex and derivative expression of a particular religious faith. These beliefs are obtained ultimately by inference from experiences and phenomena construed as sign-clusters. In addition, it also indicates

an important philosophical task in the service of showing how it may be possible to justify the truth of theological beliefs. The task in question is the analysis of this sort of reasoning as it operates at the foundational level in this enterprise.

Though I consider it is an interesting and important suggestion, this task is not nearly as unproblematic as Heimbeck's account might lead us to expect. In particular, as I have argued, two features of reasoning from signs in theology combine to vitiate his thesis that it is possible to establish the truth of category B theological beliefs on empirical grounds alone. First, the results of a process of reasoning from signs, whether it is theological or not, are never logically conclusive. As such, these results are always open to challenge, development and revision. Second, reasoning from signs in theology moves in a hermeneutical circle. For example, if others fail "to see" or interpret a set of phenomena or experiences as a sign-cluster signifying some category B theological belief as its conclusion, our only recourse in argument appears to be that we try to show how our interpretation makes the best sense of these phenomena. Should that strategy prove unsuccessful, perhaps we can try to demonstrate how our reading makes better sense than other alternative readings.



Hence, it is more accurate to say that theological beliefs in general and category B theological beliefs in particular are inferred from interpreted experiences. Not only are other rival religious and non-religious interpretations possible, but it is only within the context of a particular presupposed religious faith and its cumulative historical tradition that such phenomena can be interpreted as a sign-cluster of the relevant sort. It is this discovery that I refer to as the context-dependent character of reasoning from signs in theology in terms of which the truth of particular theological beliefs is justified, if at all.

But I maintain that this discovery can be construed in at least two alternative ways. First, it could be interpreted to indicate that as Peter Donovan has remarked:

...the first thing to be investigated to evaluate the truth of religions is not the truth or falsity of statements and claims made in religious language, /theology/, but the interpretation of phenomena mostly non-verbal on which these claims rest. What is there about such things that has led people on the strength of them, to speak in these ways? How if at all might these things support such interpretations and sustain such responses?<sup>28</sup>

In other words, this discovery may indicate that, by redirecting our attention towards the sources in religious experience from which category B theological beliefs are ultimately inferred, we need to better understand how these beliefs and the interpretations on which they depend are related to and derived

from the experiences and phenomena whose meaning they claim to articulate and express. From this perspective, the affirmation of a set of theological beliefs, whether category A or B, is to be understood as a set of proposals or suggestions, none of which is by itself sacred, to clarify and display the judgments of significance, (interpretations or readings of meanings), involved in a religious faith that a participant alleges is manifested in and warranted by a certain sort of experience.<sup>29</sup>

It is for this reason that I have suggested that to make progress with the question regarding the truth of the beliefs advanced in a theological discourse, we need to address it in terms of another question that can be generalized now in the following manner. Inasmuch as a religious faith, whether specifically Christian or not, receives a variety of expressions through various groups of verbal and non-verbal signs, what is the source of the criteria for a correct or right interpretation of these signs? This question has the merit of directing attention towards a reflection on the sources in religious experience from which signs are drawn and that are invoked in theological reflection in order to justify the truth of particular theological beliefs.

But as I have said, there are at least two ways in which this discovery of the context-dependent character of reasoning from signs in theology can be construed. The second way is to interpret it as indicating that after all

theological beliefs, whether category A or B are not justifiable. These beliefs are not justifiable because they rest or may rest on a preferred interpretation of our experience. This is or may be a preferred interpretation because theological beliefs that are advanced on this basis cannot be known to be true without presupposing the context provided by a particular judgement of significance involved in a religious faith and preserved and developed in its cumulative historical tradition. In other words, the recognition of the context-dependent character of reasoning from signs in theology might be construed as a fundamental objection against the point of developing a detailed account of the structure of the justification of theological beliefs. This objection is "fundamental" because the suspicion aroused by the context-dependent character of the justification of these beliefs threatens to block once more the need or even the point of addressing and considering seriously the question about the truth of theological beliefs. It does so, I note, even after worries about the cognitive meaningfulness of theological sentences have been laid to rest.<sup>30</sup>

As should now be apparent, how this discovery is itself to be interpreted, whether as an important clue or a fundamental challenge regarding the justification of theological beliefs is potentially rich with consequences for the conduct of a philosophy of religion. It is to the detailed consideration of this issue and these alternatives that I now turn.

Notes: Chapter 2

1. Heimbeck is not alone in raising and addressing the question of the truth of the beliefs asserted in a theological discourse. Among others who have done so are William A. Christian, Meaning and Truth in Religion, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), Basil Mitchell, The Justification of Religious Belief, (London: Macmillan, 1973), and Ninian Smart, Reasons and Faiths, (London: Routledge & Hegan Paul, 1958).
2. Raeburne S. Heimbeck, Theology and Meaning, p. 174.
3. To anticipate a possible source of confusion, I note that "conclusive" as Heimbeck construes it in the phrases "conclusively verifiable" or "conclusively falsifiable" refers to the elimination of reasonable doubt about the truth or falsity of an assertion or belief. See Theology and Meaning, p. 214. I think that only in very restricted contexts of inquiry such as perhaps symbolic logic or mathematics is it reasonable or plausible to expect a level of certainty that would exclude even the logical possibility of error. As Charles Taylor explains, such an expectation would be "to adopt an absurdly severe criterion of 'certainty' which deprives the concept of any sensible use". Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man", Review of Metaphysics, 25(1971), 6.
4. For Heimbeck's understanding of the phrase "empirical anchorage", see above Chapter I note 46.
5. Heimbeck, op. cit., pp. 205-206.
6. For this and other examples of reasoning from signs, see Heimbeck, ibid., pp. 207, 206-210.
7. As is obvious, any conclusion of an example of reasoning from signs by itself is only one among many other possible explanations. Consider, for instance, how one might determine what is signified by a person who winks his eye in the presence of a group of other persons. Considered by itself such a phenomenon might be construed as a sign that could signify virtually anything or perhaps nothing. But when this sign is placed in a context provided by a more complete and detailed description of the situation involved, one can make considerable progress in determining which of several explanations are plausible.

In one context, this phenomenon might signify that the person is nervous, in another that the person is signaling to someone, in yet another, that a "private joke" has just be played and so on. It is this process of interpreting and situating a particular phenomenon within a set of phenomena, the placing of them in their appropriate context thereby, that I refer to as a judgement of significance.

8. Heimbeck, ibid., pp. 245-246. On p. 246, Heimbeck extends this list to include the social sciences, the life sciences and the normative sciences, (law, aesthetics, ethics). Each of these groups of inquiries has a logical type gap as does theology that cannot be bridged by a logic of entailments. In theology, the gap is between the data or evidence expressed in empirical language and the conclusion of these inferences expressed by the assertion of a category B theological belief.
9. Ibid., pp. 204 note 1, 209-210, 215-217, 218. Though his language is doubtless somewhat cumbersome, it is but one way of stating the now familiar point that in any theological enterprise, theories not only serve to explain observations they also serve to condition or constitute them as observations in the first place. Contrary to cruder forms of empiricism, there are no brute givens or uninterpreted data in any knowledge-producing activity, theology no less than the natural sciences. Any set of data is logically neutral until it has been judged in a context provided by the relevant background knowledge to count as evidence of a certain sort from which an inference may be drawn. On this point, as it applies in the natural sciences, see Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes", in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave eds., Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 98-100. I will have occasion below to return to this point.
10. Examples of such confessional formulae for identifying God in thought are the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647), "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth"; or Charles Hartshorne's "dipolar panentheistic God" or Paul Tillich's "ground of being", see Heimbeck, op. cit., pp. 109-110.
11. For his discussion of these points, see Heimbeck, ibid., pp. 200-201, 218-227.

12. Cederblom and Paulsen, for instance, suggest that a conceptual theory, "ideally designates precisely the conditions under which a certain concept applies to an object." For their discussion of conceptual theories, see Jerry Cederblom and David W. Paulsen, Critical Reasoning, (Belmont Calif.: Wadsworth, 1980), pp. 177-188.
13. Regarding this "challenge" and the four objections upon which it is based, see Heimbeck, ibid., pp. 211-248.
14. Malcolm L. Diamond, "The Challenge of Contemporary Empiricism" in Malcolm L. Diamond and Thomas V. Litzenburg Jr., eds., The Logic of God/Theology and Verification, pp. 43-45. See also in the same collection, Antony Flew, "Theology and Falsification" in Retrospect", pp. 275-278.
15. Diamond, ibid., p. 45.
16. Benoît Garceau, "Critique et Hermeneutique en Philosophie de la Religion", in T.F. Geraets ed., Rationality Today, p. 378. This reaction is all the more surprising given the current state of theological pluralism characteristic of Christian theologians. It is worth noting that Heimbeck's version of classical Christian theism is but one of several options available within the "orthodox model" of theology that includes among its other options that represented by Vatican I. For a discussion of this and other currently available models of theology, see David Tracy, Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology, (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 3-14, 24-25, 22-42. Nor, as Heimbeck points out, are checkable consequences unique to his own starting-point. They are present in the theologies of Schleiermacher, Tillich and Hartshorne. See Theology and Meaning, pp. 170-171.
17. I think there is a double irony in the fact that although Heimbeck's results are positive, his work has been accused of theological naiveté by a philosopher. One might have expected such a response from a theologian in regard to a work whose results regarding the possibility of theological knowledge were negative.
18. Heimbeck is quite aware of this important point. He remarks that "every meta-theological investigation presupposes, consciously or unconsciously, some system or systems of theological understanding as the starting point for analysis" and it proceeds "from there to test for conceptual clarity and coherence, cognitively, checkability and its other concerns." Its findings, however,

are always relative to and limited to the hermeneutical understanding(s) with which it started." Heimbeck, op. cit., pp. 41-42.

19. Heimbeck, ibid., p. 238.
20. Heimbeck draws attention to the similarities between his "seeing a G-configuration with data" and Wittgenstein's "seeing an aspect of" or Wisdom's use of "models to get the hang of the patterns in the flux of experience". As Heimbeck explains regarding the exegesis of the verse "when Jesus is made to say, 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9 RSV), 'see' is being used in two distinct senses. 'See' in 'He who has seen me' is empirical sight plain and simple; 'see' in 'has seen the Father' is what I am calling 'seeing a configuration in', for in the first sense of 'see' no one has or can see the Father." Heimbeck, ibid., pp. 215-216 note 1. For Wittgenstein's discussion, see his Philosophical Investigations, tr. by G.E.M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), pp. 149-168. For other similar discussions that make use of a concept of model for detecting patterns of significance in a set of phenomena construed as evidence, see Frederick Ferré and Kent Bendall, Exploring the Logic of Faith, (New York: Associated Press, 1962), pp. 163-181 and Frederick Ferré, "Mapping the Logic of Models in Science and Theology", reprinted in Dallas High ed., New Essays on Religious Language, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 54-56 and Ian G. Barbour, Myths, Models and Paradigms, (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 49-70.
21. For further discussions of this view of interpretation, see Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man", 3-17 and Peter Donovan, Interpreting Religious Experience, (London: Sheldon Press, 1979), pp. 21-35.
22. Heimbeck, op. cit., p. 208.
23. Taylor, op. cit., p. 6.
24. For a careful examination of the importance and nature of this "theological a priori" or "fundamental-motif research" see Anders Nygren, Meaning and Method, pp. 351-378.
25. Heimbeck, op. cit., p. 175.
26. Heimbeck, ibid., p. 231.
27. Ibid., p. 174.

28. Peter Donovan, Religious Language, (London: Sheldon Press, 1976), p. 101.
29. To suggest that theological beliefs can be construed "as a set of proposals, none of which by themselves is sacred" does not at all imply that such assertions are not important. Indeed, they are important in so far as they permit us to a degree to understand something of the religious faith they mediate at any particular time. These beliefs, especially for participants, are not more important than that to which their faith is considered a response, for Christians, God. This distinction between a religious faith and theological reflection and its subsequent assertions or beliefs can be expressed briefly in terms of Gordon Kaufman's more traditional epigram. However much for particular Christians, their "faith is a gift of God; theology is human work". As such, I would add its results however greatly to be revered and pondered, qua human, are fallible. Gordon Kaufman, An Essay on Theological Method, (Missoula Montana, Scholars Press, 1978), pp. xi, 3-4.
30. It was primarily to expose this context-dependent character of theological sign-reasoning that I examined Heimbeck's proposals for justifying the truth of theological beliefs. I am aware that to do full justice to the features of reasoning in theological contexts requires more than this discussion allows. But as I have said, to provide such an account was not the objective of this thesis. Again, the objective is to expose and criticize certain powerful philosophical assumptions that threaten to prevent our undertaking this task.



## Chapter 3: Interpretation and the Justification of Theological Beliefs

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### 3.10 Two Alternatives

In response to the discovery of the context-dependent character of reasoning from signs in theology, I have suggested that the question about the justification of theological beliefs should be reformulated. The question that merits our attention is this. Inasmuch as any religious faith, whether Christian or not, receives a variety of expressions through various groups of verbal and non-verbal signs, what is the source of the criteria for a correct or right interpretation of these signs? I think this question raises more clearly the central issue in these matters because believers claim the right to interpret or judge the significance of their experience in a particular way and to infer on this basis to the truth of particular theological beliefs. Nevertheless, if the justification of theological beliefs rests finally upon what is or may be a preferred interpretation of a set of phenomena and experiences, as a skeptic may allege, it would seem that believers are not entitled to this right. If this is the case, then we seem compelled to conclude that there is no legitimate way to make out or justify the truth of theological beliefs.

In this and ensuing chapters, I argue that this latter conclusion is premature because it owes its plausibility to certain deep-seated epistemological presuppositions about the structure of the justification of our beliefs. Worse still it is mistaken because once these presuppositions have been detected, criticized and abandoned, the general suspicion they foster and sustain will be recognized as unwarranted. In a word, it is the main objective of this thesis to defend in detail the contention that the context-dependent character of the justification of theological beliefs is not a crippling defect warranting the suspicion that these beliefs must be invalid and so not entitled to be considered as legitimate candidates for truth or falsity. By implication, the suggestion, that the justification of theological beliefs about God, Ultimate Reality, The Transcendent or what have you, can be construed as inferences presupposing a judgement of the significance of a believer's experience ~~within the context of a particular tradition of religious faith,~~ deserves serious consideration.

Towards this end, in this chapter, I will begin by examining each of these alternative readings of the discovery of the context-dependent character of reasoning from signs in theology in greater detail. In particular, in section 3.11 I clarify further just what sort of judgements, judgements of significance are that I suggest are involved in any particular

religious faith. I do this not to provide an account of the justification of any particular judgement of significance, much less an account of the justification of any particular theological beliefs. I do it in order to offer an account of the relationship between these judgements and the sense of "experience" that is at issue here and upon which these judgements are ultimately founded. In section 3.12, I return to a closer examination of this discovery construed as an objection that the project of justifying the truth of theological beliefs cannot be legitimate because such a justification cannot but appeal to what may be preferred interpretations or preferred judgements of the significance of our experience. I argue that this objection, which can be raised against any religious faith, is a second version of meta-theological skepticism. This second version certainly need not be couched in terms of a theory of cognitive meaning. As such, it is more fundamental and far-reaching.<sup>1</sup> Finally, in section 3.13, I suggest that this second version of meta-theological skepticism presupposes a powerful, and I contend fundamentally, mistaken general epistemological theory about the justification of our beliefs. There, I propose a strategy designed to place this epistemological framework in question. In this fashion I intend to secure the main objective of this thesis. The context-dependent character of the justification of theological beliefs appears as a crippling defect only as long as we remain committed to this general

epistemological perspective. Unless we recognize that really it is this framework that is defective and learn to set it aside, we will be unable to properly address the question of how it may be possible to justify the truth of theological beliefs in a manner appropriate to them.

### 3.11 Judgements of Significance and Religious Experience

Let me begin by saying explicitly what I have indicated already in passing. However critical I am of Heimbeck's contribution to the discussion of the meaning and truth of theological beliefs, I consider that the greatest merit of his work consists in redirecting our attention towards the sources in our experience that are fundamental for any religious faith. As I have indicated, criticism of his proposals regarding the justification of theological beliefs has prompted the following question. Since any religious faith receives a variety of expressions through various groups of verbal and non-verbal signs, what is the source for a correct or right interpretation of these signs? The answer I have proposed is that any religious faith can be construed as involving most basically, a judgement of the significance or an interpretation of meaning. Participants of a particular faith allege that this meaning is manifested in and warranted by a certain sort of experience. It is these judgements of significance, which have their source in religious experience, that are fundamental both for understanding the role and

making out the truth of the results of theological reflection.

But what sort of source is this that I have referred to as "religious experience"? As is well known, religious experience, as this has been recorded in the history of religious traditions, is an extremely variegated phenomenon. It has assumed a wide variety of forms. Three of the more prominent forms perhaps are the experience of the self, in religious or mystical experience, the experience of the world, as in experiences of the apparent design, order, creativity or superabundance of the physical universe and the experience of history as recorded in the Gospels, the Qur'an or the Torah. Each of these forms of religious experience was, is and can be, for participants, a source of signs from which inferences may be drawn to the truth of particular theological beliefs.<sup>2</sup> In addition, each of these forms of religious experience has been accorded different degrees of importance throughout the history of the life of a particular religious faith as recorded and preserved in these different historical traditions.<sup>3</sup> But as I said above, my concern in this section is not the development of an account of the justification of any particular religious beliefs.<sup>4</sup>

My interest is somewhat more narrowly focused. In particular, I am concerned to clarify further the meaning of the phrase "judgement of significance" in terms of the relationship these judgements have to our experience. I can

introduce this interest by saying that by the phrase "judgements of significance", I have in mind the norms invoked both by theologians and believers generally, to evaluate the truth of the many different religious and theological beliefs that allegedly express, articulate, communicate and justify for them and perhaps others their faith. Examples of the locus of these judgements of significance are readily available in the first-order accounts of the religious experiences recorded, preserved and cherished by participants in all the great religious traditions. Often these judgements are focused upon and rendered, in numerous and bewilderingly complex ways, in terms of such "central symbols as Jesus The Christ, Gautama the Buddha, the Torah in Judaism, the Qur'an in Islam, the Veda in India, the Sage in China, Socrates the Lover of Wisdom".<sup>5</sup> These judgements, expressed in terms of these symbols, serve to indicate the specific difference that marks off a particular religious faith from others. For instance for Christians, the symbol "Jesus the Christ" has been and is invoked as the final norm for evaluating both the results of theological reflection and, for participants more important, assessing and understanding what is fundamentally valuable or finally significant about living humanly. As Hans Kung remarks, however much members of other religious and non-religious traditions may venerate him:

...the special feature, the most fundamental characteristic of Christianity is that it considers this Jesus as ultimately decisive, definitive archetypal for man's relations with God, with his fellow-man, with society, in the curtailed Biblical formula as 'Jesus Christ'.<sup>6</sup>

To be sure, all that this particular formulation of a judgement of significance has meant, does or may mean for participants and observers of this faith is merely adumbrated in this quotation. In effect, and as the context suggests, this is hardly the last word. Even so, I submit that this judgement and others like it, that could be formulated by participants of the other religious traditions in terms of their central symbols is, I think, rightly and crucially among the first words.

But if it is judgements of significance such as these that are or should be among the first words in a study of the question of the justification of theological beliefs, how are these judgements to be understood? In saying that these are "judgements of the significance of our experience", what is the sense or meaning of "experience" that is at issue here? Of course, this question of understanding experience and especially religious experience is large and complex. For the moment, I am interested in clarifying one aspect of it that I think is important for understanding what sort of reading of our experience is involved in these judgements and is relevant for understanding the justification of theological

beliefs when it is addressed from this perspective.

As I suggested in section 1.3, those accounts of meaning in religion that are most valuable are those that have stressed the importance of relating meaning to context.<sup>7</sup> But rather than offer a summary account of some of these other approaches to this question, I will address it by recourse to a recent exchange between Benôit Garceau and Kai Nielsen.<sup>8</sup> This exchange is quite useful because of the many issues it raised. One that is particularly important is the question regarding the sort of understanding of our experience that is at issue in a religious experience and hence is appropriate for a conversation between skeptics and believers. I begin with Nielsen's critique of Garceau's views on this matter as a foil for clarifying the sense of "experience" that I have in mind in stressing the importance of understanding the judgements of significance believers presuppose in interpreting this experience.

In the course of Garceau's critical review of Nielsen's work in analytic philosophy of religion, Garceau proposes three "rules" that he considers are conditions for a "dialogue or a fruitful conversation between believers and skeptics."<sup>9</sup> Commenting on Garceau's first rule, "that the public manifestations of religion be open to the various canons of critical reason", Nielsen remarks that "Garceau claims that while religious discourse constitutes a public manifestation



of religion, and so is open to critical scrutiny, 'the religious person may claim, and rightly so, that one does not understand what he means unless one is a participant in his faith'." This view may also be implied in Garceau's third rule which is to the effect that "the manifestations of religion are an inadequate means for understanding religious faith." In any case, Nielsen identifies such a contention as a version of Wittgensteinian Fideism. In brief, he criticizes this supposed need for a participant's grasp of religious discourse and in the absence of a solid case for such a need, he criticizes it as an immunizing stratagem.<sup>10</sup>

What is of considerable interest for my purposes in this exchange are Nielsen's views regarding the sort of understanding that is appropriate in these matters. In particular, just what does it mean to request the need for a "participant's understanding" in this context? Nielsen construes this request in the following manner. It is important that people who engage in this sort of conversation "have a participant or a participant-like grasp of the discourse in question". "A participant-like grasp of a discourse" is the sort of understanding that Nielsen presumes Evans-Pritchard had cultivated during his study of the Azande and Nuer. Though he learned their language, religious discourse and magical belief-systems and attendant practices well enough that he could have participated in them had he chosen,

according to Nielsen, Evans-Pritchard "gained all this understanding without becoming a participant or even being tempted to become a participant." As Nielsen explains, to say that it is enough minimally that a person have a participant-like grasp of the relevant discourse is just to say that such an understanding as this is "analogous to the grasp a skilled speaker of a language has of that language". Hence, though Evans-Pritchard knew the life of the Azande and Nuer well, armed with his "participant-like grasp of its manifestations", "his mind was nonetheless firmly shut to the very possibility of there really being witches". He was, as some might prefer to put it, capable of making linguistically correct moves in this language-game and he could distinguish deviant and non-deviant moves. But to acquire this sort of understanding, it was not at all necessary that Evans-Pritchard be committed to believing that there are witches.<sup>11</sup>

I think it is clear that motivating Nielsen's reading of the phrases "participant's or participant-like grasp of a discourse" is a laudable concern to preserve a useful and important distinction between understanding what a discourse or practice means or signifies for a participant and evaluating or assessing the truth or value of that discourse or practice. As Nielsen interprets Garceau's third rule that stresses the inadequacy of the manifestations of a religion as a means for understanding that particular religious faith, the insistence

on the need for a participant's understanding that is more than a "participant-like grasp of it" is precisely a request to collapse this distinction.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, to carry his objection further, if the sense of "understanding" and "experience" at issue here is of the sort where understanding the discourse of a particular religious faith implies assenting to its truth then such a requirement would imply more than merely that the discourse of that faith was immune to a critique by those who do not share it. It also implies that its public manifestations be they creed, dogma, ritual, etc., are immune to a critique from within as well. For instance, those reformers who advocate a renewed understanding of the faith can always risk being accused by advocates of the reigning orthodoxy that any such proposed revisions constitute a tragic misunderstanding and departure from the faith. It is perhaps for these reasons that Nielsen maintains that "it is absurd to say of a deeply religious person...that at the very moment he loses his faith he also loses his understanding of that faith". In brief, to request the need for a participant's understanding of that faith, if it leads to this conclusion, is to "erect an arbitrary roadblock inhibiting a dialogue between belief and unbelief".<sup>13</sup>

Certainly, understanding something does admit of degrees. At first blush, it would seem unlikely that understanding religious experience should be an all or nothing

affair. In addition, such understanding can also be of different sorts whether "existential" in the sense of "understanding what a given experience is like" or "theoretical" in the sense of understanding the explanation of something."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the question regarding the degree of understanding to which one need aspire or presuppose in order to understand adequately what is important for a participant about his religious experience and faith has received a wide spectrum of answers. Such answers have ranged from Nielsen's own view that a "participant-like" level of understanding is enough all the way perhaps to Donald Evans' view that "legitimate talk about God arises only as reflection on religious conversion. All other talk about God is vain and empty."<sup>15</sup> It is hardly my intention to specify where in such a spectrum and between these extremes, the requisite degree of understanding lies. But I will argue that Nielsen's view of the matter is mistaken. Further, I will indicate a presupposition that I think is required minimally, if we are to come to terms with the question of the truth of the beliefs held as a consequence of the formative judgements of significance believers make on the basis of an interpretation of their experience.

It is not at all clear to me that Garceau intends his remark about the importance he attaches to a participant's understanding of his faith to be construed in the way Nielsen

does. Be that as it may.<sup>16</sup> What is more sorely needed here, however, is a somewhat more detailed gloss on the concept of a "participant's understanding of his experience" be it specifically religious or not. Toward this end, Charles Taylor's recent work may be quite useful inasmuch as it is more generally focused on coming to terms with the sense of "understanding our experience" that he considers is very important for the human sciences.<sup>17</sup>

According to Taylor the sense of "understanding our experience" at issue in the human sciences generally, and that I think is involved in Garceau's remark is this. It is an understanding of religious experience and the manifestations of a particular religious faith that construes them as an account of the way things are, given in terms of "subject-related properties" or "desireability-characterizations".<sup>18</sup> These phrases mean to capture an understanding of the "properties of things which they have only in so far as they are objects of experience of human subjects". For example, "colour is a property of things which they have only in the experience of sighted subjects". Similarly when one describes one's experience of something as "liberating beyond words", "morally outrageous", a "trial and tribulation" or says that the course of one's life has been as if under the hegemony of the Chinese curse, that "one has been condemned to live in interesting times", such descriptions do not refer us merely to our pro or con attitudes towards the

objects, be they God, nuclear war, the loss of a loved one, or the course of one's life. Instead, such descriptions focus upon and articulate a view of the meaning these objects and situations can have for us because of our experience of them when the significance of this experience is judged from a particular perspective.

The sort of understanding of our experience that is at issue here is the sort most often involved and invoked in the context of interpersonal relationships where understanding another person is a process of learning to understand them in terms of the concepts they use to describe themselves and what is important to them. As Taylor explains:

...to understand someone is to understand his emotions, aspirations, what he finds admirable and contemptible, what he loathes, what he yearns for and so on. Understanding doesn't mean sharing these emotions, aspirations, loathings, etc., but it does mean seeing the point of them seeing what is here which could be aspired to, loathed, etc. Seeing the point means grasping the objects concerned under desirability-characterizations. Understanding another person is understanding his world: it is grasping the significance of things for him.<sup>19</sup>

Judgements of significance are judgements about how the significance of our experience is to be construed if we are to come to grips with what it means for those who experience it and who consider themselves compelled to judge it in these terms within a particular context. As this bears on the religious context, the judgements of significance any religious faith

involves have to do with the final or ultimate meaning of human living and our experience of it as participants of that faith allege it to be discernible in their experience. I think it is this sense of "understanding our experience" that is at issue in the request for considering seriously a participant's understanding of his faith.

But some philosophers may consider that the phrases "desireability-characterizations" or "descriptions in terms of subject-related properties" are unhappy. These phrases may foster the impression that what is at stake in having or allowing a recourse to judgements or descriptions of this sort is a non-cognitive, irreducibly subjective, component that really ought to be avoided. For the moment, I will consider only whether the sense of "experience" here in question is really irrelevant because it is a non-cognitive component.

In fact, I think that this contention is mistaken as the following example may help to illustrate. Consider this question. In a conversation about the truth of theological beliefs, are believers entitled to refer to what they think they know to be true given the reading or judgement of the significance of their alleged religious experience of God? Though some might think this a perverse question, according to Nielsen the answer would be "no". Such appeals are not legitimate. It is ultimately not rationally permissible. But this judgement is hardly simply the expression of Nielsen's

aversion towards such appeals. Rather, it is based on his view that such alleged religious experiences cannot be a source of objective truth because not only are they not self-authenticating, they involve claims to an experience that appears to be self-contradictory - "a claim to have experienced that which is beyond experience".<sup>20</sup> Conversely, Garceau could and doubtless would respond by holding that such appeals are legitimate and rationally permissible. But this judgement need not simply be an expression of his positive attitude towards such an appeal. Rather it might be based on the ground that in the absence of a proof or a compelling reason to think that the concept of God is incoherent, in ordinary contexts we do accept first-person reports of the import of one's experience as at least prima-facie evidence for the truth of one's beliefs. Hence, why can we not do the same in this context?

The point of this example has not yet to do with the question of the epistemic status and locus of an appeal to the interpretation of an alleged religious experience of God in a proposed conversation about the truth of the beliefs advanced in the context of such a judgement of significance. I will have occasion to return to a detailed consideration of this question below. Instead, it has to do with the kind of judgements, judgements of significance are. Neither Nielsen nor Garceau, I submit, would hold that we learn nothing from



their judgements, nothing that has a cognitive content, about the prospects and conditions for such a conversation between skeptics and believers other than their subjective attitudes towards it. In this context, I think it fair to say that "rationality" is a "subject-related property term". When used either by Nielsen or Garceau, it expresses a judgement about the meaning of the situation that they allege really obtains between believers and skeptics given their rival interpretations of the experience of attempted conversation. Regardless of how one might seek to resolve their disagreement, I think it is clear that both mean their judgements of the rationality of such appeals to a participant's understanding of their experience to be true not merely for themselves but for others as well.

As a result, I suggest that terms like rationality, irrationality, honesty, integrity and the judgements of significance that are sometimes couched in terms of a reference to the formative symbols which provide the focal points for participants of the great religious traditions, are descriptions which:

...apply to actions or ways of living, not simply to feelings or experiences. But they describe them in subject-related terms. In a world without subjects of the specifically human kind, with language and hence moral, aesthetic, evaluative, /religious/, consciousness there couldn't be such properties as integrity applied to ways of life or honesty applied to the appearances given to the world....These terms straddle the gap

between things and our experience of them; they characterize reality, but in experience-related terms. The same can be said of a host of words in which we characterize relationships as desirable or undesirable: 'close', 'distant', 'strained' as well as with such key terms as 'love', 'communion', 'estrangement', or the way we characterize situations: 'humiliating', 'fulfilling', 'frustrating'.<sup>21</sup>

In drawing attention to the importance of a participant's understanding of his faith and its expressions and the potential chasm that can separate an observer and a participant, I think Garceau is drawing our attention to the importance of understanding religious experience as the occasion for articulating and ultimately justifying for him and perhaps also for others, a judgement of significance that he considers to be grounded in a "metaphysical experience of a value in man".<sup>22</sup> Granted this experience and the judgement that articulates it is difficult for others in the absence of such an experience, to understand. As Garceau remarks, this judgement and the experience that prompts it needs to be understood, as a judgement expressed in a "language that is the expression of that which is experienced by a subject; an expression by means of which he communicates his experience to a fellow-subject."<sup>23</sup> It is a description of what is real described in experience-related terms.

I do not pretend to have understood all that Garceau has in mind in his view that the judgement of religious faith

is anchored in a "metaphysical experience of a value in man." As with the passage cited earlier from Kung, it is hardly the end of the matter to say as Garceau does, that this experience of a

...possibility in man of becoming a person is judged by the religious man as the possibility of being liberated from all things, including the thing that he is, this being actualized only in as much as he gives himself to a Presence that is in him the source of freedom, the experience of God that is inseparable from the quest of man.<sup>24</sup>

It should occasion no surprise that often understanding what persons find significant about their experience does not happen easily or on the first try especially in these matters. Nevertheless, if it is judgements of significance that are at issue here, in admitting recourse to them in a conversation about the truth of theological beliefs one is admitting that they can and should be treated as a serious alternative. The request for a participant's understanding of a religious faith in terms of its formative judgements and symbols, is a request of the skeptic to acknowledge that there is a point to being human in this way, given of course a more detailed account of the implications of these judgements in the context in which they are embedded. To admit that there is a point to being human in this way is to admit that these judgements of the significance of our experience of things and human living are or may be in some sense true.

Certainly, to admit the propriety of consideration of judgements of significance may require more than a participant-like grasp of religious discourse in which a skeptic may possess greater or lesser facility in manipulating religious words and phrases. But the admission that some sort of experience of transcendence is possible, that is more than a psychological reality lacking any potential cognitive import, in no way implies that a skeptic is committed to agreeing that the judgement of significance believers consider themselves compelled to advance is correct. In other words, to admit that an experience of God, Ultimate Reality, Nirvana or Transcendence in whatever form and terms it may be described, may on occasion take place is not eo ipso to claim human infallibility for the judgements or interpretations of its significance that participants hold as a consequence of it. Moreover, this admission does not or need not compromise the distinction between understanding what an experience signifies for a participant and assessing the truth of the beliefs that may be inferred from it. After all, it is still quite logically possible that those who consider themselves to have had such experiences as these have nonetheless profoundly misread what their significance is.

Nor need believers of all people, be reminded by the "masters of suspicion" and their current disciples of the very real dangers of misreading the import of their experience.

Indeed, I think it is quite remarkable that many philosophers of religion should so easily overlook what no believer can afford to ignore. Such scholars often forget that, regarding the examples of the central symbols cited above and in terms of which the full significance of such judgements is articulated;

...whether the reference is to a person or to a set of rules or verses, in every instance what is mentioned is a concrete entity or set of entities available to public scrutiny. The focal point of each tradition is an object observable by both faithful and faithless.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, as Peter Donovan has suggested,

...it is perfectly natural for the skeptic to say of these experiences that, 'they are simply the ups and downs of life and the feelings that go with them read differently.' But isn't that just what is at issue in the whole dispute about the truth of belief in God and the validity of religious experience.<sup>26</sup>

The point is that failure to attend to and consider seriously the understanding of their alleged religious experience in the terms and in the context in which it is articulated is perhaps to risk begging important questions that are at issue. If what is at stake in the question of the truth of theological beliefs about God is judgements of the significance of our experience articulated in subject-related terms, we who profess to be observers of religious life and faith must be wary lest we succumb to the temptation of imposing an interpretation. After all, there is little reason to assume either that qua

observers, "we know the rights and wrongs of a dispute even if the parties to it do not" or that we should eschew consideration of what may to us appear to be theologically ramified interpretations of their experience. It is "just as possible to miss the genuine significance of an experience through under-interpretation as it is through over-interpretation."<sup>27</sup> For the moment then, I contend that the question of the truth of religious and theological beliefs turns upon the sympathetic understanding, discussion and assessment of judgements of significance. These judgements themselves are to be construed as descriptions of the significance of participant's alleged experience of the way things are, including for some, God, world, self and human living in the light of them, articulated within the context of a particular religious tradition in subject-related terms.<sup>28</sup>

### 3.12 The Scandal of a Hermeneutics of Signs

In stressing the cognitive importance of judgements of the significance of our experience and the sort of understanding that is appropriate for them, I do not mean to imply that the justification of these judgements on the ground of an appeal to an alleged religious experience is either straightforward or routine. As is well known, participants, quite naturally, regard these judgements as convincing. But, of course, there is a great range of possible interpretations, conflicting

theological or a-theological contexts, and experiences susceptible of religious or non-religious interpretation, available. Even so, I suggest that addressing the question of truth in religion by attempting to comply with a request by believers, that their interpretation or judgement of the significance of their experience be considered as a serious alternative, is plausible. It is on the ground of such an interpretation that they - in a process of reasoning from signs - infer to the truth of category B and ultimately category A theological beliefs.

Nevertheless, however promising such a proposal may appear, it confronts a defect that many philosophers would consider crippling. The examination of Heimbeck's discussion of the logic of foundational category B theological assertions revealed that these are inferred in a process of reasoning from signs. These signs are drawn from experiences and phenomena that are constituted as a sign-cluster presupposing the context provided by a particular religious faith and its cumulative historical tradition. Such a context is itself shaped for each of the different religious traditions by formative judgements of significance. For participants, these judgements are descriptions that articulate the meaning of their experience of things in subject-related terms. It is in the context provided by such judgements that participants structure the rest of their experience into a meaningful whole.

But it is the discovery of the context-dependent character of any reasoning from signs in theology that seems to generate an impasse for even the most sympathetic critic. For example, it appears that just as part of the content of the judgement of significance involved in Christian religious faith affirms a scandal of specific Divine actions, so also the project of justifying theological beliefs by reasoning from signs seems to precipitate a scandal. To select one formulation of it, the Christian scandal consists in the affirmation of a fully incarnate God who willingly dies for believers of all peoples or perhaps, better, for all people regardless of belief or unbelief.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the scandal affirmed by the critique of the truth of theological beliefs conducted in theology is that it can be performed only in and for participants of a particular religious faith themselves.

To appreciate the full force of this problem, it is worth considering more carefully a certain peculiarity about the task of developing an account of the justification of theological beliefs by a reflection on the interpretation of experiences and phenomena construed as signs bearing a religious significance as here understood. This task, that I refer to as a hermeneutics of signs, is a version of the critique of the truth of theological beliefs. But unlike either version of the critique of truth discussed above in section 1.2, this critique alone is internal. It does not



evaluate the truth or falsity of theological beliefs from a standpoint external to them nor does it use a standard of evaluation that is foreign to their content. A hermeneutics of signs takes seriously the requirement that emerged from the critique of Heimbeck's proposal concerning the verification of category B theological assertions. This requirement, discussed at length in section 3.11, is that for the verification or justification of theological beliefs, the source of the criteria for a correct or right interpretation of signs is founded in each religious tradition upon judgements of the significance of an alleged experience of God or Ultimate Reality. The process of justification presupposes as the norm for its success, an openness at least to the possibility of such an experience and the response to it that is a ~~faith~~ involving judgements of significance whose meaning we are trying to understand more fully by recourse to theological beliefs. One of the central tasks of a Christian hermeneutics of signs is to discern those conditions that make possible a correct interpretation of the signs from which theological beliefs may be inferred and their meaning clarified. But these conditions themselves are determined by reflection and within the context provided by judgements of significance articulated in terms of the central symbol of Jesus Christ that is formative for Christian religious faith.<sup>30</sup>

The implication of such a situation should now be obvious. To undertake a hermeneutics of signs at all requires that the structure and judgements of significance of the Christian, and mutatis mutandis, those of other faiths, are presupposed and shared by critics themselves. In particular, if philosophers are to avoid distorting the subject-matter under investigation, they must first acknowledge that the Christian, rightly or wrongly, understands and lives his faith as an absolute and exclusive certainty that is not totally conditioned either by other systems of thought or by social and psychological factors.<sup>31</sup>

To explain, this certainty is absolute inasmuch as it constitutes the foundation both for his beliefs and his way of life because his faith, if genuine, is fundamentally a response to an initiative he considers to have been undertaken by God on his behalf. From a Christian participant's perspective, it is God who has communicated that and who He is through signs. Furthermore, for the Christian, it is God who has demonstrated to human beings how it is that they ought to live their lives so as to accomplish themselves fully as created beings by giving to man a concrete exemplar of Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. This certainty is exclusive because this initiative is understood by a Christian as the introduction and establishment of meaning in the world before which all other meanings pale in

comparison. As Nicholas Wolterstorff succinctly put it, Christians consider themselves called out "to share in the work of being witness, agent and evidence of God's work of renewal." As such, "the members of God's people would constitute themselves a band of disciples of Jesus Christ. For it was He who was the principal witness, the decisive agent, the one who gave the most lucid evidence."<sup>32</sup> It is a reflection conducted from within this perspective that I intend when I maintain that a hermeneutics of signs, as a critique of the truth of theological beliefs, can be performed only by those participants who consider themselves to live by faith in communion with God.

Now a skeptic and even a sympathetic critic may well wonder, if this be the aim, structure and presuppositions of the critique of truth as performed under the title of a hermeneutics of signs, how can this effort be construed as critical? Is not the real result of the discussion thus far simply that, as a skeptic suspected and a sympathetic critic feared, a religious faith, in its judgements of significance and theological beliefs and practices is, after all, inimical to any and all critique? As Nielsen, for instance, recently put it for the critical observer, "though manifestations of religious faith are open to the scrutiny of reason, it appears at least, that religious faith is not...open to such scrutiny and possible rejection."<sup>33</sup>

I think it is important that it be recognized by participants and critical observers alike that though these questions have merit, they are yet partly misdirected. The critique of truth as conducted in a hermeneutics of signs is critically indispensable for the life of a religious faith. In a Christian context for instance, among other things, it is a critique of any discourse about God intended to render it more adequate to what it is about. As a faith in One who is transcendent, for example, one of its tasks is to criticize all the expressions of faith, whether these be expressed in creed, dogma, liturgy or ritual including its own. It is undertaken by theologians and reflective believers generally in order to prevent the identification of God with these finite and inevitably human expressions. An interpretation which, wherever it is complete, constitutes a reduction of God simply to the status of having a function in a believer's life. In addition, it is also an attempt to express the message allegedly experienced and communicated in faith as a response in a discourse that is or at least aspires to be universal. This ongoing task is undertaken as a consequence of the particularity or situatedness of all human discourse. This particularity, of course, is most readily manifest wherever others fail to understand the believer.

Hence, when I speak of assessing the truth of the beliefs which are founded upon judgements of the significance

of their experience, I do not mean that through the successful execution of this critique, the theologian can expect to establish their truth conclusively. Instead, a theologian as a participant, refers to and reflects upon the significance of the liberating experience of God as manifested in any of the aforementioned shapes religious experience has and does assume, as recorded within the cumulative historical tradition of his faith. In so doing, he attempts to demonstrate in detail and maintain thereby the purity of the various expressions of his faith, by clarifying the implications of that significance for our understanding of God.

For example, as the condition sine qua non for any and all producing, God is not to be confused, much less identified with the human products, be these concepts, avowals, beliefs, definitions, that believers tend to preserve, transmit, create or exploit in order to give expression to their faith and articulate its meaning. If one could verify the truth of any one set of human expressions, such as the assertion of a particular constellation of theological propositions, this would destroy the religious faith they mediate. Again, referring to a Christian context, of course, for participants who perform this critique, their faith, as lived, is experienced and judged by them as a response to a gift freely given. In appropriating it into their lives they or perhaps the best of them, are enabled to make of themselves

a gift in love for their neighbour. Conclusive demonstration of any of this would destroy the gratuitousness, freedom and consequent risk that genuine faith is. From this perspective it is hardly surprising that believers might consider such a coercive demonstration to be impossible and undesirable in any case.

Hence, strictly speaking, the gesture of religious faith and a hermeneutics of signs do not preclude the possibility of critique. The task of assessing the adequacy and truth of the theological beliefs advanced in the context of formative judgements of significance, whether these latter are obtained as a consequence of personal religious experience or the experience of apparent design in the physical universe or in the experiences of the first witnesses recorded in the historical tradition, is performed within Christian religious faith by reflective believers generally and by theologians in particular.<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, the questions posed by a skeptic or a sympathetic critic are only partly and not completely misdirected. After all, though it may be granted that a case can be made for the importance of this sort of critique of truth within the life of a particular religious faith, it is the rationality, if not the intelligibility, of this critique that is assumed by the believer who performs it. Furthermore, if philosophical reflection is to be restricted to the analysis of the practice of this critique, some philosophers may

consider that they are committed unjustifiably to a positive answer regarding the legitimacy of this assumption. It is precisely this assumption that a skeptic, as an observer of religious experience and faith, is not prepared to allow. As we have seen, a hermeneutics of signs is conducted by participants only within the circle of a particular faith and its religious tradition. Thus, the suspicion may persist that the conclusions of reasoning from signs in theology are still not legitimate candidates for truth or falsity because they are grounded upon a preferred interpretation of the meaning of their experience.

To make the character of this suspicion explicit, I note that it is a suspicion that if the interpretation of their experience as a sign is sectarian or affected by particularity due to the interpreter's membership in a theological tradition, then theological language and the beliefs it expresses may manifest also a preference that is not inspired by a desire for the truth. Rather it may be inspired from other and perhaps more unsavoury motives. A corollary to this suspicion that has assumed many well known forms is the suggestion that believers who use religious discourse are really misleading themselves and others, however unconsciously, by elaborating an illusory "world view" perhaps in order to justify and sustain an inauthentic form of life.

Hence, even if a hermeneutics of signs is successful to the degree that criteria are specified that indicate how

theologians can and rightly do judge the propriety of rival interpretations of these signs, this will not remove the suspicion that this discourse is ideological. A skeptic, will doubtless protest that any hermeneutics of signs is question-begging, if by developing it, a believer considers that he has addressed and resolved a skeptic's central concern that motivated raising the question about the correct interpretation of signs in the first place. A hostile and perhaps even a sympathetic critic will still question the rationality or justifiability of the initial condition that the conduct of this type of critique of truth in the context of a particular religious faith requires. This initial condition requires that the performer of this critique must assent to stepping into the circle of faith, as the traditional formula expressed it, of faith searching understanding. Conversely, it requires of critical philosophers who study the conduct of this critique, that they be prepared to grant minimally that the judgements of significance derived from and founded upon an alleged religious experience may possibly be true. But some critics will not be impressed by the assurance that within the context provided by a particular religious faith and its formative judgements of significance, there are means available for determining rationally justifiable conclusions regarding the truth or falsity of particular theological beliefs. They may not be impressed, I contend, unless such critics are assured that in stepping into this circle, even where they confine their



attention to the analysis of the kind of reasoning occurring here, they are not stepping thereby into a circle of illusion.

Before proposing a strategy for dealing with this objection, two points about the sort of suspicion that can be entertained here are important. First this sort of skeptical suspicion is not at all couched in terms of a critique of the cognitive meaningfulness of theological sentences. The substance of this objection is more fundamental because it is unambiguously epistemological. It does not appeal to the validity of any particular theory of cognitive meaning. Instead, it maintains that fundamental theological beliefs about God are not justified independently of the context of a particular religious faith, its judgements of significance and its cumulative historical tradition. But unless these theological beliefs can be so justified, it is alleged that we cannot be assured that the context in which they are embedded as a whole is not ideological.

Second, nevertheless, this sort of skeptical suspicion is similar in certain important respects to the skepticism of cognitive meaningfulness. In particular, it is another version of a general meta-theological skepticism. It is meta-theological because it is not a denial of the truth of any particular theological belief or system of theological beliefs. It is directed against the very possibility of the justification of theological beliefs without reference to other religious and theological presuppositions. It is general because, although

I have introduced it in terms of a skepticism about the justifiability of theological beliefs about God, it can in fact be raised against the possibility of justifying the beliefs implied in the judgements of significance involved in and formative for any religious faith. Again, against the project of justifying theological beliefs in a hermeneutics of signs whether Christian, Jewish, Moslem, Buddhist, Hindu and so on, the second version of meta-theological skepticism poses the following challenge. If the truth of particular theological beliefs cannot be rationally justified independently of the context of a particular faith and its attendant judgements of significance, how can the believer demonstrate that those judgements of significance are not really the expression of a preferred interpretation of his experience construed mistakenly by him as religious signs that in fact really serve needs, interests or ends other than the pursuit of the truth?<sup>35</sup>

### 3.13 Questioning the Framework - A Strategy

Thus far I have been pursuing the implications of the suggestion exploited by many analytic philosophers of religion for the conduct of philosophical reflection on the practice of a religious faith. In general, it is characteristic of this approach that the appropriate starting-point for interpreting and understanding religious faith and experience is to investigate it as it comes to expression in language. This project

consists in the analysis of the "logic of religious and theological language," developed within the context of a critique of the cognitive meaningfulness of this language. But, as I have argued, the conduct of this reflection has issued in yet another and more powerful version of meta-theological skepticism. This second version of meta-theological skepticism does not contend that religious and theological language is cognitively meaningless. This second version acknowledges that some religious and theological beliefs are in principle empirically falsifiable. But these beliefs are still invalid because these beliefs are not rationally justifiable except in a context provided by a particular religious faith and its cumulative historical tradition.

The second version of meta-theological skepticism arises as a consequence of certain results of a provisional attempt to make progress with reflection on the question regarding the truth or justifiability of theological beliefs. The results in question concern the discovery of the context-dependent character of reasoning from phenomena and experiences construed as signs in theology by which the justification of particular religious and theological beliefs is accomplished. Skeptical suspicion is aroused because the context in which this critique of the truth of theological beliefs is conducted is itself shaped by or presupposes an initial judgement of the significance of a believer's experience of things and situations.

Judgements of significance are descriptions of the meaning of our experience of things and situations offered in subject-related terms. Moreover, it is judgements of the significance of experience rather than category A or B theological beliefs that constitute, if anything does, the experiential anchor of a particular religious faith.

In addition, I have also argued that to accept the context-dependent character of the justification of theological beliefs implies the acceptance of an important condition for conducting a fruitful reflection on the question of truth in religion. This condition is that philosophers of religion, interested in this issue, be prepared to consider seriously a participant's understanding of the significance of the alleged experiences they judge formative of their particular religious faith. Again, I stress that this condition does not imply that a philosopher must accept or even assent to any particular expression of that understanding, however theologically ramified it may be. Nor does this condition imply that a philosopher must assume that an alleged religious experience affords those believers who consider themselves to have enjoyed it, with a self-authenticating knowledge of God, Brahman, Ultimate Reality or what have you.<sup>36</sup> This contention does imply that a philosopher is prepared to abandon any presuppositions or perspective that makes it impossible for him or her to acknowledge or entertain minimally, the possible validity of a judgement of the religious

significance of certain alleged experiences at least for participants of this practice. The condition, that is a request "to consider seriously a participant's understanding of the significance of his experience" means that a philosopher is prepared to entertain the possibility that these judgements of significance may be true.

Lest there be any doubt, to accept these preliminary results raises some very formidable and perplexing issues both for participants in a particular religious faith and critical observers concerned with the question of truth in religion. Two issues are readily apparent. First, for Christians for example, the certainty of living in a relationship with God in and through Jesus Christ is affirmed in the face of unbelief which on its own is capable of treating this judgement of significance and the alleged experiences upon which it is founded, so as to deny the reality of any such involvement. Second, prima-facie at least, the other great religious traditions provide ample evidence of the fact that religious experience is quite capable of fostering and sustaining a variety of rival judgements of significance that are no less formative for their participants. If the question of the truth or justification of religious and theological beliefs is legitimately on the agenda for philosophical reflection, then the manifest plurality of "religious truths" and the stance of unbelief that would protest the alleged religious import of any such judgements of significance cannot be ignored.

Perhaps the following may be conceded. A discussion of the features of judgements of significance presupposed in the conduct of a hermeneutics of signs within theology and the clarification of the sense in which a participant's understanding of his religious faith and experience are important aspects involved in a reflection upon the question of truth in religion. This discussion and clarification has the merit of directing our attention towards the sources in experience from which, for participants, signs are drawn in order to infer to the truth of particular theological beliefs. Nevertheless, as I have said, this attention once focused, cannot help but expose the element of contingency or particularity ineluctably involved in both the understanding and evaluation of theological beliefs. After all, if particular theological beliefs are justifiable only within the context of a particular religious faith and its judgements of significance, many philosophers may still suspect the importance or need to consider seriously a participant's understanding of his faith and experience construed as a condition for a reflection on the question of truth in religion. They may suspect it as an illegitimate immunizing strategem because this condition appears to compromise unduly the critical posture requisite for a philosopher of religion. In addition, if the second version of meta-theological skepticism that articulates this suspicion is a valid objection, like the first version of meta-theological

skepticism, it would effectively block the need or point of reflection on a strategy for dealing with the difficult issues a serious consideration of the question of truth in religion raises.

I submit that difficult and perplexing as these latter issues are, reflection on the question of truth within and as we can now see also among religions deserves to be addressed. Certainly, there have been a few isolated steps taken by some philosophers of religion among others, in the direction of what might be referred to as a "comparative philosophy of religion."<sup>37</sup> Valuable and exciting as these contributions are and regardless of initial successes at "dialoguing", "encountering" and the like among participants of different religious faiths, I contend that unless the presuppositions of both versions of meta-theological skepticism are recognized, criticized and abandoned these efforts will not be accorded the attention they deserve. This is because hostile and even sympathetic critics who reflect upon it may as yet remain unconvinced that this work addresses the logically prior and for them central, issue. This logically prior issue centres on the suspicion that is aroused once the context-dependent character of the question of truth or justification in religion is acknowledged. Philosophers profess to be neutral in their reflection regarding any particular religious faith. But how can they be assured that, even in restricting their attention to the analysis of the

kind of reasoning used by participants who conduct a hermeneutics of signs in theology, they are not stepping into a circle of illusion?

Meta-theological skepticism does articulate a radical suspicion. In either version, this suspicion is directed against the legitimacy of the very project of seeking to justify particular theological beliefs and judgements of significance involved in a religious faith by means of a hermeneutics of signs. In addition, either version poses a serious challenge militating against the very project of seeking to resolve or ameliorate the differences among rival judgements of significance characteristic of different religious faiths, however ecumenically inspired these efforts are. Hence, in the service of removing obstacles in the way of cultivating a serious study of these issues, in the ensuing chapters I will undertake a critique of both versions of meta-theological skepticism from a different angle. As the suspicion articulated by meta-theological skepticism is radical, I think it calls for a radical solution. Hence, as the title of this section indicates, I propose to offer a critique of meta-theological skepticism that places in question the epistemological framework both versions of it presuppose. In other words, I propose that the most effective strategy for dealing with the general suspicion meta-theological skepticism articulates is to argue that it can and should be out-flanked. It can and should be



out-flanked by criticizing the presuppositions that together form the horizon or perspective in which it is developed and to which it owes its plausibility.

To explain, the strategy I propose is not a direct response to meta-theological skeptical suspicion. Rather it is an attempt to dissolve it by undermining its presuppositions. As is now clear, it is possible to distinguish two versions of meta-theological skepticism. The first version is couched explicitly in terms of a theory of cognitive meaning for sentences. According to this version it is alleged that putative religious and theological assertions are invalid because they violate the requisite conditions of cognitive meaningfulness. Hence, these sentences cannot be used legitimately to express genuine assertions and so cannot be considered as legitimate candidates for truth or falsity. The second version of meta-theological skepticism is more fundamental. It is more fundamental because it does not invoke any particular theory of cognitive meaning. As such this version is unaffected by Heimbeck's counter-critique that exposes the confusions latent in the "checkability" theory of meaning the first version of meta-theological skepticism involves. The second version questions the context-dependent character of the structure of the justification of theological beliefs in a process of reasoning from signs in theology. It maintains that theological beliefs cannot be considered rationally justifiable because

they cannot be justified independently of the context afforded by a particular religious faith, its judgements of significance and its cumulative historical tradition. In other words, theological beliefs are not rationally justifiable because the manner in which they are allegedly justified violates certain conditions alleged to be characteristic of the justification of our beliefs generally. Hence, these beliefs cannot be considered as legitimate candidates for truth or falsity.

Both versions of meta-theological skepticism also share certain common features. The first type invokes general conditions about cognitive meaning for sentences, while the second invokes no less general conditions about the structure of the justification of our beliefs generally. Both versions assume that theological sentences or theological beliefs must satisfy these sets of conditions if they are to be considered as legitimate candidates for truth or falsity. In addition, both versions assume that the cognitive meaning of theological sentences or the structure of justification of theological beliefs must repose on epistemologically basic or foundational claims. It is these claims that are identified according to the conditions both versions invoke. But in what follows, I will argue that the project of articulating and defending such conditions, upon which the validity of either version of meta-theological skepticism depends, is itself mistaken. It is mistaken because this project presupposes the tacit acceptance of a powerful and widespread epistemological theory about the

justification of any alleged claims to knowledge in general and any alleged claims to religious knowledge in particular. This epistemological theory, I refer to as "foundationalism". As I will explain in greater detail below, foundationalism is a normative theory about the nature and structure of the justification of our beliefs regardless of particular contexts of inquiry.

The structure of the argument to be explicated and defended in the balance of this thesis is as follows: I argue, first, that this foundationalist epistemological theory sustains a widespread view about the nature of religious belief and the strategy to be pursued in philosophical reflection upon it. Second, I argue that this theory of the structure of the justification of our beliefs is mistaken. I have already provided grounds for rejecting the first version of meta-theological skepticism in section 1.4. Even so, third, I will show that and how both versions of meta-theological skepticism presuppose a commitment to a foundationalist theory of justification. Hence, if this general theory of justification is mistaken then so also in particular, is the second version of meta-theological skepticism that presupposes it, mistaken.

In other words, contrary to what many philosophers might suppose, it is not a defect, crippling or otherwise, to hold that the project of justifying the truth of particular theological beliefs in a process of reasoning from signs presupposes the truth of formative judgements of significance

involved in a particular religious faith. The suspicion that it must be a defect is itself not rationally warranted. Hence, it is in this fashion that the first reading offered above for construing the import of the discovery of the context-dependent character of the justification of theological beliefs as this bears on the question of truth in religion is defended. In a word, the question about the truth of religious and theological beliefs turns upon the sympathetic discussion, understanding and assessment of rival judgements of the significance of participants alleged religious experience. It is a defense designed to remove the last remaining stumbling-block that otherwise threatens to prevent us from carrying further the development of a philosophy of religion oriented towards a reflection upon the question of truth in and among religions.

Notes: Chapter 3

1. It is more fundamental and far-reaching in this respect. A successful counter-critique of meta-theological skepticism articulated in terms of a theory of cognitive meaning leaves untouched any version of meta-theological skepticism that is couched in terms of a theory of the justification of our beliefs.
2. This division of the types of religious experience is not meant to be exhaustive. It is meant only to illustrate that the sources from which signs may be drawn in the project of conducting a hermeneutics of signs in theology are different.
3. Among the different religious traditions not all the sources of signs are equally fundamental in inferences accomplished in theology. For example, for the Christian faith, unlike the Hindu or Buddhist faiths, it is signs drawn from "sacred history" that have tended to provide the categories for interpreting and rendering intelligible personal religious experience and the experience of apparent design in the physical universe.
4. This project would require the development of theories of the interpretation of signs within specific religious traditions. For one such theory see Paul Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning, (Fort Worth: Christian University Press, 1976). For a study of some of the theological and philosophical issues involved, see Daniel Patte, What is Structural Exegesis, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) and David C. Hoy, The Critical Circle, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), respectively.
5. Peter Slater, The Dynamics of Religion, (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 34.
6. Hans Kung, On Being a Christian, tr. by Edward Quinn, (Glasgow: Collins, 1978), pp. 123, 124-126. Compare also Leslie Houlden, "The Creed of Experience", in John Hick, ed., The Myth of God Incarnate, (London: SCM Press, 1977), p. 125. Commenting on the authors of the Gospels he writes, "all (except James?) unite in seeing Christ as the key that unlocks all doors where God is concerned, the clue to the discovery of all secrets. And we can sketch a shared background within whose terms they all expressed those great dominating convictions." Nevertheless as Francis Young notes in the same volume, this unity should not blind us

to the important fact that in confessing, "In Jesus Christ I perceive something of God", a confession that lies at the heart of Christian belief, and /that/ sums up the common mind of the faithful. Yet, as a matter of fact, Christian believers have experienced and understood this confession in more than one way." Francis Young, "A Cloud of Witnesses," p. 13.

7. In addition to the work of Nygren and Phillips cited there, I have in mind also Donald Evans, The Logic of Self-Involvement, (London: SCM Press, 1963), William A. Christian, Meaning and Truth in Religion, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964) and Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society", in Bryan Wilson ed., Rationality, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 78 - 111.
8. The relevant texts for this exchange are Benoît Garceau, "On Dining With the Meta-Theological Sceptic: Comments on Nielsen's Position", in Mostafa Fagfoury ed., Analytical Philosophy of Religion in Canada, (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), pp. 125 - 137 and Kai Nielsen, "Skepticism and Belief: A Reply to Benoît Garceau." Both texts were read before the Canadian Philosophical Association in June 1982. References to Nielsen's response are obtained from an unpublished draft of his article presented at this meeting and kindly provided by Benoît Garceau.
9. Kai Nielsen summarizes Garceau's three rules as follows: "1) whatever is publicly observable about religion must be open to the various canons of critical reason. 2) There is a duty on the part of those who engage in serious discussion of religious matters, skeptics as well as believers, to confess the anthropological particularity of their reason'. 3) 'The manifestations of religion are an inadequate means for understanding religious faith", (emphasis Garceau's), unpublished draft p. 3. For Garceau's discussion of his own rules see, "On Dining with the Meta-Theological Sceptic" in Mostafa Fagfoury ed., Analytical Philosophy of Religion in Canada, pp. 128 - 131.
10. Nielsen, ibid., pp. 3 - 4, 4, 6.
11. Ibid., p. 4.
12. Ibid., pp. 5 - 6.
13. Ibid., p. 5.
14. Ninian Smart, "Understanding Religious Experience", in Steven Katz ed., Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis, (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), pp. 10 - 21.

15. Donald Evans, "Authenticity and Truth in Religion", unpublished draft, p. 1. This paper was read before the Canadian Philosophical Association, June 1982.
16. In conversation with Garceau he indicated that he was quite surprised that Nielsen construed his "off-the-cuff" remark quoted above in this way because he did not intend any substantive fideistic thesis by it.
17. Charles Taylor, "Understanding in Human Science", Review of Metaphysics, 34 (1980), pp. 25 - 38.
18. Taylor, ibid., p. 31.
19. Ibid., p. 37.
20. Nielsen, op. cit., pp. 9, 12.
21. Taylor, op. cit., p. 34. "Religious" in square brackets is my addition.
22. Garceau, op. cit., p. 134.
23. Ibid., p. 131.
24. Ibid., p. 134.
25. Peter Slater, The Dynamics of Religion, p. 34. He continues in this passage to note that, "what engages the emotions, concentrates attention and invites reflection is not initially some esoteric reality whose very existence may be called in question."
26. Peter Donovan, Interpreting Religious Experience, (London: Sheedon Press, 1979), p. 82.
27. Donovan, ibid., pp. 31, 28.
28. For a similar view of the "experiential dimension of religious faith" that seeks to avoid the error of identifying "this experiential dimension with mental states or attitudes which are divorced from one's being in the world, one's behaviour, thoughts and beliefs", see Eugene T. Long ed., Experience, Reason and God, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1980), pp. 2 - 3.
29. For example, speaking of what he considers to be the amazing aspect of the Incarnation in the context in which it was first witnessed, Huston Smith remarks,

... we usually assume that its most startling claim concerns Jesus. That the son of a Jewish carpenter is to be identified with God - what could be more fantastic than this? Actually, however, the Greeks and Romans who heard the doctrine were astounded by its other side; it was what the Incarnation asserted about God that they found disturbing. The thought that God might walk the earth in human form was not foreign to their thinking, but that he would voluntarily suffer for man's sake - this was the incredible part of the Christian claim. A God willing to proceed unmajestically, strength willing to become weakness, goodness good enough to be unmindful of its own repute, love plenteous enough to give and ask not for return - the revolutionary feature of the Christ-claim was not what it claimed for Jesus, but what it claimed about God.

Huston Smith, The Religions of Man, (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 326 - 327.

30. Three recent examples of studies I would include under the rubric of a hermeneutics of signs in theology are the works of Hans Kung, Does God Exist?, tr. by Edward Quinn, (New York: Doubleday, 1980), Bernard J. Lonergan, S.J., The Philosophy of God and Theology, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) and Karl Rahner, S.J., Foundations of Christian Faith, (New York: Seabury Press, 1978). In differing ways each of these works try to provide an account of the "reasonableness of Christian faith". As McCool puts it, each is a "fundamental theology, a reflection made within faith and directed to the believer." Gerald A. McCool, "How Can There Be Such a Thing as a Christian Philosophy?" in Philosophical Knowledge, ed., John B. Brough, Daniel O. Dahlstrom and Henry B. Veatch, (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1980), p. 133.
31. Certainly any human formulation of a participant's understanding of the significance of his faith and experience is partially conditioned by these factors. In this respect, any attempt to make further progress with the question of the justifiability of religious and theological beliefs that ignores the contributions of studies of religious faith and belief offered by phenomenologists, comparative historians, anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists does so at its peril. Nevertheless, for a participant, his faith is also ultimately and over-ridingly conditioned by his relation with God. I note that however much the actual



performance of a hermeneutics of signs in theology may require involvement in a particular religious faith, it seems to me to be equally clear that this requirement is not necessary for a philosophical reflection on the sort of reasoning at work in this context. For a brief survey of other approaches to religious faith and belief and their potential contributions, see Richard E. Creel, Religion and Doubt, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977), pp. 6 - 27.

32. Nicholas Wolterstorff, Reason Within the Bounds of Religion, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Erdmann's, 1976), p. 69.
33. Kai Nielsen, "Skepticism and Belief: A Reply to Benoît Garceau," p. 5.
34. I think that substantially the same remarks, though couched in a different idiom in terms of different judgements of significance but serving similar interests, could be made regarding the importance, role and tasks of a hermeneutics of signs for other religious faiths. But this proposal does not warrant the conclusion, however ecumenically inspired, that all faiths are one and only traditions and communities are many. Whether such a hypothesis is true is an open question. As Slater cautions, this conclusion may come dangerously close to forgetting that for the faithful, "The centering points in religious thinking are not the end states as such. Nirvana, life as an Immortal or whatever. Nor are they the powers which epitomize those states or our means of achieving them - God, Brahman, 'Virtue', (I.e.) and the like...The central symbol is the occasion either for following the traditional way or departing from it. It is not an optional extra in the repertoire of either believers or unbelievers." The fact that a faith involves different judgements of significance articulated by means and in terms of different central symbols is not or may not be incidental for understanding what sort of faith it is. Peter Slater, The Dynamics of Religion, p. 35.
35. As is now clear, not all versions of meta-theological skepticism involve recourse to a theory of cognitive meaning. Hence as I noted above in Note 1, this second version is quite unaffected by the fate of those other versions that do involve a theory of cognitive meaning. As such, it requires and deserves a study in its own right.
36. I will return to the question of the possibility of a "self-authenticating" knowledge of God below in section 6.24.

37. See, for example, Ninian Smart, Reasons and Faiths, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), and his World Religions: A Dialogue, (Harmondsworth England: Penguin, 1966), John Hick ed., Truth and Dialogue, (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), and his God Has Many Names, (London: Macmillan, 1980), William A. Christian, Oppositions Among Religious Doctrines, (London: Macmillan, 1972), Wilfred C. Smith, Questions of Religious Truth, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967) and his Towards World Theology, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), and Peter Slater, The Dynamics of Religion.

## Chapter 4: Foundationalism and Analytic Philosophy of Religion

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### 4.14 Two Theories of Justification

Whether meta-theological skepticism is couched in terms of a theory of cognitive meaning or in terms of a theory of rational justification, it poses a serious challenge for those interested in pursuing the question of truth in and among religions. It does so because both versions of meta-theological skepticism manifest a radical suspicion to the effect that there is really no point to considering the question of the truth of theological beliefs because theological sentences or theological beliefs, on various grounds, are not legitimate candidates for truth or falsity. This view depends upon a strategy that consists in the elaboration and defense of various alleged conditions of cognitive meaning or various alleged conditions of rational justification. In the course of this type of critique, these conditions are invoked in order to explain why it is that theological sentences or beliefs cannot be considered as legitimate candidates for truth or falsity.

To effectively circumvent this challenge, I have proposed a counter-critique of the epistemological framework both versions of meta-theological skepticism presuppose. I

think that this framework is provided by a powerful epistemological theory about the structure of the justification of our beliefs generally, I submit that it ~~is~~ this foundationalist perspective that lies at the root of the meta-theological skeptical strategy. Moreover, if this foundationalist theory is mistaken, then this strategy and the challenge it sustains will be shown to be unwarranted.

But before entering upon the detail of a critique of foundationalism in recent analytic philosophy of religion, a few remarks about the place of the ensuing discussion within the wider context of recent philosophical debates may prove helpful. Cornelius F. Delaney's comment in the introduction of his collection, Rationality and Religious Belief, is a useful starting-point. He writes:

When the issue of the rationality of religious belief is raised, very often the meaning of 'rationality' is assumed to be fixed and unproblematic and suitable as it stands as a measuring rod vis-à-vis religious belief. The papers in this volume call this simplistic strategy into question. Together they exhibit the fact that our specific question about the rationality of religious belief should be seen to be as much about rationality as about religion.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly Delaney is explicitly concerned with the meaning of the concept of "rationality" as this is presupposed in discussions of "the rationality of religious beliefs". Nonetheless, I think that the same comment can also be made regarding the related issue of the justifiability of religious and theological

beliefs. Stated sharply, what I consider to be amiss in both versions of meta-theological skepticism has to do with views about what it is to provide an acceptable account of the justification of fundamental religious and theological beliefs.

To focus the concern still further, two points merit consideration. First, the concepts of rationality and justification have been and are closely linked in discussions of the possibility of religious knowledge. Second, the issue regarding the justifiability of theological beliefs can be construed as itself an instance of a wider debate currently being conducted in epistemology generally about the structure of the justification of our beliefs.

To consider the first point, the connection between the concepts of rationality and justification is not at all surprising or unusual. As I have indicated, foundationalism is a normative theory about the kind of justification our beliefs require, if they are to be considered rationally warranted as items of our knowledge. For the moment, suffice it to say that a foundationalist theory of justification maintains that any purported knowledge consists of a hierarchically organized system of beliefs. However much individual beliefs or classes of beliefs within this system can be said to support each other, these beliefs must ultimately depend on epistemologically basic or foundational beliefs. To say that a belief is epistemologically basic or foundational in a system of beliefs

is just to say that unlike the beliefs they support, the justification of foundational beliefs is privileged. It is privileged in the sense that foundational beliefs do not require additional justification or support from our other beliefs. Rather, epistemologically basic beliefs are justified directly upon experience alone.

As a normative theory, or as a theory of rational justification, foundationalist theories also stipulate general conditions of rational basicity. These are conditions or standards that indicate when we are rationally entitled to consider that a belief qualifies as foundational or privileged within a system of beliefs. To be rational with respect to our beliefs is to accept as properly basic those beliefs that satisfy the requisite conditions and to accept those non-basic beliefs in addition to the basic beliefs that can be derived from them.<sup>2</sup>

But this account of the connection between the concepts of rationality and justification is by no means the only general theory of rational justification available. A number of philosophers, dissatisfied with foundationalism, have attempted to provide an alternative general epistemological theory of the justification of our beliefs. This alternative theory is referred to as a coherence theory of justification. Like foundationalists, coherence theorists agree that any purported knowledge consists of a system of beliefs. But

coherence theorists maintain that this system consists of mutually justifying beliefs and that these beliefs are justified to the degree that they cohere with each other.

On a coherence theory, it is still possible to distinguish between basic and non-basic beliefs. However, unlike foundationalist accounts, this distinction no longer distinguishes a set of beliefs whose justification is somehow privileged within our system of beliefs as a whole. Instead, this distinction marks the fact that not all of our beliefs in any system of purported knowledge are equally fundamental or important. In other words, for coherence theorists, all of our beliefs are open to potential revision and none are privileged. Nevertheless, it is admitted that to abandon some of our beliefs would generate a greater upheaval within the system as a whole than would the abandonment of some of our more peripheral beliefs. Hence, as a theory of rational justification, coherence theorists hold that it is rational to accept those beliefs that in the absence of alternatives, do not require far reaching re-adjustments within the system as a whole<sup>3</sup>.

It is in this context that the second point mentioned above is relevant. I think that current analytic philosophy of religion would benefit greatly from a careful consideration of some of the implications of this debate about the structure of the justification of our beliefs. I think that this is

especially true as these implications bear on the question of the justifiability or rationality of fundamental theological beliefs and the challenge posed by either version of meta-theological skepticism.

So, in general, I propose to take advantage of the integrated character of philosophical reflection. In particular, this means that I intend to take cognizance of the fact that in recent years the foundationalist theory of the structure of the justification of our beliefs has confronted serious criticism. I argue that foundationalism cannot provide a plausible account of the justification of our beliefs. In addition, if it is true, as I will also argue, that meta-theological skepticism presupposes this theory of justification, then this type of critique is mistaken as well. Hence, meta-theological skepticism can no longer legitimately be invoked as an obstacle barring the way towards addressing the question of truth in and among religions.

Though my main concern is to circumvent the threat posed by meta-theological skepticism, I note that if this argument is successful, it has certain consequences for the prospects of an epistemology of religious and theological beliefs. Clearly, if it is true that a foundationalist account of the structure of the justification of our beliefs generally is mistaken, then there is little value in persisting in the view that a foundationalist account of the justification of religious and theological beliefs must be provided. But this is not



because religious and theological beliefs, unlike our non-theological beliefs cannot be rationally justified as meta-theological skeptics would maintain. Rather, the difficulties besetting a foundationalist account of the justification of religious and theological beliefs are a consequence of the tacit application of this theory of justification in this context. These difficulties are not due to any peculiarities of religious and theological beliefs. In other words, a successful critique of foundationalism suggests that some non-foundationalist account of the structure of the justification of religious and theological beliefs may be appropriate.

But, I hasten to add, that to say that a non-foundationalist account of the structure of the justification of religious and theological beliefs may be appropriate, does not imply that I endorse coherentism as a general account of the justification of our beliefs. Indeed, no less than foundationalism itself, the coherence theory of justification has also confronted serious criticism in recent years.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, how it is that things stand regarding the structure of the justification of our beliefs generally, is not an issue that need detain us.<sup>5</sup> As I have indicated, the main objective of this thesis is the removal of philosophical obstacles that otherwise threaten to block the need or even the point of considering seriously the question regarding the truth of religious and theological beliefs. The obstacles in question, consist in

the challenge posed by the two versions of meta-theological skepticism. To secure this objective, that requires a critique of foundationalism, a consideration of the impact and merits of the rival coherence theory of justification in the philosophy of religion is not relevant.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, it is in the service of this objective, that just as the question regarding the rationality of religious belief is as much a question about rationality as it is about religious belief, so also I suggest that the question of the justification of religious belief is a question as much about justification as it is about religious belief. In this chapter, I will illustrate and explain in greater detail how it is that the foundationalist theory of justification has powerfully shaped and guided much recent work in analytic philosophy of religion. First, I suggest that it is this perspective that can be construed as sustaining a widespread and readily recognizable view regarding the nature and central importance to be accorded to particular theological beliefs for a believer's religious faith. Second, I argue that this perspective is also responsible for suggesting two strategies invoked in order to establish the rationality of theological beliefs. In addition, I will show how the alleged failure of either of these strategies issues in its own attendant version of meta-theological skepticism. Third, I will illustrate how the tacit acceptance of a foundationalist perspective indicates the central questions and main task of a philosophy of religion.

In brief, I think that the key to a critique of meta-theological skepticism consists in a critique of the merits of the foundationalist model of justification this kind of skepticism presupposes in the first place.

#### 4.15 Foundationalism and Belief in God

In this section I develop the suggestion that a foundationalist theory of justification can be understood as forming the background epistemological framework sustaining the following picture about what is central for a believer's religious faith. In particular, this picture involves a certain view about what belief in God amounts to and a view about the relationship between religious and theological beliefs and religious practices.

I think it is not unfair to say that when many analytic philosophers of religion think of religion and of what is central to it they tend to think of a set of religious doctrines or theological beliefs about God. As is well known, this set of doctrines is referred to variously as "Christian theism", "Judaean-Christian theism" or simply as "theism". Whatever other beliefs and practices any religion doubtless involves, many are inclined to say that what is distinctive about it is that it is a mode of human living that fundamentally consists in the adherence by its practitioners to the truth of some minimal set of theological beliefs. It is



these doctrines that form the central core sustaining and justifying the various other beliefs believers accept and practices in which they participate. "It is in terms of these beliefs that religion is distinguishable from other modes of human living that involve no such adherence. Indeed, without this doctrinal content and commitment to it, religion would be very different from the way it is, if it were recognizable at all."<sup>7</sup>

Involved in this picture of what is central to the practice of a religious faith is perhaps the acceptance of a sharp distinction between religious and theological doctrines about God and the welter of religious practices, rites, rituals and ethical commitments in which believers participate. Hence, many might be inclined to agree that to be religious, "consists fundamentally in living in a certain way, in holding a certain set of convictions, in the having of certain attitudes and in being a member of a distinctive confessional group."<sup>8</sup> But, of course, however important this living, these convictions, attitudes and membership are to being religious, these components have been and presently are extremely diverse. Even so, however much these expressions of trust and commitment may differ or wax and wane among participants, their persistence implies that what is fundamental and has been presupposed throughout is an alleged awareness of or an alleged knowledge of God. According to Hick for instance, "this putative knowledge or awareness is a mode which has long been accorded the special

name of 'faith'; the "faith that there is a God and that such and such propositions about him are true."<sup>9</sup>

In the context provided by this distinction between religious beliefs and practices, one can say that

The use of religious language is seen by virtue of the meanings of the terms used, as committing the believer to certain 'existential' claims; these claims are articulated in theologies. Unless these theologies are verifiable or at least falsifiable, there is in principle no way of telling whether these existential presuppositions are warranted. Thus the believer's language has no meaning and his beliefs fail of rationality.<sup>10</sup>

So on this picture, one is tempted to say that what is distinctive about religion or being religious is that it is any mode of being human that is lived in terms of, or better, minimally presupposes a belief in the alleged truth of a set of theological beliefs. In addition, this picture suggests that a believer is justified or rationally warranted in engaging in the practice of worshipping God for example, only if he or she is justified in believing that there is a God. As such, the relationship between religious and theological beliefs and the practices any religious faith involves amounts to the view "that the practices of believers are, at the most fundamental level, to be explained by the believer's 'belief in the truth' of certain theological doctrines."<sup>11</sup> As for the believer's belief in God itself, following Sayre, this is construed typically on a "referential model". On this model, it is

assumed "that 'God' unambiguously designates a certain unique entity, and that 'believing in' is a particular mental state in which the believer assumes a certain attitude toward a particular entity."<sup>12</sup> Clearly, interpreting belief in God in this fashion, substantially as a putative relationship between a mind and a particular object, makes issues about what the term "God" designates especially important. Unless the believer can determine what this term designates, there is simply no way of knowing what his belief in God amounts to.

I think that many philosophers would admit that this brief sketch does capture certain readily recognizable features of the context in which philosophical reflection has been conducted especially upon Christian religious faith and belief. In particular, this approach might be considered to serve two valuable ends. First, it serves to distinguish and identify believers as a unique group from non-believers who presumably are human in ways that minimally presuppose a belief in the alleged truth of sets of doctrines other than those about God. Second, this approach is strategically useful in demarcating among the rich diversity of religious phenomena, those which can be considered likely candidates for a specifically philosophical inquiry. Among analytic philosophers, this type of inquiry has been oriented towards the critical evaluation of the rational credentials of the belief in God religious phenomena and practices of whatever sort, presuppose.

To be sure, this view about the nature of belief in God and the relationship between this belief and religious practices has been criticized from perspectives other than that to be developed here.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, I suppose what is less obvious is the connection between the centrality accorded to theological beliefs about God in the philosophy of religion and foundationalism as a general normative theory of the justification of our beliefs. Nevertheless, I contend that this view about the philosophy of religion is itself an example of a more general foundational role that philosophy has been expected or supposed to play within culture as a whole.

Recently, Richard Rorty has described this role as the view that, "philosophy as a discipline sees itself as the attempt to underwrite or debunk claims to knowledge made by science, morality, art or religion." In the execution of this task, "philosophy can be foundational in respect to the rest of culture because culture is the assemblage of claims to knowledge, and philosophy adjudicates such claims." Towards this end, "philosophy's central concern is to be a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretense of doing so)."<sup>14</sup>

As I have pointed out before, much recent work in analytic philosophy of religion manifests a widespread consensus



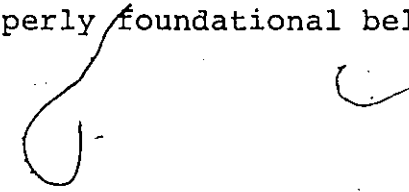
that at least as a starting-point for philosophical reflection, the questions dealing with the coherence and truth of religious and theological language are of central importance. In addition, given the prominent position accorded to meta-theological skepticism, it is clear that many philosophers consider that the language of religion is one area of culture that is often accused of "not representing reality at all despite its pretense of doing so." To be more precise, I think it possible to illustrate the impact of the tacit acceptance of foundationalism in the philosophy of religion in two ways. First, it is this perspective that is largely responsible for sustaining the reconstruction of the alleged cognitive components of a particular religious faith in such a fashion that the beliefs about God allegedly central to it are apparent. Second and more important, this perspective provides the critical tools necessary for the evaluation of the rational credentials of these beliefs once they have been detached from the context of a particular religious faith.

To explain, foundationalism is a general normative epistemological theory about the structure of the justification of any alleged claims to knowledge. It is both general and normative in the sense that it provides a model for understanding the manner in which our beliefs are to be justified if they are to be considered rationally warranted, regardless of particular contexts of inquiry. Hence, whether



what is at issue are scientific beliefs about nature, historical beliefs about what is significant in the human past, political beliefs about the state, aesthetic beliefs about the beautiful, moral beliefs about the good or theological beliefs about God, according to foundationalism, the structure of the justification of these beliefs ought to conform to the same pattern. The pattern, in question, holds regardless of differences among the inquiries concerned with these beliefs.

This general pattern of the justification of our beliefs is characterized usefully in terms of two theses. First, foundationalists hold that any purported knowledge consists of a hierarchically ordered system of beliefs. In this system of beliefs, however much individual beliefs or classes of beliefs can be said to support each other the system of beliefs must at some point depend for its justification on epistemologically basic beliefs. "Epistemologically basic beliefs" refer to a class of beliefs that are justified in some way directly upon experience and so do not presuppose the truth of any other non-basic beliefs within the system. Second, besides establishing an order of justification among the beliefs a system of knowledge contains, all versions of foundationalism stipulate general conditions that any belief must satisfy if it is to be considered as a rationally basic or properly foundational belief in the system.<sup>15</sup>



To maintain that much recent analytic philosophy of religion betrays the tacit acceptance of a foundationalist theory of justification is to hold the following. First, the reason why theological beliefs are allegedly central to the practice of a religious faith is that these beliefs are logically presupposed by those beliefs within a particular religious faith that can be regarded reasonably as epistemologically basic by participants in it. Second, the strategy used to evaluate the rational credentials of these theological presuppositions is a matter of showing how they are justifiable in terms of a class of beliefs that are alleged to be properly foundational for the system of our knowledge as a whole. In the ensuing sections, I explain and defend each of these contentions in turn.

#### 4.16 Epistemologically Basic and Logically Basic Beliefs

I have suggested that the tacit acceptance of foundationalism can be understood as largely responsible for sustaining the reconstruction of the alleged cognitive components of a particular religious faith in such a manner that the beliefs about God, supposedly central to it, are apparent. It can be so understood because within this framework it can readily be established that a belief in God or other minimal theological beliefs about God, such as "there is a God", are logically presupposed by those beliefs that can be regarded as epistemologically

basic by participants within the context of their particular religious faith. Hence it is that, qua logically fundamental, minimal theological beliefs are treated as the appropriate candidates for a properly philosophical reflection on the practice of a religious faith.

To illustrate and clarify how it is that the first thesis of foundationalism is effective in supporting this reconstruction of the alleged cognitive components of a particular religious faith, I think the introduction of the first volume of Richard Swinburne's recently proposed trilogy of works in philosophical theology is especially useful.<sup>16</sup> This first volume of his study, The Coherence of Theism, begins as follows:

By a theist, I understand a man who believes that there is a God. By a 'God', he understands something like a 'person' without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe. Christians, Jews and Moslems are all in the above sense theists. Many theists also hold further beliefs about God, and on these Christians, Jews and Moslems differ among themselves, and yet further beliefs, in which some members of each group differ from others.../But this book/...is concerned with the core of theistic belief, that God exists, that there is a God. It is not concerned primarily with whether this belief is true or whether it can be known to be true, but with the prior questions of what it means and whether it is coherent, what claim a man who asserts that there is a God is making and whether it is a claim which is coherent, a claim which it makes sense to suppose could be true.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the acknowledged differences among the religious communities he mentions, according to Swinburne, Christians, Jews and Moslems appear to share the claim "there is a God" or that "God exists". It is this belief that constitutes the common "core theistic belief" that is minimally presupposed despite the disparate ways in which they practice their respective faiths. It is this "core theistic belief" that cuts across the other different religious and theological beliefs they hold. But again, that it is this "theistic core" that is fundamental and deserves critical attention can itself be understood as a result of the implications of the first thesis of foundationalism. According to the first thesis of foundationalism, knowledge in general and any purported religious knowledge in particular constitutes a hierarchical order or "noetic structure" in which some parts support each other but as a whole is supported by its foundation.<sup>18</sup>

Following Plantinga, there are three features involved when we conceive of knowledge as a hierarchically ordered system of beliefs. The first feature is a consequence of the importance of distinguishing within a system of beliefs those that are epistemologically basic or foundational beliefs and those beliefs which are less basic. To say that a belief A is epistemologically less basic than a belief B is just to say that our reasons for believing A are based on or supported by other beliefs B we hold. For example, I believe that Ottawa

is south of Quebec City and this belief is based on my belief that that is how this relation between these two cities is depicted in my atlas. Or again, I may believe that Pierre Elliot Trudeau is the current Prime Minister of Canada and this belief is supported by my beliefs that I have read this in the newspaper and heard it on the radio. But we do not accept all our beliefs on the basis of other beliefs. Rather, some of our beliefs are epistemologically basic in the sense that they are not justified in terms of any other more basic beliefs in the system. So, for example, I believe that I am now seated at my desk and that I am feeling thirsty but I do not believe them on the basis of any other beliefs.

In the case of a system of purported religious knowledge, the distinction between epistemologically basic and less basic beliefs is replicated in the following manner. As Swinburne's account implies, Christians, Jews and Moslems differ among themselves regarding the beliefs they hold about the nature of God. Speaking to the question of whether Christians and Moslems worship the same God, Ninian Smart for instance, remarks that:

As far as the concepts and practices go, the two foci of faith are different. Among other things, the Christian worships Christ as a person of the Trinity: the Christian concept of God is thus organically related to God's manifestation in history and to his representation of himself in the sacraments. These are elements not present in the Muslim's conception of Allah.<sup>19</sup>

Not, I should add, are these elements present in a Jew's conception of Jahweh. But, important as these conceptual differences are for their different beliefs about God, epistemologically more basic for participants of these faiths are their respective beliefs regarding the manner in which they judge the significance of their communities' alleged experience of God's "manifestation in history", in Christ, in the Koran or the Torah respectively. As Smart suggests, for Christians, it is their beliefs centered upon Jesus Christ that are epistemologically more basic for justifying the particular, often theologically ramified, beliefs some of them also hold about the triune nature of God, God's transcendence or God as Creator, Legislator or Supreme Judge and so on.

The second feature involved in treating our knowledge as an ordered hierarchical system of beliefs where less basic beliefs are justified in terms of epistemologically more basic beliefs is that the latter enjoy a stronger "index or degree of belief" than the former.<sup>20</sup> In a system of purported religious knowledge, this psychological feature characteristic of epistemologically basic beliefs can be illustrated in this way. Christians, Jews and Moslems may consider themselves to be quite strongly committed to the different beliefs they hold regarding the nature of God and His relationships with man and the world. Nevertheless, participants in these faiths, despite their differences, are more strongly

committed to the beliefs they hold regarding how it is that God is allegedly known within their respective traditions.

In this respect what Christians, Jews and Moslems are prepared to say or accept about God is more sharply circumscribed by reference to Jesus Christ, the Koran or the Torah respectively that constitute the focal points for the beliefs that are epistemologically basic for the justification of the rest of their religious and theological beliefs.

The third feature of these systems of beliefs implied by Swinburne's account, is that particular religious and theological beliefs can also be ranked in terms of their "depth of ingression". As Plantinga explains:

Some of my beliefs are we might say on the periphery of my noetic structure, I accept them and may even accept them quite firmly, but if I were to give them up not much else in my noetic structure would have to change.<sup>21</sup>

This feature can be illustrated in a non-religious context by noting that the consequences for the system of my beliefs as a whole of the discovery that my belief that there are twelve states in Nigeria is mistaken are quite slight. However, were I to believe that there are no states in Nigeria or that Nigeria or Africa does not exist or that continents themselves do not exist; each of these beliefs would require progressively greater modifications among the system of my beliefs in order to accommodate them. Conversely, in a Christian's system of religious beliefs, it is very likely that, at the present time

beliefs about the authorship of the "Epistle to the Hebrews" are less basic or more peripheral in the system as a whole, than his beliefs about the Apostle Peter. While, if it were discovered that the Gospels were complete fabrications, suggesting that it is unlikely that Jesus had ever lived, no doubt such a discovery would send great reverberations throughout a Christian's system of religious beliefs.

Examples illustrating this "depth of ingression" epistemologically basic beliefs enjoy over our other beliefs could easily be multiplied for the faiths of Jews and Moslems. In any case, with respect to specifically religious systems of belief two additional points are worth noting.

First, the content of both types of belief, whether epistemologically basic or peripheral, within any particular system of religious belief, is and has been subject to considerable historical variation.<sup>22</sup> Cognizant of this feature, I have proposed that what is central for Christians for instance, is their judgement of the significance of their community's alleged experience of God articulated in terms of and with reference ultimately to the symbol Jesus Christ. In these terms, Christian religious and theological thinking, that issues in particular complex theological doctrines, can be identified to the degree that it is centred eventually upon the interpretation of this symbol. In this respect, theological thinking can be construed as a process of inquiry that involves



an "intensive elaboration of the meaning of this basic claim, spelling out its implications for thought and action".<sup>23</sup> It is in the course of reflecting upon Jesus Christ and the cluster of symbols and stories in which it is embedded in relation to current changing circumstances that participants define and re-define what it means to be Christian at any particular time.<sup>24</sup>

Second, it is important to stress that to say that a belief or set of beliefs is epistemologically basic in a system of beliefs is not to say without further ado that the belief or beliefs in question are also logically basic. As I have suggested, those beliefs that can be regarded reasonably as epistemologically basic for the justification of the different beliefs about the nature of God held by Christians, Jews and Moslems, are those offered upon reflection on the key symbols Jesus Christ, the Torah and Koran, respectively. It is with reference to these central symbols, embedded within clusters of secondary and tertiary symbols and stories as recorded in different canonical texts, that the meaning of these communities' alleged experiences of God, formative for these traditions, is interpreted and assessed. To say that these beliefs are epistemologically basic, if they are, is just to say that their justification does not depend on any less basic religious and theological beliefs within the system of beliefs in question.

However, as Swinburne argues, even if for particular Christians for instance, what is crucial is their judgement of the significance of their community's alleged "experience of a personal relationship with God in Christ" and not the affirmation of any specific theistic or "creedal" sentences:

The religious man may tell us that he at any rate has such a relationship, and that he knows what he means when he says that he has this relationship.../but/...even if affirming creeds were no part of religion, you can only have a relationship to God in Christ, if it is true that God exists. And it is true that God exists only if it is coherent to suppose that God exists.<sup>25</sup>

Hence, although Christians, Jews and Moslems differ among themselves regarding which beliefs are epistemologically basic for the justification of the different beliefs they hold regarding the nature of God, logically, their epistemologically basic religious beliefs are all of a piece. They are all of a piece in the sense that epistemologically basic religious beliefs logically presuppose the belief "that there is a God": the belief that there is a God who, following Smart, can "manifest Himself in history". It is in this sense that Christians, Jews and Moslems may be said to share a "common core of theistic belief".

In sum, to say that the current conduct of analytic philosophical reflection on the practice of religious faith involves the tacit acceptance of foundationalism is to say that the structure of the justification of the beliefs a system of purported religious knowledge forms is akin to a pyramid or

triangle. The apex of the triangle, in the case of Christianity consists of the often highly theologically ramified beliefs about the nature of God and his relationships with man and the world such as the doctrines of the Trinity, Creation, Redemption and so on. These beliefs are less basic or peripheral in the sense that these beliefs depend for their justification on many other religious and theological beliefs.<sup>26</sup> The rest of the triangle extends downward to link up at various points with experience both current and past. It consists of all the other religious and theological beliefs this faith can be said to involve at any particular time. The epistemologically most basic beliefs consist of those produced by reflection on the meaning of the central symbol of God's alleged dealings with man, Jesus Christ, as articulated first and foremost in the Gospels. To say that these beliefs are epistemologically basic or foundational, is just to say that their justification does not depend on any less basic religious or theological beliefs within the system.

In addition, qua foundational, Christians are committed more strongly to believing the basic or foundational beliefs than they are committed to the less basic beliefs and practices that presuppose them. The foundational beliefs also have a greater depth of ingression than the less basic religious and theological beliefs in the sense that were the former altered or abandoned great changes would ensue

among the rest of the beliefs that system contains. Finally, though all the beliefs in the system are subject to varying degrees of historical variation, it is nonetheless true that foundational religious beliefs about Jesus Christ are not themselves logically fundamental beliefs in the following sense. However it is that particular beliefs about God may be justified in a particular system of religious belief, the foundational beliefs in terms of which this is accomplished themselves logically presuppose the minimal belief that "there is a God". It is this belief that constitutes the logical core, if not the epistemological core, of the faiths of Christians, Jews and Moslems.

#### 4.17 Properly Foundational Beliefs and Meta-Theological Skepticism

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As so far discussed, foundationalism is a theory about the structure or pattern of justification obtaining among a set of beliefs any purported system of knowledge contains. In particular, it asserts the claim that the pattern of the justification of our beliefs is linear or hierarchical. However much individual beliefs may support each other, the system of beliefs as a whole depends ultimately upon epistemologically basic or foundational beliefs. Epistemologically basic beliefs are beliefs whose justification does not depend on any other rudimentary beliefs in the system in question.

On the contrary, epistemologically basic beliefs depend for their justification directly upon experience.

But foundationalism involves more than the fairly innocuous claim that there are certain features characteristic of the structure of justification obtaining among a set of beliefs in a purported system of knowledge. In particular, a foundationalist theory of justification asserts a second more important thesis. As a normative theory of justification, foundationalists allege that there are certain general conditions that any belief must satisfy if it is to be considered legitimately as a properly foundational or rationally basic belief. In this section, I discuss this second thesis of foundationalism in order to display a sense in which the challenge to the rationality of belief in God posed by either version of meta-theological skepticism can be understood to presuppose a commitment to a foundationalist theory of justification.

To explain, I begin by noting that classical varieties of foundationalism have differed regarding which beliefs can be considered rightly as epistemologically basic in a system of beliefs. These versions have differed also regarding whether the relation of support obtaining between epistemologically basic beliefs and non-basic beliefs in a system of beliefs is logical entailment, probability or reasoning from signs. Nevertheless as Plantinga notes, all versions of foundationalism:

...lay down certain conditions of proper or rational basicity. From the foundationalist point of view, not just any kind of belief can be found in the foundations of a rational noetic structure; a belief to be properly basic (i.e. basic in a rational noetic structure) must meet certain conditions.<sup>27</sup>

Conditions of "rational basicity" are the conditions any proposed candidate for membership in the class of epistemologically basic beliefs must satisfy. These conditions, whenever they obtain, explain why it is that we are rationally warranted in considering that a belief or set of beliefs is capable of functioning as a properly foundational belief within a system of beliefs.

To function as a properly foundational belief, the belief in question cannot be justified by recourse to any other non-basic beliefs in the system. Rather, the justification of properly foundational beliefs rests in some way directly upon experience alone. Hence, the conditions of rational basicity spell out the relationship between these beliefs and our experience that must hold if these beliefs are rightly justified by an appeal to experience alone. As Plantinga notes, Aquinas and Descartes are two classical examples of philosophers who have advocated different general conditions of rational basicity.<sup>28</sup> For Aquinas, an epistemologically basic belief must be one that is "self-evident to a person" or "evident to the senses". In this respect, beliefs such as "this paper is white" or "this room contains a table and chairs"

would qualify as properly basic. For Descartes, the conditions, in question, are somewhat more stringent and the beliefs admitted into the class of properly foundational beliefs is, correspondingly, more restricted. It consists of beliefs about one's own mental life that are arguably incorrigible for the speaker. In this case, beliefs such as "I seem to see that this paper is white" or "it seems to me that this room contains a table and chairs" would qualify as properly foundational.

Nevertheless on three points, I think Aquinas and Descartes would agree. First, their respective conditions of rational basicity are the norms or standards that ought to be used in assessing whether we are confronted with a belief that is properly basic in the sense that it is not based upon or supported by any other beliefs. Second, as is well known, both philosophers are authors of classical arguments for the existence of God. As such, neither thinker would consider that the belief, "there is a God" is an epistemologically basic belief. Even so, third, within the system of our knowledge as a whole, both would also agree that the belief, "There is a God" is a non-basic belief that is rationally warranted because it is justifiable by inference from premises that do express properly basic beliefs.

I think that many current meta-theological skeptics and apologists among analytic philosophers of religion would

concur with Aquinas and Descartes on the first two points. With the exception of fideists perhaps, most meta-theological skeptics and apologists would agree that the rational credentials of the belief, that "there is a God" and other such central bits of God-Talk are to be evaluated and established in terms of a set of beliefs that satisfy some set of general conditions of rational basicity. In addition, they would also agree that the belief, "that there is a God", is not an epistemologically basic belief within the system of our knowledge as a whole.

Nor is their agreement on these points difficult to understand once the implications of the second thesis of foundationalism are made explicit. To consider the second point, as we have seen, those beliefs that are arguably epistemologically basic within the context of the particular religious faith of Christians, Jews and Moslems, logically presuppose, minimally, the belief that there is a God. But relative to our other non-religious or non-theological beliefs, this presupposition is hardly epistemologically basic. Atheists notwithstanding, the justification of the belief that there is a God is hardly privileged in the sense that its justification does not depend on any other beliefs. But to consider the first point, if we could show how this belief is justifiable in terms of a class of epistemologically basic beliefs that are properly foundational for our knowledge regardless of particular



contexts of inquiry, then doubts about the rationality of this presupposition would be resolved.<sup>29</sup>

Where recent meta-theological-skeptics and apologists disagree, however, is regarding the question of whether the rationality of belief in God can be established by showing how this belief is justifiable in terms of a class of properly foundational beliefs. Moreover, I maintain that it is this foundationalist background that affords the best perspective for understanding the force of the challenge posed to the rationality of belief in God by either version of meta-theological skepticism.

To explain, earlier I distinguished between two versions of meta-theological skepticism. According to the first version, it is alleged that theological sentences about God are cognitively meaningless. They are allegedly cognitively meaningless because the beliefs these sentences purport to assert are not in principle verifiable or falsifiable by any empirical state of affairs. For instance as Kai Nielsen has proposed, theological sentences must be "confirmable or infirmable by non-religious straightforwardly empirical factual statements."<sup>30</sup> If theological sentences cannot satisfy this condition then these sentences cannot be used to assert theological beliefs. Since they cannot be used to assert theological beliefs, these sentences cannot be considered legitimately either true or false. Hence, if a system of these

sentences is construed nonetheless, as asserting a set of theological beliefs, believers who persist in this obduracy give indication of a failure of rationality.

But it is important to stress that the force of this critique of cognitive meaning is due to its epistemological presuppositions. In particular all parties to this debate appear to assume that the cognitive meaning of the beliefs about God purportedly asserted by theological sentences must be specified in terms of epistemologically basic or properly foundational claims. Whether these claims are empirical observations, "non-religious straightforwardly empirical factual statements" or some other "experienceable state of affairs"<sup>31</sup>, these claims are epistemologically basic in this sense. If theological sentences satisfy this condition, then the justification of the logically fundamental theological beliefs in question would not depend on any more basic or rudimentary religious or theological beliefs in a particular system of these beliefs. Instead, the justification of these beliefs about the existence of God and so, the system of religious and theological beliefs as a whole, would rest on beliefs justifiable directly on experience.

According to the second version of meta-theological skepticism, it is alleged that theological beliefs are not rationally justifiable because the manner in which they are supposedly justified presupposes other religious and theological

beliefs. I have maintained against Heimbeck, that the justification of theological beliefs takes place within the context of a process of reasoning from signs in theology. But the success or failure of this project presupposes a judgement of the significance of a community's alleged experiences of God articulated in subject-related terms within the context of a particular religious tradition. It is this alleged experience and the judgement of its significance that, for participants, establishes the criteria for a correct interpretation of signs. As such, the justification of theological beliefs does not repose on properly foundational or rationally basic beliefs. It does not repose on beliefs that themselves depend for their justification directly upon experience without theological presuppositions.

In sum, to say that both versions of meta-theological skepticism presuppose a commitment to a foundationalist theory of justification is to say that both versions assume that there are general conditions of rational basicity characteristic of properly foundational beliefs. These conditions stipulate the circumstances in which we are rationally warranted in considering that a belief qualifies as properly foundational for the system of our knowledge as a whole regardless of the context afforded by particular inquiries. Moreover, both versions agree that the belief that "there is a God" is a non-basic belief that is not justifiable in terms of members of a class of epistemologically basic beliefs.

#### 4.18 Foundationalism and the Central Questions for a Philosophy of Religion

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In this section, I propose to explain and substantiate the contention that it is the tacit acceptance of foundationalism that is responsible for determining the central questions and main task pursued by analytic philosophers of religion. As is well known, sometimes believers allege that the practice of their faith does involve cognitive elements, beliefs that they consider are true. But if believers are rationally warranted in holding that some of their beliefs are true and so constitute a system of religious knowledge, from a foundationalist perspective certain implications for a philosophical study of these beliefs follow.

According to the first thesis of foundationalism, if theological beliefs constitute a system of religious knowledge, they do so because some beliefs within this system are epistemologically basic and the rest are less basic or peripheral. The epistemologically basic beliefs are foundational in the sense that the justification of these beliefs does not presuppose any less basic beliefs in the system. As well, the justification of basic beliefs is to be sought in some way directly in experience. Since these beliefs are allegedly foundational, any pertinent philosophical inquiry ought to concern itself with the evaluation of these foundational beliefs and their presuppositions. After all, if these fail

of rational justification then the less basic beliefs in the system cannot be considered rationally warranted.

According to the second thesis of foundationalism, if the alleged foundational beliefs and their presuppositions really are rationally warranted it is because they are justifiable in terms of a class of beliefs that satisfy certain general conditions of rational basicity. Again these conditions indicate when we are rationally warranted in considering that a belief is properly foundational in the sense that it is justifiable directly by experience alone without presupposing any other beliefs. Hence, if the supposed foundational beliefs and their presuppositions satisfy the conditions necessary for coherence and truth, then these beliefs can be considered as rationally warranted and so capable of justifying the attendant edifice of religious and theological beliefs and practices that presuppose them. As such, it is the main task of the philosopher of religion, armed with the knowledge of these conditions of rational basicity, to evaluate the sentences and beliefs religious practices presuppose in order to undermine or establish their rational credentials.

Following Swinburne's account, and he is hardly alone in this, we can see that several assumptions are involved in accepting this foundationalist perspective in the philosophy of religion. First, it is assumed that the subject-matter of

a philosophy of religion consists fundamentally in a study of beliefs such as "there is a God" or "God exists". It is beliefs of this sort that are logically presupposed in the justification of the beliefs involved in the faiths of Christians, Jews and Moslems. Second, the rationality of this "presupposition of the reality of the supposed divine object of faith",<sup>32</sup> cannot be established within the context of a particular religion for to do so, would presuppose other religious and theological beliefs whose rational status is as yet in question. Rather, the rationality of this presupposition must be sought and established independently of the context of a particular faith and its cumulative historical tradition in terms of beliefs themselves justifiable in some way on experience alone. Hence, the first properly philosophical task is to determine whether believers are warranted in presupposing that this central logical core of theistic belief about the existence of God is coherent. Moreover, it is a properly philosophical task because it is one performed by a philosopher who qua philosopher, also occupies a standpoint independent of the context provided by the practice of a particular religious faith.

That the foundationalist perspective suggests the strategy for the conduct of philosophical reflection on the practice of religious faith is confirmed by a glance at Swinburne's overall project. For Swinburne as we have seen,

the place to begin a philosophy of religion is with the issue of the coherence of the central core claims about the existence of God. If one were to succeed in demonstrating that theological sentences are coherent then we are entitled to consider whether the beliefs about God they assert are true. Swinburne claims to have established that the claim "that there is a God" is coherent.<sup>33</sup>

Consonant with a foundationalist perspective in his second volume, The Existence of God, Swinburne considers the question about the truth of theological beliefs about God in this manner. He says he is "concerned to assess the weight of arguments from experience for and against this claim and to reach a conclusion about whether on balance the arguments indicate that there is a God or that there is not."<sup>34</sup> He considers it necessary to address the question of the truth of theological beliefs about God in this way, however, because, again, he assumes that such beliefs as "there is a God" or "God exists" are to be evaluated in terms of their putative relationship with properly foundational beliefs independently of a system of Christian religious belief. If one treats the belief that "there is a God" in this way, it implies that the project of demonstrating how it is justifiable cannot be accomplished within the context of that system of religious beliefs itself. It can be done, if at all, only by a consideration of the "arguments from experience" that allegedly warrant the conclusion that "there is a God".

According to Swinburne, "on our total evidence theism is more probable than not". Hence, it is that "although reason can reach a fairly well-justified conclusion about the existence of God, it can only reach a probable conclusion, not an indubitable one." So the question to be pursued in his third volume, Faith and Reason comes to this. Given that theistic claims such as "there is a God" are coherent and probably true, what function remains for religious faith in this situation and is this role rationally warranted? It is with the resolution of this question that the pertinent issues according to a foundationalist philosophy of religion are settled.<sup>35</sup>

But that the philosophy of religion should be concerned with the coherence and truth of the central core of theistic belief and the role of religious faith regarding these claims is due to the foundationalist framework, that this type of philosophy presupposes. After all, challenges regarding either the cognitive meaning of theological sentences or the manner of the alleged justification of theological beliefs have force only if it is true that these beliefs must be evaluated in terms of their putative relationship to a class of properly foundational beliefs, that as such, involve no theological presuppositions. As well, these challenges have merit only if it is also true to suppose that there is a class of beliefs that does satisfy general conditions of rational basicity allegedly valid for the justification of all of our beliefs regardless of particular inquiries.



The practical import of specifying, defending and invoking any such conditions, whether restrictive or liberal, should now be obvious. If logically fundamental theological sentences or beliefs are not justifiable in terms of a class of beliefs that satisfy them, then theological sentences or beliefs cannot be considered rationally warranted. They cannot be so considered either because these sentences do not express genuine beliefs or because the justification of these beliefs is context-dependent. But, in either case the result is the same. Putative theological beliefs about the existence of God are not rationally warranted. Inasmuch as these putative beliefs are logically presupposed by the surrounding matrix of religious beliefs and practices, these latter beliefs and practices are not rationally warranted as well. Hence, it is from within the foundationalist perspective that challenges to the validity of theological beliefs arise and appear plausible.<sup>36</sup>

It is also fair to say that it is this underlying perspective that is responsible for the tone and the paucity of solid results that have emerged from the recent debate about the cognitive meaningfulness of theological language. Commenting on the course of this debate, the comparative historian of religions, Wilfred C. Smith, considers it to have gone "seriously awry". Speaking as a historian, he suggests that much of it is rather "superficial" and

"irrelevant". The conclusions of critical linguistic philosophers of religion do not, he writes, "aid the comparativist historian in trying to articulate a conceptual scheme that will make theoretical sense of the wide panorama of man's religious life and history." What is more, he remarks, of this work, that it seems to be of little relevance for the observer or participant in religious life. "It fails to illuminate empirical studies of religious movements in general or the history of religious belief ignoring or overriding the protests of religious persons."<sup>37</sup>

Though this is a severe judgement, I think, that in the main, he is quite right. But this is not merely because analytic philosophers of religion have been derelict in their duty. Instead, it is because many philosophers of religion who have contributed to this debate are simply not interested in illuminating "empirical studies of religious movements in general or of the history of religious belief". Given a perspective dominated by foundationalism, that focuses our attention on selected core theistic beliefs, such as "there is a God", that are neither obviously self-justifying nor justifiable within the context of a particular religious faith, it is clear that "the chief worry among many philosophers of religion is the possibly illusory meaningfulness of religious claims".<sup>38</sup> I think it is also clear that what fuels philosophical reflection on the practice of religious faith can be construed as the thrust of radical skepticism. The threat of radical

skepticism in this context is the threat that there is not and perhaps cannot be any religious or theological knowledge at all.<sup>39</sup> As I have indicated above, this threat can be articulated in either of two versions of meta-theological skepticism. It is alleged that unless the central core of theistic belief is justifiable in terms of beliefs that satisfy certain general conditions of rational basicity, believers who persist in holding theological beliefs and continue to participate in religious practices may be misleading themselves and others. They may do so by elaborating an illusory "world-view" that perhaps unwittingly justifies and sustains for them an inauthentic form of life.

Significantly enough both Kai Nielsen<sup>40</sup> and Ian M. Crombie<sup>41</sup> who occupy opposing sides in this controversy, agree that it is this suspicion or radical skepticism that motivates those who develop the critique of the cognitive meaningfulness of theological sentences. In this regard, I think that the recognition of the influence of this foundationalist perspective in recent analytic philosophy of religion enables us to understand the positions taken in this debate and discussed in section 1.3 as a series of reactions to the radical skepticism this perspective occasions. Hence, skeptical philosophers argue that this skepticism is in fact confirmed because theological sentences are cognitively meaningless. Apologists maintain that it is not either because theological

sentences are cognitively meaningful or because the general conditions of cognitive meaning in question are mistaken. Fideists argue that this skepticism is unwarranted because this "language game" has its own standards of intelligibility and/or rationality.

But the consensus is that there are such general conditions of rational basicity and, (again fideists excepted), that logically central claims about the existence of God are to be evaluated in terms of a class of beliefs that satisfy them. In addition, it is also considered that it is the philosopher of religion who is best placed to resolve and rightly charged with resolving this chief skeptical worry, to the degree that rational argument alone is capable.

In sum, I submit that the tacit acceptance of foundationalism in analytic philosophy of religion involves several assumptions about belief in God that serve to establish the central questions and main aim to be pursued in the conduct of a philosophy of religion. First, it is assumed that any system of purported religious knowledge, like our knowledge generally, constitutes a hierarchically-ordered system of beliefs containing putatively basic and non-basic beliefs. Second, it is assumed that sentences used to express beliefs about the existence of God, that are arguably logically presupposed by those religious beliefs that are epistemologically basic within the context of a particular religious faith, are to be

evaluated in terms of their putative relationship to a class of beliefs that are properly foundational for our knowledge generally. This latter class of beliefs is a class of beliefs that satisfies general conditions of rational basicity considered valid independently of the context of particular inquiries. Hence, it is that the main aim and central questions to be pursued in a philosophy of religion consist in the evaluation of the rational credentials of this central core of theistic belief implied in or explicitly stated by participants of this practice.

But as we have seen, this aim presumes that it is reasonable to stipulate and defend general conditions of rational basicity that are valid independently of the contexts in which they are applied. It is in terms of beliefs that satisfy these conditions, whether the latter are drawn from an analysis of common sense or scientific cognition as has been the recent fashion, that the rationality of belief in God is to be assessed. Moreover, it is in the service of this aim that the subject-matter available for philosophical reflection is circumscribed in such a manner that this presupposition about the existence of God stands out in bold relief. Once detached from its context in this way, the following set of questions appears plausible. Are the sentences allegedly used to assert beliefs about God coherent? If these sentences are coherent, are the beliefs they assert about God true? If these

beliefs about God are true, what rôle if any remains for religious faith and is this rôle rationally warranted? In this way, the tacit acceptance of a foundationalist theory of the structure of the justification of our beliefs generally can be construed as providing the framework for indicating the central questions and main aim to be pursued in the conduct of a philosophy of religion.

What remains to be explained, however, is first, what prompts many philosophers to consider that the rationality of belief in God, (in which I include questions about the intelligibility and justifiability of this belief), must be established in this way? Second, what if anything is wrong with addressing our subject within this epistemological framework? Third, what are some of the implications especially for a study of the rationality of belief in God should it become apparent that the foundationalist perspective deserves to be abandoned? It is to a consideration of these issues that I now turn.

Notes: Chapter 4

1. Cornelius F. Delaney ed., Rationality and Religious Belief, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), p. 1.
2. I will expand on this brief sketch of the foundationalist theory of justification below. Recent advocates of foundationalism in epistemology generally include Roderick Chisholm, Theory of Knowledge, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), David M. Armstrong, Belief Truth and Knowledge, (London: Routledge and Regan Paul, 1973), and John Pollock, Knowledge and Justification, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).
3. Recent advocates of a coherence theory of justification in epistemology generally include Gilbert Harman, Thought, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), Nicholas Rescher, The Coherence Theory of Truth, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973) and Keith Lehrer, Knowledge, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974).
4. For criticism and discussion of the coherence theory of justification, see Michael Williams, "Coherence, Justification and Truth", Review of Metaphysics, 34(1980), pp. 243-272 and Stephen D. Ross, "Skepticism, Holism and Inexhaustibility", Review of Metaphysics, 35(1982), pp. 529-556.
5. On this score I am in agreement with John Kekes when he notes that

The central foundationalist criticism of coherentism is that if justification is a matter of approximating truth, then justification must be more than the coherence of beliefs in a world-view, for false beliefs may also cohere. The coherentist has no rational way of choosing between equally coherent world-views.

John Kekes, The Nature of Philosophy, (Totawa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), p. 95. But to abandon attempts to provide a general and all-inclusive account of the justification of our beliefs, whether foundationalist or coherentist, need not imply that we must embrace skepticism. Instead, it is to insist as Ross suggests, that "(1) justification is contextual, never holistic; (2) every epistemic field (theory or theory including background) is permeable to epistemic principles lying outside it, in other

fields. The latter principle is the antithesis of holism." Stephen D. Ross, "Skepticism, Holism and Inexhaustibility", p. 539.

6. In passing I offer as a hypothesis that regarding the question of the justification of theological beliefs it is plausible to consider Wittgensteinian Fideists as advocates of a coherence theory of justification in the philosophy of religion. See for example Norman Malcolm, "The Groundlessness of Belief" in Reason and Religion, ed., Stuart C. Brown, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 143-157, 186-190. For a discussion, see Kai Nielsen, "Religion and Groundless Believing", reprinted in Analytical Philosophy of Religion in Canada, ed., Mostafa Faghfoury, (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), pp. 115-124.
7. Commenting on what he regards as presupposed in Flew's challenge, Nielsen writes that it "is the belief that there are central putative truth-claims in the Jewish-Christian tradition, such as the claim that God governs the world, which at least purport to be factual claims, and that if they are not genuinely factual claims, Jewish and Christian belief would be something radically different from what it is believed by the faithful to be." Kai Nielsen, Contemporary Critiques of Religion, (London: Macmillan Press, 1971), p. 56.
8. Kai Nielsen, "In Defense of Atheism", reprinted in Norman O. Schedler ed., The Philosophy of Religion: Contemporary Perspectives, (New York: Macmillan, 1974), p. 251.
9. John Hick, Faith and Knowledge, (2nd edition, 1966, Glasgow: William Collins Sons, 1974), pp. 1 - 3. Hick refers to this distinction as a distinction between "fiducia", trust and "fides" as the cognition of the object of that trust.
10. Peter Winch, "Meaning and Religious Language", in Stuart C. Brown ed., Reason and Religion, p. 201.
11. Peter Winch, ibid., p. 202.
12. Kenneth Sayre, "A Perceptual Model of Belief in God" in Frederick J. Crosson ed., The Autonomy of Religious Belief, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 114.
13. Sayre for example argues that if we construe belief in God on a referential model then

...unless a given person believes in God  
under a description that happens to be right,



then despite what he or she thinks about the matter the person is simply wrong in thinking the belief is in God. So unless that person is an unusually competent and confident theologian (at least), he ought to respond to the question whether he believes in God with a frank and honest, 'I don't really know'.

Kenneth Sayre, *ibid.*, pp. 113 - 114. Taking a very different line Wilfred C. Smith argues that "a great modern heresy of the church is the heresy of believing. Not believing this or that, but of believing as such. The view that to believe is of central significance - this is an aberration." See his *Belief and History*, (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1977), p. v.

14. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 3.
15. For a recent discussion of foundationalism in the context of a critique of phenomenalist theories of perceptual knowledge, see Michael Williams, *Groundless Belief*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 57 - 58. Other discussions of some aspects of foundationalism in the philosophy of religion are Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Erdman's, 1976), and Alvin Plantinga's articles "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology" in John B. Brough, Daniel O. Dahlstrom and Henry B. Veatch eds., *Philosophical Knowledge*, (Washington: Catholic University of America Vol. LIV, 1980), pp. 49 - 62 and "Is Belief in God Rational?" in Cornelius F. Delaney ed., *Rationality and Religious Belief*, pp. 7 - 27.
16. Richard S. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). The second volume is entitled *The Existence of God*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). The third volume is tentatively entitled, *Faith and Reason*.
17. Richard S. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, p. 1.
18. The account I offer to explain the idea of a hierarchy or order of justification among our beliefs does not differ in essentials from that presented by Alvin Plantinga for the idea of a "noetic structure". See his "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology" pp. 54 - 55. Such differences as there are I will make clear at the appropriate place below.
19. Ninian Smart, "Truth and Religions" in John Hick ed., *Truth and Dialogue*, (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), p. 54.

20. Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology", p. 54.
21. Alvin Plantinga, ibid., p. 55.
22. On the considerable scope of this historical variation, Basil Mitchell's comment in his summary of a colloquium on the debate between the "Mythographers" and "Traditionalists" about the meaning and status within the life of Christian faith both historically and for the present of the doctrine of Incarnation is instructive. He remarks that one of the questions this controversy raised concerns whether there is a "recognizable body of Christian doctrine which we can distinguish and discuss; or are the various expressions and formulations of Christian belief throughout the centuries so diverse that almost all we can say about them is that they proceeded from people who called themselves Christians?" The debate in question was initiated by the publication a collection of essays edited by John Hick, The Myth of God Incarnate, (London: SCM Press, 1977). Basil Mitchell's remark is from Michael Gouldner ed., Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued, (London: SCM Press, 1979), p. 236.
23. Donald A. Crosby, Interpretative Theories of Religion, (New York: Mouton Publishers, 1981), p. 21. However, rather than speaking of a "claim" that suggests that what is central is some particular belief or doctrine, I would prefer the phrase "judgement of the significance of a community's alleged experience" to underline the fact that for participants what is crucial is a certain sort of experience upon which their tradition has been centred.
24. For an interesting discussion of the principles constitutive of the transformations of meaning within a particular religious tradition, see Peter Slater, The Dynamics of Religion, (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 79 - 95.
25. Richard S. Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism, p. 6.
26. To say that such doctrines as the Trinity, Creation, Incarnation and so on are peripheral epistemologically is not at all meant to preclude that Christians do not or cannot rightly also consider them fundamental in other senses of the word. Instead, it is to point out that these and other similar products of theological reflection depend for their justification on other epistemologically more basic religious and theological beliefs.
27. Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology", p. 56.

28. Alvin Plantinga, ibid., pp. 56 - 57.
29. Below in section 5.21, I will explain in more detail how foundationalism, and attempts to establish the rationality of theological beliefs and meta-theological skepticism are linked.
30. Kai Nielsen, Contemporary Critiques of Religion, p. 56.
31. See Nielsen's comments on the theory of "factual intelligibility" he and Flew share with Hick, Crombie and Wilson in his "Empiricism, Theoretical Constructs and God", The Journal of Religion, 54(1974), pp. 207 - 209.
32. John Hick, "Forward" to Wilfred C. Smith's The Meaning and End of Religion, (New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 1978), p. xv.
33. Swinburne describes the program for his first volume of his trilogy of works in philosophical theology as a matter of showing "whether it is possible for the religious man to have the relationship, /to God in Christ/, he claims." The Coherence of Theism, p. 3. The material is square brackets is my own addition.
34. Richard S. Swinburne, The Existence of God, p. 1.
35. Richard S. Swinburne, ibid., pp. 1, 191, 2.
36. I will consider below in section 5.20 the possible objection that doubts about the rationality of theological beliefs need not arise within a foundationalist framework.
37. Wilfred C. Smith, Belief and History, pp. 4 - 5.
38. Peter Donovan, Religious Language, (London: Sheldon Press, 1976), p. 107.
39. I think it is not surprising that the adoption of a foundationalist perspective in the context of philosophy of religion is itself a function of the need to respond to a radical skepticism regarding theological beliefs about God. As Michael Williams has explained, "epistemological theories are best seen as offering different ways of responding to the threat of radical skepticism"; regarding knowledge generally,

The threat of skepticism actually arises on two distinct levels. At the first level, it arises to compel the adoption of the foundationalist

view; for the claim that, if there were no epistemologically basic beliefs, knowledge could never get off the ground, or the claim that one would be 'justified' in believing anything at all threatens us with a skepticism so all-corroding as to truly deserve the epithet 'radical'. However, having once accepted the idea that there must be a foundation for knowledge, we are faced with the problem of explaining how our chosen foundation could possibly function as such. This is the point at which we seem compelled to choose between the familiar options; direct realism, reductionism...and 'the scientific' approach. The task is made pressing by the skeptic's claim that we are doomed to failure. Thus the respite from skepticism afforded by the recognition of epistemologically basic knowledge threatens to be short-lived; for having once accepted the foundational view we become vulnerable to one form or another of the skeptical argument.

Michael Williams, Groundless Belief, pp. 22 - 23.

40. Kai Nielsen, Contemporary Critiques of Religion, pp. 1 - 2. Speaking of his own work and in his judgement, the work also of J.N. Findlay, P. Edwards, B.A. Farrell, R. Hepburn, C.B. Martin and W. Matson, Nielsen remarks that,

Much contemporary analytic work in the philosophy of religion has abandoned any attempt to find a general meaning criterion in virtue of which the putative truth-claims of religion can be shown to be intelligible or incoherent and has gone instead into the detail of actual theological argument in an attempt to establish the incoherence or at least the baselessness of religious and theological claims. p. 114.

41. Ian M. Crombie, "The Possibility of Theological Statements", reprinted in Basil Mitchell ed., The Philosophy of Religion, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 26 - 27. Elsewhere, Crombie no doubt speaks for many sympathetic philosophical theologians when he comments that "Religion has indeed its problems; but it is useless to consider them outside their religious context. Seen as a whole religion makes rough sense, though it does not make limpidity."

"Theology and Falsification" in Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre eds., New Essays in Philosophical Theology, (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 130. Suffice it to say that there is much truth in Crombie's lament. But the major "problems" confronting religion are due to the foundationalist perspective in which philosophical reflection has been conducted upon it.

## Chapter 5: Undermining Foundationalism in Analytic Philosophy of Religion I

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### 5.19 Are There Epistemologically Basic Beliefs?

In what follows, I do not intend to take issue with the particular details of Swinburne's work, or for that matter, the details of the work of other analytic philosophers of religion that it represents. To repeat, my central concern is to remove the obstacles represented by either version of meta-theological skepticism that threaten to block or impede a consideration of the question of truth in and among religions. To accomplish this end, I have suggested that it is necessary for philosophers of religion to recognize the need to learn to set aside the pervasive perspective afforded by the foundationalist theory of the structure of the justification of our beliefs. The reason for this is that both versions of meta-theological skepticism in fact presuppose it. Hence, those details of the work of particular analytic philosophers of religion I will discuss will be selected as illustrative of the debilitating effects of foundationalism in the philosophy of religion.<sup>1</sup>

But to undertake the task of undermining foundationalism in this context, I begin by suggesting and clarifying

a question that will serve to guide the ensuing discussion. In this respect Michael Williams' reason for his judgement about the bleak prospects for meeting the charge of radical skepticism that can be raised against empirical knowledge generally by adopting a foundationalist view of justification offers a useful clue. He notes that the problem with a foundationalist response to such a skepticism is that "once we give in to the idea that empirical knowledge needs to be placed on a foundation we become vulnerable to skeptical attack."<sup>2</sup> As I will argue in this chapter, I think his remark applies equally and with the same force to the question of the possibility of religious knowledge. Once we give in to the idea that the rationality of belief in God must be established in terms of a class of epistemologically basic beliefs then I submit that some version of meta-theological skepticism is inescapable. But, as will also become apparent, the main problem for either version of meta-theological skepticism is that this foundationalist view about how the rationality of theological beliefs must be established is mistaken.

To explain, in this context I think that the following question will prove particularly useful for undermining the foundationalist presuppositions I consider are presupposed by either version of meta-theological skepticism. Must fundamental and logically central theological beliefs about the existence of God be justifiable in terms of a class of beliefs

that satisfy certain general conditions of rational basicity that are considered valid independent of particular contexts of inquiry in order to be considered rationally warranted?

As I will show below, first, the view that the rationality of theological beliefs must be established in this way is shared by both meta-theological skeptics and apologists. Second, it is mistaken because it is mistaken to hold that there can be any properly basic beliefs in the requisite foundationalist sense. But for the moment, I am content to clarify the import of this question.

I note at the outset that I do not intend to offer a justification for any particular theological belief. Rather this question is intended to focus our attention on the prior issue regarding what it is that is involved when an account of the rationality of theological beliefs is requested. Restricting my attention to the work of recent analytic philosophers of religion, I mean to be understood as providing a critique of the way the problem of what it is to provide a justification of the rationality of theological beliefs has been construed thus far.

This orientation is consonant with the objective of the critique I have been conducting. Again, this objective consists in the removal of theoretical obstacles to a reflection upon the question of the truth of the beliefs and judgements of significance involved in a religious faith. I seek to



accomplish this objective by severing the close link between the dominant view of the main aim of the philosopher in this enterprise and a radical skepticism or suspicion about the rationality of religious and theological beliefs. I believe that this link is itself sustained by the foundationalist project of elaborating a set of general conditions of rational basicity and using them as a standard against which to evaluate the legitimacy of a set of cultural expressions. It is this project itself, that I mean to call in question.

As we have seen, according to the dominant view, the role of a philosopher of religion is not restricted to a descriptive analysis of the language in which fundamental theological beliefs about God are expressed. Nor is his or her role restricted to an analysis of the modes of reasoning used by theologians and reflective believers generally. Rather, the philosopher's concern is with the critical evaluation of theological language and beliefs conducted with an eye to non-religious alternatives. This concern is typically construed as an attempt to confirm, assuage or neutralize the suspicion that fundamental theological beliefs about God are not capable of being considered rationally warranted.

This suspicion manifests itself in either of two versions of meta-theological skepticism. According to the first version of meta-theological skepticism, sentences purporting to assert a belief in the existence of God are not

cognitively meaningful because these alleged beliefs are not in principle verifiable or falsifiable by any empirical state of affairs. According to the second version of meta-theological skepticism, theological beliefs about God are not rationally justifiable because the justification of these beliefs takes place only within the context of a particular religious faith and its cumulative historical tradition. If either of these versions of the critique of validity are acceptable, it implies that theological beliefs about God are not legitimate candidates for truth and falsity. As such, the secondary theological beliefs and religious practices that presuppose them are without a proper foundation and so the system of beliefs and practices as a whole fails of rationality.

But, in this chapter, I argue that a key presupposition shared by both of these versions of the critique of validity is mistaken. This presupposition consists in the general foundationalist account of the structure of the justification of our beliefs that forms the background for this critique. In particular, according to foundationalism, the structure of the justification of our beliefs generally is hierarchical and reposes ultimately upon properly foundational or epistemologically basic beliefs. A belief or class of beliefs is properly foundational or epistemologically basic just if their justification is privileged in the sense that it does not presuppose the truth of any non-basic beliefs. In addition, as a normative

theory of justification, foundationalist theories stipulate general conditions of rational basicity. Conditions of rational basicity explain when we are rationally warranted in considering that a belief qualifies as properly foundational or privileged within a system of beliefs.

I submit that both versions of meta-theological skepticism pose the challenge to the rationality of theological beliefs they do because of a tacit commitment to foundationalism. Both versions assume that there are certain general conditions of rational basicity characteristic of properly foundational beliefs. The first version of meta-theological skepticism involves the view that the cognitive meaning of putative theological beliefs must be specified in terms of epistemologically basic beliefs, beliefs that are in principle verifiable or falsifiable on empirical grounds alone. Since the cognitive meaning of sentences purportedly asserting theological beliefs cannot be specified in terms of empirical beliefs of this sort, these sentences are allegedly cognitively meaningless. The second version of meta-theological skepticism also involves the view that the justification of theological beliefs must repose upon epistemologically basic beliefs, beliefs whose justification does not presuppose any other beliefs. Since the justification of theological beliefs in a process of reasoning from signs in theology is context-dependent, these beliefs cannot be considered rationally justifiable.

But as I hope to show, it is this foundationalist account of the structure of the justification of our beliefs that is mistaken. In particular, it is mistaken to suppose that there is or must be a class of epistemologically basic beliefs identified by general conditions of rational basicity and considered valid as the proper foundation for our knowledge independent of all particular contexts of inquiry. Since a foundationalist theory of justification encounters crippling difficulties of its own and since both versions of meta-theological skepticism presuppose its acceptability, I maintain that the challenge posed to the rationality of theological beliefs by either version of meta-theological skepticism is not warranted. The believer does not deserve censure for a failure of rationality because he cannot show how his theological beliefs are justifiable in terms of a class of properly foundational beliefs. The reason is that, against foundationalism, it is implausible to believe that there can be any properly foundational beliefs.

If this argument is sound, it implies that it is not necessarily a defect and so indicative of a failure of rationality to acknowledge that the justification of theological beliefs presupposes the context afforded by a particular religious faith and its cumulative historical tradition. In other words, the recognition of the context-dependent character of the justification of theological beliefs in reasoning from

signs in theology does not warrant, by itself, the general suspicion that these beliefs are not rationally justifiable.<sup>3</sup> It is in this fashion, that I propose to remove the final theoretical barrier against considering seriously the question of truth in and among religions.

In the service of developing this argument in detail, in section 5.20 I anticipate and discuss three possible objections that some might consider to militate against the need for the kind of critique I intend to conduct. In section 5.21 I examine, in more detail, the link between a foundationalist theory of justification and both versions of meta-theological skepticism. In brief, this link consists in the view that the rationality of theological beliefs must be established by showing how these beliefs are justifiable in terms of a class of epistemologically basic beliefs. Whether these beliefs are described as beliefs about observations, straightforwardly empirical beliefs or simply non-religious beliefs, they are considered epistemologically basic in the sense that their justification does not presuppose any non-basic theological beliefs. Finally in section 5.22, I examine, in summary form, some of the main criticisms of foundationalism as a general theory of the structure of the justification of our beliefs. The substance of these criticisms suggests that it is implausible to hold that there can be any class of beliefs that are unqualifiedly epistemologically basic in the requisite foundationalist sense.

### 5.20 Three Objections

One way of interpreting the kind of critique I am proposing is to think of it as a critique of the way the problem of what it is to provide an account of the rationality of theological beliefs has been understood thus far. In fact, I note that if this critique is successful, it might persuade some philosophers that it is important to consider a logically prior issue. This issue would be a question about how to address questions of the meaning and truth of rival judgements of significance involved in the practice of different religious faiths in the first place. For example, in the absence of a foundationalist perspective, dealing with this question may involve the difficult task of rethinking the relationship between philosophical thinking and religious faith. Minimally, however, it may involve the sympathetic attempt to understand the believer's own interpretation of the relation between his religious language and beliefs and the "experience of faith" of which the former is the "expressive system" on its own terms.<sup>4</sup>

But some philosophers might resist these suggestions for one of three reasons. First, with Dallas High, some philosophers might maintain that surely we can now "get on" with "the mapping of the logic of religious language" and "display constructively the various features of religious

language as it is lived." This view, perhaps inspired by the later work of Wittgenstein, might be offered on the ground that "restrictive theories of meaning no longer have an essential cash-value".<sup>5</sup>

Second, others might contend that it is enough to amend some of the presuppositions characteristic of the conduct of analytic philosophy of religion. For example, they might propose that we consider broadening the concepts of experience and interpretation in ways advocated by philosophers outside this style of philosophical reflection such as Husserl or Hegel.

Third and most important, with Kai Nielsen other philosophers would protest that even though analytic philosophy of religion as characterized above, can be fitted into the foundationalist model and is usually understood in this fashion, nevertheless meta-theological skepticism need not only arise within this framework. In particular, it might be contended that one need not embrace foundationalism in order to harbour doubts about the intelligibility of theological beliefs. After all, to accept Heimbeck's "semantic solution" to the effect that the necessary and sufficient conditions of cognitive meaning for sentences are that the sentences in question have logical entailments and incompatibles is not particularly helpful for clarifying the meaning of theological sentences. For example,

it will not...help to say that we know what it would be like to disconfirm (say) 'God loves mankind', namely that it can be noted whether God hates mankind, for if we have trouble understanding what we are talking about when we are talking about God loving mankind, we are going to have as much trouble understanding 'God hates mankind'.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, the questions raised by a skeptic about the intelligibility of theological claims are questions that ordinary people, including believers, often ask quite apart from or "in complete innocence of philosophical foundations for or against religious belief".<sup>7</sup> I consider each of these objections briefly.

However laudable High's suggestion about "getting on with mapping the logic of religious language" may be, I think in the end it lacks force. It lacks force unless it can be demonstrated either that the critiques that appeal to these "restrictive theories" can be met or that the epistemological framework generating such critiques and sustaining the main aim and role of a philosopher of religion who develops, responds to or seeks to by-pass them are mistaken. As we have seen, the former option has not proved entirely successful. I say this despite the fact that I have expressed my agreement with the substance of Heimbeck's counter-critique and have argued that the question of truth in religion can no longer be postponed for this reason. But even if meta-theological skepticism couched in terms of a theory of cognitive meaning



can be met, a second version of meta-theological skepticism arises. This second version focuses on the manner in which theological beliefs are allegedly justified in reasoning from signs in theology. Hence, to deal with the second version of meta-theological skepticism that is more far-reaching and is unaffected by the demise of the first version, I have urged the need for a more radical alternative. Again, this alternative consists in a critique of the foundationalist epistemological framework both versions, I have suggested, presuppose.

As for the second contention, I have attempted to clarify to a degree the sense of "experience" and "interpretation" that are involved in inferences to the truth of theological beliefs from judgements of the significance of a believer's alleged experience of God. Nevertheless, it is clear that no amount of tinkering with these concepts will be sufficient by itself to assuage so radical a suspicion. The suspicion in question threatens the very possibility of the project of justifying the truth of theological beliefs in reasoning from signs in theology. Speaking with the first version of meta-theological skepticism in mind, Garceau is quite right to maintain that it is doubtful:

whether the debate on God-talk gains much by opposing to the radical questioning of religious language by logical empiricism a minimal hypothesis about religion, to the effect that it consists in a set of beliefs, held by some to be expressible by mere performatives, and by others to be expressible also by declaratives.<sup>8</sup>

This should be clear because the suspicion manifested in either version of meta-theological skepticism refers to religious and theological language considered as a whole. Hence, it is unlikely that any piecemeal analysis of selected statements of theological belief, however fundamental these are alleged to be, will be sufficient to counter it.

As for the third objection I think Nielsen is quite right to reject Heimbeck's "semantic" solution as a useful way of clarifying the meaning of theological claims. For this purpose, it is not helpful.<sup>9</sup> In addition, he is quite right to point out that concerns about the intelligibility and truth of traditional forms of religious and theological belief are not the preserve of skeptical philosophers alone. These concerns can and do arise among believers themselves within the context of the practice of their faith. It is true for instance, that during this century, "Christian beliefs have indeed become meaningless to a large number of Westerners and false for many others."<sup>10</sup> But the challenge posed by meta-theological skepticism as a critique of the validity of theological language and belief cuts deeper than a request to clarify for the perplexed. "What is it or who is it that is this being of infinite love, mercy, power and understanding of whom we stand in need?"<sup>11</sup> In particular, it involves a request of the believer to provide an "empirical anchorage" for their beliefs that is specified in terms of some "unequivocally

empirical state of affairs",

...so that we can distinguish the conditions under which we would be justified in asserting that there is an infinite saviour transcendent to the world and the conditions under which we would not be justified in making such a putative assertion.<sup>12</sup>

It is the failure to provide an "empirical anchorage" in this manner that grounds his reiterated contention "that key religious utterances are very like ideological utterances and that religion is ideology."<sup>13</sup>

Now as the cited passage indicates, according to Nielsen the project of providing an "empirical anchorage" for theological beliefs about God is entangled with considerations about when a person would be considered justified in asserting that these beliefs are true. As such, the thesis is implied that unless we can do this in terms of a class of beliefs that do not themselves presuppose a recourse to any other religious or theological beliefs, then the beliefs about God in question fail of cognitive meaning and the system of beliefs and practices as a whole fails of rationality. But, to hold that these damaging implications follow, presumes that there is a class of beliefs, beliefs about "unequivocally empirical states of affairs", that can function as rationally basic or properly foundational in the structure of the justification of our beliefs. In addition, it is also to presume that the rational credentials of theological beliefs are to be assessed

in terms of whether they are justifiable by recourse to beliefs that belong in the class of rationally basic beliefs. In a word, I submit that if meta-theological skepticism is to be construed as a critique of the validity of theological language and belief then it is in this sense that it presupposes a commitment to a foundationalist theory of justification.

In fact, to advocate the need to set aside the currently pervasive foundationalist perspective in which this type of critique arises, is precisely to argue for the need to sever the close link between this perspective and the aforementioned suspicion that is most readily apparent in the radical charge of the cognitive meaninglessness of theological language. Indeed, so central has this suspicion been that for many analytic philosophers of religion the role of the philosopher of religion is thought to consist chiefly in the analysis of key theological sentences and beliefs about God and their alleged relationship with experience. The main pre-occupation of this study has centred on the attempt to confirm, refute or neutralize the radical suspicion that these sentences and beliefs are invalid. It is to accomplish this end by evaluating the coherence and truth of these sentences and the beliefs they purport to express in order to determine whether these theological sentences and beliefs about God are justifiable in terms of a class of properly foundational beliefs.

The result of this study will be to resolve the question of whether these logically central beliefs about

God are capable of supporting the surrounding edifice of secondary religious and theological beliefs and so justify the rationality of the religious practices that presuppose them. It is this foundationalist perspective that forms the background for understanding the view, shared by many analytic philosophers of religion, that it is the main task of a philosophy of religion to "evaluate or judge of the case for or against religion by elucidating the logical structure of the discipline in question."<sup>14</sup>

Hence in proposing a critique oriented towards undermining foundationalism in the philosophy of religion, I am not proposing merely a need for amending certain assumptions characteristic of the current conduct of particular examples of the work of analytic philosophers in this area. Again, the line of criticism I intend to pursue refers to a critique of the very horizon or framework implicitly sustaining this view about what a philosophy of religion amounts to. In this respect, as I have noted above, the consensus that the place to begin in the conduct of a philosophy of religion is with the issues concerning the validity of theological language and belief betrays the presence of a deeper consensus. This deeper consensus receives expression in the view that the attempt to deal with this suspicion is the central pre-occupation of the philosopher of religion. Moreover, as I will explain in the

next section, I think that this deeper consensus consists in a certain mistaken view about how the rationality of theological beliefs must be established.

#### 5.21 Foundationalism and Showing the Rationality of Theological Beliefs

In section 5.19, I maintained that both versions of meta-theological skepticism presuppose a commitment to a foundationalist theory of justification. In particular, I think both of these versions of the critique of validity involve the key foundationalist assumption that there is a class of epistemologically basic beliefs that constitute the proper foundation for the justification of our beliefs regardless of particular contexts of inquiry. In addition, both versions of meta-theological skepticism maintain that the belief "that there is a God" is not justifiable in terms of members of the class of properly foundational beliefs. But, in this section, I intend to explain why it is that many apologists and skeptics among analytic philosophers of religion are in agreement about how the rationality of theological beliefs is to be established. In particular, I think it is because both groups accept the view that the rationality of theological beliefs must be established by showing how they are justifiable in terms of a class of beliefs that, relative to theological beliefs, are epistemologically basic.

To secure this objective, I begin by noting that if some version of a foundationalist theory of justification were acceptable, it would imply that there is a class of privileged epistemologically basic beliefs identifiable by means of some particular conditions of rational basicity. Qua foundational, the justification of epistemologically basic beliefs is privileged in the sense that it does not presuppose any other beliefs. The justification of epistemologically basic beliefs depends in some way directly upon experience. In addition, this class of beliefs would serve as the proper foundation for the justification of the rest of our non-basic beliefs regardless of particular contexts of inquiry. Conversely, the justification of any other non-basic beliefs we hold would be rationally warranted to the degree that non-basic beliefs are justifiable in some way in terms of the class of epistemologically basic beliefs.

Hence, given this framework, if we harbour doubts about the rationality of a particular belief or set of beliefs then two strategies are readily available for responding to these doubts. First, we could argue that the beliefs, in question, can be justified directly in terms of a class of beliefs that are epistemologically basic. Second, we could argue that the beliefs, in question, can be justified indirectly from an intermediary class of beliefs that, themselves, can be justified directly in terms of a class of beliefs that are epistemologically basic.<sup>15</sup>

Again, within this framework, there have been apologists for the rationality of theological beliefs among analytic philosophers of religion who have advocated each of these strategies. Moreover, I maintain that as long as we retain the assumption that the rationality of a belief in God must be established by determining how these beliefs are justifiable in terms of a class of epistemologically basic beliefs then some version of meta-theological skepticism is inescapable. Beginning with the second strategy, I consider each briefly and show how the apparent or putative failure of each strategy spawns its own related version of meta-theological skepticism.

As we have seen<sup>16</sup>, Heimbeck is an exponent of the second strategy for establishing the rationality of theological beliefs. He does not attempt to show how beliefs about God are justifiable directly in terms of a class of epistemologically basic beliefs. According to Heimbeck, category A theological beliefs such as "there is a God", "God loves all human beings" or "God is transcendent to the universe" are in fact the result of complex inferences from lower-level category B theological beliefs. Category B theological beliefs record beliefs about the relationship and involvement of God with particular events and human experiences in this world. He considers that a prime example of this lower level type of theological belief is the belief that "God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead



near Jerusalem at time  $T_2$ ". Beliefs of this sort, that are members of the intermediary class of category B theological beliefs, are themselves justifiable if they can be inferred in a process of reasoning from signs in theology from beliefs that can be justified directly upon empirical grounds alone. The beliefs Heimbeck alleges as the foundation for inferences in theology are beliefs about the life, words, deeds and death of Jesus as recorded for instance in the Gospels. This set of beliefs can be considered epistemologically basic, relative to the system of category A and B theological beliefs constituting classical Christian theism, because their justification does not presuppose any other less-basic category A or B theological beliefs.<sup>17</sup>

But as I have argued<sup>18</sup>, this indirect attempt to establish the rationality of theological beliefs founders on the discovery of the context-dependent character of reasoning from signs in theology. Against Heimbeck, I have maintained that category B theological beliefs are not justifiable in terms of a class of beliefs themselves justifiable on empirical grounds alone, without theological presuppositions. Category B theological beliefs are justifiable only upon the basis of interpreted experiences and phenomena that presuppose the context provided by a particular religious faith and its cumulative historical tradition, if they are to be considered as signs of the relevant sort. Hence, the beliefs about Jesus

that Heimbeck alleges are properly foundational cannot play the role assigned to them in the justification of a system of theological beliefs. I have referred to this critique as a second version of meta-theological skepticism because it challenges the validity of theological beliefs in the following manner. This version claims that the justification of theological beliefs, whether category A or B, cannot be considered rationally warranted because the manner in which they are allegedly justified does not repose upon a class of properly foundational beliefs. It does not repose, that is, upon a class of beliefs justifiable in some way directly upon experience without presupposing any other less basic religious or theological beliefs.

By far the most popular strategy for establishing the rationality of theological beliefs, within this epistemological framework however, has been the first strategy.<sup>19</sup> Again, this first strategy seeks to establish the rationality of theological beliefs by showing how the cognitive meaning of these beliefs can be specified directly in terms of a class of beliefs that can be regarded as epistemologically basic. So, speaking with Hick, Crombie and Wilson in mind, Kai Nielsen has described their efforts as a matter of focusing upon the "confirmation of certain key religious claims" in order "to specify certain experienceable states which, if they were actually to transpire, would count for theism and against

atheism."<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, as is evident in his discussion of Hugo Meynell's attempt to comply with this particular requirement, not any particular "experienceable states" will do. For example, Nielsen argues that to offer "the believer's experience of God's graciousness in his own life" as confirming evidence for the putative truth-claims about the reality or providential care of God is in fact question-begging. It is question-begging unless we can provide some "independent and purely empirical specification of the particular state of affairs covered by 'God's graciousness in his own life.'"<sup>21</sup>

Nor, given this framework, is Nielsen's objection off the mark. After all, those who adopt this direct strategy are engaged in a project of establishing the rationality of theological beliefs by showing how beliefs about God are justifiable, (confirmable or infirmable in principle), in terms of a class of beliefs about some "unequivocally empirical state of affairs." If we cannot specify the cognitive meaning of theological beliefs in terms of a set of beliefs of this sort then, again, as Nielsen remarks, "the putative state of affairs appealed to, Meynell's "experience of God's graciousness"7, "will have a similar problematic status and we shall still have our initial difficulties in understanding."<sup>22</sup> Hence, relative to putative theological beliefs about God, the class of beliefs about some "unequivocally empirical state of affairs" can be regarded as epistemologically basic in the

following manner. The cognitive meaning of beliefs of this latter sort is unproblematic because we can specify their cognitive meaning in non-religious or non-theological terms. As such, if we could specify the cognitive meaning of putative theological beliefs in terms of members of this class of beliefs we would have succeeded in doing so without presupposing the cognitive meaningfulness of any religious or theological beliefs.

But, the direct attempt to establish the rationality of theological beliefs cannot succeed. Indeed, any attempt to determine the cognitive meaning of theological beliefs in terms of a set of "non-religious straightforwardly empirical statements" appears to end in failure. Again, following Nielsen, his counter-strategy with philosophers of religion who adopt this approach:

...has been simply to track down their varied and often subtle claims to have described a conceivable experienceable turn of events which could count for the truth of theism and against atheism. If my arguments have been correct, they have not succeeded in doing that; they have not succeeded in showing that there is a God' and 'there is no God'...are not equally incompatible with any and every conceivable experienceable turn of events that might, logically might transpire.<sup>23</sup>

It is as a consequence of the alleged failure of this first direct strategy that the first version of meta-theological skepticism emerges as a challenge to the rationality of

theological beliefs.<sup>24</sup> If the cognitive meaning of sentences purporting to assert theological beliefs about God cannot be specified in terms of beliefs that are confirmable or infirmable in principle on empirical grounds alone, (and so do not presuppose the cognitive meaningfulness of any other putative theological beliefs), then theological sentences are cognitively meaningless.

In sum, I think it worthwhile to point out several things that both of the strategies for establishing the rationality of theological beliefs and both versions of the critique of validity have in common. Considering the two strategies I note first, that both of them treat what is central to the practice of Christian religious faith as if it consisted fundamentally in holding a set of beliefs about God. Second, both strategies regard beliefs about God as non-basic beliefs that seek admittance within the system of beliefs, constituting our knowledge as a whole. Most analytic philosophers of religion do not consider that minimal theological beliefs are themselves epistemologically basic beliefs. The belief that "there is a God" hardly seems to be intrinsically credible or privileged and so seems to require some sort of justification.<sup>25</sup> As such, third, both strategies presume that if these non-basic beliefs are to be considered rationally warranted then they must be justifiable either directly or indirectly in terms of a class of "non-religious straight-

forwardly empirical beliefs". What is important about this latter class of beliefs is not so much its content. What is important about it is that, relative to non-basic theological beliefs, it can function as a class of epistemologically basic beliefs in the following sense. Again, since members of this class of beliefs are confirmable or infirmable in principle on empirical grounds alone, their justification can be accomplished without presupposing any less basic theological beliefs whose rational status is as yet in question.

But the apparent failure of both of these strategies to establish how theological beliefs are justifiable either directly or indirectly in terms of epistemologically basic beliefs, as we have seen, issues in its own version of meta-theological skepticism. If we adopt the second indirect strategy, theological beliefs appear to fail of rationality because the justification of theological beliefs whether category A or B is context-dependent. The justification of theological beliefs, in other words, cannot be accomplished in terms of a class of epistemologically basic beliefs that do not themselves presuppose other non-basic theological beliefs. Conversely, if we adopt the first direct strategy, theological beliefs again appear to fail of rationality because the cognitive meaning of putative theological beliefs cannot be specified in terms of beliefs that are justifiable, (confirmable or infirmable in principle), on empirical grounds alone. In

other words, the cognitive meaning of sentences allegedly asserting theological beliefs cannot be determined in terms of a class of epistemologically basic beliefs that do not themselves presuppose the cognitive meaningfulness of other equally non-basic theological beliefs.

But, the key point is that both of these strategies and both versions of meta-theological skepticism their apparent failure occasions presuppose a commitment to some version of foundationalism. In particular, both apologists and meta-theological skeptics are committed to the view that the structure of the justification of our beliefs, theological beliefs included, reposes ultimately upon epistemologically basic beliefs. As such, they hold that the rationality of theological beliefs must be established by showing how these beliefs are justifiable, somehow, in terms of a class of beliefs that themselves presuppose no other non-basic theological beliefs. The link between a foundationalist theory of the structure of the justification of our beliefs and either version of meta-theological skepticism comes to this. As we have seen, it is the tacit acceptance of the second thesis characteristic of foundationalism that suggests the two strategies available for establishing the rationality of theological beliefs in the first place. Moreover, given the apparent failure of these strategies to establish how theological beliefs are justifiable directly or indirectly in

terms of a class of beliefs that involve no other non-basic theological presuppositions, then some version of meta-theological skepticism emerges as a challenge to the rationality of theological beliefs. I submit that either version of meta-theological skepticism presupposes a commitment to the foundationalist framework in this sense. Both of these critiques of the validity of theological beliefs maintain that unless the rationality of theological beliefs can be established in terms of a class of beliefs that are properly foundational or rationally basic, then theological beliefs fail of rationality.

Nevertheless, whether we judge that the two strategies outlined above succeed or fail, I will argue that it is the view, that the rationality of theological beliefs must be established in this fashion, that is fundamentally mistaken. In particular, it is mistaken to hold that there is or must be a class of epistemological beliefs, identifiable according to certain general conditions of rational basicity that serve as the proper foundation for our knowledge independent of all particular contexts of inquiry. The key foundationalist thesis tacitly accepted among apologists and meta-theological skeptics is that the beliefs constituting our knowledge must rest upon epistemologically basic beliefs, if they are to be considered rationally warranted. Moreover, it is just this thesis that has been powerfully criticized. If these criticisms are sound; if it is implausible to hold that there



is or must be a class of epistemologically basic beliefs as the foundation of our knowledge, then it is hardly a defect meriting censure for a failure of rationality to hold that theological beliefs are not justifiable in terms of them. Not only are theological beliefs not justifiable in this manner, it is unreasonable to hold that they must be in order to be considered rationally warranted.

#### 5.22 Problems for the Foundationalist Theory of Justification

As I have said, the foundationalist theory of justification has been submitted to critique by a number of philosophers in recent years.<sup>26</sup> The central thrust of these criticisms has been stated recently by John Kekes. He writes:

...that the basic beliefs required by foundationalism turn out to be no more privileged and have no better justification than many other beliefs. The Cartesian clear and distinct ideas, self-evidence, the 'given' of empiricism, the phenomenological intuition of essence, the protocol sentences of early logical positivism, the sense-data of phenomenism, the incorrigible avowals of Wittgenstein, all lack the joint qualification of requiring no further justification and of other beliefs being justified with reference to them. Nor is there any method, standard or rule which if adhered to would endow basic beliefs with the required justification. Induction, deduction, the verifiability principle, falsifiability, translatability into an empiricist language, all certify beliefs which for different reasons fall short of the kind of justification foundationalists require for privileged basic beliefs.<sup>27</sup>

In this passage and in broad strokes, Kekes identifies the main problem area that despite local variations, confronts all versions of foundationalism. This problem area refers to the concept of "epistemologically basic" or "foundational" beliefs. In particular, two questions are worth posing about it. First, what are these foundational beliefs about?

Second, how can foundational beliefs be identified such that we can be assured that they supply the kind of justification for our other beliefs that, according to foundationalist philosophers, our knowledge requires?

To clarify further just what sort of justification is at issue here, it is worthwhile to begin by demonstrating that Kekes has touched upon the central problem area for this theory of justification. Foundationalism, of course, is a normative theory of justification. It is a general theory about how the justification of our beliefs ought to proceed if these beliefs are to be considered rationally warranted as items of our knowledge. This theory is general in the sense that it delineates the structure of the justification of all of our beliefs regardless of specific contexts of inquiry. As such, any version of foundationalism advances two important theses. First, it involves the view that justification ought to proceed ultimately in terms of epistemologically basic or foundational beliefs.<sup>28</sup> Second, it involves the view that the concept of justification names a relationship between basic and non-basic beliefs.

To consider the second thesis first, the idea is that the justification of our beliefs is linear, hierarchical or unidirectional. The justification of our beliefs proceeds directly from epistemologically basic beliefs to non-basic beliefs. As such, the system of our beliefs that constitutes our knowledge at any particular time forms a hierarchy or strict epistemological order. The history of epistemology is replete with many different attempts to spell out precisely in what this relationship of justification or support consists. For example, some philosophers have held that epistemologically basic beliefs provide a rational justification for non-basic beliefs just if the latter can be deduced from the former. Other philosophers have proposed induction or inference to the best explanation as candidates for explaining how non-basic beliefs are justified by recourse to epistemologically basic beliefs. In a word, deduction, induction, inference to the best explanation, or for that matter Heimbeck's version of reasoning from signs in theology and the like, are variations on a common theme. They are attempts to indicate the conditions under which we are rationally warranted in claiming to extend our knowledge beyond the foundational beliefs.<sup>29</sup>

In the passage cited above, Kekes does not deal with the problems confronting attempts to explain the relation of justification or support that allegedly obtains between epistemologically basic and non-basic beliefs. Instead, he focuses

attention directly upon epistemologically basic beliefs. As is obvious, any and all attempts to give an account of the relationship of justification depend crucially on the first thesis to the effect that the system of beliefs constituting our knowledge reposes ultimately upon the justification of epistemologically basic or foundational beliefs. To say that a belief is epistemologically basic or foundational in a system of beliefs, is just to say that unlike the beliefs it supports, basic beliefs are privileged. Foundational beliefs are privileged in the sense that they do not require justification from other beliefs; they have all the justification that could be required. So to say that foundational beliefs are privileged is just to say that it is these beliefs alone among all the rest of our other beliefs that are "intrinsically credible", "directly evident", "self-justifying" or "self-authenticating". As these phrases suggest, beliefs that are justified in this fashion do not presuppose the justification of any other non-basic beliefs. It is these privileged or intrinsically credible beliefs, one might say, that provide the secure point of contact between our system of beliefs as a whole and the world.

Here also, and this Kekes does note, the history of epistemology is replete with attempts to specify what these privileged beliefs are beliefs about. Some philosophers have held that it is beliefs about the contents of our mental life

that are foundational. Others have proposed beliefs about sense-data, or beliefs expressed in observation reports, protocol sentences, the intuition of essences and so on. In addition, and no less important than selecting a particular set of beliefs to comprise the foundation for our knowledge, many of these philosophers have tried to establish standards, principles or rules that stipulate the conditions under which we are rationally warranted in considering that a belief or set of beliefs is epistemologically basic or foundational. So some philosophers have held that a foundational belief is a belief that is clearly and distinctly perceived to be true. Others have proposed that a foundational belief is one that is either self-evident or evident to the senses. Still others, such as advocates of meta-theological skepticism, have averred that a foundational belief is one that is in principle verifiable (confirmable or infirmable) by some observable empirical state of affairs and the like. In both cases, each of the candidate classes of beliefs and standards are variations on a common theme. The candidate classes of beliefs indicate the content of our foundational beliefs. The standards are attempts to explain why it is that we are rationally warranted in believing that the beliefs which conform to them have all the justification that could reasonably be required. In this sense, the standards or conditions of rational basicity explain why it is that it is beliefs of this sort that form

the solid foundation upon which ultimately all of our knowledge regardless of particular contexts of inquiry is based.<sup>30</sup>

The thrust of Kekes' summary statement of the central difficulty for foundationalist theories of justification should now be clear. It can be expressed in the form of several claims that are at bottom equivalent. It is doubtful that there are any epistemologically basic or foundational beliefs that are foundational in the requisite sense. There are no beliefs in our system of knowledge that by themselves are intrinsically credible, directly evident, self-justifying or self-authenticating. Finally and alternatively, one could say that there are no general conditions that a belief must satisfy if it is to count as an epistemologically basic or foundational belief. These claims are directly to the point because to hold that the justification of our beliefs reposes ultimately upon foundational beliefs is to maintain that the kind of justification that epistemologically basic beliefs enjoy cannot involve or presuppose a recourse to any other non-basic beliefs. As such and unlike our other beliefs, if our epistemologically basic beliefs are to be considered justified, it is because, unlike non-basic beliefs, they enjoy some special relationship to what they are about. What this special relationship is alleged to be is spelled out in the various rules proposed as conditions of rational basicity. Presumably, if there are no privileged or foundational beliefs or

alternatively, if there are no such general conditions that epistemologically basic beliefs must satisfy, then either foundationalist accounts of the justification of our beliefs are mistaken or none of our beliefs are rationally justifiable.<sup>31</sup>

But it is this thesis that there are privileged or intrinsically credible beliefs in the sense required that has been criticized by philosophers like Popper, Quine, Sellars and Wittgenstein. Indeed, I think that their criticisms of "basic statements", the attempted reduction of science to the terms of immediate experience and the analytic/synthetic distinction, the myth of the given and the impossibility of a private language, could be construed as converging on a similar point. After all, the sort of justification required for epistemologically basic beliefs on the foundationalist model is one that involves or presupposes no recourse to other non-basic beliefs. Hence, to maintain that some of our beliefs are privileged is just to maintain that we have some sort of direct access or direct acquaintance through our experience that they are true. But the important question is how, if at all, can one show as the foundationalist must, that acquaintance or experience of something gives us knowledge of that thing?

The problem for providing an acceptable answer to this question, as Popper for instance has pointed out, is simply that an experience of something is not in itself knowledge. One should resist the temptation to confuse an

important means by which we can acquire knowledge with the process or processes by which we might seek in community to justify what we believe. "Statements", Popper writes, "can only be justified by statements, experiences can motivate a decision and hence an acceptance or rejection of a statement, but a basic statement cannot be justified by them - no more than by thumping the table."<sup>32</sup> "Experiences can motivate a decision and hence an acceptance or rejection of a statement" in the sense that the experience in question is of the sort which would be explained if the statement were true. But whether a particular statement is true depends also and crucially upon the relation between it and the rest of the statements we accept that constitute the system of our knowledge at any particular time.

The reason for this is that every statement expressing a judgement of the significance of our experience involves a description that qualifies or interprets the "given" in a certain way in the context of particular interests and our background knowledge. Consider, for example, whether we are to judge of the significance of the moon landings as a spectacular achievement of American ingenuity and technology or as yet another frivolous waste of desperately needed resources as befits the capitalist system in its decadent phase. Or, consider, whether we are to construe the Palestine Liberation Army as a band of unprincipled terrorists or as freedom fighters in



a struggle for the liberation and restoration of their homeland.<sup>33</sup> In this respect, every such judgement involves a description that has the "character of a theory or hypothesis", including also for instance, observation reports of our perceptual experience. The point is that in accepting any judgement of the significance of our experience as accurate we are at the same time accepting either implicitly or explicitly a host of other beliefs of varying degrees of complexity that bear crucially upon whether we are justified in accepting the descriptions such judgements involve. In the case of accepting an observation report such as "there is a table in the corner", one is also implicitly accepting beliefs about the reliability of our perceptual capacities, beliefs about how they function, beliefs about what sorts of inferences can be drawn from them and so on.

But the point that any description or observation report is theory-laden or that there are no unqualified, unmediated or uninterpreted experiences is as Wolterstorff remarks "obviously devastating to foundationalism".<sup>34</sup> Nor is this surprising. It is devastating because it means that there can be no epistemologically basic beliefs that are privileged in the sense that they do not require justification by recourse to other non-basic beliefs. Each of the proposed candidate classes of beliefs Kekes mentioned - observation reports, protocol sentences, clear and distinct ideas, the

intuition of essences - presuppose recourse to non-basic beliefs for their justification that these foundational beliefs by themselves are supposed to justify. No single belief or set of beliefs, identified according to some general standard, can serve as a foundational belief because no account of the supposed direct or privileged access to what is by means of our experience that these beliefs allegedly enjoy can be given that does not itself presuppose recourse to non-basic beliefs. Wittgenstein's aphorism expresses the point quite well: "when we begin to believe anything", he says, "what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.)"<sup>35</sup>

Something of the import of this kind of criticism can be further clarified by considering what might prompt philosophers to seek to account for the justification of our beliefs ultimately in terms of some special class of foundational beliefs. One compelling response might be to insist that whatever difficulties current foundationalist accounts confront, we need epistemologically basic beliefs in order to provide the terminating points in chains of justification. It might be alleged that if we are to avoid a potentially infinite regress in the justification of our beliefs:

...not all our knowledge can be inferential in the sense of based on further justified beliefs. To escape the regress, we must accept the existence of beliefs that can be justified without their justification accruing to them from further beliefs. In

other words, we must recognize the existence of beliefs that are intrinsically credible.<sup>36</sup>

It is for this reason that we need to retain the concept of privileged, basic or foundational beliefs and persist in developing more sophisticated accounts that will not suffer the problems of earlier versions of foundationalism.

But as Williams suggests, this "regress argument" for the necessity of epistemologically basic beliefs that are intrinsically credible in the foundationalist sense is fallacious. Non-foundationalists, who hold that there are "no privileged classes of beliefs such that ultimately justification terminates with beliefs belonging to these classes" are not at all thereby involved in a vicious infinite regress. As he remarks:

Clearly any actual process of justification must terminate after finitely many steps. But what follows from this? Not very much. It shows at most, we can say, that at any given time we must have some stock of beliefs, which are not thought to be open to challenge, though any one of them can subsequently come under fire. But the fact that justification must come to an end somewhere does not allow us to infer that the class of justification terminating beliefs can be characterized in any non-trivial way. It would be clearly fallacious to argue that since justification must come to an end somewhere, there must be some special kind of belief with which justification always terminates.<sup>37</sup>

The key point in this passage is the recognition of the error of supposing that "since justification must come to an end

somewhere", it must always come to an end with "some special kind of belief". It is this error that fuels the persistent efforts among foundationalists to elaborate general standards or conditions to explain what is "special" about this privileged class of beliefs. Nor is the excessive generality of these standards surprising. It is a consequence of the fact that foundationalists are committed to the view that the structure of the justification of all our beliefs regardless of particular contexts of inquiry is linear and reposes ultimately upon some one specific set of foundational beliefs.

Critics of foundationalism are not denying that there are epistemologically basic beliefs in the restricted and innocuous sense that some of our beliefs are considered fundamental as terminating points for claims of justification, given a particular context of inquiry. But to resist the suggestion that this class of beliefs in which justification terminates "can be characterized in any non-trivial way" is to maintain that "being basic is not a privileged but a conventional, contingent, variable status".<sup>38</sup> To point out that any particular candidate for the status of privileged, epistemologically basic, beliefs in an unqualified sense, in fact presupposes many other beliefs that by anyone's "standards" are not epistemologically basic, is to point out that what counts as "foundational" is relative to and dependent on the context of a particular inquiry, the interests and aims it serves and the

phenomena it studies. But all such "epistemologically basic" beliefs in this non-foundationalist sense are open to criticism and potential revision. None are privileged or intrinsically credible in the sense that their justification does not repose upon other beliefs that at the particular time, are held apart from critique as part of our background knowledge. In particular, no specific class of beliefs is privileged or epistemologically basic, in the sense that it, independent of all contexts of inquiry, is foundational for the beliefs we hold as a consequence of specific inquiries.

In sum, I think it fair to say that the prospects for a foundationalist account of the structure of the justification of our beliefs look bleak. Such accounts, regardless of local details and differences, confront two serious difficulties. First, there are difficulties concerning the explanation of the relationship of justification or support that allegedly obtains between epistemologically basic and non-basic beliefs such that we are rationally warranted in claiming to extend our knowledge beyond the foundations. Second and more serious still, there are difficulties concerning the explanation of how epistemologically basic beliefs can be justified while satisfying foundationalist requirements. The main problem here is that these accounts fail in helping us to understand how it is that these allegedly foundational beliefs permit us to bridge the gap between our experience of something

and our knowledge of it. Any account that attempts to do this, itself presupposes the truth of some non-basic beliefs as part of our background knowledge which the foundational beliefs, in question, are supposed, by themselves, to justify. Finally, the main argument, that might incline some philosophers to seek out a foundationalist account of the structure of the justification of our beliefs, is invalid. As we have seen, to hold that requests for the justification of our beliefs must come to an end somewhere does not warrant the inference that it must come to an end in the same place for all contexts of inquiry.

Hence, it is quite likely that this general theory of the structure of the justification of our beliefs is mistaken. This does not mean that some future foundationalist account may be offered that might overcome the problems mentioned; though the prospects for this are certainly not good. But to eschew this sort of general theory of the justification of our beliefs also does not imply that no account of the justification of our beliefs can be given. Nor, in the absence of this general theory, does it imply that we are not justified in accepting any of our beliefs. It does imply that an acceptable account of the justification of our beliefs will be a non-foundationalist one. It will be an account that does not refer to privileged or epistemologically basic beliefs that are allegedly intrinsically credible independent of all contexts

of inquiry. In a word, it will be a view that maintains among other things, that it is unreasonable to request that the fundamental beliefs within a system of beliefs in a particular context of inquiry must be justifiable in terms of a class of unqualifiedly epistemologically basic beliefs. This request is unreasonable because it is in principle unsatisfiable. As will become apparent below, this collapse of foundationalism has important implications both for meta-theological skepticism and the rationality of theological beliefs.

## Chapter 5: Notes

1. Though I am critical of analytic philosophy of religion, I stress that I am critical of it not because it is "analytic" but because it is the one style of philosophy of religion with which I am most familiar that exhibits the presence and impact of foundationalism. It is the critique of this foundationalist framework that is my central concern. From the perspective of my thesis, I think Rorty is quite right to suggest that

The kind of philosophy which stems from Russell and Frege is like classical Husserlian phenomenology, simply one more attempt to put philosophy in the position which Kant wished it to have - that of judging other areas of culture on the basis of its special knowledge of the 'foundations' of these areas. 'Analytic' philosophy is one more variant of Kantian philosophy, a variant marked principally by thinking of representation as linguistic rather than mental and of philosophy of language rather than 'transcendental critique' or psychology as the discipline which exhibits the 'foundations of knowledge'.

Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 8.

2. Michael Williams, Groundless Belief, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), p. 23.
3. Nor does it imply that displaying the rationality of theological beliefs "within the context of a particular religious faith" is an obvious or simple matter. I will return to this issue below in Chapter 6.
4. Commenting on some of Nielsen's earlier papers in the philosophy of religion, Garceau remarks that "what seems to me to be demonstrated through Nielsen's efforts is that given a certain reconstruction of theism, skepticism is both intelligible and rational, and if this reconstruction of theism is correct skepticism appears to be the only position that an intelligent person may adopt. Nielsen is aware, however, that the believer has another interpretation of theism than the observer." On this point and the alternative understanding of the nature of religious belief and language in relation to the "experience of faith" that is fundamental for a participant, see Benoit



- Garceau, "On Dining With the Meta-Theological Skeptic: Comments on Nielsen's Position" in Mostafa Faghfoury ed., Analytical Philosophy of Religion in Canada, (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), pp. 127 - 128, 131 - 132.
5. Dallas High ed., New Essays in Religious Language, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. xii.
  6. Kai Nielsen, "Empiricism, Theoretical Constructs and God", Journal of Religion, 54(1974), p. 199.
  7. Kai Nielsen, "Religion and Groundless Believing" reprinted in Mostafa Faghfoury ed., Analytical Philosophy of Religion in Canada, p. 124.
  8. Benoît Garceau, "On Dining With the Meta-Theological Skeptic: Comments on Nielsen's Position", ibid., p. 127.
  9. In Chapter 6 I will offer a different model for understanding the meaning of theological beliefs that I hope is more useful than this one.
  10. Wilfred C. Smith, Belief and History, (Charlottesville, V.A.: University of Virginia Press, 1977), p. 21.
  11. Kai Nielsen, "Religion and Groundless Believing", ibid., p. 119.
  12. Kai Nielsen, "Empiricism, Theoretical Constructs and God", ibid., p. 199.
  13. Kai Nielsen, "Introductory Note" in Mostafa Faghfoury ed., Analytical Philosophy of Religion in Canada, p. 71.
  14. Basil Mitchell ed., The Philosophy of Religion, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 2.
  15. Some might consider that within this framework, there is a third strategy available for establishing the rationality of theological beliefs. It might be argued that theological beliefs are not non-basic beliefs at all. Their rational credentials do not have to be established by showing how they are justifiable either directly or indirectly in terms of a class of properly foundational beliefs. This is because theological beliefs or minimally belief in God, can be regarded as itself epistemologically basic because it satisfies the appropriate conditions of rational basicity. Suffice it to say that though this strategy is logically possible it is not plausible. After all, belief in God hardly seems to be intrinsically credible.

because it is self-evident, evident to the senses, incorrigible or publicly observable. However, when considering the implications of the collapse of a foundationalist framework for the rationality of theological beliefs, I will consider what might be construed as a variant of this strategy in section 6.24.

16. For my discussion of Heimbeck's views regarding the justifiability of theological beliefs, see above section 2.6.
17. Raeburne S. Heimbeck, Theology and Meaning, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), p. 173.
18. See above section 2.8.
19. See, for example, John Baillie, The Sense of the Presence of God, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), pp. 69ff., Kent Bendall and Frederick Ferré, Exploring the Logic of Faith, (New York: Association Press, 1962), pp. 163 - 181, Ian Crombie, "Theology and Falsification" in Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre eds., New Essays in Philosophical Theology, (London: SCM Press, 1955, 1963), pp. 109 - 130, Frederick Ferré, Language, Logic and God, (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), pp. 159 - 166, John Hick, Faith and Knowledge, pp. 134 - 165, Philosophy of Religion, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 94 - 106, George I. Mavrodes, Belief in God, (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 49 - 89, Ninian Smart, Reasons and Faiths, pp. 127 - 159, Richard Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism, p. 6, William J. Wainwright, "Religious Statements and the World", Religious Studies, 11(1966), pp. 49 - 60, John Wilson, Philosophy and Religion, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 34 - 95.
20. Kai Nielsen, "Empiricism, Theoretical Constructs and God", ibid., p. 207.
21. Kai Nielsen, Skepticism, (London: Macmillan Press, 1973), pp. 9 - 16, 13. His discussion of Meynell is based on Hugo Meynell, "Discussion of Language and the Concept of God", Question, No. 5, (January 1972), Sense and Nonsense and Christianity, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1964), and The New Theology and Modern Theologians, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1967).
22. Kai Nielsen, "Empiricism, Theoretical Constructs and God", ibid., p. 199.
23. Kai Nielsen, ibid., p. 208.

24. I say "alleged failure" because I wish to avoid a consideration of the details pro or con regarding the success or failure of this strategy for establishing the rationality of theological beliefs. Since I consider that it is the epistemological framework of this discussion that is at fault such a consideration is unnecessary. For Nielsen's critical discussion of Hick, Crombie, and Wilson's attempts, among others, in pursuing this strategy, see his "On Fixing the Reference Range of 'God'", Religious Studies, 2(1966), pp. 13 - 36, "Eschatological Verification", Canadian Journal of Theology, 9(1963), pp. 271 - 281, "Christian Positivism and the Appeal to Religious Experience", Journal of Religion, 42(1962), pp. 248 - 261, Contemporary Critiques of Religion, (London: Macmillan Press, 1971) and Scepticism.
25. See above Note 2.
26. Most prominent of those philosophers I have in mind are, Karl Popper, The Logic of Scientific Discovery, (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), Willard Quine, From a Logical Point of View, (New York: Harper & Row, 1953, 1961), Wilfrid Sellars, Science Perception and Reality, (London: Routledge, 1963) and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953, 1972) and On Certainty, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).
27. John Kekes, The Nature of Philosophy, (Totowa, N.J.: Rowan and Littlefield, 1980), p. 98.
28. In what follows unless otherwise stated I treat the expressions "epistemologically basic" or "foundational" as equivalent.
29. For accounts of the problems confronting each of these alternatives, see Michael Williams, Groundless Belief, pp. 115 - 143 and Nicholas Wolterstorff, Reason Within the Bounds of Religion, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 31 - 41. I note in passing that some versions of falsificationism also involve an appeal to epistemologically basic beliefs. These versions purport to explain when we are not rationally warranted in accepting a non-basic belief. For a discussion of the problems with this proposal, see Wolterstorff, pp. 37 - 41.
30. For accounts of the various problems besetting appeals to the "given" in the context of phenomenalism and perceptual knowledge, see Michael Williams, Groundless Belief, pp. 25 - 59 and Nicholas Wolterstorff, Reason Within the Bounds of Religion, pp. 42 - 51.

31. It is very important to stress that these are the alternatives according to proponents of foundationalism. Below I will argue that this is a false set of alternatives.
32. Karl Popper, The Logic of Scientific Discovery, p. 105. Sellars makes a similar point when he maintains that it is a "mistake of a piece with the 'naturalistic fallacy' in ethics" to attempt "to analyze epistemic facts without remainder into non-epistemic facts". The reason is because such a foundationalist project refuses to acknowledge that "in characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state, we are placing it in the logical space of reasons of justifying and being able to justify what one says." Wilfrid Sellars, Science Perception and Reality, pp. 131, 169.
33. I owe this second example to Walter Sims. Leszek Kolakowski's recent study of Marxism offers an additional example worth quoting in full.

Karl Marx was a German philosopher. This does not sound a particularly enlightening statement, yet it is not so commonplace as it may at first appear. Jules Michelet, it will be recalled, used to begin his lectures on British history with the words: 'Messieurs, L'Angleterre est une île'. It makes a good deal of difference whether we simply know that Britain is an island, or whether we interpret its history in the light of that fact, which thus takes on a significance of its own. Similarly, the statement that Marx was a German philosopher may imply a certain interpretation of his thought and of its philosophical or historical importance, as a system unfolded in terms of economic analysis and political doctrine. A presentation of this kind is neither self-evident nor uncontroversial.

Leszek Kolakowski, Main Currents of Marxism, Vol. I, The Founders, tr. P.S. Falla, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 1. The point of each of these examples is that the interpretation adumbrated in any description has important often unforeseen consequences for our knowledge of the phenomena so described.

34. With perceptual experience and our beliefs about it in mind, Wolterstorff comments that

...only if our beliefs about the nature of what we are experiencing are already fully accurate will that which we experience appear to us as it really is. But this is obviously devastating to foundationalism. Perception does not yield a rock-firm base for our theories. Rather our theories must already be accurate if our perceptions are to be veridical. Perception is not insulated from theory. Theories cart along their own confirmations.

Reason Within the Bounds of Religion, pp. 48 - 39.

35. Ludwig Wittgenstein, On Certainty, #141, p. 21e. Quine's much quoted remark strikes a similar chord, "our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body." From a Logical Point of View, p. 41. So also I submit do our statements about the meaning of our experience of it.
36. Michael Williams, Groundless Belief, p. 63. The thesis that there must be ultimate terminating points for chains of justification, as Williams notes, is neutral regarding the question as to whether or not intrinsically credible beliefs are capable of revision in the light of experience or are incorrigible. As he explains,  
  
whether we opt for incorrigibility or prima-facie justification, the credibility of basic beliefs must still be intrinsic. That is their justification must not accrue to them through knowledge of any general facts about the world or any further background knowledge.  
  
p. 62. As I put this point above, the justification of epistemologically basic beliefs, on the foundationalist model, cannot involve a recourse to or presuppose the truth of any non-basic beliefs.
37. Michael Williams, Groundless Belief, pp. 83 - 84.
38. John Kekes, The Nature of Philosophy, p. 98.

## Chapter 6: Undermining Foundationalism in Analytic Philosophy of Religion II

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### 6.23 Two Extreme Views

In exploring some of the implications of a critique of foundationalism in the philosophy of religion, in this chapter I steer a course between two extreme views about the rationality of theological beliefs. The first is the view that the rationality of theological beliefs must be established by showing how these beliefs are justifiable in terms of a class of beliefs that are epistemologically basic in the sense that their justification is privileged and presupposes no other non-basic beliefs. The second is the view that given the demise of a foundationalist account of the structure of the justification of our beliefs, the believer is quite right to consider that his belief in God is epistemologically basic within the context of his faith. I maintain that both of these views are mistaken and they are mistaken for the same reason. Both views involve a commitment to the foundationalist view that some of our beliefs are epistemologically basic in the sense that their justification is somehow privileged.

Considering the first view, in section 5.21, I argued that both versions of meta-theological skepticism pose

a challenge to the rationality of theological beliefs because these critiques of validity presuppose a commitment to foundationalism. In particular, both versions arise as a consequence of the apparent failure of apologists to show how theological beliefs are justifiable either directly or indirectly in terms of a class of beliefs that are regarded, relative to theological beliefs, as epistemologically basic. As such, the key claim is that the rationality of non-basic theological beliefs must be established in terms ultimately of a class of beliefs that themselves do not presuppose any other non-basic theological beliefs whose rational status is as yet in question.

In section 5.22, I offered a summary account of some of the main problems confronted by a foundationalist account of the structure of the justification of our beliefs. The central difficulty for this theory is that it is implausible to hold that there is a class of beliefs that can function as epistemologically basic independent of all particular inquiries. It is doubtful, in other words, that the justification of our beliefs reposes ultimately upon a class of beliefs themselves justified without presupposing any other non-basic beliefs. Against foundationalism, the justification of any belief always presupposes the truth of some non-basic beliefs as part of our background knowledge that the epistemologically basic beliefs by themselves are supposed to justify. In a word, there is no class of epistemologically basic beliefs in this unqualified foundationalist sense.

Hence, I maintain that as a challenge to the rationality of theological beliefs, both versions of meta-theological skepticism rest upon an unreasonable demand. Both versions maintain that the believer must establish the rationality of theological beliefs by explaining how these beliefs are somehow justifiable in terms of a class of beliefs that do not themselves presuppose any other non-basic theological beliefs. It is alleged that the apparent failure of these attempts is indicative of a lack of rationality. This allegation is mistaken. However, it is not mistaken because theological beliefs must and can comply with this request. It is mistaken because this request is in principle unsatisfiable. As we have seen, none of our beliefs that we hold as a consequence of particular contexts of inquiry can satisfy it. What needs to be underlined is that theological beliefs are no better and certainly no worse off than any of our other non-theological beliefs in this respect. In the absence of a foundationalist framework, there is no reason to suspect that theological beliefs must fail of rationality because their cognitive meaning or justification cannot be accomplished in terms of a class of beliefs that have no theological presuppositions.

Nevertheless, I do not mean to imply that displaying the rationality of theological beliefs within the context of a particular religious faith is a matter that can be dealt with easily. For example, perhaps in concert with the views



of certain protestant reformers, Alvin Plantinga has defended the second extreme view about the rationality of belief in God. According to Plantinga, in the absence of a foundationalist framework, the believer "is entirely within his epistemic rights, entirely rational, in believing in God, even if he has no argument for this belief and does not believe it on the basis of any other beliefs he holds."<sup>1</sup> In other words, in the absence of the view that there is or must be a class of beliefs identifiable by means of general conditions of rational basicity that constitute the foundations for the justification of any of our beliefs regardless of particular contexts of inquiry, the believer is quite right to consider that "fundamentally belief in God can be properly taken as basic".<sup>2</sup>

Though I think Plantinga is correct to reject foundationalism, he is mistaken in advocating that belief in God can be considered by the believer as an epistemologically basic belief. In this chapter, I begin by arguing against Plantinga that it is no less mistaken to suppose that, if the justification of theological beliefs is quite properly context-dependent, then believers are rationally warranted without further ado, to consider that within the context of their faith, their belief in God can be regarded by them as epistemologically basic. This suggestion forgets that the reason why we reject the view that the rationality of our beliefs must be

established in terms of some class of epistemologically basic beliefs is that it is implausible to believe that there can be any epistemologically basic beliefs in the requisite sense. Again, a critique of foundationalism implies that the justification of our beliefs always presupposes other non-basic beliefs. The point is that none of our beliefs, whether theological or not, are justifiable in the sense that their justification is privileged or intrinsically credible. In particular, as I will argue in section 6.24, a believer's alleged experience of God no more and no less than our experience of anything else does not afford those who enjoy it a self-authenticating knowledge of God.<sup>3</sup>

But to reject the view that a believer's alleged experience of God affords him any self-authenticating knowledge of God does not imply that theological beliefs are not rationally justifiable. Nor does it imply that an alleged experience of God cannot be real or genuine. On the contrary, in section 6.25, I maintain that given the demise of foundationalism, there are no good arguments available for thinking that an alleged experience of God can possess no evidential value for the theological beliefs believers may hold because of it. Considering these arguments also affords me the opportunity of clarifying the claim to truth involved in the beliefs advanced in a theological context of inquiry.

A key question that emerges from this discussion, however, is this. How is the evidential value of an alleged experience of God to be construed in the absence of a foundationalist perspective? Alternatively, given that the rationality of theological beliefs need not be established in terms of a class of epistemologically basic beliefs and given also that an alleged experience of God does not afford those who enjoy it any self-authenticating knowledge of God, how is the rationality of theological beliefs to be displayed within the context of a particular religious faith? In section 6.26, I offer an alternative sketch of an approach to our subject that consciously seeks to preserve and account for the manifest diversity and development of theological beliefs. It does so by construing what is central to religious faith as a particular kind of experience rather than a particular belief or set of beliefs. As such theological beliefs, the particular results of theological research areas, are more plausibly construed as fallible human attempts to spell out the meaning and implications of this alleged experience for thought and living. But I offer this sketch only as a provisional attempt to suggest that the question of the rationality of theological beliefs is to be explored more fruitfully by recognizing and emphasizing the dynamic context in which this thinking moves.

## 6.24 Religious Experience and the Justification of Theological Beliefs

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As I have said before, though I think Plantinga is correct in his rejection of foundationalism, he is mistaken to hold that belief in God can be considered by the believer as an epistemologically basic belief. To construe belief in God in this way is to risk obscuring the relationship between theological beliefs and the believer's judgement of the significance of his alleged experience of the way things are, including for some, the experience of God, world, self and human living in the light of them, articulated within the context of a particular religious tradition. In the absence of a foundationalist framework, I intend to establish the importance of considering carefully and on its own terms the potential epistemic value of the believer's alleged experience of God.

It is important to note at the outset that neither Plantinga nor the reformers he champions are claiming that belief in God is properly foundational because this belief satisfies certain conditions of rational basicity. For example, they do not hold that belief in God is epistemologically basic because it is self-evident, evident to the senses, incorrigible or justifiable in terms of straightforwardly empirical non-religious statements.<sup>4</sup> There are no such general conditions of rational basicity that independently of all contexts of inquiry, epistemologically basic beliefs must satisfy. But

to hold that for the believer within a religious context, belief in God can be taken by him as properly foundational, does imply the following thesis. It implies the claim that for the believer the justification of his belief in God is privileged in the sense that it is intrinsically credible, self-justifying or self-authenticating. I maintain that the collapse of foundationalism provides no warrant for accepting this thesis about the justification of belief in God.

To establish this contention, I think a return to yet another aspect of the Nielsen-Garceau exchange will prove instructive. Recently, Garceau has insisted that the "logico-linguistic approach to religion", espoused by Nielsen, "can only be secondary to a more direct approach which consists in questioning the thing of religion, the experience itself, in relation to which religious language [and theological belief] is but an expressive system".<sup>5</sup> But early in his response to Garceau, Nielsen offers a summary of his negative estimation of the epistemological value of appeals to the "experience of faith" or the "experience of God". He writes:

I certainly acknowledge it is an experience that some people have and I do not deny that for some it is an important experience in orienting their lives. What I do deny is that it is some kind of essentially private experience which gives us some self-authenticating knowledge or direct access to His Presence not monitorable by intersubjective empirical knowledge. And I do deny that such an experience provides us with any evidential value or inferential

grounds for the belief that God exists and I also deny that where God is construed non-anthropomorphically as an Infinite Individual Transcendent to the world, that it makes any sense to say we have experienced or become aware of God or felt the presence of God.<sup>6</sup>

As I interpret this passage, there are four claims advanced. First, a certain sort of experience, seemingly of God, does occur and is important for those who enjoy it in orienting their lives. Second, this sort of experience does not provide those who enjoy it some self-authenticating knowledge of God or direct access to His Presence. Third, such a putative experience of God does not provide any evidential or inferential grounds for the belief that God exists. Fourth, given a non-anthropomorphic conception of God, it makes no sense to say we have experienced or become aware of God.

In the present context, I think Nielsen's defence of his second and third claims merits careful attention.<sup>7</sup> Again, according to Nielsen's second claim, a believer's alleged experience of God does not afford he who enjoys it some self-authenticating knowledge of God. He defends this claim by using considerations drawn from Wittgenstein's work "from the Blue Book onward". These considerations cast grave doubt upon the possibility of a "private language" or the possibility of a "privileged access" to the truth of our beliefs that our experience allegedly affords. For instance, Nielsen remarks that an alleged experience of God, "does not provide a basis, or a ground in experience, for the believer

that cannot be known by anyone, (if he would but take the trouble), in an ordinary propositional way. There is no essentially privileged access here, for there is nothing that is not manifestable and expressible in a 'public language'."8

On this point, at least against Plantinga, Nielsen is quite right.<sup>9</sup> Again, to hold that belief in God is properly foundational, minimally for the believer and within a religious context is nonetheless to hold that within this context its justification is somehow privileged. But this contention ignores that what is defective about foundationalism is not merely the view that the justification of our beliefs must rest on some one class of epistemologically basic beliefs that independent of all contexts of inquiry constitute the foundations of our knowledge. To abandon a foundationalist framework is not just to abandon the view that there are general conditions of rational basicity characteristic of properly foundational beliefs. Rather it is also to abandon the view that the justification of any of our beliefs is privileged in the sense that its justification can be secured without presupposing any other less basic beliefs. It is this point that is at issue in Nielsen's view that our experience whether putatively religious or not, does not afford those who enjoy it with a privileged access to the truth of the beliefs they hold as a consequence of it.

But to argue in this manner is not at all to advance much less warrant, the additional claim that an experience of God, if and when it occurs cannot be real or genuine. Nor does it imply that a believer cannot legitimately appeal to his reading of its significance as evidence for the truth of his beliefs. It implies only that an alleged experience of God cannot be a ground justifying a claim to a self-authenticating knowledge of God. As Donovan has remarked:

The chief point of philosophical criticisms of 'knowing God by experience' amounts to this. Where popular religious reasoning falls down is not in taking the sense of God too seriously, but in trying to treat it as a form of knowledge of a self-certifying kind immediately available to those who have it. Knowledge, the philosophers point out is just not like that whether it is knowledge of God or of anything else. The sense of knowing is never on its own a sufficient sign of knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

What is worth noting here is that Nielsen's argument and Donovan's summary statement regarding the epistemic status of an alleged experience of God refer to considerations about how the relationship between our experience and knowledge is to be understood.

What is amiss about appeals to an alleged experience of God construed as providing a privileged access to the truth of beliefs about God has nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that these are appeals to an alleged experience of God. The important point is that an alleged experience of God, no



more than the experience of anything else, does not afford those who enjoy it with a privileged access to the truth of the beliefs they advance because of it. Hence against Plantinga, it is mistaken to suppose that belief in God even for the believer and within the context of a particular religious faith can be regarded as epistemologically basic. This belief even for the believer is not intrinsically credible and requires some sort of justification.

But if this estimation of the merits of an appeal to an alleged experience of God for justifying a claim to a self-authenticating knowledge of God is correct then the question to pursue is this. To what degree can an alleged experience of God if and when it occurs, possess evidential value for the justification of the beliefs those who enjoy it advance?

On this question, Nielsen's third thesis is directly relevant. According to his third claim, an alleged experience of God does not provide any evidential or inferential grounds for the claim that God exists. In the context of the passage cited earlier, it appears that Nielsen believes that this claim follows from a denial of the claim that there can be a self-authenticating knowledge of God. But if this is so, I think Nielsen is very much mistaken.

To understand why he is mistaken here is to notice and take seriously the fact that considerations vitiating

claims to the possibility of a self-authenticating knowledge of God apply equally and with the same force against claims to the possibility of a self-authenticating knowledge of things offered on the ground of our alleged experience of them. Again, the considerations in question refer to a critique of the concept of epistemologically basic, privileged or intrinsically credible beliefs. They refer to a critique of the foundationalist view that our system of knowledge must be founded on a class of beliefs whose justification does not presuppose the truth of other non-basic beliefs the former allegedly support. This critique trades not on the alleged content of properly foundational beliefs. Rather it criticizes a foundationalist account of the structure of the justification of our beliefs that presupposes the existence of some class of epistemologically basic beliefs in the first place.

Hence, if it is true that an alleged experience of God provides no evidential or inferential ground for the claim that God exists because such an alleged experience is not self-authenticating this is no less true for our alleged experience of things. Our alleged experience of things can provide no evidential or inferential ground for claims about things because our experience of things is not self-authenticating either. Were one to argue in this fashion, one would be committed, however unwittingly, to the view that no knowledge of anything is possible on the ground of an appeal

to the evidential value of our experience of it. But this is absurd. Granted, in the absence of any recourse to privileged or intrinsically credible beliefs, we may always risk being mistaken in thinking that our interpretation of our experience provides us with evidence for the truth of our beliefs. But to hold this view is hardly to assert that since we might be wrong on some or many occasions, we can never be right and so never rightly claim to know the truth of some of our beliefs on the evidence provided by our experience.

What has gone wrong here can be clarified by recognizing with Swinburne, that many philosophical discussions of religious experience advance the distinctly odd thesis "that an experience is evidence for nothing beyond itself and that therefore religious experience has no evidential value."<sup>11</sup> Nielsen comes close to advancing it explicitly when, in speaking of the claim "that something tastes pleasant", (which he considers might be construed as self-authenticating), he suggests that:

it becomes less plausible to believe that we have anything counting as self-authenticating knowledge, which could make objective knowledge claims, could be a source of objective truth about some non-psychological reality external to ourselves.<sup>12</sup>

But this remark conveys the impression that we have only two alternatives. Either some of our experiences do afford us some self-authenticating knowledge; there are intrinsically

credible beliefs, but then these experiences are evidence only for the truth of beliefs about our psychological states. Or such experiences do not afford us any self-authenticating knowledge, but then these experiences can possess no evidential value for the truth of the beliefs we hold as a consequence of them.

But this is surely a pair of false alternatives. Interestingly enough, these alternatives amount to a special case of the strategy invoked in a defense of foundationalism generally. As I noted above in section 5.22, that strategy pleads, that, in the absence of some recourse to privileged or epistemologically basic beliefs, we would not be justified in accepting any of our beliefs because of the (spurious) threat of an infinite regress of justification.

To expose just what is distinctly odd about discussing religious experience in this fashion, I begin again with Swinburne, by noting the fact that many of these same philosophers would not adopt this view about the evidential value of our experience "when discussing experiences of any other kind". For instance, when we consider ordinary cases of sense perception, if "I seem to see a table in the corner" or if "I think this orange tastes pleasant", these reports are taken as good evidence for supposing that the belief, that "there is a table in the corner" or the belief that "this orange tastes pleasant" are true. Of course, in either case,

it is possible that I could be mistaken both about how things seem to me and how things are. Nevertheless, as Swinburne suggests:

...it is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations) if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that X is present then probably X is present; what one seems to perceive is probably so. How things seem to be is good grounds for a belief about how things are. From this it would follow that in the absence of special considerations, all religious experiences might be taken by their subjects as genuine, and hence as substantial grounds for belief in the existence of their apparent object-God or Mary or Ultimate Reality or Posiedon.<sup>13</sup>

I leave aside the question whether Swinburne's proposed "principle of credulity" is to be construed as an "ultimate principle of rationality" or simply as a widely held but defeasible epistemic belief about the veridicality of first-person reports of our experience. It is rather more important to understand carefully the view Swinburne is proposing.<sup>14</sup>

He points out that he is not suggesting that "an experience entails the existence of its purported object". Nor is he maintaining without further ado, that reports of an alleged experience of God can be taken by themselves and straight away at face value. Swinburne's proposed principle of rationality is a "principle of credulity" not a principle of gullibility. But to advocate the importance of a principle of "credulity" is to draw attention to the additional question that remains after a preoccupation with issues about the

possibility of self-authenticating knowledge on the ground of our experience subsides. This additional question is simply whether our experience of something affords those who have it with at least prima facie evidence justifying their beliefs about it.

Commenting on Penelhum's view that "an argument beginning with the occurrence, as a psychological fact, of a given experience or set of experiences and ending with ascription of them to a divine cause is either a poor explanatory hypothesis or a circular argument",<sup>15</sup> Swinburne remarks:

Such writers do not seem to me to be aware of the skeptical bog in which the failure to accept the Principle of Credulity for other experiences will lead them and if it is all right to use it for other experiences they need a good argument to show that it is not all right to use it for religious experiences.<sup>16</sup>

On this point, I think Swinburne is clearly right. If he were wrong, if none of our experiences could count, at least, as prima facie evidence for the justification of our beliefs, then I submit that it is difficult in the extreme to envisage what, if anything else could. Hence, in concert with Swinburne, I suggest that what is so regarding the evidential value of our experience generally and if there are "no good arguments" for supposing otherwise, is so regarding the evidential value of an alleged religious experience. In other words, believers are quite within their epistemic rights to appeal

to their community's alleged religious experience and the interpretation of its significance they offer as, at least, prima facie evidence relevant for justifying whatever theological beliefs they may hold. However, such an appeal is not to a self-authenticating knowledge of God because, as we have seen, none of our beliefs are justifiable in the sense that they are privileged or intrinsically credible. Justification always takes place within a particular context of inquiry in which many other beliefs are presupposed. But what implications the contextual nature of justification may have for the justification of theological beliefs and for interpreting the evidential value of an alleged experience of God remains to be seen.

#### 6.25 Verification and the Theological Context

I have argued that the denial of the view that the justification of belief in God is privileged on the ground of an alleged religious experience does not by itself imply that such experiences can possess no evidential value for the justification of the beliefs of those who have enjoyed them. But the obvious question that arises at this point is the following: are there not "good arguments" readily available for restricting the scope of the application of Swinburne's "principle of credulity" so that it excludes an application to

an alleged religious experience?<sup>17</sup> As is clear, Nielsen, particular, considers that there are good arguments for suspecting the evidential value of an appeal to an alleged religious experience of God.<sup>18</sup> Taking his arguments as illustrative, I maintain that they hit their mark only if some version of foundationalism is tacitly presupposed. In addition, I also maintain that if properly qualified, they hit their mark only if we misconstrue the claim to truth involved in a theological context of inquiry.

I begin by noting that it is in regard to the issue of the evidential value of an alleged religious experience of God that Nielsen's fourth thesis mentioned above is relevant. As I have suggested already, given the manner in which his skeptical judgement of its evidential value is embedded in his discussion, it appeared that he considers that it follows directly from his rejection of the view that an alleged religious experience of God affords those who enjoy it some self-authenticating knowledge of God. But I submit that this skeptical assessment follows if at all, from his fourth thesis. Again according to this fourth thesis, given non-anthropomorphic conceptions of God, it does not make sense to say we have an experience of God. As Nielsen bluntly puts it.

...if God is infinite and transcendent to the world, we plainly have no experience of Him, we cannot...see Him or in any way apprehend Him or encounter Him or stand in His presence. We have only Ersatz metaphors which we cannot cash in.<sup>19</sup>



One can distinguish two lines of argument, one explicit, the other implicit, in defense of this fourth thesis in Nielsen's discussion. The first explicit argument is that an alleged experience of God cannot possibly occur because in claiming to have experienced "that which is transcendent to the world" or in claiming "literally to have an experience or in any way encounter that which is infinite"; "it sounds very much as if it were the case that the believer is claiming to have experienced that which is beyond experience and that, of course, makes no sense."<sup>20</sup> The second implicit argument is at most adumbrated in his remark in the passage cited earlier. The remark I am referring to is the suggestion that if a believer is to be considered rationally warranted in claiming to have knowledge of God on the ground of an appeal to his alleged religious experience, then "such claims must be monitorable by intersubjective empirical knowledge". He makes this requirement somewhat clearer later on when he indicates that to say that a claim to knowledge is "monitorable by intersubjective empirical knowledge" means that "the statement 'God exists' is either publicly intersubjectively verifiable (confirmable or infirmable) or it is not".<sup>21</sup> I will consider both of these arguments, briefly, in turn.

As Nielsen explains, the thrust of the first argument is that if a believer claims "literally to have an experience or in any way encounter that which is infinite"

the complaint that such a contention is apparently contradictory need not trade on any particular reading "narrow or non-narrow we give to experience". Sustaining this objection is the legitimate request "that the believer explain carefully what he means since it appears at least that his claim is contradictory". Now I readily confess that I do not fully understand all that a believer who may assert this understands by it, yet I do not find it difficult to dispell the air of paradox that Nielsen considers surrounds it.

To do so requires learning to place such a contention in an appropriate context and taking note of some of the features characteristic of that context. The latter condition is most important. As I have suggested above, beliefs about God of this sort are in fact derivative, highly complex products of theological reflection useful and valuable to the degree that they assist believers in articulating the meaning of particular kinds of alleged experiences.<sup>22</sup> These beliefs are justifiable to the degree that they can be inferred in a process of reasoning from phenomena and experiences, construed as signs, that are interpreted in a context provided by a judgement of significance, formative for a given historical tradition. The point of this brief reminder is simply that from this perspective, it is by no means obvious, as Nielsen presumes, that this "claim" is to be construed literally as a "claim" about God alone. Instead, I think it more accurate to say

that beliefs of this theologically ramified sort are in fact beliefs about the meaning of certain features of our experience that are disclosed when it is interpreted from the perspective of a believer's and his community's alleged relationship with God.<sup>23</sup>

With this background, I see no reason why such an assertion as the one Nielsen considers cannot be construed as Donovan has suggested we construe other similar and apparently puzzling claims about God, Ultimate Reality, Brahman, The Void, Tao or what have you, that allege that these are ineffable, indescribable, inexhaustible, or inexpressible.

He writes:

When it is said that God (or some other ultimate reality) is inexpressible this must be taken to mean not that one can say absolutely nothing about God, but rather that one can say nothing absolutely about God. For God would not be an ultimate reality, if any words or descriptions would fully comprehend or be 'the last word' on the subject.<sup>24</sup>

Hence, to say that an experience of God is an experience of a Presence that is transcendent to the world is, among many other things no doubt, to say that any alleged experience of God, however direct and compelling it is for participants, is fragmentary. It is fragmentary in the sense that all human interpretations of the import of such an experience and its implications for understanding our other experiences are fallible.

On the ground of such an alleged experience, one is never

entitled to claim that one's reading of the import of this experience exhausts all of what may be or is true of God. To infer the belief that God is transcendent in this sense of being, for us, and for as long as we remain human, epistemologically inexhaustible, is, I submit, no more contradictory or paradoxical than making the same claim for our knowledge of things on the ground of the multiple varieties of our experience of them and the multiple perspectives in which this experience can be construed and beliefs about it assessed.<sup>25</sup>

Stressing an analogy between the epistemic inexhaustibility of our experience of things and a believer's alleged experience of God might be considered helpful for demystifying some things some believers are inclined to say about God. But it might be argued that treating all theological claims advanced, in part on the ground of an alleged experience of God in this way is misleading because there are important if not crucial disanalogies too. For instance, no one seriously doubts that things exist and that our experience of them possesses some evidential value for justifying the beliefs we hold about them. However, the same cannot be said either about the existence of God or about the evidential value of a believer's alleged experience of God. Referring to the latter point, Nielsen's second argument maintains that if an alleged experience of God is to have any evidential value it "must be monitorable by intersubjective empirical knowledge". This

phrase implies that the beliefs about God that believers hold on the ground of this alleged experience must be open to public intersubjective verification. The idea is that unless some theological beliefs are verifiable (confirmable or infirmable) in principle by some publicly observable intersubjectively available state of affairs then these theological beliefs are without cognitive significance. Hence, if the cognitive significance of putative theological beliefs cannot be specified in terms of beliefs justifiable in this fashion, then Nielsen concludes that even though religious experience is an "evident psychological reality" it is necessary "to question its noetic status".<sup>26</sup>

As is apparent from section 5.21, Nielsen's second argument is an example of the sort of meta-theological skepticism that emerges as a result of the apparent failure of the first strategy for establishing the rationality of theological beliefs. According to this version of meta-theological skepticism, putative theological beliefs are cognitively meaningless unless their cognitive meaning can be specified directly in terms of a class of beliefs themselves in principle verifiable and intersubjectively testable on empirical grounds alone. But a critique of foundationalism provides the background required to argue that it is difficult to envisage how any such a priori standard for assessing the rationality of theological beliefs could itself be justified. The point is

that in the absence of a foundationalist perspective there is simply no reason for believing that the cognitive significance of theological beliefs must be established in terms of a class of beliefs about "some publicly observable intersubjectively available state of affairs".<sup>27</sup>

I do not dispute whether this standard of public empirical verifiability that Nielsen proposes for factual statements is appropriate for specifying the cognitive meaning of some of our beliefs in some contexts of inquiry.<sup>28</sup> The issue is whether and why this standard is appropriate for theological beliefs in a theological context of inquiry. On this score, I think that the cognitive meaning of theological beliefs ought to be assessed according to this standard of public verifiability only if one of two conditions obtained. If first, this standard of verification were normative for all of our beliefs regardless of all particular inquiries or if second, it were normative for theological beliefs advanced in a theological context of inquiry, then these beliefs would deserve censure for failure to comply with it.

To consider the first condition, as I have argued, the strategy of demonstrating the rationality of theological beliefs in this way presupposes the discredited foundationalist view that there exists a class of epistemologically basic beliefs. It does so because to advocate that this standard is normative generally for all of our beliefs is to defend the

view that the cognitive meaning of all of our beliefs must be specified in terms of a class of beliefs themselves justifiable in some way directly on empirical grounds alone without presupposing any other non-basic beliefs. It is, in other words, to defend the view that there exists a class of (publicly empirically verifiable) beliefs whose justification is somehow privileged. Moreover, if there were such a class of privileged or intrinsically credible beliefs then this class could serve as the ultimate terminating point for all chains of the justification of our beliefs in all contexts of inquiry. In addition, if there were such a class of epistemologically basic beliefs, then the standards articulating their features could be invoked legitimately for purposes of evaluating the cognitive meaningfulness of beliefs characteristic of other inquiries. But there are formidable difficulties confronting the view that there can be a class of epistemologically basic beliefs whose justification is somehow privileged. In particular, the major problem consists in explaining how our experience affords us any privileged access to the truth of these beliefs without presupposing some recourse to the truth of some non-basic beliefs that the former by themselves are supposed to justify.

Hence, it is doubtful that a general standard of the sort Nielsen suggests can be considered normative for all of our beliefs in all contexts of inquiry. But to consider the

second condition and in fairness to Nielsen, perhaps a compelling case can be offered for believing that the standard of verification he proposes is normative for theological beliefs advanced within a theological context of inquiry.

To explain, Nielsen's response to an objection against the way he conducts his skeptical case is instructive. According to this objection, Nielsen complains that he has been accused unjustly of performing:

...a conjuring trick with 'God'. First I treat 'God' as a word which does not stand for any determinate, discrete reality in order to show that there is a problem about the reference of 'God' and then I insist on the propriety of asking what is this God, thereby inconsistently treating 'God' as if it were to be thought of as a term standing for a determinate discrete reality. However, it is not I who treat 'God' this way, but it is the very use of 'God' which has the incoherence in it. On the one hand, God is not an object among objects and is not something whose essence whose 'whatness', we can understand, but on the other hand, 'God' is presumably an expression used referringly and an expression used in sentences employed to make statements. But then it must be possible to say...what God is so that we can ascertain the truth-value of the statements in question; but if we say what God is, we treat God as an object while it remains the case that it is a conceptual or grammatical remark to say God is not an object, a being among beings. The cleft and incoherence is in the very first-order God-talk itself.<sup>29</sup>

I think there is some justice in Nielsen's complaint. Again, I maintain that as long as we return a particular reading of what belief in God amounts to then Nielsen is quite right to evaluate it according to the standard of verification he proposes and to reject these putative beliefs as invalid.



Bearing in mind the target of his version of meta-theological skepticism, it is important to remember that Nielsen has no quarrel or problem about the cognitive significance of anthropomorphic conceptions of God. Anthropomorphic conceptions of God assume that "God is at least in principle observable" or involve assumptions about the logic of God-talk which presuppose that God is at least in principle verifiable or in some other way empirically observable or detectable". But though these conceptions are plainly factually intelligible, they are "absurdly false - little better than a gross superstition".<sup>30</sup> Conversely, if we retain a religiously adequate non-anthropomorphic conception of God where "God" is not in principle publicly verifiable, it appears that we must sacrifice any referential use for the word "God". We sacrifice, apparently, the view that "'God' is really being used as a term which is about some difficult to characterize but still objective reality" where "Christianity is now simply a way of life cum ceremony. It is no longer as well a set of cosmological truth-claims".<sup>31</sup>

So, to say with Nielsen, that "the statement 'God exists' is either publicly intersubjectively verifiable (confirmable or infirmable) or it is not", is actually to confront the believer with the following nasty dilemma. If the believer holds that "God exists" is a belief that is publicly intersubjectively verifiable then what he/she believes in is

a factually intelligible obviously false and gross superstition. Conversely, if the believer holds that "God exists" is a belief that is not publicly intersubjectively verifiable then what he/she believes in is a factually unintelligible religiously sensitive picture preference emptied of any claim to truth.

I think that the most appropriate strategy to take for dealing with this dilemma is to urge that it is a false dilemma. In particular, I begin by noting that I have no objection to the contention that the standard of verification Nielsen proposes is not appropriate for the evaluation of the cognitive significance of our putative factual beliefs.<sup>32</sup>

If the debate about God-talk has established anything, I think it is that if a believer's alleged experience of a Divine Presence is genuine and manifest in the empirical world, that Presence is not a publicly verifiable phenomenon. Moreover, this result does have important consequences for theological reflection. For example, those who maintain that "belief in God" names a relationship between themselves and some extraordinary object or those who maintain that their theological beliefs are hypotheses for explaining the behaviour of things as these are experienced "in a world set objectively over against us and indifferent to our purposes" are mistaken and rightly criticized from this perspective.<sup>33</sup>

But this criticism offered from this perspective must be understood in a properly qualified way if its value and limits are to be ascertained. Regarding its value, I note that in the absence of a foundationalist theory of justification, there is no one class of beliefs or standard of rational basicity normative for the justification of all of our beliefs independent of all contexts of inquiry. Hence, failure to comply with a standard of verification of the sort advocated by Nielsen is indicative of a failure of rationality only if this standard is appropriate for the evaluation of theological beliefs. As I have just suggested, I think the value of this type of meta-theological skepticism is to be construed in the following way. It is useful for drawing attention to the fact that the context appropriate for understanding and assessing an alleged experience of God, in particular, or theological beliefs in general, is not a context in which additional information about some highly unusual matter of fact is acquired.

Regarding its limits, this criticism does not warrant the general meta-theological skeptical conclusion that theological beliefs cannot be considered rationally justifiable. To reiterate, it is a mistake to suppose that theological beliefs are related to and grounded upon our experience of things in the manner that ordinary factual beliefs allegedly are. Instead, as I have suggested earlier, it is more accurate to hold that complex theological beliefs about God are the results of a process of reasoning from signs whose sources are

located in interpreted experiences. As such, the claim to truth of an alleged experience of God, or theological beliefs generally, involves is a claim to truth about how things are in the context of the meaning our experience of them has articulated in subject-related terms.

In this respect, I think it is appropriate to suggest with Sayre that:

...to believe in God is to view the world as possessing a comprehensive significance in which human vicissitudes are ultimately meaningful. By 'comprehensive significance', here I mean an all encompassing order in which human experience fits with the rest of nature and by suggesting that human vicissitude in this order is ultimately meaningful, I mean that the unaccountable excursions of human experience finally cease to appear gratuitous.<sup>34</sup>

I think that what Sayre is after here is familiar enough. His suggestion is that believing in God is "a capacity to respond in certain ways to certain experiences under the perception of the world as a certain sort of place".<sup>35</sup> So, for example, when confronted with severe hardship, to believe in God is to recognize that panic or despair are unnecessary and unwarranted because the world is viewed as a place where ultimately perseverance is not thwarted. When confronted with suffering, to believe in God is a matter of interpreting the world as a place that is not ultimately hostile to, or at odds with, or indifferent to the vagaries of human living. When burdened with guilt, to believe in God is a matter of experiencing the world as a

place in which forgiveness is not foreign or impossible. When tempted to moral transgression, to believe in God is a matter of being aware of the world as a source of strength which is ultimately reliable in our efforts to become better persons and so on.<sup>36</sup>

Chief among the merits of this way of understanding what belief in God amounts to are two. First, it underlines the point that believing in God is not a matter of believing that "certain facts are the case" so much as it is a matter of the acceptance of certain facts in the light of a certain way of viewing them".<sup>37</sup> Again, with reference to the example of resisting moral temptation, to believe in God is not simply a matter of believing something about what God may or may not do for us. Rather, to believe in God is to look on this situation as a test and challenge to our character and to respond to it out of the confidence and assurance that doing so successfully is possible and ultimately rewarding. Second, this view also permits an intelligible distinction to be drawn between an incorrect and correct religious belief. One does so in terms of whether or not the world in fact possesses the sort of final or ultimate significance a believer attributes to it because of his experience of it. As Gadamer suggests, the stories recounted in different religious and cultural traditions have a verifiable content; "but what claims to be the truth is not the story, but what it means for the fate of man, his

expectations and his hope".<sup>38</sup> I think it is in the context of a consideration of our different judgements about what is finally significant about human living that the evidential value of a believer's alleged experience of God is to be understood and assessed.

#### 6.26 The Relation Between Theological Beliefs and Religious Experience

I note at the outset, that to raise issues regarding the sort of claim to truth involved in an alleged experience of God or of the justification of particular theological beliefs within the context of a particular religious faith is to raise issues that properly belong to the development of an epistemology of different religious and theological belief systems. As such, a complete discussion of this issue is outside the scope of this thesis, which is restricted to the removal of philosophical obstacles that currently threaten to block a reflection on the question of truth in and among religions. Nevertheless, an alternative sketch of an approach to these issues and our subject generally is in order if we maintain, as I do, that it is important to consider seriously what justification, truth, belief in God and so on amount to within a religious context.

At the close of section 3.11, I suggested that the question of truth in and among religions turns upon the sympathetic understanding, discussion and assessment of rival or at least different judgements of significance. These judgements of significance are to be construed as descriptions of the significance of participants' alleged experiences of the way things are, including for some, God, the world, self and especially the meaning of human living in the light of them, articulated within the context of a particular tradition in subject-related terms. In the sketch to follow, I focus on the relationship between theological beliefs and an alleged religious experience. I do so in order to develop the suggestion that what is central for participants in a particular religious community consists in drawing attention to a certain kind of experience formative of their faith and not any particular theological belief or set of such beliefs.

To introduce this provisional sketch, it is useful to begin by considering an objection that often arises against the propriety of offering, much less exploring, an interpretive model of belief in God of the sort I have endorsed. For example, Nielsen charges that to advocate such an "interpretive move" is to abandon "the claim that theists and non-theists are making rival factual assertions". It is to emasculate Judaeo-Christian belief to the point that it "at least appears to become something very different from what traditional

believers have taken it to be".<sup>39</sup> We must be careful about reassessing our views about what is central for participants in a particular religious faith lest we involve ourselves unwittingly and unnecessarily in matters of current theological controversy which are not within our competence as philosophers to assess. Hence, we should retain the "traditional view" that what is central for the faiths of mainstream or near-mainstream Christians, Jews or Moslems is a set of beliefs about the existence and properties of God. Moreover, this proposal might be offered on the ground that a philosophically pertinent study of religion ought to be conducted on what can reasonably be taken to be an "orthodox" interpretation of these faiths. Such a study, restricted in this way, would be relevant for the widest audience and would avoid what to some may appear to be more radical or marginal theological options.<sup>40</sup>

But, however laudable this suggestion is, it is practically useless. Even if we restrict our attention to Christian religious faith, it is becoming increasingly better understood, according to some scholars, that the theological and historical presuppositions the "traditional view" involves, to the effect that "Christianity consists and always has consisted in a certain definite set of beliefs", is highly misleading at best, if not clearly false. According to the authors of the preface to The Myth of God Incarnate for instance:



...modern scholarship has shown that the supposed unchanging set of beliefs is a mirage. Christianity was from the first very diverse and has never ceased developing in its diversity. Today's conservatives are themselves diverse and their positions in most cases are of quite recent origin. 'Orthodoxy' is a mirage, which can and often does inhibit the creative thinking which Christianity sorely needs today.<sup>41</sup>

Certainly, this is currently a hotly contested thesis.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, the point at issue here is important and trades less on a resolution of this debate as on its existence. In particular, it suggests, at least, the value of developing an approach to our subject that does not attempt to conceal this diversity.

To explain, when one looks more closely at any proposed set of allegedly central theological beliefs and their history, one is inevitably struck by how different the interpretations given of these beliefs and their importance in the life of a religious community are in practice. Philosophers who construe their enterprise as a second-order inquiry into the "logic of religious and theological language" have not considered seriously enough the implications for their study of the justification of theological beliefs of this massive and evident fact. As we have seen, there have been two alternative accounts regarding the content of the "central core of theistic belief" characteristic of Christian religious faith among analytic philosophers of religion. The vast majority

hold that this central core consists of theistic beliefs about God, His properties and relations with man and the world. Heimbeck, however, holds that this central core consists of category B theological beliefs such as the resurrection claim that "record what are referred to in current theological idiom as the mighty acts of God in history".<sup>43</sup>

The least plausible view about what is central to participants in the faiths of Christians, Jews and Moslems is the former view. For instance, this view masks the potential importance of the differences among the theological beliefs participants of these different faiths may hold.<sup>44</sup> In addition, this view of the matter in fact conceals the complexity of the process of the justification of theological beliefs undertaken by theologians in the context of a particular faith. As the discussion of Heimbeck's work indicated, the justification of any particular complex theological belief such as "God is love" or "God is a Trinity of three persons" in fact presupposes a recourse to a great number of other religious and theological beliefs. By distinguishing between two types of theological belief within any system of theological beliefs in terms of whether these beliefs have any direct empirical entailments or incompatibles, his approach permits us to recognize the mutual interdependence of the many beliefs studied and developed in the course of theological work. For example, from discussing his example of the justification of

the belief that "God loves all human beings" in section 1.4, it was apparent that this belief depends on a host of other theological beliefs about the sinful condition of the world separated from God, the special mission and sacrifice of Jesus to and for this world and the action undertaken by God on our behalf in the resurrection of Jesus, among many others.<sup>45</sup>

Heimbeck's view has the merit of re-directing our attention ultimately towards the sources in religious experience from which inferences to the truth of category A theological beliefs are drawn in any system of theological beliefs. But he is mistaken in considering that it is some particular category B theological belief, such as the resurrection claim, that is central for participants of Christian faith. This view neglects the context-dependent character of reasoning from signs in theology. The context-dependent character of this sort of reasoning reminds us that category B theological beliefs are themselves complex inferences from various sources in experience construed as signs. For Christians, in particular, perhaps, the main source of signs is located in the interpretation of the Gospels on the authority of the testimony of the first witnesses it records and preserves. But the justification of category B theological beliefs is accomplished by means of a recourse to a host of other religious and theological beliefs regarding how this material is to be interpreted, the relative importance of the various components recorded there, what sorts of theological interpretation are

appropriate and so on. Hence, to say that the justification of theological beliefs whether category A or B is context-dependent is to say that their justification occurs only within a context presupposing an initial, and for participants, formative, judgement of the significance of their and their community's, alleged experience of God. It is these initial judgements of significance that provide the framework in which participants of different religious traditions develop, criticize, revise and articulate the different religious and theological beliefs they hold.<sup>46</sup>

In a phrase, no assertion of a particular theological belief or set of such beliefs, whether category A or B, can be considered, by itself, as central in the sense that it is this belief or set of beliefs that alone provides the justification for a whole theological system of beliefs and the practices attendant on participation in a particular religious faith. As I see it, two important consequences follow from this suggestion regarding our understanding of the justification of theological beliefs. First, the manifest diversity of theological beliefs suggests that a particular religious faith receives an expression in a whole complex system of mutually justifying, mutually qualifying and interlocking sets of religious and theological beliefs. Second, philosophers of religion are mistaken to conclude either that there is necessarily something of substance common to what are in fact

different faiths or that there is necessarily something of substance common to what are in fact different theologies within one such faith, merely because certain very general and by themselves abstract statements of belief such as "there is a God" or "Christian faith is incarnational faith" figure prominently in the deliberations of most theologians or reflective believers most of the time.

The principal defect of an approach to our subject in terms of a search for particular theological beliefs that can be considered central, is that it forces us to ignore the manifest diversity of these beliefs and their theological interpretation both among different faiths and within any particular faith. This defect is analogous to a defect that Thomas S. Kuhn once pointed out to good effect regarding our views of the practice of scientific research. He remarks that:

History if viewed as a repository for more than anecdote or chronology could produce a decisive transformation in the image of science by which we are now possessed. That image has previously been drawn, even by scientists themselves, mainly from the study of finished scientific achievements as these are recorded in the classics and, more recently, in the textbooks from which each new scientific generation learns to practice its trade.<sup>47</sup>

Certainly, several other philosophers of religion have noted and exploited, in various ways, the fact that "recent work in the philosophy of science has or can have important implications

for the philosophy of religion and for theology".<sup>48</sup> But the aspect of this passage that I consider may be of particular value in this context is its implications for helping us to understand the dynamic context in which theology is conducted and theological beliefs change.

Just as our view of the structure and development of scientific research was shaped at one time by a concentration on the "constellations of facts, theories and methods collected in current texts" that constitute "finished scientific achievements", this is equally and currently true of our view of theology and the centrality accorded to particular theological beliefs. By focusing our attention on selected statements of religious and theological beliefs as found in the Apostles Creed or the "theistic thesis", we overlook how complex and historically multifarious these "finished products" and participants' understanding of them has actually been. It is for this reason that I have suggested that it is more accurate to consider particular theological beliefs as historically situated, derivative expressions of a believer's religious faith. As such, these beliefs are fallible attempts to articulate the meaning and implications of certain alleged experiences in which his faith is rooted as expressed in the context of formative judgements of significance articulated in terms of central symbols. So again, for Christians for instance, the main focus of these experiences is the

experiences of God recorded in the Gospels on the authority of the first witnesses, whose significance Christians judge is best articulated with reference to and in terms of Jesus Christ. For Muslims, on the other hand, the interpretation of these experiences is oriented by the Koran that for participants of this faith is, judged to be the word of Allah and so on.<sup>49</sup>

But it is important to understand what it is that I have in mind when I maintain that there is no particular theological belief or set of theological beliefs that Christians need to consider as a fixed central core, in terms of which the justification of the practices and beliefs involved in their particular religious faith must be conducted. I do not mean to be understood as holding that a religious faith is without beliefs or that religious and theological beliefs are not important. In arguing against the view that there is a central core of theistic belief, whatever content is assigned to it, my intention has been to suggest that there is no such single set of beliefs beyond or behind the plethora of specific, context-dependent theological interpretations that theologians study and criticize. I intend to be understood as arguing that there is a vast array of religious and theological beliefs that vary from one faith to another, that vary within a particular faith and that vary from one historical period to the next. What is central and fundamental for a particular religious faith consists not of a fixed set of minimal theological beliefs.

It is something that can be and sometimes is manifested by the substantive results of specific theological research areas.

Rather than to insist that there is or must be some minimal set of theological beliefs that underlies or is hidden among the welter of specific theologies, I think it more profitable and plausible to suggest that religious and theological beliefs are themselves in the process of being developed. Systems of theological belief are not something which underlie changes in the practice of a religious faith, but something that is forged and that changes along with changes in practice in relation also to the non-religious beliefs and practices of the prevailing culture. Theologians and reflective believers generally, in other words, create and develop rather than simply adhere to, repeat or fossilize specific theological beliefs. In the continuous process of articulating what this means or ought to mean for those who share it, and perhaps also others, in this reflective enterprise, theologians also articulate what it means to be a Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist. These developments, specific creedal formulae, for example, may or may not prove worthy of being integrated into the self-understanding of a particular community's faith at a particular time. But all of these developments, in varying degrees, have had an impact in shaping that self-understanding.<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps, in closing, I can make this perspective somewhat clearer if I do so in terms of an amended version of a



proposal recently offered by John Hick regarding the value of a "Copernican revolution in our theology of religions". Concerned with the problems of how to foster and encourage conversation among participants of different religious faiths, Hick suggested that Christians abandon the view in which "Christianity is seen as the centre of the universe of faiths, and all other religions are regarded as revolving around it, and as being graded in value according to their distance from it". For Hick, this view is theologically ptolemaic because it involves progressively more complicated revisions of doctrine "to try to accommodate our growing knowledge of other faiths and our awareness of the true piety which they sustain". Hence, he argues that just as:

Copernicus realized that it is the sun and not the earth, that is at the centre, and that all the heavenly bodies, including our own earth, revolve around it...we have to realize that the universe of faiths centres upon God and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion. He is the sun, the originative source of light and life, whom all religions reflect in their own different ways.<sup>51</sup>

The merits of this proposal for inter-faith dialogue are not here in question. But with reference specifically to the Christian religious tradition, this proposal may be quite useful for explicating the relationship between the results of theological reflection and the judgement of the significance of this community's alleged experience of God. After all, it is this alleged experience that, for participants, forms the

context in which theological reflection is done and the rest of their experience is structured into a meaningful whole.

As a consequence of a critique of Heimbeck's view of the justification of theological beliefs, I have argued that reasoning from signs in theology is context-dependent. The truth of particular theological beliefs, whether category A or B are justified by participants only within the context provided by an initial judgement of the significance of their own and their community's fund of religious experience articulated in terms of central symbols. Following Hick, I think it may be helpful to explore the possibility that, for Christians, the universe of particular theologies, creedal formulae, changing rites and rituals, practices and ethical commitments that compose the multifarious cumulative Christian religious tradition is focused upon what has been referred to variously as their alleged experience of faith, of religious conversion or saving experience.<sup>52</sup> It is through reflection upon this experience and in interpreting its significance that participants in Christian religious faith articulate their sense of what is significant about human living and living humanly, both its possibility and promise. Moreover for Christians, it is Jesus Christ that constitutes the identifying reference point for interpreting the meaning of their experience - a meaning whose pattern changes throughout the history of the interaction of this symbol with the network of stories, beliefs and practices developed around it in this tradition and in

interaction with changing cultural patterns in society at large.<sup>53</sup>

Viewed from this perspective, however, systems of theological belief are but one important derivative expression of Christian religious faith that is part of the larger cumulative development of this religious tradition. At any one time, this tradition comprises a large network of loosely interrelated community's, each with its own and often overlapping coterie of systems of theological beliefs and religious practices. Moreover, as Slater notes:

In each tradition we discern family resemblances between expressions of faith from one generation to the next. But there is no single essential core, such that we can say that this or that concept of transcendence or the sacred is necessarily present in the minds of the faithful at any given time.<sup>54</sup>

Nor, as is well known, is there an easy exchange of views on the meaning of these beliefs and practices that different groups within one religious tradition regard as fundamental or important.

In sum, systems of theological beliefs are better understood as the fallible results of networks of complex intersecting and overlapping theological research areas rather than as a single unit governed by the slavish adherence to a particular set of beliefs. Theologies and the discussion and assessment of theological beliefs are not the unified entity they are often portrayed to be. In addition, I submit

that the question of the rationality of particular theological beliefs is not a matter of showing how some selection of these beliefs is justifiable in terms of a class of allegedly epistemological basic beliefs. Rather, it is a matter of displaying and assessing the degree to which these beliefs articulate successfully the ultimate significance of our experience of the world, for being human, that participants allege is available to all of us. Whether this approach does violence to a particular religious faith is for participants of that faith to determine. However, I note that it does have the merit of avoiding what Robert Bellah has called the "objectivist fallacy", "the confusion of belief and religion, which is found only in the religious traditions deeply influenced by Greek thought".<sup>55</sup> Perhaps, much the more important test of the vitality and truth of a particular religious faith may turn out to be the degree to which it enables participants in it to live fully human lives on the model of those considered paradigmatic within their respective traditions. Whether and in what sense this suggestion is accurate however, remains to be seen.



## Chapter 6: Notes

1. Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology" in John B. Brough, Daniel B. Dahlstrom and Henry B. Veatch eds., Philosophical Knowledge, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1980), p. 53. See also his "Is Belief in God Rational?" in Cornelius F. Delaney ed., Rationality and Religious Belief, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), pp. 7 - 27.
2. Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology", p. 53.
3. It is on this point that I would make common cause with those critics of fideism that urge that it is a mistake to hold that theological beliefs and in particular, belief in God are "framework beliefs" to which evidence or grounds are irrelevant. Rather, I maintain that theological beliefs are complex inferences offered to display the significance of a certain sort of alleged experience. For a discussion, see Norman Malcolm "The Groundlessness of Belief" and his "Postscript", Colin Lyas "The Groundlessness of Religious Belief", and Basil Mitchell, "Remarks" in Stuart C. Brown ed., Reason and Religion, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 141 - 190. Kai Nielsen, "Reasonable Belief Without Justification" in Body, Mind and Method, Donald Gustafson and Bangs L. Tapscott eds., (Dordrecht Holland: D. Reidel, 1980), pp. 65 - 75.
4. Alvin Plantinga, op. cit., pp. 57 - 58.
5. Benoît Garceau, "On Dining with the Meta-Theological Skeptic: Comments on Nielsen's Position" in Mostafa Faghfoury ed., Analytical Philosophy of Religion in Canada, (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), p. 132.
6. Kai Nielsen, "Skepticism and Belief: A Reply to Benoît Garceau", unpublished draft, p. 11.
7. I will consider Nielsen's fourth claim below in section 6.25.
8. Kai Nielsen, ibid., p. 8.
9. As Nielsen remarks, some of the things Garceau says about the "experience of God" or "the experience of faith" might easily be construed as making a claim to a self-authenticating knowledge of God. For instance, as quoted

by Nielsen, Garceau does refer to the "experience of God" as a "domain of private and non-published experience"; "a dimension that is not manifest and remains secret" or is "untouched even if it were possible to know the totality of the manifestations of a religious group or a religious person". Kai Nielsen, *ibid.*, p. 7. But, I say he is correct at least against Plantinga because as I have argued above in section 3.11, Garceau need not be interpreted in this way.

10. Peter Donovan, Interpreting Religious Experience, (London: Sheldon Press, 1979), p. 71.
11. Richard S. Swinburne, The Existence of God, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 254.
12. Kai Nielsen, "Skepticism and Belief: A Reply to Garceau", p. 9.
13. Richard S. Swinburne, The Existence of God, *ibid.*, p. 254. By an "epistemic use" of the words "seems", "looks", "appears", he means that these words "describe what the subject is inclined to believe on the basis of his present sensory experience. If I say the ship appears to be moving. I am saying that I am inclined to believe that the ship is moving and that it is my present sensory experience which leads me to have this inclination to belief", pp. 245 - 246.
14. Following Michael Williams, by an "epistemic belief", I mean a belief about our beliefs. "Our epistemic beliefs include beliefs about techniques for acquiring and rejecting beliefs, beliefs about the conditions under which beliefs of certain kinds are likely to be true, and so on." Though I do not pause to argue this view here, I think that "principles of rationality", "standards of verification", "conditions of rational basicity", "grammatical remarks" and the like are in fact edifying labels for widely held but defeasible epistemic beliefs that in certain contexts of inquiry may well be overruled by other epistemic beliefs. For Williams discussion of epistemic beliefs and their importance, see Michael Williams, "Coherence, Justification and Truth", Review of Metaphysics, 33(1980), 248 ff.
15. Terence Penelhum, Religion and Rationality, (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 168.
16. Richard S. Swinburne, The Existence of God, p. 254, note 1.

17. As Swinburne puts it, "if it seems to me that I have a glimpse of Heaven or a Vision of God, that is grounds for me and others to suppose that I do. And more generally, the occurrence of religious experiences is prima-facie reason for all to believe in that of which the purported experience was purportedly an experience." Richard S. Swinburne, ibid., p. 260. Of course, this is hardly the end of the story regarding how the evidential value of alleged religious experiences in the myriad shapes these take is to be evaluated within particular religious traditions. In addition, to say that our experience generally has evidential value for the beliefs we advance because of it is intended to be trivial. It is trivial until attention is paid to particular contexts of inquiry. How the evidential value of our experience is to be construed is relative to the context provided by specific inquiries, the subject-matter they study, the interests and aims they serve and the "standards" they involve for assessing it. For instance, consider the many different ways Swinburne's own "principle of credulity" may be interpreted and constrained in the contexts of the law, psycho-analysis, behaviouristic psychology, aesthetics, history or chemistry. But for present purposes my point is more restricted. I am interested in removing a priori obstacles that many philosophers consider currently stand in the way of taking Swinburne's contention seriously for the religious context. To make much progress in this objective presupposes a willingness to listen and learn from those whose experience this is about the ways in which its evidential value is construed and circumscribed within this context.
18. In fairness to Swinburne, I note that he considers and rejects two such attempts to restrict the "principle of credulity", in ways designed to rule out its application to religious experience. The first is "that this principle of credulity is not an ultimate principle of rationality but itself requires inductive justification and that justification is available in ordinary cases but not in the religious cases." The second "allows that the principle holds in the ordinary cases (without needing inductive justification) but denies that (in the absence of inductive justification) it holds in less usual cases". For his discussion, see The Existence of God, pp. 255, 257. For consistency of exposition I will consider Nielsen's views as illustrative of the sorts of consideration usually invoked at this stage.
19. Kai Nielsen, "Skepticism and Belief: A Reply to Benoît Garceau", p. 11.

20. Kai Nielsen, ibid., p. 12.
21. Kai Nielsen, ibid., pp. 11, 18.
22. On the derivative and secondary status of theological beliefs, William A. Christian observes that there are "two layers in the structure of religious discourse involved here. First, the main point of the doctrines of a religion is not to deny the doctrines of other religions; they are not generated simply as negative reactions to doctrines of other religions...On the contrary, the main point of the doctrines of a religion is to say something positive about the meaning of life. Second, the doctrines of a religion themselves are generated by a certain vision of life, and this vision is suggested and shaped by particular experiences and practices in particular historical and social settings. Thus oppositions of doctrines are derivative and consequential; they are twice removed from those particular experiences and activities which are existentially primary in religion." William A. Christian, Oppositions of Religious Doctrines, (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 15. For a more complex view of the "layers in the structure of religious discourse" involved here, see Benoît Garceau, "On Dining with the Meta-Theological Skeptic: Comments on Nielsen's Position", p. 131.
23. I think that Nielsen is unaware of the importance of this feature for understanding the meaning of sentences and beliefs about God. His discussion of Donald Evans' view that "faith in God is best understood...by reference to depth experiences" is illustrative. Nielsen writes, "Evans is perfectly aware that these experiences can be understood in a purely secular manner, but he tells us, 'the man of faith interprets the depth-experience as a revelation concerning both man and God.' These do not he believes, just show in man a mysterious depth, a capacity for awe, self-abasement, exaltation and wonder, but they do attest to the fact that they can be read as 'a revelation of God', the hidden personal being who reveals his own nature through the numinous sunset or saint'." According to Nielsen, "the problem is what does it mean to 'interpret the depth-experience as a revelation of God'? What could this mean?" This reconstruction gives the impression that according to Evans, in the interpretation of a depth-experience there are two separable interpretations of its meaning, one secular and one theological, that are overlaid one upon the other. I think this is a misunderstanding. In the passage Nielsen cites, Evans reiterates his view that "the man of faith interprets the depth-experience as a revelation of both man and God". But Evans also prefaces Nielsen's



second citation, that Nielsen ignores, with the remark that "for the man of faith however, the depth-experience is also a revelation of God...", (my emphasis). In judging of the significance of an alleged depth-experience, that it is revelatory of both man and God, the believer is maintaining that to properly understand the significance the depth-experience has, one must interpret it in terms of the relationship between man and God it discloses. The point is that assertions or beliefs about God construed in abstraction from their connection with the significance of human experience are systematically ambiguous. To understand beliefs about God one must remember that they are beliefs founded upon and derived from an alleged experience of our relationship with God. For Evans' discussion, see his "Differences Between Scientific and Religious Assertions", reprinted in Norman O. Schedler ed., The Philosophy of Religion, (New York: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 305, 306 - 307. Kai Nielsen, Skepticism, (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 68.

24. Peter Donovan, Interpreting Religious Experience, p. 33.
25. Relevant here are Stephen D. Ross's remarks concerning his theory of "query"; his theory of rational activity that is grounded in multiple perspectives among which he includes art, philosophy, science and I would add theology and religious reflection generally. He writes "If query is context and perspective dependent then the natural step is to affirm the context and perspective-dependence of things. What something is is a function of its contexts and locations including but not restricted to its relations to human experience. Experience indicates the inexhaustibility of things, but it does not to my mind create that inexhaustibility". As such, in the context of "perspectival realism", "science in particular, but any mode of query in general, tells us when its conclusions are valid, what is true about the nature of things, but never the whole truth - because things are inexhaustible - and both truth and being are perspectival a function of location". Stephen D. Ross, "Skepticism, Holism and Inexhaustibility", Review of Metaphysics, 35(1982), pp. 552, 553, also 542 - 556.
26. Kai Nielsen, "Skepticism and Belief: A Reply to Benoît Garceau", p. 12. It should now be clear in what sense Nielsen means to be construed when he claims that "religious experience is an evident psychological reality". If it is true that the cognitive meaningfulness of theological beliefs must be displayed in this way and if this cannot be accomplished, then believers are mistaken in thinking that their religious experience can be construed as evidence

for the justification of their beliefs. They are mistaken because no such alleged religious experience could provide such evidence. In a word, there cannot be experiences that have religious significance because there is no legitimate religious significance to be discerned. Hence, reminiscent of Alfred J. Ayer I suppose, Nielsen would agree that "the fact that people have religious experience is interesting from a psychological point of view, but it does not in any way imply that there is such a thing as religious knowledge. 'The theist...may believe that his experiences are cognitive experiences but unless he can formulate his 'knowledge' in propositions that are empirically verifiable, we may be sure he is deluding himself. It follows that those philosophers who fill their books with assertions that they intuitively 'know this or that moral or religious truth' are merely providing material for psychoanalysis." Alfred J. Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1936, 1971), p. 158.

27. For a discussion of several other examples of proposed standards that might allegedly explain how the foundationalist knows or indeed how anyone knows that a given proposition is self-evident or rationally basic, see Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Rational?", in Cornelius F. Delaney, ed., Rationality and Religious Belief, pp. 21 - 27.
28. This appears to be Nielsen's view. See, for example, his "Empiricism, Theoretical Constructs and God", The Journal of Religion, 54(1974), p. 209.
29. Kai Nielsen, Skepticism, p. 98.
30. Kai Nielsen, ibid., p. 92. For his critique of Zeus-like conceptions of God, see his discussion, pp. 90 - 94.
31. Kai Nielsen, ibid., p. 99. I note in passing that it is at least arguable that debates about rival cosmological theories are not resolvable by invoking a standard of public verifiability of the sort Nielsen proposes. For a discussion, see Mary Hesse, "Criteria of Truth in Science and Theology", Religious Studies, 11(1975), pp. 390 - 391.
32. The situation here may not be so obvious as this. For instance, speaking with the concepts of "objectivity" and "empirical control" in mind, Andrew Lugg has proposed that "like most philosophers, I too hold that scientific inquiry is objective because it is under empirical control. Where I differ is in my insistence that objectivity is secured in different ways in different contexts. Scientific

activity is controlled, but not always in the same way. Theoretical speculation, as I see the matter, is constrained not by a single method but in a piece-meal fashion by various particular methods appropriate to the various particular research areas which science comprises." Andrew Lugg, "Science Without Method", public lecture read at Carleton University, November 1981, unpublished draft, p. 2.

33. Mary Hesse, "Criteria of Truth in Science and Theology", Religious Studies, 11 (1975), p. 392.
34. Kenneth Sayre, "A Perceptual Model of Belief in God" in Frederick J. Crosson ed., The Autonomy of Religious Belief, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 124 - 125. See also Donald Evans' recent discussion of "on-looks" in his "Authenticity and Truth in Religion" read at the Canadian Philosophical Association, Ottawa, June 1982, unpublished draft, pp. 13 - 16.
35. Kenneth Sayre, ibid., p. 123.
36. For further examples, Sayre writes that "to believe in God is to see the world in a certain manner when near despair, it is to perceive a world where human needs make a difference. When afflicted with injustice, it is to see a world in which righteousness prevails. When mournful, it is to see the world as offering comfort; when moved to mercy, to see an order in which mercy is rewarded." Kenneth Sayre, ibid., p. 124.
37. Sayre, ibid., pp. 122 - 123.
38. Hans Gadamer, "Religious and Poetical Speaking" in Alan M. Olson ed., Myth, Symbol and Reality, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), p. 92. Similarly Sayre notes that "a person who believes in God (perceives the world as having a certain significance) has a correct belief (perceives the world correctly) if and only if the world in fact possesses significance of this sort...although considerable problems remain in specifying the ultimate significance of the world we experience, there is a sense in which a person who perceives the world as having a certain form of significance would perceive incorrectly if nothing existed in the world corresponding to that perception." Sayre, ibid., p. 126.
39. Kai Nielsen, "Empiricism, Theoretical Constructs and God", pp. 210 - 211.

40. For a discussion of current theological diversity, see David Tracy, Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology, (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 3 - 42.
41. John Hick, ed., The Myth of God Incarnate, (London: SCM Press, 1977), p. x. The authors of the Preface to this work from which this quotation is taken are unnamed. However, the Preface begins by announcing that "it is clear to the writers of this book - as to a great many other Christians today - that Christianity has throughout its history been a continuously growing and changing movement", p. ix. Hence, I take it that these quotations represent the views of all of the contributors to this volume. These include Maurice Wiles, Francis Young, Dennis Nineham, Michael Gouldner, Don Cupitt as well as John Hick.
42. In addition to The Myth of God Incarnate, ed., John Hick, see also Michael Gouldner ed., Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued, (London: SCM Press, 1979), Michael Green ed., The Truth of God Incarnate, (Grand Rapids Mich.: W.B. Erdman, 1977) and Don Cupitt, The Debate About Christ, (London: SCM Press, 1979).
43. Raeburne S. Heimbeck, Theology and Meaning, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), p. 174.
44. For examples of the potential importance of considering seriously differences between different faiths for understanding the meaning and structure of the justification of theological beliefs participants of them hold, see Emil Fackenheim, "Elijah and the Empiricists" in his Encounters Between Judaism and Modern Philosophy, (New York: Schocken, 1980), pp. 11 - 12 and Ninian Smart, "Truth and Religions" in John Hick ed., Truth and Dialogue, (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), p. 50.
45. Raeburne S. Heimbeck, Theology and Meaning, pp. 175 - 176.
46. Perhaps it is not unfair to say that theological reflection and theological beliefs conducted in the absence of an alleged experience of God is empty. But an alleged experience of God in the absence of some theological tradition is blind.
47. Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962, 2nd edition, 1972), p. 1.

48. Ian G. Barbour, Myths Models and Paradigms, (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 3. See also Basil Mitchell, The Justification of Religious Belief, (London: Macmillan, 1973) and Earl Maccormac, Metaphor and Myth in Science and Religion, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1976).
49. The view of theology and theological work adumbrated here can be clarified further by commenting on John Hick's distinction between two types of theology, "dogmatics" and "problematics". "Dogmatic theology", he writes "...studies and conserves the inherited tradition, having accepted its fundamental structure as permanently valid, because divinely revealed. Problematic theology, on the other hand, takes place at the interfaces between the tradition and the world - both the secular world and the other religious world and is concerned to create new theology in the light of new situations. Thus whilst dogmatic theology assumes that its basic positions represent the final truth, problematic theology sees its conclusions as hypotheses open to revision and always seeking greater adequacy, being comparable in this respect with the hypotheses of the sciences". Though this distinction is helpful, I think that it marks at most a difference of degree and not in kind, I suggest that what is valuable about the various components of a developing religious tradition is that participants of it have been able, in varying degrees, to discern and articulate their continuing involvement through its changing patterns. What is divinely revealed for Christians, I suppose, is God most clearly in Jesus Christ and not the "fundamental structure of the inherited tradition". Of course, this suggestion is for Christians to evaluate. But were it acceptable, I see no reason to think that the conclusions theologians offer in the conduct of a dogmatic theology oriented towards achieving a consensus among the faithful are not susceptible of revision and development "in the light of new situations" in the manner Hick suggests is true of the conclusions of problematic theology. John Hick, God Has Many Names, (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 1.
50. I note that if this view of theological work is near the mark, we should expect to see evidence from the history of theology of the following. There should be "theological revolutions" where one paradigm of interpretation or a cluster of them are replaced by others. There should be a "normal theology" in which problems or puzzles are solved through reflection on the work of classic authors and texts. There should be considerable resistance to adaptations or new formulations of older paradigms. There should be the emergence of new difficulties that resist being incorporated

into older paradigms. In addition, the process of paradigm change should disclose one of three ways of resolving a crisis. Either the problems in question are resolved by improving the existing paradigm, or the problems are shelved or a new paradigm is advocated that offers a different perspective capable of solving the initial problems even as it generates new ones. Whether and to what degree any of these and other parallels between the history of theology and the history of science are present is a matter for further work though there is evidence available to suggest that they are present. See, for example, Hans Kung, Does God Exist?, tr. Edward Quinn, (New York: Doubleday Inc., 1978), pp. 111 - 115.

51. John Hick, "Whatever Path Men Choose Is Mine", reprinted in John Hick, God Has Many Names, pp. 51 - 52.
52. Benoît Garceau, "On Dining With the Meta-Theological Skeptic: Comments on Nielsen's Position", pp. 133 - 135, Donald Evans, "Authenticity and Truth in Religion", unpublished draft, pp. 1 - 5 and Peter Slater's description of this experience is worth quoting in full. He writes that a "saving experience", "will be the experience of one who was shattered and is now whole, was lost but is found, was bound but is now free, was alienated but is now reconciled, was utterly gloomy but is now ecstatically joyous. It will be the experience of one who has transcended or is transcending, whatever conditions are hellish and is entering upon the path to Nirvana. In William James's sense, it is the experience of the twice-born." Peter Slater, "The Transcending Process and the Relocation of the Sacred", in Alan Olson and Leroy S. Rouer eds., Transcendence and the Sacred, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 41.
53. See Peter Slater's discussion in his The Dynamics of Religion, (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 28 - 47 for a discussion of how to go about "characterizing the continuity through change which typifies the dynamics of religion", p. 28.
54. Peter Slater, "The Transcending Process and the Relocation of the Sacred", op. cit., p. 48.
55. As Bellah notes this confusion of belief and religion has been characteristic of both believers and their detractors. But he suggests, "the effort to maintain orthodox belief has been primarily an effort to maintain authority rather than faith". Robert Bellah, "Religion and Belief: The Historical Background of 'Non-Belief'", reprinted in Robert

Bellah, Beyond Belief, (New York: Harper & Row, 1970, 1976), pp. 220, 221. On these issues of the differences and relationship between the concepts of belief, faith and authority, see Van A. Harvey, The Historian and the Believer, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 102 - 126 and Wilfred C. Smith, Faith and Belief, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 3 - 19.

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