

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: PART II

Atheism and Christianity

It is necessary now to observe briefly the multiform influence of atheism upon twentieth-century thought.

In the Existentialist school, names like Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and others stand out. These men were brilliant. Their influence was widespread. They were atheists. At times Sartre seems to scold God because He does not exist. He wishes to believe in what he cannot believe.

The psychologists like Freud, Jung, Adler, and many others who invented and practised psychoanalysis were all atheists. Because they have denied the reality of God, they have sought to classify personal religious experience with God as illusion or worse, abnormal behaviour.

The "God is dead" theologians like Altizer, Van Buren, Hamilton and others have accepted the tirades of Nietzsche against God as viable philosophical thought. They have proclaimed themselves "Christian atheists" whatever that may mean.

The religious value of the above philosophers has more or less become obvious in the last decade of the twentieth century (1975-1985).

Because of their kinship to "scientific" thought the Logical Positivists are still influential in a materialistic earthbound world. (The astronauts have proven just how earthbound man really is.) Names like Schlick, Wittgenstein, Carnap, Ayer, and many others come to mind when one thinks about the school of thought called "Scientific Empiricism" or "Logical Positivism." However, like the dew of the morning this partial description of reality which was so important in the early years of the twentieth century is slowly disappearing.

This school of thought was driven by a militant atheism which did not attack the doctrines of theology, but sought to destroy metaphysics both in philosophy and theology by "proving" their language to be unverifiable and therefore nonsense. Logical Positivism, which began in Vienna, came to be known as Scientific Empiricism because of its theory of knowledge which was based upon the scientific method and appealed to *sense evidence* exclusively. The *key word* for this thought seems to be *experience*—palpable experience of the five senses. Of course, with David Hume, the possibility of a metaphysic is excluded by presupposed criteria. It may be interesting to examine briefly the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein and A. J. Ayer who are the most important of the philosophers for English-speaking people.

¹Albert E. Avey, *Handbook in the History of Philosophy*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1961), pp. 313, 317.

Is the following statement true or false?

The author discusses the influence of atheism on twentieth-century thought. _____

(true)

Many psychologists have said that personal religious experience is an _____. .

(illusion)

Logical Positivists did not attack the doctrines of theology head on, but sought to show religious language to be _____ and therefore _____.

(unverifiable, nonsense)

Logical Positivists depend on _____ exclusively.

(sense evidence)

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951)

Ludwig Wittgenstein was born in Austria and studied to be an engineer. In his early student years he became interested in the activities and thought of the Vienna Circle founded by Moritz Schlick at the University of Vienna. He was associated with Schlick, Carnap and others, leaving his own influence upon their thinking. He became a professor at Cambridge and later at Oxford. He established a sort of "philosophical sect" among those who followed his thought. He died in England in 1951. He believed that the task of philosophy was to analyze the knowledge of science, and the method for analysis was the analysis of language.

Wittgenstein is the "most eminent representative of the movement."²

He gained some recognition when he published *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in 1921. He wanted to show the limits of meaningful language. Some things can be said and others cannot really be said at all. He is quoted as saying, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereon one must be silent."³

Wittgenstein believed that the world consists of many atomic facts. The simple propositions correspond directly to these facts. "More complex propositions are 'truth-functions' of the simple propositions."⁴ All the really meaningful propositions belong to the natural sciences. All other propositions are (1) tautologies⁵ or (2) nonsense. Metaphysical questions arise, according to Wittgenstein, from a failure to understand the logic of language.⁶ He compares his own book to a ladder that one kicks away when he has reached the top.

For Wittgenstein, religion is inexpressible simply because it cannot be expressed in scientific terms or demonstrated in terms of sense experience. It is plain that he places an embargo on theological talk. His tool was the "verification principle." That which he could not verify or falsify became nonsense.

Wittgenstein abandoned philosophy for a while. When he returned, he spoke of "language games." Chess and checkers are played on the same board, but have radically different rules. One must learn the rules of every language game. This "gives religious language a reprieve."⁷ Wittgenstein himself never bothered to make the analysis of religious language.

Alfred Jules Ayer (1910—)

Alfred Jules Ayer wrote the classic statement (in English) for the Logical Positivists in his book *Language, Truth and Logic*. Pivotal in his argument are his following words: "We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the

²John Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1963), p. 302.

³Ibid, p. 303.

⁴Ibid.

⁵A tautology—an analytical statement or a definition, a needless repetition.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., p. 305.

The analysis of language was the method proposed to analyze knowledge by _____.

(Wittgenstein)

All the really meaningful propositions belong to the _____.

(natural sciences)

That religion cannot be demonstrated in terms of sense experience was the position of _____.

(Wittgenstein)

Is the following statement true or false?

Wittgenstein supported his views on religion by thorough analysis of religious language. _____

(false)

Alfred Jules Ayer wrote the classic statement for the L _____ P _____.

(Logical Positivists)

proposition which it purports to express—that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false. If, on the other hand, the putative proposition is of such a character that the assumption of its truth, or falsehood, is consistent with any assumption whatsoever concerning the nature of his future experience, then, as far as he is concerned, it is, if not a tautology, a mere pseudo-proposition. The sentence expressing it may be emotionally significant to him; but it is not literally significant.”⁸

Ayer admitted the possibility of “verifiability in principle,” or some things which are meaningful which have not yet been verified. When Ayer wrote his book, no one knew for sure if there were mountains on the other side of the moon, but the question made sense. Some day there would be a way of finding out. “So Ayer allowed that the idea was ‘verifiable in principle’, for one could say what sort of experiments might be relevant to ascertaining the truth of the statement.”⁹

Ayer points out that he is not an atheist, nor an agnostic any more than he is a theist. “All unverifiable talk about a transcendent God is without logical content, and so to deny that there is such a God, . . . is just as senseless as to claim that he exists.”¹⁰

Logical Positivism

Logical Positivism has set new trends in philosophy. Much has been written on Language Analysis because of it. William Hordern’s work on *Speaking of God*¹¹ explains much of the significance of language analysis for the Christian faith. “Hordern is typical of a number of theologians who seem far from clear in their view of the relation of theology to ontology and metaphysics, but who seem to claim a kind of metaphysical independence or immunity for theology.”¹² But his argument is illuminated by a statement on the last page of his book. The “Gnostics, believing that the flesh was evil, affirmed that Christ did not really have a human body.” Today, in the crisis of communication, we need to recall that Christ in the flesh means that Christ spoke in the language milieu of man, and that means the post-Babel milieu. As Christ redeemed the flesh of man by dwelling in it, He redeemed the language of man by speaking it. He took the language of His time in homey parable and thought form and spoke so that men could know God. The Gnostics of today deny the ability of God to reveal himself in the everyday language of man.¹³

⁸A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1952), p. 35.

⁹Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 171.

¹⁰John Macquarrie, p. 310 (Kant in reverse).

¹¹William Hordern, *Speaking of God* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1964).

¹²James Alfred Martin, Jr., *The New Dialogue Between Philosophy and Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1966), p. 164.

¹³William Hordern, p. 200.

UNDERLINE the correct answer.

The following statement can be attributed to which of the following authors?

“We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express.”

John Dewey

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Alfred Jules Ayer

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Is the following statement true or false?

Ayer admits there may be some meaningful things that exist but have not been verified. _____

(true)

Christ also redeemed the _____ of _____.

(language, man)

Scientific Empiricism

The Scientific Empiricists, in order to be "scientific" in their philosophy, have reduced philosophy to a philosophy of science which excludes many of the realities and experiences of man which are of vast importance. Ian T. Ramsey has suggested that religious language functions often like a *working model*. "A model is a representation of something else which enables us to grasp the thing that it stands for."¹⁴ The model presents something familiar and can be used for reaching the unfamiliar. Jesus' parables have been called "earthly stories with a heavenly meaning." Ramsey takes the ancient instance to liberate Christian communication today.¹⁵

William G. Pollard

The advent of atomic fission into the modern world, and the nuclear physics that made it possible, made science once again pivotal for philosophical understanding. The chasm that separates scientific causality (presently conceived) and providence (biblically proclaimed) is exceeding difficult to span. I hesitatingly offer some of the basic thoughts of Dr. William G. Pollard, one-time director of the Oak Ridge Atomic Centre and now the rector of an Episcopalian Church.

Pollard traces scientific determinism to Isaac Newton's physics and Laplace's classical mechanics. Laplace's demon (computer), according to him, could predict the position and exact state of any particle of the universe at any given time in the future (that is determinism). But the newer quantum mechanics has offered great alternatives to this.

The basic characteristic of atomic and molecular phenomena which forced the transformation of classical mechanics into quantum mechanics was formulated by the German physicist, Werner Heisenberg, in his now famous *principle of indeterminacy* (1918, sic). There is a universal indeterminacy measured by a universal constant of nature (Planck's constant, $h = 6.63 \times 10^{-27}$ erg-sec) to which all objects are subject regardless of their nature. For very small objects such as an electron or an atom, this indeterminacy becomes decisive and makes it impossible to specify both their position and their velocity simultaneously with precision. If either one is precisely known, the other will be wholly indeterminate . . . The Heisenberg indeterminacy principle strikes at the very root of the determinism of classical mechanics and undermines its very foundations.¹⁶

The solar system seems to prove the laws of classical mechanics, but geologists would have us believe that the

¹⁴Colin Brown, p. 178.

¹⁵Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language* (Philadelphia: SCU Press, 1957), p. 61.

¹⁶William G. Pollard, *Chance and Providence* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), pp. 52, 53.

sun itself came from another source and over a sufficiently long period of geological time the classical mechanics would not obtain here either. "Thus, the typical situation is an indeterminate one involving alternatives and latitude. Only in circumstances involving large numbers of identical systems . . . does . . . emerge . . . a pattern of actualized and predictable behaviour which becomes more and more determinate as the numbers and frequencies of occurrence increase."¹⁷

As history is viewed in the sense of indeterminacy, there are two natural factors that intervene: (1) chance, and (2) accident. It is evident that a history governed by the laws of nature or by the laws of human behaviour or by both cannot be a uniquely determined thing. "Scientific" law becomes a law only in a laboratory where the same thing occurs over and over again *under controlled conditions*. It never has existed in the uncontrolled natural world outside the laboratory.

Pollard says, "The contest of science is the laboratory . . . The context of providence is history which happens only once. What is labeled chance in one context can without contradiction manifest the will of God acting in judgement or redemption in the other. It is in this way that a world ruled by God and responsible to His will can be at the same time a world capable of scientific description in terms of natural law and natural causality."¹⁸

A simple scientific illustration of the apparent "two-fold nature" of reality is that of the transistor radio which is so common the world over. The "tube" radio would never have functioned unless the reality or nature of electricity were conceived as "smooth" waves of energy. The proof of this theory is the excellent function of the "tube" radio. On the other hand, the transistor radio will never function on "smooth" waves of energy but must have "particles" of energy to be able to function. Both radios will function using the same electrical current. There is no scientific conclusion possible other than the two-fold nature of electricity. It is both waves and particles—not waves of particles nor particles of waves. Before one insists upon unique reality he would do well to remember the nature of electricity.

Reason Again?

The most formidable enemy of the Christian faith in the twentieth century is modern Humanism. Humanism, as such, is any view in which the welfare and happiness of mankind in this life is primary.¹⁹ Humanism in the Renaissance began to attack organized religion because it seemed to restrict or limit the "progress" of knowledge that the new science and the classical philosophers offered. The futuristic ascetic outlook and hope of spiritual salvation seemed to despise the enjoyment of this present life.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 94, 95.

¹⁹Dagobert D. Runes, *Dictionary of Philosophy* (Totowa, N. J.: Littlefield, Adams and Company, 1967), p. 131.

Illustrate the "two-fold nature" of reality.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Any view in which the welfare and happiness of mankind in this life is primary is called

(Humanism)

Modern Humanism has become a religion.²⁰ It is naturalistic and rejects all aspects of the metaphysical both in religion and philosophy. As has been suggested above, Humanism is utterly earthbound and by giving man more "freedom" of pleasure and knowledge in this life, it has deprived him of any hope for the life to come. Humanism in its present form considers the greater good of all humanity on this planet as the supreme ethical good. The methods for reaching and realizing this good are natural science, reason and the democratic "rule of the people." Auguste Comte's positivism, utilitarianism, are "forerunners" of this brand of thought which is organized and promoted by the American Humanist Association and the International Humanist and Ethical Union.²¹ An easy alliance with Marxism is manifestly constant. In Latin America it has been dignified by a sort of syncretism known as "Liberation Theology."²²

Bertrand Russell is quoted as saying: "... the first and essential condition of the good life on earth is the freeing of men's minds from the bonds of ignorance and superstition (religion, *sic*), and of their bodies from the arbitrary oppression of the constituted social authorities."²³

Like the Christian Church, the Humanists are divided. This may be attributed to methods, but the division is sharpest at the point of attitudes toward the Christian Church. Some, like the Liberation theologians, would carry on a thorough humanism within the organization of the Church. They would affirm that proper evangelism is really political social action. On occasion, they would condone and use violence. Their heroes are Che Guevarra and Camilo Torres.

Recently Pope John Paul II has put the Liberationists "on hold" for a year in order to decide whether this is outright Marxist heresy or merely "dialogue" as they claim.²⁴

Ronald Hepburn at Edinburgh is "sympathetic to religion."²⁵ He is interested in the mysticism of religious experience, especially in the area of "natural theology."

But even for these "religious humanists," there is no "new birth," and the only sure thing for man is his own, private death. The Humanists claim to offer the best of a bad life.

Benedetto Croce (1866-1952)

The philosophy of Benedetto Croce was a revival of Idealism.²⁶ He became especially interested in poets and artists and their use of intuition. He agreed with Hegel that "Philosophy is history,"²⁷ but gave more emphasis to change and progress than that with which he credited Hegel.

²⁰Ibid., p. 132.

²¹Ibid.

²²Peter Wagner, *Latin American Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), p. 76.

²³Colin Brown, p. 227.

²⁴*Time Magazine*, March-May, 1985.

²⁵Colin Brown, p. 229.

²⁶Albert E. Avey, p. 243.

²⁷Ibid., p. 244.

List ways Humanism aims to help all humanity achieve the "supreme ethical good."

(Compare your answers with the text.)

John Dewey (1859-1952)

John Dewey was a pragmatist although he insisted on calling his thought "instrumentalism." He would not admit that he was an idealist, but the influence of Hegel upon his thought was obvious. "The solution of the most pressing human problem, the problem of living together, is a perpetual process."²⁸ Dewey is essentially a humanist who discounts metaphysics. "Religion . . . is interpreted in naturalistic and humanistic terms."²⁹

A. N. Whitehead (1861-1947)

A. N. Whitehead was the author of what is known as "process philosophy" which was the foundation of so-called "process theology." Contemporary American radicals like Charles Hartshorne, Norman Pittenger, D. D. Williams, Shubert Ogden and John Cobb are all extending their thought from a Whiteheadism basis. "Like Teilhard, they believe that evolution must be taken with utmost seriousness."³⁰ They know nothing of the Creator-God of Genesis. Western metaphysics uses the categories of "being" and "substance," while "becoming" and "change" are part of its "ontology." "The Whiteheadian-Hartshornian neo-classical metaphysics takes precisely the opposite tack . . ."³¹ Even God is in process and change.

Francis Schaeffer (1908-1984)

One of the more recent philosophers, Francis Schaeffer, the founder of the L'Abri Fellowship in Switzerland, has sought to use philosophy, art, literature and whatever else might be useful for rehabilitating intellectuals inundated by the humanism of this secular culture. His work is "an attempt to work out a philosophy of life which integrates the natural and the supernatural on the basis of the primary—and indeed unique—source of Christian origins, the Bible."³²

Schaeffer's writings³³ leave something that is missing. That something is Schaeffer himself. His dynamic presentation of his ideas at L'Abri are easy to follow. His writing is not, but his reasoning is believable if not proved logically.

Conclusion

What does the future hold for the relationship between philosophy and religion? This is, perhaps, unpredictable. The relationship is not over. The pendulum on the philosophical clock has started to swing back toward the

A. N. Whitehead set forth what is known as _____ philosophy.

(process)

The modern philosopher who has tried to integrate the natural and the supernatural is _____.

(Francis Schaeffer)

²⁸Ibid., p. 253.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Colin Brown, p. 241.

³¹Alan Gragg, *Charles Hartshorne* (Waco: Word Books, 1976), p. 43.

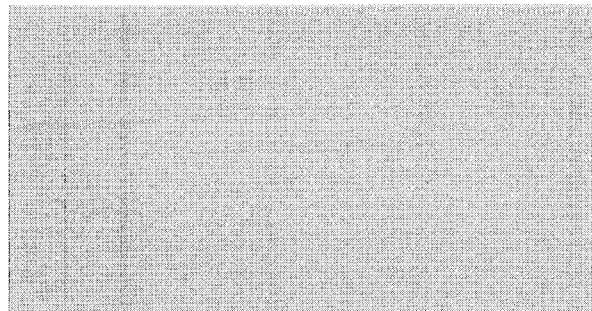
³²Colin Brown, p. 265.

³³*Escape from Reason; The God Who Is There; Death in the City; The Mark of the Christian; The Church at the End of the Century* (InterVarsity Press).

right.³⁴ It swings so slowly that even some “conservatives” are not yet aware of it. Some forms of idealism, different from Plato and the past, are sure to emerge with new forms of Neo-Thomism. Until the Omega-Point,³⁵ Christian faith will struggle with unbelief and militant atheism in some form, but the trend for the immediate future is a return to metaphysics. Prove it? One will just have to wait and see.

³⁴1985.

³⁵A term used by Teilhard de Chardin to represent a transcendent eschaton.



Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (*Levels 1, 2, and 3*). Read the study guide and answer the following questions:

1. What have atheistic psychologists tried to do?

2. How did Logical Positivism attack metaphysics in both philosophy and religion?

3. Upon what is Logical Positivism based?

4. What method did Wittgenstein propose for the analysis of the knowledge of science?

5. According to Wittgenstein, where can all the really meaningful propositions be found?

6. What did Wittgenstein think about religion?

7. Give the title of Alfred Jules Ayer's classic book on Logical Positivism.

8. What was Ayer's position on verifying propositions?

9. What is meant by “verifiability in principle”?

10. How does the author say Christ redeemed the language of man?

11. Define modern Humanism.

12. How does modern Humanism propose to accomplish its goal for the "supreme ethical good" of humanity?

13. What is the heart of the thinking of A. N. Whitehead?

14. What has Francis Schaeffer attempted to do?

Supplementary activity (*Levels 2 and 3*). Read pages 168-181 in Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* and answer the following:

1. Who was the theologian to introduce the problem of "religious language"? What is analytical language?
2. Who formed the Vienna Circle? What was its purpose?
3. What was the Verification Principle?
4. A. J. Ayer's work was called Logical Positivism. Why? What did it project with regard to language analysis?

Advanced activity (*Level 3*).

1. Point out the weaknesses of Logical Positivism. How much truth does it miss?
2. Explain the "models" and "qualifiers" of Ian Ramsey. (See Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, p. 178.)
3. Theological Discourse is affected in its symbolism. How? Explain. (See Brown pp. 179-180.)
4. Explain the "technique of falsification." (See Brown, p. 177.)

Seminar Discussion

1. Discuss why Paul Tillich insists that the symbols of the Bible must not be broken (altered).
2. If Biblical symbols are constant, is demythologizing possible?
3. How do the five senses and even common sense make scientific verification inaccurate for religious language?