Religious and Secular Statements

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The relation between religious and scientific explanations of events and states of affairs has been the subject of much debate. For example, are the statements

'John's life was saved by surgery'
'John's life was saved in answer to prayer'

in competition with each other and, if so, in what way? They do not seem to be rival causal explanations, nor are they straightforwardly contradictory. Yet each seems to cast doubt on the other, or at least to make it to some extent redundant.

Mackay (e.g. 1958) has suggested that the relation is one of 'complementarity', using a term taken from quantum physics. However he characterises complementarity as essentially a logical rather than a physical relation. He holds, I think mistakenly, that it is a logical relation distinct from those definable in terms of entailment, independence and incompatibility. For a critical discussion of this supposed relation see Alexander (1956). The idea is roughly that both scientific and religious descriptions (and hence explanations) of the world can be separately complete or exhaustive without either including the other. So there is a problem of choice between the two, which cannot be resolved by saying that the one serves to complete (or fill gaps in) the other, because each *is* complete in its own terms. The trouble with this way of putting the problem is the difficulty of making any stronger sense of a description being complete or exhaustive than that of applying or withholding every descriptive term in a fixed vocabulary. But this sense is clearly too weak to be interesting: exhaustive descriptions in two such independent fixed vocabularies will simply be logically independent. Even if we add Mackay's stipulation (1958, pp. 114–115) that every referent of each be referred to in the other, still the descriptions are just logically independent. Nothing in the application of one need inhibit the application of the other; in these terms I see no problem to solve.

Nevertheless there still seems to be a problem, and my object here is to set it out in a more perspicuous manner. I shall contrast religious rather with 'secular' than just with narrowly 'scientific' statements, since whatever problem there is clearly arises as much with everyday cognitive claims as with those of the nuclear physicist.

I think the trouble arises from conjoining four separately plausible assumptions:

(a) Religious 'statements' are properly so-called, i.e. are susceptible of truth or falsity.
(b) There are public methods of assessing their truth or falsity, so that acceptance or rejection of them can be publicly recommended on other than moral or prudential grounds.
(c) These methods differ in kind from those used to assess secular statements.
(d) Secular and religious statements may have the same subject matter.

The problem is that it is hard to see how sameness of subject matter, (d), is compatible with difference of kind in methods of assessment, (c). For if two statements are about the same thing, then *prima facie* they may stand in such logical relations as entailment or incompatibility, in which case the methods used to assess the truth of one cannot but bear on the truth of the other. Yet in such examples as the one above, this conclusion may seem to be unacceptable.

To start with, assumptions (a) to (d) themselves perhaps need further recommending. If (a) is rejected, of course, the further assumptions lack application, and similarly with (b). Rejecting (a) or (b) will appeal to many agnostics, or to those who take religious discourse to be merely prescriptive or subjective, perhaps because they take moral discourse to be so and wish to assimilate religious discourse to it. I shall not argue these possibilities in depth, because on them it is quite clear that, and why, no problem at all remains. But it is worth sketching briefly why (a) and (b) must strongly appeal to reasonable Christians and atheists, who share an old-fashioned desire to be able to disagree with each other.

Applied to other than religious utterance, the categories of truth and falsity signify, roughly, at least a possibility of agreement or disagreement. A question, a command, a cry of pleasure or of pain, cannot properly be called 'true' or 'false' precisely because, while we may answer, obey, or sympathise, we can hardly either assent or dissent.[1] Religious discourse may naturally include questions, commands, and linguistic expressions of agony or ecstasy, but that does not seem to exhaust it. The rivalries of different sects and the indicative language of their creeds, for example, strongly suggest that a Christian is also up to something which may intelligibly be agreed to or dissented from. Techniques of persuasion and

[1] This is perhaps least obvious and most debatable in the case of commands. I shall not argue the point here since, apart from anything else, only to the extent that it *is* debatable is any analogy plausible between commands and apparently indicative religious utterance (as opposed to straightforward commands uttered in a religious context, e.g. 'Take and eat this').

conversion, concepts of belief and heresy, all presuppose that adherence to Christianity, whatever else it involves, also involves essentially something that can be said to be 'true' or 'false', and hence can be formulated as a statement.

It is rather presumptuous of those who claim that religious language has recently become dated in this respect[2] to imply, as they tacitly do, that those who have persisted in using indicative language do not understand the difference between an assertion and, say, an expression of an attitude. It is much more plausible to suppose a substantial dispute about the content of Christianity. But even a very weak view of Christianity, as a mere attitude, or 'commitment' to some attitude (or 'form') of life, tacitly asserts this attitude to be in some way preferable to its alternatives. And unless this view is combined with a purely prescriptive view of non-religious moral discourse, from which it would then be barely distinguishable, it is still formulatable as a true or false statement, acceptance of which would still have to characterize a Christian.

The consequence of abandoning (a) seems to me an unacceptable trivializing of religious activity in any society containing unbelievers. Christianity would become, like ski-ing or eating, merely an activity in which one might indulge or not (with more or less agreeable results) but entailing no view of the world, nothing it would make sense to dispute with outsiders. No doubt a skier may entice others to join him by remarking the pleasure of it, but that is no part of what makes him a skier. Even if it were, although he would then be involved in making true or false statements, they would plainly be merely scientific, moral, prudential or biographical. A Christian, on the other hand, to be such, must commit himself to disputable views, which are not merely analogous empirical (or even moral) presuppositions of his activity in the way in which the physics of stone and brick that makes chapels stand is analogous to the physics of snow and ice that makes skis glide.

Christianity then deals, *inter alia*, essentially in truths (or, of course, falsehoods) peculiar to itself. Hence, since 'statement' is widely used, as here, of whatever can be true or false, Christianity essentially deals in statements. These statements are properly called 'religious' because acceptance of them is essential for adherence to the religion, and at least wildly implausible in one who does not so adhere.[3] The skier or eater, in

[2] e.g. 'It is perfectly possible to remain fundamentally encased and still think and talk of God, of death, and of my neighbour, and mean something by those terms. This talk is what I call the old language' (Moore, S. (1967) p. 10). If in the 'new' language 'God' etc. mean nothing, clearly sentences containing these terms can make no statement, true or false.

[3] Whether acceptance of the appropriate religious statements is also sufficient to make a man a Christian is a moot point; the view that it is may be strengthened by observing that the vagaries of faith are not here in question, only the sort of mundane acceptance, compatible with faithlessness, that is well illustrated by the alcoholic driver who accepts the statistics, is afraid of death, but goes on driving.

contrast, need accept *no* statement not equally acceptable to the non-skier or hunger-striker (except, trivially and obviously speciously, autobiographical statements). We cannot, alas, stop those who decline this assumption calling themselves 'Christian', any more than we can stop some male homosexuals calling others 'she', but it is a generally misleading use of current English. It would, if accepted, require a tedious, though trivial, reformulation of the argument, which I see no present need to undertake.

Assumption (b) is perhaps more debatable than (a) in a post-positivist age, even though the public methods I have in mind are not supposed to provide conclusive and incorrigible assessments of truth and falsity. Anyway, someone who declined such methods entirely for religion, on the grounds that none existed even for science, would not be searching for rational solutions to problems of conflict between them, since he would have to deny such solutions even to conflicts within science itself. We need not waste time on the details of so extreme a Kuhnian[4] position, since it would only affect in terminology a discussion of differences between the relation one scientific statement has to another and the relation it has to a religious statement.

We may, for present purposes, suppose both that human reports of pain or pleasure (for example) can be true or false and that there is no public method of so assessing them. One who held even weak verificationist principles might then wish to deny the possibility of knowledge of another's pain, and hence, perhaps, on intuitionist grounds, to deny a truth-value to such third-person statements. Many, that is, might still wish assumptions (a) and (b), of candidature for truth and some degree of public assessability, to stand or fall together. In separating these assumptions, I dispute not this, but merely that the question need be begged in the present context.

There are, in any case, grounds for recommending assumption (b), granted (a), apart from a general verificationism. (b) is needed to make any respectable sense of proselytizing, even in the most modest and uncoercive way. If I am in pain, I may hold a statement to that effect to be true but, lacking any public methods of assessing it (let us suppose), I would be unwilling to press its truth on others. Acceptance of such a third-person pain statement might still be recommended on prudential grounds, if I threatened to beat up anyone who didn't believe it, and was equipped with lie-detectors to expose insincerity. It might even be recommended on more imposing moral grounds, in that belief in the suffering of others might be held to promote better character or action. But there would not also be the

[4] The reference is to the much canvassed view of Kuhn (1962) Feyerabend (e.g. 1962) and others that *major* conflicts in science, between whole systems of theory, are irresolvable by any independent public criteria. But nobody I know of has extended this view to *every* disputable statement in science.

sort of morally neutral, evidential grounds for recommending belief, of which the paradigms are mathematical proofs and the detailed results of reputable scientific investigation.

Doubtless much of the effort put into persuading others of what are taken to be religious truths is justified on prudential or other moral grounds. For instance we have, on the one hand, Pascal's wager and, on the other, concern for the effects on social morality of a decline in religious adherence. These need not be despised, but they hardly seem, in themselves, adequate criteria of acceptance for religious statements. Most Christian views have been advocated on the stronger grounds of public evidence. Indeed their truth, so established, is then commonly appealed to in order to justify further prudential and moral arguments. Only if one has evidential grounds for a belief entailing the existence of Hell, to take a crude instance, is it reasonable to accept the prudential argument for the same belief that holding it will enable one to avoid damnation.

These observations hold as well even if the evidence is available only to those who have provisionally accepted the belief, i.e. made some 'leap of faith'. Much evidence for scientific and mathematical truth is, after all, far from obvious to the layman. A fair amount of initiation into the relevant mysteries, acceptance of the appropriate theoretical language, may be needed even to state the relevant evidence. But this need neither make assembling evidence trivially easy, nor make that for which it is assembled trivially self-supporting. So long as counter-evidence could be forthcoming that would reverse initial acceptance, it does not matter that initial acceptance is requisite to collecting any evidence at all. Similarly, even if, as is sometimes implied, evidence about religious statements is available only to believers, the possibility that it may even then be unfavourable makes the contrary claim non-trivial. So a proselytizing claim that Christianity will justify itself to those who believe must be construed as a claim that public evidence, albeit of a weak and inconclusive sort, is available for its truth. And mere weakness and inconclusiveness of evidence will not serve these days for a distinction of kind between science and religion.

Assumption (b) then recommends itself; without it, (a), if it survives at all, can give religious statements no more than the subjective strength of sincere reports of uncheckable private experience. Clearly, that is a possible view, but any organized, proselytizing, publicly debatable Christianity or atheism is going to need some such stronger assumption as (b). On the basis of (a) and (b) then, I turn to (c) and (d); first to recommend them separately, and then to consider whether, conjoined, they really are incompatible in any sense strong enough to be worth resolving.

That the public methods available for assessing religious statements differ in kind from secular methods in general, and those of science in particular, is an assumption that needs clarifying before it can be recommended. By what criteria are we to classify public methods of assessing

truth-value into kinds, and how then are we to show the requisite difference between secular ones and those of religion?

First, paradigms of methods differing in the kind here relevant are those of the natural sciences contrasted with those of mathematics. It is well recognized that the public methods by which the truth of proposed theorems in mathematics is assessed, differ in kind from those by which proposed theories in science are assessed. In the former case, it is supposed to be a matter of reflection, proof, deductive argument; the latter also essentially include an ingredient of controlled observation. Much more, of course, can be said, and the distinction has been disputed,[5] but its point is that the methods of one are taken to be, not merely eccentric and cumbersome, but utterly ineffective when applied to the other. No mathematical truth can be either supported or assailed by counting either apples (for which $1+2$ tends to equal 3) or drops of mercury (for which $1+2$ tends to equal 1). Equally, no truth of science can be established by methods of proof from purely mathematical premisses (*pace* Eddington (1927 Ch.11) and the Pythagoreans; see e.g. Einstein (1923) and Stebbing (1937 Ch.4)).

Compared with these distinctions, those between the methods of different sciences seem quite trivial. Any science may contribute to the methods of another. Biological systems may be used to separate chemicals in order to assess the result of an experiment in physics. Nobody supposes that any such distinctions of method within the sciences bear at all in principle on how effectively a scientific theory has been assessed. No doubt the methods of biology differ impressively from those of nuclear physics, but contrasted with those of analytic topology, they are of a kind.

This distinction of kind, where accepted, between the methods of science and of mathematics is closely related to a distinction between the statements these methods respectively assess. This distinction, into kinds of truths, has to do with their implications, with the consequences of admitting them into our body of accepted knowledge. Nothing in science, it is thought, no substantial fact about the world, follows from the necessary truths of mathematics. So we have no qualms about admitting mathematical truths without appeal to any scientific method of assessment. We are convinced we will not thereby admit any opinion about the world, as it is ultimately revealed by our senses, that scientific methods might later require us to revise. Equally, we think that nothing in mathematics follows from any application of scientific method. (More precisely, since necessary truths follow from anything, no particular sensory observation should incline us to accept a mathematical result which another, equally possible sensory observation would have inclined us to reject.)

[5] In that the analytic-synthetic distinction has been questioned, for example by Quine (1953 Ch.2). But one who denied such a distinction between science and mathematics would be unlikely to admit it between science and religion, i.e. to accept (a), (b) *and* (c).

A similar difference in kind of truths, and perhaps more clearly pertinent to religious statements, is that widely drawn between science (and mathematics) and morality. Again, the distinction appears in assumptions about statements in one field lacking implications in the other. No character virtue, or prescription for behaviour, can be deduced from number theory; details of the good life in return afford no clue as to the structure of the atomic nucleus or the truth of Fermat's last theorem. There are some connections, of course, as in the maxim 'ought implies can'. Thus the empirical discovery that a seemingly desirable action is psychologically impossible might stop us blaming a man for not doing it. But such connections, between mere possibility and moral statements, still leave a gulf of kind separating mathematical and scientific statements of what is from moral statements of what ought to be.

In turn, to support this difference in kind of truths, we suppose that there must be differences in methods of assessing moral statements. Insofar as they fail to imply anything controvertible by the methods of science or mathematics, so our assessments of them must have another, independent, basis. And, of course, the well-known difficulties of finding, describing, and justifying any such peculiarly moral methods have led alternatively to denials of what correspond to our assumptions (a), (b) and (c). That is, the obscure nature and existence of proposed public methods of moral assessment have led some to conclude that there are no moral statements; others that they are merely subjective; yet others to reduce moral statements in kind to empirical statements (e.g. about happiness), and hence to assimilate moral methods to those of the sciences.

I have laboured the case of moral statements because it shows more clearly the religious options and their varying appeal. I have already argued that denying (a) or (b) is less plausible for religious than for moral utterances. So what is the presumption in favour of (c)? Precisely that, if (c) is denied, secular methods come to bear on the truths of religion. Thus the Russian astronaut who is alleged to have said that he saw no sign of God in space, however silly his remark,[6] would at least not have made a category mistake. If (c) is denied, it is difficult to see how religious statements can be given any independence of the secular findings of science and mathematics, or how faith in them can be distinguished from that of a chemist in quantum physics. The justification for taking the word of Popes, Archbishops and prophets, uncertified by their standing in the Royal Society, becomes utterly obscure.

And indeed, that Christianity has its peculiar methods has long been held. Whether they rest on mystical experience, direct revelation, the teaching of the Church or the authority of Scripture, each is sufficiently

[6] After all, many respectable scientific entities, not to say numbers, obtrude their existence on astronauts no more than on the rest of us.

public for present purposes. Each is in principle accessible to anyone (perhaps only after he has come provisionally to belief; (see p. 37 above) and each could in principle fail to give an expected support to the religious statement being assessed. What remains for discussion is how these methods can differ in kind from those of the sciences, of mathematics, and of morality, and still do the job they are required to do.

Let us dispose first of a number of well-rehearsed objections to religious methods, by showing, not necessarily that they are unfounded, but that they could equally be urged against those of the sciences. This in turn will sharpen the difficulties of distinguishing the two, which I then attempt to meet.

A main objection to religious methods is their being often available only to those prepared to accept the very statements to be assessed by them. I have already argued that, however justified this suspicion may be psychologically, in that a great deal of charlatanry can thus excuse its lack of agnostically attestable evidence, there is here no logical objection. 'If you doubt Christianity, try accepting it and see if it works' is a perfectly reasonable offer of evidence.

However, one's natural discontent with this reply is closely linked to a second objection, that religious assessments are not conclusive. If they were so, the possibility of contradictory leaps of faith would not matter, since conclusive methods of assessment would presumably pull everyone back to some common view. As things are, each of many incompatible religions can gain what seems to its adherents adequate evidential support, which is yet not available as counter-evidence to adherents of the others. To the judicious agnostic this naturally appears a concept of evidential support too weak to be worth having.

The trouble with these objections is that they can all be raised against most of our present scientific knowledge. We know now that the statements of scientific theory are not remotely reducible to incorrigible statements (if any) of sense-experience. And all attempts to build confirmation theories, for conclusively assessing whether inconclusive evidence better supports one theory than another, have so far quite failed to rely exclusively on principles of logic impervious to changes in theoretical language. In assessing any substantial body of scientific theory, one seems to need many empirical assumptions, not only for evidence, but for the very process of assessment—assumptions which one would wish, in turn, to be able to assess. So it is entirely possible, precisely because scientific theories go so far in both content and convention beyond what can plausibly be taken to be given in experience, for alternative leaps of scientific faith to be made into substantially self-confirming, but mutually contradictory, scientific theories.

Perhaps this should lead us to give up the scientific equivalent of assumption (a), and adopt an instrumentalist view of scientific theories

(e.g. see Nagel 1961, Ch. 6). That would fit precisely the view that 'if you doubt [say] continuum fluid mechanics, try accepting it and see if it works'. It does work, by and large, and so does the incompatible kinetic theory. Hence the instrumentalist refers to neither as true, rather to both as useful in their diverse ways. Objections to instrumentalism, however, have been extensively and, to my mind, conclusively argued (see e.g. Sellars (1961), Maxwell (1962), Feyerabend (1966)). (One is that, lacking any sharp dividing line between the observable and the theoretical, it is difficult for instrumentalism to sustain *any* plausible concept of empirical truth at all.)

So if science must live endlessly with irremovable possibilities of error and theoretical conflict, and yet can lay claim to truth and evidence, why should not Christianity do the same? But in that case, what *is* the difference of kind between the methods of science and of religion? Why are they as detached and uncomplementary as they seem to be?

The answer, I think, is that religion, unlike science, has no decent theory of perception to back up its methods of assessment. If I claim to know a temperature, there is, quite apart from the thermodynamic theory I may be testing or applying, a scientific account and justification of my temperature-measuring procedures. The theories on which these rely relate my claimed perception of temperature to my common-place perception of a needle on a scale, or of a set of brightly lit numerals. These theories will be distinct from the one I am using my thermometer to test, and so the latter cannot generally safeguard itself from unpalatable measurements. The theories of measurement in turn may be tested by methods relying on yet other theories, put up and adopted for wider purposes, which cannot therefore be bent or discarded at the whim of a disgruntled tester. And so on. It is the variety of largely independent scientific theories, which may be independently appealed to in certifying empirical secular methods, that makes a scientist's, or everyday observer's, claims to knowledge so convincing. And most of all, there is the deliberate linking of all scientific perceptions and assessments to everyday perception, the seeing, hearing and touching of plain and barely mistakable everyday things. However much science goes beyond this, it must include and explain what cannot but command the assent of the least scientific.[7]

The methods of religion do not seem to be, in the same way, a disciplined and interconnected extension of everyday methods of reliable perception. There is no problem, of course, about perceiving the scriptures and assessing them as books with writing, but the path from this to specifically

[7] Although I think these remarks indisputable, they have been seriously disputed. That parts of science are separately assessable has been denied most notably by Quine (1952 Intro.) and Duhem (1914, Pt. 2, Ch. 6) and defended by Grünbaum (1964, Ch. 4). That science must include commonplace truths has been denied by Feyerabend (1962) and Ryle (1954, Ch. 5) from opposite viewpoints, and has been defended by me (Mellor, 1969).

religious truth is not in turn certified by any independent, and independently testable, theory (e.g. of biblical revelation). The point is yet clearer for the other methods, of mysticism, direct revelation and Church teaching. In secular enquiry, a questioning of the theory behind a method may be countered by a demand for alternative explanations of widespread phenomena covered by the theory. The appeal to 'see it or be damned' need be made only at the crudest level of everyday vision. In religion, however, no such counter to sceptical questioning of a method (such as that of revelation) is at hand, and the appeal to question-begging insight seems to be needed at the very level of the original question.

I conclude then, that the price Christianity pays for immunity to secular knowledge, in the independence of its methods of assessment, is that those who find them insufficiently conclusive cannot be answered by any independent appeal to a theory of perception. And this is why, and where, the process of secular instruction, whether in history, science, or mathematics, differs from, and is cognitively more convincing and complete than, the process of religious conversion. This price, of course, is not an impossible one for a Christian to pay. One who claims to know a truth, and to have relevant evidence, does not have to know what gives that evidence the force it has. However, after considering assumption (d), it will be worth returning to ask whether the price is worth paying in full. It may be not only desirable, but true, that Christianity surrenders some immunity to *possible* empirical attack in return for some *actual* empirical support.

Meanwhile, what does it mean to say, and why should we think it true, that religious and scientific statements have the same subject matter? A general discussion of the problems of such common reference is outside the scope of this paper, but a few examples will serve to make the *prima facie* case. In the example on p. 33, John's life is the subject matter common to both statements. Similarly, if statements of Christ's humanity and divinity are not both taken to refer to one and the same individual, they lose all their religious point. If the birds of the air fed by our Heavenly Father are not identical with those whose dietary sources science can investigate in other terms, there is no obviously creditable point to His activities.

A statement's references may, of course, be various, and not all references of a pair of statements need be shared. Thus, if I teach a man, I suppose I teach his mind, while if I operate on him, I may operate on his knee; his mind is not his knee, yet the same man is referred to in each case. All we seem to need for (d), and what seems to be essential to the (e.g. human) relevance of religious statements, is *some* common reference. It will not follow, to take a crude illustrative fallacy, that because science need not refer to a man's soul, a religious statement that does so lacks common reference with science.

Granted assumption (d) then, in these vague and modest terms, why should its conjunction with (c) pose any problems? The point would seem to be this. Granted that at least some of the objects of assertive religious discourse are also those of secular discourse, they can be identified, and their existence established or disproved, by secular methods alone. For a religious statement referring to them to be true, it is necessary that they exist,[8] i.e. that something possesses some sufficient set of their secular characteristics.[9] But then the methods, everyday and scientific, used to assess these secular matters, come to bear on the truth of the religious statement. Whether John's life was saved at all is an entirely secular matter, and if it wasn't, the religious statement that it was saved by prayer is false.[10] If no *man* ever indulged in a sufficient number of the plainly historical activities attributed to Jesus (see note 9), then the religious statement ascribing divinity to such a man is false. Were there no birds of the air, a matter to be assessed purely secularly, our Heavenly Father could not feed them. And so on.

It might here be objected that the argument I have presented could as well be directed at science as at religion. Why should Christians not include religious characteristics among those serving to define the objects of which secular discourse speaks? Thus, to take the most plausible example, if we take Christ's divine character as defining, then it is the secular statements about him that are at the mercy of the religious. If, if not divine then not Christ, and not divine, then that Christ was a man must be false, precisely because there was no such (divine) person.

But the ontological tables cannot really be turned on secular discourse in this way. If we try any of the other examples, they become wildly implausible. It is not a remotely plausible defining characteristic of the birds of the air that they are divinely fed. An atheist who impugned the findings of ornithology on the grounds that its supposed object lacked an essential (religious) characteristic would cut no more ice with secular birdwatchers than with the Church. No more, one feels, would a cosmologist, denying the existence of the Universe on the grounds that it is by definition a divine creation and there is no God, receive a patient hearing either in the Vatican or at Jodrell Bank.[11] Even with Christ, the Christian claim surely is that

[8] Whether one adopts a Russellian theory of descriptions, (e.g. Russell, 1919, Ch. 16) or a Strawsonian theory of presupposed reference (1952, Ch. 6, Pt. 3), it follows that the truth of a statement entails the existence of what it refers to.

[9] An object may or may not have specifiable defining (i.e. essential) characteristics. If not, one would still insist on *some* sub-set of its supposed characteristics, even though no one such is essential.

[10] I have put these examples in Russellian terms. In Strawsonian terms, one would say that the corresponding sentences could not be used to make true statements.

[11] Provided neither institution is converted to the extreme views referred to in fn.[4] above and illustrated by Troilus' remarks [amplified in Kuhnian jargon]

some one among the secularly bodily identifiable, spatio-temporally locatable, perceptibly human inhabitants of the earth had also divine attributes. There is no corresponding secular claim that a (so to speak) divinely defined entity was physically embodied. So, whereas a secular (in this case historical) discovery could discredit the Christian ontological claim, no amount of religious evidence for atheism is going to disturb a secular historian.

The fact is that there is a clear asymmetry which prevents ontological conflict between secular and religious discourse. Religion may add to the secular ontology of both attributes (e.g. sin) and individuals (e.g. God), but it cannot subtract from it. The reason seems to lie in the lack, already discussed (p. 41), of any religious theory of perception which could be appealed to in order to discredit some secular method of assessment where it clashed with a religious one. It follows, then, that any common reference of religious and secular statements lies completely within a secular ontology which is impervious to religious erosion. It follows in turn that there is a one-sided dependence, at least for those religious statements that do have any such common reference, of religious upon secular truth. And this conclusion seems to be incompatible with assumption (c).

Let us now enquire whether the present conclusions ought really to be unpalatable to Christians, and whether some more modest form of (c) cannot be reconciled to them. I cannot myself see why the dependence of religious on secular truth suggested here should be thought repugnant. The contrary view seems to spring from a desire that religious knowledge should be more secure than *empirical* secular knowledge, at any rate, can be. And of course it is empirical rather than mathematical objects that are most commonly referred to in religious statements. This desire for greater certainty in religious knowledge may perhaps be granted, if really desired, to statements lacking empirical reference (e.g. those dealing with fine points of celestial organization). But that it cannot be granted to most religious statements need distress only those neurotically infected with Humean doubts about all merely contingent truth. The rest of us may admit that religious belief in prayer saving John's life can be no stronger than empirical belief in John's continued existence, and yet find it strong enough. And similarly for the heavenly feeding of birds, the divine nature of Christ, and the celestial origin of the Universe. Whoever demands more than empirical certainty (e.g. by revelatory reassurance) in matters of

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on observing Cressida's faithless behaviour with Diomed: 'Was Cressida here? . . . No, this is Diomed's Cressida. If [one adopts the theoretical paradigm of which it is a tenet that] beauty has a soul, [etc.], this was not she. . . . This is, and is not, Cressid [depending on which of two conflicting theories of sexual fidelity one adopts]' *Thersites*: 'Will 'a swagger himself out on's own eyes?'—Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida V* ii.

empirical consequence must be prepared to submit his religious methods to competition with those of the sciences. And apart from the unacceptable result that purely secular statements could then be established by purely religious methods, this seems to me as rash as the alternative of denying any secular consequences, in particular any empirical reference, to religious statements is implausible.

What then is left of (c)? We can perfectly well accept that since many religious statements entail secular ones, they are equally subject to refutation by secular methods. But since the converse is not true, merely secular methods give us no ground for going beyond secular statements to the religious statements entailing them. We have reason, therefore, to admit purely religious methods of assessment, which do not bear at all directly on the truth of secular statements, but which must be appealed to in debate with unbelievers when no secular facts are at issue. (c) must be rejected only insofar as these methods do not *exhaust* those bearing on the truth-values of religious statements. But the purely religious methods may form a clearly distinct sub-class of the latter, and it is to this non-empty sub-class that (c) may plausibly be applied.

To all this, I can now conceive it objected that, sound as it is, it evades the point at issue. The secular member of the pair of statements

'John's life was saved by surgery'
'John's life was saved in answer to prayer'

is not entailed or presupposed by the religious member. The former goes beyond the secular statement they both entail as much as does the latter. The real point is whether, and in what way, they compete with each other as *explanations* of what they both entail, and that point I have not discussed at all. So far I have merely set the stage for such a discussion, and tried to sweep it free of irrelevant matter. But I can hardly now conceal the view implicit in all I have concluded, that there really is no further problem at all. Whatever competition there may be between these statements is merely psychological. There is no secular reason to reject the religious statement, no religious reason to reject the secular one. One person might be content with the one statement as an explanation, another person be content with the other. There is no sort of incompatibility between the two, and neither philosophy, science nor religion is competent to adjudicate any conflict there may be thought to be.[12]

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