

CAN FAITH VALIDATE GOD-TALK?

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THESIS: Philosophical analysis provides fideism with a crucial problem. It seems that we can accept on faith only what we can understand. For if we cannot understand something, we cannot know what it is we are to accept on faith. Yet crucial religious assertions appear to be completely without truth value. But if they are, how then can we possibly accept them on faith? This essay examines some efforts to get around this barrier to an appeal to faith and concludes that fideism can only be a satisfactory apologetic stance if the factual intelligibility of key religious utterances has been established.

TO be a fideist is to believe that fundamental religious beliefs rest solely and completely on faith. Finite and sinful man cannot by the use of his unaided reason come to know God. Belief and unbelief are intellectually on a par, religious experience is unalterably ambiguous as to the reality of its object, and the existence of God can never be established by empirical investigation or philosophical demonstration. But the storms and stresses of our lives will drive us to faith. We must turn to God to overcome despair and the "threat of meaninglessness." Without God life can indeed be nothing more than a "tale told by an idiot." Faith will give our lives an anchor, will enable us to overcome that sickness unto death that goes with a loss of God, but with or without faith, we will only see through a glass darkly, for God remains an utter mystery and a thorough scandal to the intellect. Intellectually speaking, a belief in God is absurd; taken as a hypothesis it is at best fanciful. The believer, the "knight of faith," can only trust that he is not "whistling in the dark," is not believing something that is thoroughly illusory, when he accepts the God revealed in the

Scriptures as an ultimate reality. Here, the quest for certainty or even for a guide that will give us "reasonable probabilities" is a quixotic quest. The believer must simply take the leap of faith without any intellectual assurance at all that he is leaping in the right direction. But this total risk is well worth it for without God man's life is without meaning.

Fideism has an ancient and respected lineage. One finds it in Tertullian, Pascal, Hamann, and Kierkegaard. In our time it finds expression in one way or another in the theologies of Barth, Brunner, Nygren, and the Niebuhrs. It is even a dominant motif in the writings of such a perceptive linguistic philosopher as Alastair MacIntyre.¹ But in characterizing fideism as I have, I have not been concerned to set forth a view which necessarily fits the exact views of any of these men. Kierkegaard, it seems to me, presents the purest case of such an orientation, but while I do not wish to do battle with straw men or tilt with windmills, I am not concerned here with the history of a movement. In the defenses of religion given by the men mentioned above, such fideistic approaches are dominant though other claims are made as well. I want here to take the core concepts of fideism—concepts that are frequently appealed to in theological discussion—and subject them to examination without attempting to prove that any theologian of note holds exactly the view I have characterized as fideism.²

I

Such fideistic approaches to religion have an obvious appeal. Natural theology, which has somewhat extravagantly been called "the Sick Man of Europe," can now be bypassed; the harassed man who is struggling to decide whether he can accept the claims of religion can ignore the ambiguities of metaphysics and the rarified atmosphere of philosophical analysis. Fideism provides him with a rationale for rejecting such claims as little intellectual games that are irrelevant to his quest for God.

It is true that we do not and cannot know whether there is a God,

¹ See particularly his "The Logical Status of Religious Belief" in *Metaphysical Beliefs*, ed. S. Toulmin *et al.* (London: 1957) and his *Difficulties in Christian Belief* (London: 1957).

² That such a view is not the straw man of an eager, all-too-eager, philosophical analyst, but a powerful tradition within Christian theology, is amply shown by Richard Popkin in his "Theological and Religious Scepticism," *The Christian Scholar*, vol. XXXIX (June, 1956), pp. 150-8 and in his "Kierkegaard and Scepticism," *Algemeen Nederlands Tijdschrift Voor Wijsgeerte En Psychologie*, vol. 51 (No. 3), pp. 123-41.

whether there is an omniscient and just Being who looks after us, as a perfect father would, or whether Jesus is God. If we feel this scepticism and if deep in our hearts the claim that Jesus is God remains—along with the other central claims of the Christian faith—a “shocking but relevant possibility,” fideism will attract us.³ Given that our need to believe is strong enough, it may incite our assent. By an act of faith we accept the absurd claims of Christianity not as mere possibilities but as actualities that will direct our lives and give fiber to our deepest hopes.

Yet the fact remains that for many philosophers of an analytical persuasion, it is just this initial claim that such alleged beliefs are *intelligible possibilities* that serves as the greatest stumbling block to religious belief. Christian and, more generally, theistic talk is indeed a part of the languages of the West. (There is, of course, no special Christian language.) If we can speak English we can and do learn to speak of God. If we take religion as a kind of myth (albeit an important and moving myth), we will generally have no overwhelming difficulty in understanding religious talk in the way we understand and accept all myths. But while no Jew or Christian should deny that religious discourse has mythical elements, the Jewish and Christian tradition would insist that there is something more there, too. In some sense, divine existence is taken to be more than a human creation, a human ideal, no matter how worthy, projected onto the universe. But in trying to *say* what more is involved, all the trouble begins.

When the fideist says that this “more” is a possibility he will opt for with his whole heart and his whole mind, it is the very *meaning* of his claim that perplexes the contemporary philosophical analyst. How can we presuppose it and then act on it? If it is a possibility, what would it be like for it to be actualized? What would have to happen or not have to happen in order for “Jesus is God” or “There is a God” or “God governs the world” to be either true or false? While the nineteenth-century sceptic characteristically puzzled over whether there was sufficient evidence for “There is a God” to be true or even probable, the twentieth-century sceptic has come to be perplexed over the question of what it *means* even to affirm or deny the existence or love of God. This last question was seen to be logically prior to questions about the truth of religious beliefs.

³ Paul Holmer, “Philosophical Criticism and Christology,” *The Journal of Religion*, vol. XXXIV (April, 1954), p. 90.

Here's the rub for the fideist. Before we can intelligibly say, as an atheist, "There is no God," or as a believer, either fideist or non-fideist, "There is a God" or, as an agnostic, "We do not have sufficient evidence to either affirm or deny there is a God," we must know what such sentences *mean*. But do we? Do we have any idea what it would be like for any of these utterances to be used to make true or false statements? Many philosophers, rightly or wrongly, have concluded that we do not. If they are right, these theistic utterances are then *factually* meaningless utterances, though they indeed have some emotive, ceremonial, or pseudofactual (ideological) meaning.⁴

These philosophical contentions themselves have been subject to fierce controversy among philosophers and theologians, but from this discussion it has become apparent that the logical status of certain crucial theistic utterances is extremely controversial. Some find the whole mode of theistic discourse in its essential respects meaningless or chaotic and, as a result, disapprove of religion; others argue that one can never justifiably say of a whole mode of discourse, a form of life, that it is meaningless or chaotic, and they may go on to conclude, as does the Oxford philosopher, I. M. Crombie, that "seen as a whole religion makes rough sense, though it does not make limpidity."⁵ But for all parties, the central philosophical puzzle is about the very *meaning* of religious talk. The puzzle here is not only about various analyses of religious discourse but over whether central aspects of first-order religious talk are themselves intelligible.

It is tempting to suppose that fideism shows how the man, seriously involved with religion, can put such abstruse and baffling concerns aside as the twaddle of philosophers. Those who accept religion on faith, those who operate within "the circle of faith," need not bother about what "God" means. They clearly realize that they cannot understand what many of the central theistic claims mean. But this is just as it should be. After all, religion is a mystery. But God, in his majesty and grace, infuses religious utterances with meaning, though to man they remain meaningless. The man of faith does not and cannot understand them; he simply accepts God's word, though these words (as well as the very word "God") remain meaningless to him.

⁴ For an analysis that construes certain key religious utterances as ideological utterances, see my "On Speaking of God," *Theoria*, vol. XXVIII, Part 2 (1962), pp. 110-137.

⁵ I. M. Crombie, "Theology and Falsification," *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. by A. G. N. Flew (New York: 1955), p. 130.

It can be plausibly argued that this fideist defense cannot be correct, for such remarks are without sense.⁶ If the believer doesn't understand the utterances *at all*, he cannot accept or reject them, for he literally would not understand *what* he is accepting or rejecting. If they are meaningful *at all*, they must be intelligible to at least some men. If we do not understand what "God" means or what it would be like for "There is a God" to be true or false, to say we accept God on faith is like saying we accept Irglig on faith or "There is an Irglig" on faith. Before we can make the leap, before we can accept a claim on faith or refuse to accept it on faith, we must at least have some minimal understanding of *what* it is we are accepting or rejecting. *At this level*, faith cannot be a way to understanding. Faith cannot insure the meaningfulness of religious utterances; quite to the contrary, faith presupposes that the discourse in question is itself meaningful (intelligible). If we lack evidence for x, we may take x on faith, but we cannot by an act of faith step from what we do not understand to what we do understand. If I do not know what is meant by x, I cannot intelligibly say that I have faith in x, that I place my trust in x, or that I accept x on authority. I may say: "I have faith that segregation will come to an end in the South in the next five years" or "I have faith in the farm policies of Secretary Freeman." Here I mean that I trust Secretary Freeman or trust that his policies will work out for the best and trust that segregation will come to an end within five years. I trust that these things will take place but I have no evidence that they will take place or even that they are likely to take place. Yet I trust that they will. In the latter case, I might do this simply because I trust Freeman. As the fideist takes the Bible or the church as his authority in matters of religion, so I simply accept Freeman's statements as authoritative on questions of farm policy. But in the two non-religious cases, I know what it would be like for the authoritative statements to be true or false. The *meaning* of the statements taken on faith is perfectly clear. To understand their meaning we do not and cannot invoke faith. Faith has no role at all to play here. I *must* understand the *meaning* of a proposition before I can accept or fail to accept it on faith or on authority.

If we could reasonably assume that religious utterances were meaningful (intelligible), then the fideist's claim would be perfectly un-

⁶ See Bernard Williams' brilliant essay, "Tertullian's Paradox," *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. by A. G. N. Flew (New York: 1955), pp. 208-11.

derstandable, though it might still fail to be convincing. But this is just what we cannot assume, for it is just this that is at issue. Fideism only works when we know what the religious claims in question *mean* and simply lack evidence for their *truth*. For traditional fideists the appropriate question is not "What do they mean?" or "Are they intelligible?" but, granting they are intelligible, why should we accept them when we cannot establish their truth or even establish that they are probable. The fideists are trying to show us why we should believe, even though we haven't one iota of evidence for our beliefs. It is this last question that Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Barth wrestle with, while (in effect) assuming that there is no puzzle about the *meaning* of religious utterances.⁷ But it is just this logically prior question that disturbs contemporary philosophers when they think about religion, and to this question it would seem that fideism is no answer at all nor is it a way around the problem. We are, whether we like it or not, left with the crucial question: Are religious utterances intelligible, can we meaningfully assert or deny there is a God? This logically prior question remains a question of first importance in an examination and defense of religion. Apologetics cannot reasonably skirt it. To ask someone to understand by faith is nonsense, though if he already understands what his phonemic sequences mean, then it may well be (in some contexts at least) perfectly reasonable to ask him to accept the truth of what they are used to assert on faith—that is, understanding their meaning, we may be asked to accept on faith that what is asserted by their use is true. We still may not find it reasonable to opt for anything for which we lack evidence, but like William James or Soren Kierkegaard we may so believe though we lack evidence for our beliefs. We may, out of our despair and infinite hope, come to believe in the absurd, take it on faith that there is a God and that for God all things are possible, and at the same time be fully aware of the intellectual scandal involved in such a belief. Here we can legitimately talk of what a man can bring himself to do or not to do. But we must *presuppose*, in all such reasoning, that theistic utterances are (in the appropriate sense) meaningful.

A man deeply involved in religion may indeed *not* wish to engage in the philosopher's abstruse talk about talk or (more accurately) talk about the *uses* of talk. "Leave that to the philosophers" is his feel-

⁷ They do not see or do not face the semantical puzzle, "What cognitive meaning could such utterances have if we *can* have no grounds at all for saying they are true?"

ing; "I live by faith and all such philosophical chatter is entirely irrelevant to my faith. I will not cry out, like John Osborne, that 'We're along in the universe, there's no God, . . . (and) somehow we've just got to make a go of it.' I will believe!"

The fideist can of course say this and he can say it from the anguish of his heart, but unless he is clear, genuinely clear, in his own mind that he understands what is meant by "God," then he is really, consciously or unconsciously, being evasive and obscurantist. Fideism does not seem to provide an "out" here, for as a matter of fact questions about the very intelligibility of religious discourse are hotly controversial. If we wish to be religious and still wish to be non-evasive about our religion, we must tackle these difficult philosophical questions of meaning; we cannot simply go the way of faith.

II

I wish now to consider if fideism can in some reasonable way overcome the challenge put to it in section one.

It might be argued, as J. N. Findlay has argued, that it is a mistake to link "understanding x" or "knowing the meaning of x" too closely with "the method of establishing x to be true or false."⁸ Just such a close linkage is implicit in my preceding argument. I have, in effect, argued that to understand the meaning of x, where x is a sentence purportedly used to state a fact, we must know what conceivably *could* count for the truth or falsity of x. For x to have *factual* meaning, x must have truth conditions. If we do not know what these truth conditions are, x is meaningless to us, and that God might know what they are does not make x an intelligible bit of human discourse. It still remains a factually meaningless English expression.

Findlay claims this is a dogma that has created "gratuitous quandries which have haunted thought in the past decades."⁹ It would be nice to know why this is so, but Findlay does not tell us; however, he does assert what could be good news for the fideist, namely "that we may go quite a long ways towards validating an assertion whose meaning we do not understand *at all*."¹⁰ (If we don't understand it *at all*, *what* is it that we are validating? How could we possibly have the slightest notion that it was *it* that we validated?) Findlay says that

⁸ J. N. Findlay, "Some Reflections on Meaning," *The Indian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. I (August, 1959), pp. 15-16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15 (italics mine).

we do this “whenever we pin our faith to an assertion that we do not understand, but which has been made by some expert or reliable person.”¹¹ This would fit our fideistic interpretation of the religious use of language very well.

Yet there are plenty of difficulties in Findlay’s account. Findlay goes on to say that “true” has a standard use in which we “lend assent to assertions with whose precise content we are not for some reason conversant.”¹² We can know something to be true when we know little or *nothing* of it. “Physicists,” Findlay points out, “assert and make use of many sentences to which they have not given a satisfactory sense.” But the cat is out of the bag with “a satisfactory sense” or “a precise content.” In order for a sentence to serve as the vehicle for a *factual* assertion, we must be able to say what would count for the truth or falsity of this putative assertion. It must have *that* much meaning and this is not excluded in the physicist’s case, even though the precise content or the full elaboration of his sentence may not be clear.

But this will not cover Findlay’s *first situation* where we do not understand the meaning of the utterance *at all*, for there we cannot understand what it is to which we are to lend our assent. If we do not have *any idea at all* of what an utterance means, we literally cannot lend or fail to lend assent to it for, after all, how could we identify what it is we are lending our assent to? The physicist can say, “We don’t understand *very well* what we mean by ‘x’ but when this happens (and he specifies some state of affairs) we would say ‘x,’ and if it does not occur we would not say ‘x.’ ” If the believer can say something similar about “There is a God,” then his utterance can be said to have a factual meaning, though we need not and ought not assert “There is a God” is identical in meaning with a sentence asserting that these test conditions obtain. If this is the case, then the religious utterance has an appropriate meaning. But where we do not understand the utterance *at all* we cannot even say what would make it true or false; and this being so, we can have no idea of what it would be like to validate it. If x is meaningless, x can be neither true nor false, validated nor invalidated, accepted nor rejected. A completely meaningless set of marks can never become the object of faith or of disbelief.

Findlay might argue that this is too harsh. It does not at all fit

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

our linguistic practice. Consider again the analogy with physics. Many intelligent and reflective people understand little or nothing of physics. They don't understand what the physicist is talking about when he makes certain crucial statements that are a part of quantum mechanics. They don't understand his utterances at all. But they have seen our technological transformation—transformations beyond the dreams of the bold men of the Renaissance. And they have been *told* that there is a very important connection between some of these technological transformations and the (to them) mysterious statements that are a part of quantum theory. They see the fruits of science—how could they not see them?—and they trust the physicist; they trust that there is this intimate connection between his theories and these technological transformations, though they do not at all understand the physicist's statements when he states some of the key claims of quantum mechanics. They are meaningless gibberish to the non-physicist, but trusting the physicist (having faith in the physicist and in physics) they accept them humbly on faith (trust) though they do not understand their meaning. To them they remain empty formulae, but they have faith that these formulae do in reality mean something, that the physicist is asserting *something* (the layman knows not what) that is true. Such a layman has faith that such formulae are part of a coherent language game.

Why cannot the fideist, the knight of faith, do exactly the same thing? A language game of ancient lineage is being played here. The believer does not understand what is meant by certain crucial utterances that are a part of this language game, but by an act of faith, of trust in his religious authority, he accepts that what is being said is not without meaning—is part of a coherent language game. Such a fideist freely admits that such key religious utterances are gibberish to him, but he has faith that his religious authorities are saying *something* that is intelligible to them (but not to him), *something* that is important and true.

The first thing to be noted here is that by making such a claim the fideist has changed the conditions of the argument. He is no longer claiming that he has faith in meaningless propositions. His present argument in fact commits him to the claim that the propositions are meaningful. He is now only making the much less exciting claim that he can believe them even though they are meaningless to him and others like him. If the analogy with physics is close, there are

certain religious figures—priests, theologians, some kind of holy men—who understand these key religious utterances. The fideist trusts them; they are his religious authorities, but, on the argument presently being made, the religious utterances are meaningful to the religious authorities in question, though they are not meaningful to the ordinary believer. Such a believer trusts the religious authority—*assuming*, as Danto so nicely puts it, that somebody knows what he is talking about.¹³ The believer, as a fideist, may justifiably bypass the puzzling arguments about the very intelligibility of key theistic utterances but only on condition that his religious authority does not do so, for to argue as our fideist just has is to assume that his religious authority understands what the words and utterances mean. But philosophically significant fideists make no such claim. The purer and philosophically interesting and significant fideism that we are talking about claims that the religious authority, no matter how august, is in exactly the same boat as the plain believer. Such religious authorities have no key to the meaning of religious utterances. The propositions are not only meaningless to the uninitiate, they are meaningless to the theologian and holy man, too. These men too must accept such propositions purely on faith. They do not understand their meaning any more than the plain man does. They accept them simply on faith, as we all must, if we are to be genuinely religious. In this respect, the theologian or holy man is in a very different position from the physicist; and such religious men seem to be very much in the intellectual predicament described in section one. If this is so the plain man—attempting to adopt a fideistic approach to religion—cannot with justice turn to the theologian here. The analogy with science won't do.

Secondly, even forgetting the very crucial difficulty noted above, there is still trouble with the analogy, as my last remark in the above paragraph should have suggested. If a man knows nothing of physics, it is reasonable for him to accept what competent quantum physicists claim is so about quantum mechanics. The religiously perplexed layman may feel that the same thing holds for religion. There is no more point in everyone being his own theologian than everyone being his own physicist or doctor.¹⁴ There are crucial dif-

¹³ Arthur C. Danto, "Faith, Language and Religious Experience: A Dialogue," in *Religious Experience and Truth*, ed. by Sidney Hook (New York: 1961), p. 146.

¹⁴ If the "plain man" has read much theology or has run onto Walter Kaufmann's "Theology," he might, or at least he should, feel differently about this, though perhaps if he had done this he would not really be a "plain man." See Walter Kaufmann, "Theology," in *Self, Religion and Metaphysics*, ed. by Gerald E. Myers (New York: 1961), pp. 83–109.

ferences in the cases—differences that destroy the point of the analogy. The theologian whom the believer relies on will claim (if he is a fideist) that he does not understand the key religious claims involved, since he, too, is a man and finite, sinful man cannot possibly understand such claims. Everyone (including the theologian) must accept such claims simply on faith without understanding their *meaning*. But once this admission is made, the analogy with physics has been destroyed and the points made in section one become apposite. How can anyone have faith, if no one can understand what it is we are to have faith in or what it is we are to accept solely on faith? When the theologians or holy men insist that they do not and cannot understand what they call their “articles of faith,” how can we be expected to go on trusting them?

To this it may be replied, “Well, we just do. We mouth (utter) the words they tell us to mouth (utter), pray, go to communion, orient our life ethically in the way they tell us to, not understanding the superstructure they attach it to. (We utter the words in prayer, but they are words without meaning.) This gives our lives a meaning.” Such a defense might continue in this manner: “There are a bunch of words that are part of our language. They can be used to make what some people would be willing to call statements. We do not understand them—no one does except God and appeal to him here would be viciously circular. Yet as the layman can accept something in physics that he does not understand at all, so we believers can accept something in religion that we do not understand at all. We trust that these key religious utterances are sometimes used to assert *something*, though we and no one else can say what they assert.”

If the claim is made this weak, then even a Freudian or Marxian may claim that he can, in a sense, go along with it. Such utterances do typically assert something but, such a critic might aver, they can go the believer “one better” and say what that something is. Such God-sentences really refer to one’s father, though the person who asserts them is actually confused about their reference. But the fideist will, of course, claim that when he says that these religious utterances assert something, though we do not understand them at all, he *means* that they assert some supernatural, spiritual, or transcendent something. But then he seems to be implicitly admitting he does understand them to a degree, and he is bringing in with “supernatural” and the like just the sort of word he claims is not understood at all

and need not be understood. But it now seems that “supernatural,” “spiritual,” or “transcendent” must be understood if he is going to be able to claim, as he wants to, that his key religious utterances assert something that is distinct from what such a Freudian or Marxist materialist would be willing to assert. At this point the fideist may latch on to the first part of his argument alone. All he can justifiably say, he now concedes, is that believers mouth (utter) certain words (words that we humans do not understand) and act in a certain way. But this, he contends, is enough for belief.

If such a reply is made it seems to me that the fideist, if he is really willing to stick with this, cannot be dislodged by rational argument or shown, if he does nothing to adorn this position, that his position is senseless or unintelligible. It *may* be an irrational position, a position which no thoughtful man, once he had taken proper cognizance of the many thousands of conflicting religions and sects, would wish to embrace, but it is not an unintelligible position and I know of no purely logical or conceptual arguments that would defeat it.¹⁵ But it is important to take note that if someone chooses to rest his argument here he cannot draw sustenance from the analogy with physics, for the physicist has no such need to appeal to faith or to do things in conjunction with accepting formulae whose meaning he does not *at all* understand. In the religious case we have nothing that is genuinely comparable to following the doctor’s orders, though we do not understand the rationale of what the doctor would have us do, or accepting on trust that the physicist knows what he is talking about though we do not. With the fideist we have the claim that *no* one understands what he is doing, no one understands the meaning of the religious utterances in question, but we are to accept them all the same. But where this is so, it is not at all apparent that to believe under such circumstances is a reasonable thing to do and we are left with our original nagging problem—a problem posed most clearly by modern linguistic analysis: what would it be like to accept on faith or otherwise something as a factual proposition if we have *no idea* of what would confirm or disconfirm it, if we have *no idea* of under what circumstances we would be prepared to say it was true or false? The fideist claims that it is a *fact* that there is a God, that God created the world, that God loves us and the like. But if we have no idea of

¹⁵ I shall return on another occasion to the very strong claim that fideism in particular and theistic religion in general are irrational and therefore ought to be abandoned.

what it would be like for such statements to be either true or false, how can we meaningfully assert that they are statements of *fact*? And if we cannot meaningfully assert that statements asserting these claims are in reality statements of fact, how can we accept on faith that "There is a God," etc. are facts? Can fideism non-evasively and justifiably avoid this problem? I have just indicated one "out" that can be taken, but this "out" appears to be evasive. There is one more, ostensibly non-evasive move that the fideist might make. Let us now examine that.

In attempting to avoid the difficulties mentioned in section one, a fideist might state his position in the following way: "'There is a God' is true" *means*, where Jesus is the religious authority, "Jesus asserted 'There is a God.'" (If Jesus is not the religious authority, then whoever or whatever is the religious authority should replace "Jesus" in the above-mentioned sentence.) Let us designate as (A) "'There is a God' is true," and as (B) "Jesus asserted 'There is a God.'" A fideist might argue that (B) is verifiable (testable) in principle. And that Jesus uttered, or would have been prepared to utter, the Hebrew equivalent of "There is a God" is indeed verifiable in principle. (B) is not a mysterious utterance. Its truth-value is plain enough. The fideist then stipulates either that when he affirms (A) he means (B), or that when he affirms (A), (B) is at least an essential part of what he intends. But since (B) is intelligible (has a truth-value), then (A) is, to that degree, intelligible, too, and the fideist hasn't fallen into the analyst's trap after all. It is true that he does not understand what "There is a God" or "God loves us" *mean*. These utterances are meaningless to him, but he does know *what* it is he places his trust in—his faith is in something he does understand, namely, he understands that Jesus (or his religious authority) asserted that there is a God or that God loves us.

When we ask the fideist what he means when he says "'There is a God' is true," he can reply that he at least means this: "Jesus asserted 'There is a God' and because Jesus asserted it, it is true." If we ask, "*What* did Jesus assert?" he will reply that Jesus asserted "There is a God" and that we finite, sinful creatures no more understand "There is a God" than we understand "There is an Irglig." However, we don't have to, for all we need to know is that if Jesus asserts something, we are to affirm that phonemic sequence. To the question, "What are you affirming?" we answer that we don't know; but when-

ever Jesus asserts something, we properly apply "true" to it. Since this is so, our statements expressive of our beliefs have truth-conditions and thus are intelligible, factual statements.

It is not true that they are compatible with anything and everything; we can say something about the conditions under which it would be appropriate to assert or deny them. Thus, though they are meaningless in one sense, they are meaningful in another, and a person can proclaim and adhere to them as his most basic commitments, the deepest articles of his faith. God Himself is unknowable—we don't even understand what "God" means—but Jesus is knowable and we take on faith his assertions about God to be true. In this way true faith may precede understanding.

This reply has at least one crucial defect. It claims Jesus asserted "p" where "p" is admittedly unintelligible to believer and non-believer alike, though supposedly intelligible to Jesus. But does it make sense to say "He asserted p" where "p" is unintelligible to us? We could say "He *uttered* p" or "He *wrote* p" but are we entitled to say he *asserted* p or *stated* p?¹⁶ To assert something is to vouch for its truth. Now, how would it be possible for us to know that someone had asserted something except by seeing that he was willing to stick by it, give evidence for it if some moral considerations did not intervene, attempt to meet counter-claims and the like? In general, to know that he had *asserted* it, and not just *said* it, would be to know that he had behaved in certain distinctive ways. Consider this case. I say "The river is over its banks and we will have to move out to keep from being flooded." I say this but I make no effort to move out and I have no idea of how to take or direct you to a place where you could make observations of the river. To compound the confusion I keep on making the above utterance no matter what happens. Finally—after being pressed—I acknowledge that I didn't mean to claim that what I said was true but that I simply wanted to perplex you and to exercise my vocal chords. In such a situation you would *not* be entitled to say that I had asserted what I uttered but only that I had said it without meaning it. To assert something is to claim with honesty that it is true. Phonemic sequences or sentences cannot be true or false; only statements or assertions made through the use of sentences can be true or false. Be-

¹⁶ Some of the relevant distinctions between "saying," "asserting," and "stating" are nicely drawn by Isabel Hungerland in her "Contextual Implication," *Inquiry*, vol. 3 (Winter, 1960).

fore we can say that something is a *bona fide* assertion, as distinct from a sentence or a phonemic sequence, we must know what would count as evidence for the truth or falsity of what we are saying. But if we do not understand what *p* means we cannot understand what it would *mean* to say that *p* is true. Not understanding this, we cannot say what would count for the truth of *p*. Thus (B) ("Jesus asserted 'There is a God'") is unintelligible. But now we have also lost our footing for saying (A) is intelligible. Thus, our fideist has not by such a move been able to maneuver around the difficulty with fideism developed in section one.

It is not an adequate rebuttal to reply that it is enough to say "Jesus said 'There is a God,'" for "said" will either in this context bear the meaning of "asserts" or it will simply mean "uttered the sentence-token 'There is a God.'" If it means the latter it is indeed intelligible and would be just as intelligible if Jesus had said "Bright is the equation grief regains." But where "said" doesn't and couldn't do the job of "asserts" or "states," it is *not* correct to say that what Jesus said is *true* or *false*, and if that is so, then it does not make sense to say we will assert or deny what Jesus asserted or denied, for Jesus did not, and in this instance could not, assert or deny anything. For the same reasons, it makes no sense to say that Jesus's utterance is true or false, for an utterance or a sentence can't be true or false but only a statement, assertion, or a judgment can be true or false. Since in this instance he can't be asserting (or for that matter stating or judging) anything, he of course cannot be asserting (stating, judging) anything true or false. On this reading, (B) can't be an assertion—true or false—and since (A) has what meaning it has in virtue of (B), (A) cannot be an assertion either, and thus cannot be an object of our faith.

III

It is now time to sum up. Contemporary perplexity over religion typically arises from the conviction or anxiety that key religious utterances are in some appropriate sense meaningless. Fideism, I have argued, is no way around this problem. If we human beings have no understanding at all of what would or could count as an appropriate object of a religious attitude, we cannot understand what we are to take as the object of our religious trust, reverence, or faith. Such a "faith" is so blind, so objectless, that it is no faith at all.

The best face we can put on the attempt to develop a fideism compatible with the admission that our key religious utterances are meaningless—utterly beyond all human understanding—comes down to the claim that “to believe solely on faith” consists in *nothing more* than repeating certain words we do not and cannot understand and carrying or attempting to carry out certain principles of action that we trust will give a deep, though not clearly definable, point to our lives. So limited, fideism is an intelligible theological stance, even in a world in which believers and non-believers alike acknowledge that God-talk or the crucial bits of God-talk are unintelligible. But it is natural to demand more of religious belief; and where more is demanded, fideism cannot justify bypassing the contention that the claims of religion are in reality no claims at all because key religious words and utterances are without intelligible factual content. If such a sceptical claim is justified, religious claims are illusory and fideism is no adequate defense of religion.

If the fideist finally grants us that we cannot have faith in or place our trust in what is meaningless and then goes on to say “But, of course, ‘There is a God,’ ‘God loves us,’ ‘God created the heavens and the earth,’ and the like, all do have meaning, for after all they have a *use* in our ‘mother-tongue,’” he has shifted the argument. I have only been concerned here to argue that we cannot (with the qualification already mentioned) intelligibly maintain that we can have faith in meaningless propositions. If God-talk is meaningless or unintelligible, then fideism crumbles along with the other defenses of religious belief. If phonemic sequences like those mentioned above are understood as meaningful (true or false) assertions, then we can indeed believe they are *true, de fide*. Fideism would then be an intelligible though *perhaps* an irrational apologetic position. It seems to me, however, that we do not know the truth-conditions associated with “There is a God” and the like. In fact, we do not even know if they have truth-conditions. If this is so, then there seem to be no grounds for claiming that such religious utterances are used in such a way that they can count as assertions which we may take or fail to take on faith.¹⁷ But this is a large subject that deserves attention on another occasion.

¹⁷ If arguments like those made by Ziff in his “About ‘God’” are correct what I have said here would need modification. But it seems to me that Paul Edwards’ arguments against Ziff’s contentions are very strong if not decisive. See Paul Ziff, “About ‘God,’” pp. 195–202 and Paul Edwards, “Some Notes on Anthropomorphic Theology,” pp. 244–5, both in *Religious Experience and Truth*, ed. by Sidney Hook (New York: 1961).