

Kai Nielsen/**Eschatological verification**

Professor John Hick, in carrying on a discussion initiated by Professors Wisdom and Flew, argues that (1) divine experience, as it is understood in the New Testament, is taken to be a matter of objective fact, and (2) statements which assert that existence are empirically verifiable.¹ Hick does not try to show that "God exists" is true and that Christian claims have been established; rather, in "Theology and Verification" he is concerned with the *logically* prior question of whether it is *intelligible* to claim that divine existence is a fact.

I shall argue that Hick has not at all succeeded in establishing what he has set out to establish and that we have no good reasons for believing that such crucial theistic utterances are used

From "Eschatological Verification," *Canadian Journal of Theology*, 9 (1963), 271-281, by Kai Nielsen. Reprinted with the permission of the *Canadian Journal of Theology* and the author.

¹ John Hick, "Theology and Verification," *Theology Today*, 17 (1960), 12-31. [This article is reprinted in this volume beginning on p. 188.—Editors]

to make statements of fact that are either verifiable or confirmable in principle. (Although I cannot accept Hick's central claims, I should like to record that it is a pleasure to read and evaluate critically Hick's writings, for he writes with a clarity and forthrightness of statement that allows his arguments to be appraised readily. The turgid obscurity typical of Tillich, Bultmann, Niebuhr, Buber, and Maritain may give some the illusory sense that they have grasped the esoteric "essence" of religion, but such a manner of writing does not actually contribute to an understanding of religion or to an appraisal of the claims of religion. There is enduring intellectual value in writing so that one's claims can be understood and appraised.)

I

Recognizing that the central intellectual perplexity for enlightened contemporary theists is not the difficulty of proving theistic claims but the difficulty of establishing their intelligibility, Hick's primary concern is to refute claims that religious sentences have uses which are *merely* mythical, quasi-moral, ceremonial, emotive, or ideological, and to establish that they characteristically are used to make factual statements—that is, that such sentences as "God exists" or "The world was created by an act of God" typically function to make assertions of "supernatural fact."

It is Hick's contention that "divine existence is in principle verifiable" (p. 189). For a statement to have *factual meaning* it must, Hick argues, contain or entail "predictions which can be verified or falsified" (p. 191). Hick does not contend that God's existence can be *falsified* but, contending that verification and falsification are in this context asymmetrically related, Hick argues that God's existence can in principle be verified. He does not claim that the verification can come in this life. The verification is eschatological; it will come, if at all, in the next life. It need not necessarily come as a "vision" but may be an experience of the fulfilment of God's purpose for ourselves, as it has been given to us in Christian revelation, in conjunction with "an experience of communion with God as he has revealed himself in the person of Christ" (p. 203).

Hick claims in "Theology and Verification," as he did in

Faith and Knowledge,² that the notion of "eschatological verification is sound; and further, that no viable alternative to it has been offered to establish the factual character of theism" (p. 194). He also claims that it is not "an *ad hoc* invention but is based upon an actually operative religious concept of God" (p. 194).

It is important to note how Hick's insistence that the verification must be eschatological allows him to come to terms with Wisdom's argument that the existence of God is not now an experimental issue. Hick contends, in opposition to Wisdom, that the sophisticated Christian does not merely have different feelings or attitudes about the world and man's place in it. He does not view life in just a different way; that is, his difference with the atheist is not the same as that which exists where two people see the same ambiguous figure in two different ways (e.g. the duck-rabbit, seen as either a duck or a rabbit). The Christian's and the atheist's "opposed interpretations" of man's life and the nature of reality are "genuinely rival assertions, though assertions whose assertion-status has the peculiar characteristic of being guaranteed retrospectively by a future crux" (p. 196). There is then a real factual issue between the atheist and theist; it is not just a matter of rival ways of "seeing," "viewing," or "looking" at man's nature and destiny. But Hick does agree with Wisdom that in *this life* we are like men looking at an ambiguous figure. We cannot now settle by any appeal to experience the issue between the theist and atheist. There are no signs that can unambiguously count as pointing to God; there is no *present* evidence adequate to make it meaningful to assert "There is a God" where this sentence is used to make a statement of objective fact; but "Christian doctrine postulates an ultimate unambiguous state of existence *in patria* as well as our present ambiguous existence *in via*" (p. 196). But Hick makes it perfectly clear that this postulated state of an "eternal heavenly life as well as an earthly pilgrimage" cannot "be appealed to as evidence for theism as a present interpretation of our experience . . ." (p. 196). If we simply regard our experiences in this life they are too ambiguous to allow us correctly to claim that theism is a verifiable position. If we so limit our appeal, a claim such as Wisdom's is quite compelling. But, Hick argues, we do not need so to limit it. We can conceive what it would be like to have an

² Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957.

after-life and we can conceive what it would be like to verify that there is a God in the "resurrection world" of the next life. Thus, while we cannot possibly have any present evidence for or against theism, and must now live by faith if we are to believe, we can conceive what it would be like to have evidence in the next life; and so the existence of God is, after all, a factual issue and "the choice between theism and atheism is a real and not a merely empty or verbal choice" (p. 196).

It seems to me that Hick is correct in affirming that any reasonably orthodox Christian—I do not speak of Tillichians—would surely wish to regard the question of divine existence as a factual, substantive issue. If an orthodox Christian discovered that he and the atheists were *only* differing in picture preferences, he would then assert that the very foundations of Christianity had been destroyed. Religious talk is certainly embedded in myth and overlaid with ceremonial expressions; and it most certainly guides our behaviour and calls for a basic alteration of our attitudes; but, as Hick recognizes, certain key religious statements are also thought by believers to be factual assertions. If utterances such as "There exists a creator of the heavens and the earth" are not taken by believers to be factual assertions—myth-embedded as they are—theistic religious talk and hence Christianity itself would lose the character it has. If our task is to understand Christianity and not simply to redefine it to fit some antecedently held intellectual or moral ideal, we must come to grips with this assertional element in Christianity. Hick has courageously and honestly attempted to do just that. Like Barth and Crombie, and unlike Tillich and Braithwaite, Hick attempts to elucidate the Christian religion that we actually meet, and in one way or another contend with, in daily life; we sense here that Hick is actually trying to analyse the claims the Christian ordinarily makes. And this, to my way of thinking, is just what we must do if we ever are to get anywhere in an understanding of religion. I am not saying that this is all that either a theologian or a philosopher needs to do, but he at least must do this. Perhaps in that way he will make Christianity or Judaism sound very absurd; but perhaps they are absurd. (We must not forget Kierkegaard here.)

While I am in complete agreement with Hick on this methodological issue, Hick fails, in my judgment, to make the basic claims of Christianity intelligible on the very grounds on which he rightly recognizes that the believer demands they should be

intelligible. Hick's arguments are clear and straightforward until he gets to the very crux of his argument and then they become incoherent. Hick recognizes the difficulty of trying to speak to God and he argues that language is never quite adequate to state the facts of which religious people are aware. He speaks as if thought could speed ahead of language and, independently of the forms of language, grasp what is the case. It is natural to want to say this, but can we really "escape language" in this way? Is it really an intelligible claim?³ Given such complications, it seems to me apparent that we are in real darkness as to whether "there are such things as religious facts" (p. 208). It seems to me that the more plausible conclusion, given such a situation, would be that religious discourse itself is in conceptual confusion (and not just the theological and philosophical accounts of it).⁴ This, of course, would be welcome news to the secularist and most unwelcome news to all but the most rabidly Kierkegaardian defenders of the faith. Thus it is understandable that theologians such as Hick, Farrer, and Crombie should try to make an intelligible elucidation of religious concepts. I shall not attempt here to show that religious discourse itself is in a state of conceptual confusion, but merely try to show that Hick's account of such discourse is not successful. But if my analysis is correct, the following problem, relevant to the wider issue mentioned above, is suggested. If Hick utterly fails to establish how "There is a God" is in any way verifiable and if Hick is right (as I think he is) in his claim that statements asserting divine existence typically are intended to be factual, verifiable claims, then, given the care and the skill with which he has stated the arguments pro and con, would it not be reasonable to assume there is something wrong with our first-order God-talk itself? If it can be shown, as I think it can, that the analyses of Crombie, Farrer, and Mascall result in similar failures, does not the assumption of the incoherent quality of the discourse itself grow stronger? It seems to me that this issue needs

³ I shall not pursue this question here, but a study of the work of Peirce or Wittgenstein raises serious questions about the very possibility of thoughts that have no linguistic expression. For brief and more readily accessible analyses that bring out some of the crucial difficulties, see Alice Ambrose, "The Problem of Linguistic Inadequacy," in Max Black (ed.), *Philosophical Analysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950), pp. 15-37, and William Kennick, "Art and the Ineffable," *Journal of Philosophy*, 58 (1951), 309-20.

⁴ I have tried to show how this is so in an article, "Speaking of God," *Theoria*, 28 (1962), 110-37.

(I am troubled about the claim that something can be verified but not falsified, but for the sake of the argument I shall let Hick's claim here pass unexamined.) But how is Hick's claim here even verifiable in principle, without the *assumption* of God—a divine Creator? We are trying to come to understand how "There is a God" or "God created man" could have a factual meaning, but Hick's analysis requires us to presuppose the very thing we are trying to understand, for to speak of "the proper *destiny* of human nature" or of "man's *final self-fulfilment*" assumes that man is a creature of God, a divine artefact created by God with a purpose—an "essential human nature" that can be realized. Without such an *assumption*, talk of man's proper destiny or final self-fulfilment is without sense. Hick is asking us to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, for unless we understand what it is for there to be a God who created man with a purpose we can make nothing at all of (1).

I add "nothing at all" deliberately, for the believer's understanding of "God exists" or "God loves us" is not—as Hick claims—sufficiently analogous to a child's understanding of what it is to be an adult. Hick's analogy is faulty because the child, as soon as he can recognize anything at all, sees adults around him and is constantly in their presence, but Hick has not shown us how we can have a like idea of what "the divine purpose for us is" or what we mean by "God." We indeed know that these words have great emotional appeal for us, and we know that they would not have that appeal if religious discourse were treated simply as (a) a species of ceremonial discourse, (b) moral discourse touched with emotion, or (c) expressions of human commitment embedded in a mythical framework. Beyond this, we know that there are certain analytic statements we can make about "God" (e.g. "God is eternal" and the like). But what we do not know is what it would be like to verify "There is divine existence." We have no idea at all of what it would be like for that statement to be either true or false. Here the believer is in a much worse position than the child. And, as we have seen, to appeal to the divine purpose for man assumes we already know what it would be like to verify that our lives have such a purpose. We do not know what must be the case for it to be true or false that our lives have a purpose, a *telos*, a destiny or final fulfilment. Our actions may be purposive and we may so live that there is some purpose in our lives without its even being intelligible that human life has a purpose or some

final end.⁶ We do not understand how to break into this closed circle with either God or man's destiny or a Christian revelation of our "essential human nature." It is indeed true that we, who have been brought up as Christians or in close proximity to Christians, know how to use this discourse. In that sense it is sheer nonsense to say Christian chatter is meaningless, but Hick has not shown us how we understand this use of language as a factual or statement-making type of discourse. We do not know what must happen for us to assert correctly that so and so is "apprehended as the fulfillment of God's purpose and not simply as a natural state of affairs" (p. 204).

Can (2) help? I think we are no better off here. (2) is the "experience of communion with God as he has revealed himself in the person of Christ" (p. 203). Hick acknowledges that we do not know what it would be like to encounter directly an infinite, almighty, eternal Creator. But Jesus, or Christ, comes in as the mediator. "Only God himself knows his own infinite nature; and our human belief about that nature is based upon his self-revelation to men in Christ" (p. 205). Hick quotes with approval Barth's contention that "Jesus Christ is the knowability of God" (pp. 205 ff.).

There is—as R. W. Hepburn has stressed in his *Christianity and Paradox*⁷—an ambiguity in this sort of claim. "Jesus was born in Bethlehem" or "Jesus died on the cross" are straightforward empirical statements. There is no puzzle at all about their logical status. Where "Jesus" and "Christ" are equivalent we can of course make substitutions and the resulting statements will also be uncontroversial. But "Jesus" and "Christ" are not equivalent, for "Jesus is the Christ" is supposed to be informative. "Christ" or "The Christ" is not intended simply to refer to a man—no matter how extraordinary. "Jesus," by contrast, simply refers to an extraordinary man. We well enough understand the referent of "Jesus," but where "Christ" is not equivalent to "Jesus," what does "Christ" refer to? Unless we already understand what is meant by "God," how can we possibly understand words such as

⁶ Kurt Baier, *The Meaning of Life* (Canberra: University College, 1957), pp. 20f., has remarked appropriately that religionists often "mistakenly conclude that there can be no purpose in life because there is no purpose of life; that men cannot themselves adopt and achieve purposes because man, unlike a robot or a watchdog, is not a creature with a purpose."

⁷ London: Watts, 1958.

"Christ," "The Christ," "The Son of God," or "Our Lord Jesus Christ"? How can utterances incorporating them be used to make verifiable statements? What would count as verifying them? What conceivable experiences, post-mortem or otherwise, would tell us what it would be like to encounter not just Jesus, but the Christ, the Son of God, and the Son of Man, or our Lord, where "Our Lord" does not just mean a wise teacher or a monarch whom we meet either now or hereafter? If we do not know what it would be like to verify "God exists" directly, we have no better idea of what it would be like to verify "The Son of God exists," where "The Son of God" is not identical in meaning with "Jesus." (If they are identical in meaning, "The Son of God exists" can provide no logical bridge to "God exists.") The same sort of thing can be said for "The Christ"; and if it is said that "Jesus" and "The Christ" are not identical but we have verified that Jesus is the Christ, then I will reply that Hick has not shown us how we can verify this statement. He has not shown us how we can logically move from "Jesus exists" to "The Christ exists" where they are not identical.

Hick apart, how could we verify "Jesus is the Christ"? What would count as evidence for it? If we say we verify it indirectly by verifying "Jesus lived and acted in a certain way," then again it can be asked what grounds warrant our saying that the verifiable statement, "Jesus lived and in his thirty-third year died on the cross," or any statement or statements of that logically unambiguous type, counts as evidence for "Jesus is the Christ." I do not see that we have any warrant for saying that it is evidence for such a claim. We might decide that Jesus was a powerful man; we might verify that he did many quite amazing things; our moral insight might lead us to say he was a superlatively good and wise man; but how would this at all point, ambiguously or unambiguously, to Jesus' being the Christ, unless we independently understood what was meant by "The Christ" or "X's being the Christ"?

No empirical sense has been given to Hick's "an experience of the reign of the Son in the Kingdom of the Father"; and we are in no position to say, as Hick does, that this confirms Jesus's authority to reveal God's nature and purpose and thus we can verify that there is a God. No method of verification has been given; we do not know what conceivable experiences would count for or against "God exists" and thus Hick has failed to give us any grounds for saying that "There is a God" or "God exists" "asserts a matter of objective fact" (Note 1, p. 188).

Hick might reply that I am, in effect, arguing like a ration-

alist. I want a purely logical argument to prove that such experiences are experiences which point to God; but, as Hick correctly remarks, "the exclusion of rational doubt concerning some matter of fact is not equivalent to the exclusion of the logical possibility of error or illusion" (p. 193). To ask for the latter is to ask for what is self-contradictory; it is (in effect) to ask that a factual proposition be analytic. If we take this rationalist stand, then to have a post-mortem experience of "the Kingdom of God, with Christ reigning as Lord of the New Aeon, would not constitute a logical certification of his claims nor, accordingly, of the reality of God" (p. 206). If in our "resurrection bodies" in "the resurrection world" we assert "Jesus is ruling over us all with love and justice" the truth of this statement would not entail the truth of the statement "There is a God" or "There is a divine purpose which is revealed through Jesus," but, Hick argues, such a postmortem experience of Jesus's reign would leave no grounds for rational doubt of these theistic claims.

I of course agree with Hick that a statement of evidence for a statement *p* need not be equivalent to the statement *p*. My evidence for "My glasses are on the desk" may be "I looked around a moment ago and I saw them there," but the first statement is not equivalent to, and is not entailed by, the second statement; but if this is granted should we not say the same thing here about Jesus as the mediator for God? Our evidence is a certain post-mortem experience of Jesus. It is true that I know what it would be like to see my glasses, while, apart from claims about a "direct vision of God"—claims which Hick does not espouse—I cannot, even in the next life, directly observe God (p. 203). But, after all, there are certainly very many statements that are only indirectly verifiable. We speak of a magnetic field or a superego and we cannot see either, but there are recognized procedures for verifying statements embodying such conceptions. They are a part of a whole network of conceptions, but within the appropriate scientific context there are recognized procedures of verification for statements using such concepts. Why can we not properly say the same thing about Jesus and Christianity?

One important difference is that in science we are more and more willing to take a conventionalist attitude towards such theoretical conceptions. Such conceptions can be seen as useful devices for systematically predicting and retrodicting certain observable events. But once having learned the lesson that not all substantives have a substance, we no longer feel incumbent to ask

if there are any such things as magnetic fields or superegos. Such concepts are pragmatically useful constructs since they enable us to make predictions and assessments of behaviour with greater ease than if we did not have such concepts, but we can be quite agnostic about whether there are such things.⁸ But the believer cannot be agnostic in this way about God, and he cannot regard the concept of God *simply* as an important construct or as a useful heuristic device in his confessional group, and still remain a believer. (Note that this last statement is analytic.) As Hick argues, to claim "There is a God" is to make what purports to be an objective factual claim. But where we are willing to say that so-and-so is an objective factual claim we must know what could count as a confirmation of it. Sometimes our evidence is only indirect, but to know what the evidence unambiguously points to we must know what would count as observing or experiencing what the indirect evidence is indirect evidence of. As I sit upstairs I say to my wife, "The children are playing downstairs." I could give as indirect evidence: "They are laughing down there and someone is running around in the living room." But I only do this because I know what it would be like to see the children laughing and running around in the living room. But if we have no idea of what it would be like to experience that which we *supposedly* have indirect evidence for, then we in fact do not actually understand what it would be like to have evidence (direct or indirect) for it. We do not even understand what it could *mean* to say there is a so-and-so such that we have no idea at all of what it would be like to experience it, but something else can be experienced which is evidence for it. The "it" here cannot refer to anything, for in such a case how could we *possibly understand* what it is that our putative "evidence" is supposed to be evidence for? This is just the difficulty we have in using Jesus as the evidence for God. Hick's correct remarks about statements of evidence not being equivalent to statements of what they are evidence for is thus not to the point. We still do not know what is *meant* by saying that a post-mortem encounter with Jesus counts as the indirect (but sole) evidence for the existence of God. Thus we do not have a right to say, as Hick does, that we know what it would be like for our faith to be "so fully confirmed in *post-mortem* experience as to leave no grounds . . . as to the validity of that faith" (p. 206).

⁸ Cf. J. J. C. Smart, "The Reality of Theoretical Entities," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 34 (1956), 1-12.

III

Such conclusions as I have arrived at here might, if correct, lead Hick to a conclusion he merely suggests at the end of his essay. There he suggests certain considerations that would lead one to the conclusion "that only the theistic believer can find . . . vindication of his belief" (p. 207). If one becomes a believer one's theistic faith can be verified; but the non-believer cannot verify it. Hick's reasoning is as follows. It may be that predictions concerning human experience which give us good grounds for asserting that God exists are conditional predictions; since they are conditional, one is compelled to fulfil the relevant conditions.

It may then [Hick argues] be a condition of *post-mortem* verification that we be already in some degree conscious of God by an uncompelled response to his modes of revelation in this world. It may be that such a voluntary consciousness of God is an essential element in the fulfillment of the divine purpose for human nature, so that the verification of theism which consists in an experience of the final fulfillment of that purpose can only be experienced by those who have already entered upon an awareness of God by the religious mode of apperception which we call faith (p. 207).⁹

Once more Hick in effect asks us to assume just what is in question. Granted, we can only verify "There is a table in the next room" if we can carry out certain conditional predictions which the statement entails. But these conditional predictions, these operations, are themselves very well understood. No one needs to approach them by faith, for any normal observer (where "normal observer" can itself be objectively and empirically specified) can verify them. But we have seen above how "God exists" does not have any comparable conditional statements which can be so verified or are so verifiable and hence so understood by a normal observer. We must, instead, appeal to that "apperception" we call faith.

This necessity makes "God exists" a very different sort of chowder. There is a further logical difficulty. If we understand

⁹ Hick presents a similar argument in his "Meaning and Truth in Theology," in Sidney Hook (ed.), *Religious Experience and Truth* (New York: New York University Press, 1960), pp. 208-10. Cf. Paul Edwards' response, *ibid.*, pp. 245-7.

what a statement (conditional or otherwise) means, then it is proper to speak of having faith in its truth, or having faith that the evidence for it outweighs the evidence against it, or that certain experiences will verify it. Given these conditions, we could be fideists and approach God simply on trust. But what we cannot do is have faith in a proposition we do not understand, for in such a situation we literally cannot know *what* it is we are supposed to have faith in. If we cannot conceive of there being a state of affairs that would make "God exists" true or false, we cannot understand what conceivable state of affairs we are being asked to accept on faith. We can, by an act of faith, accept as true an antecedently understood proposition. In *that* sense, faith can precede understanding; but it does not make sense to say that we can certify the *meaning* of a proposition by faith; in that sense, understanding must precede faith. We can only have faith in something whose meaning we already understand; otherwise we cannot possibly have any idea what we are being asked to accept on faith. Hick assumes that, as knights of faith, we can somehow be conscious of God even though there is no understanding of what it would be like for there to be a God. But in such a situation we literally cannot have faith in God, for the statement "He has faith in God" cannot be used by him or by anyone else to make a factual claim and thus it cannot, in the requisite sense, have a meaning or a use.

There may indeed be a place for fideism but not on the level at which Hick sets the discussion. Questions of what is *meant* by *x* cannot possibly be settled by faith or trust. At the most, faith might lead us to try to fulfil certain conditions, but we would still have to understand independently of our faith *what* to fulfil. If my argument is in the main correct, we do not understand what it would be like to fulfil conditions which, once fulfilled, would result in anything that would count as a verification of God's existence. This being so, Hick's forthright argument has not established "that the existence or non-existence of the God of the New Testament is a matter of fact, and claims as such eventual experiential verification."