

**Falsifiable Statements in Theology:  
Karl Popper and Christian Thought.**

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# **Falsifiable Statements in Theology: Karl Popper and Christian Thought.**

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Making the case that Popper has some value for the theologian is a difficult task. On the one hand, there is almost no properly theological material to work with in the Popper corpus and a number of his students and supporters--some more famously--are convinced that religion and theology are the anti-type of all thought either critical or rational, and have read him from within that perspective. On the other hand, members of the theological community tend to be hesitant in incorporating philosophical ideas--indeed, sometimes any external ideas--into their work, let alone ideas which seem to threaten the theological project with the charge of falsity.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, this paper will argue that Popper is of use to the theologian in opposition to potential objectors from both sides. It will proceed in two parts. The first half will, roughly, seek to answer the question: How could someone possibly conceive that Popper would have a use for the theologian? In short, it will reply (1) that Popper's scientific realism is sufficiently parallel to theological realism to merit exploring the application of the

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<sup>1</sup>That is, falsity in the sense of bearing no correspondence to reality rather than falsity in the sense of only bearing a limited correspondence thereto.

methodological model he developed in light of the former to work undertaken in from the perspective of the latter; and (2) that, on Popper's own terms, the critical spirit can be as equally the possession of the metaphysician<sup>2</sup> as Popper would encourage it to be that of the scientist.

Of course, this is not meant to imply that Popper himself would have made the move to apply his model to theology. Rather, this paper aims to demonstrate, at a preliminary level, that Popper's epistemological methodology can be tailored to suit the situation of Christian thought and how it might be used beneficially therein.

The second half of the paper will discuss criticism and testing in theology in two sections: (1) the suggestion that theology is not testable by those who do not share its presuppositions will be countered by suggesting a counter-example; and (2) the potential for the use of critical rationalism in by those sharing the Christian paradigm will be discussed by falsifying an existing theory about theological anthropology through comparison with a competing hypothesis.

## **Part One: How could it be that a theologian could use Popper?**

### **I. 1. Theological and scientific realism.**

The connection between Karl Popper and Christian theology is, at its base, the connection of reality. Popper always remained convinced that the world is a real world and that our experience of it is real experience. He refers to this as 'common sense realism'. The notion that we live in a real world simply appealed to his common sense, though he was not

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<sup>2</sup>In this case, specifically the Christian theologian.

able to prove its veracity. He believed that the universe is present to humanity and its investigations. The task of the scientist, then, was taken as trying to understand and describe this reality as best as he can.

The theologian also accepts reality in a common sense fashion, but in a slightly different sense. Christian theology alleges that the reality of God has been made present to the examination of humanity, most particularly in the person of Jesus Christ. As with physical reality, it is possible to accept or deny this common sense belief. But for those who accept it, theological work becomes the task of describing the reality of whose existence they are convinced. The parallel between Popper's basic convictions about reality are the same as the Christian's, and they form the basis of applying Popper's method to theology: reality is present to us; we choose to accept its existence; and are eager and able to describe it to some extent.

There are further parallels between Popper and theology with respect to human knowledge. Popper believed that scientific descriptions bore a certain likeness to reality, but that this likeness was not absolute. We can describe reality in part, but never fully, and if we were to have a perfect theory about the world we wouldn't know for certain that we did. He goes further to say that this lack of knowledge creates real problems for us. For example, we do not know how to undo the effects of AIDS or predict the next catastrophic earthquake. But so that life can go on, we work with the best theories we have: the theories that have not been falsified. We progress, as above, by making informed guesses at the truth, and we continue using the best guesses we have until they too are proven wrong.

The Christian too believes that theological descriptions lie in the uncomfortable middle ground between uncertainty and actual description. We believe that our work of theology actually refers to the reality of God, but not the fullness thereof. This limitation of

our knowledge creates real theological problems for us. We don't know fully how it is that God is three and one, or how Mary and the Spirit co-operated in the birth of Christ. But, using the best hypotheses we have, we continue to try to describe the reality of God--as He has revealed it to us--as best we can. In both science and theology, the limitations of our humanity prevent us from reaching places of absolute certitude; in each case, knowledge is pursued out of a desire to know reality, the existence and availability of which we are convinced.

Finally, Popper demarcated between science and pseudo-science as that which can be potentially falsified.<sup>3</sup> The existence of God, being a metaphysical proposition is ultimately unfalsifiable. Yet so also is the question of the existence of the cosmos. There are some metaphysical options which are known falsehoods, but some--like the existence of God and the existence of the cosmos--remain both unfalsifiable and unfalsified despite attempts to establish the opposite.<sup>4</sup> The existence of God is an unfalsifiable and open metaphysical option; the constructs of theology, however, are falsifiable. The potentially falsifying tests of a theological theory will be dealt with in the next section. Suffice it to say for now that the non-falsifiable character of God's existence does not in principle interfere with the use of the Popperian methodology in theology. That is, the unfalsifiable nature of God does not mitigate the falsifiable nature of the theological assertions which seek to describe him any more than the unfalsifiable nature of cosmological realism inhibits making potentially falsifiable statements about the universe.

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<sup>3</sup>A reading of Popper fair to the metaphysical would be certain to add that pseudo-science was distinguished from metaphysics in general in that it claimed scientific status proper but would not submit its theories to any manner of falsification.

<sup>4</sup>Of course, this unfalsifiability is a demerit from a Popperian perspective, but, for the present, an unavoidable one.

In sum, both physical science (or economics, or politics) and theology are convinced of some reality, which they know in a limited sense, and which they set as their goal to try to understand better. This unity of conviction about a describable reality forms the basis of my application of Popper's method to theology.

## **I. 2. Metaphysics and the critical spirit.**

For Popper, the essential aspect of the critical method was discussion and not empirical testing: a theory can be rational--that is, rationally criticisable--without necessarily being a part of the experimental world of science. As an example, Xenophanes will be below be given as one who attempted to solve the problems facing him with metaphysical conjectures about the gods, and yet whom Popper praises in the highest terms as a paragon of the critical spirit. Later in this essay, in Part Two, the discussion will treat the extent to which theological statements can be subjected to testing in practice. In the present section, it will be argued that the critical spirit is, from the perspective of Popper,<sup>5</sup> the common possession of the best of metaphysics and the best of science in principle.

The centre of Popperian critical rationalism--the centre of the critical spirit--is found in critical arguments and not in empirical tests. To be sure, Popper is rightly well known for his stress on the critical experiment and its falsificational value. This emphasis is not countered here, but rather cast in light of the fact that the brunt of Popper's work was directed at the philosophy of the empirical sciences. In a broader reading of his work--in his critical methodology as a whole--it is seen that experimentation is an instantiation of the rational

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<sup>5</sup>This is not to suggest that "if Popper said it, it must be true," but to show that there is a critical rationalist who would allow for the application of the fallibilist method to divine metaphysics.

method rather than its canon. On one hand, he allowed that, though not all testing was of the same nature or rigour as empirical testing, it was valuable nonetheless. He commented that "tests can be graded as being more or less severe. Qualitative tests, for example, are in general less severe than quantitative tests,"<sup>6</sup> but are tests nonetheless. Obviously, the greatest severity of testing best facilitates the critical process, but where such ultimately severe tests were not available, say, in the social sciences or economics, Popper endorsed the use of those qualitative tests which could be brought to bear on the situation. Moreover, he wrote that "critical thought remains our main instrument. Observations are used only if they fit in with our critical discussion."<sup>7</sup> The key element was to ensure that critical arguments were turned upon theories that were held to be falsifiable in principle. Even if no tests could be made of a particular thesis, if real critical discussion could be given of it, humanity's 'main instrument' of critical rationalism and noetic growth would still be available.<sup>8</sup>

Metaphysics in general contains within it part of the class of those statements which can be argued about. As Popper himself acknowledges: "We may look upon testability as a certain kind of arguability: arguability by means of *empirical* arguments, arguments appealing to observation and experiment. . . . The fact that metaphysical statements and problems [being untestable] may nevertheless be arguable (even though inconclusively), I have tried to show by the simple device of arguing about them."<sup>9</sup> More specifically, Christian theology, as

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<sup>6</sup>Karl Popper (hereinafter 'KRP'), "Science: Problems, Aims, Responsibilities," in *The Myth of the Framework: In Defence of Science and Rationality*, edited by M. A. Notturmo (London: Routledge, 1994) 94.

<sup>7</sup>KRP, "On the Status of Science and Metaphysics", (Ratio, 1.2, December 1958, 97-115) 112.

<sup>8</sup>See *ibid.*, 113: "Critical discussion even of irrefutable theories may well be possible."

<sup>9</sup>KRP, *Realism and the Aim of Science*, Postscript to *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, volume I, edited by W. W. Bartley, III (London, Routledge, 1983) 161.

almost any text will show,<sup>10</sup> is in part a polemic discipline. Inasmuch as its internal arguments evince its ability to receive rational criticism, the question becomes the manner in and extent to which it can most helpfully appropriate this method.

A good example of a Popperian seeing the critical spirit in a metaphysical thinker is found in Popper's discussion on Xenophanes.<sup>11</sup> Xenophanes was a pre-Socratic thinker in whom Popper saw many of the traits of his own model of human knowledge: intellectual modesty, criticism even of masters in his field, ethical common-sense, the objectivity of truth, and the relativity of subjective certainty.<sup>12</sup> Yet Popper found this spirit not in the science of Xenophanes, but in his "speculative theology."<sup>13</sup> Xenophanes, unsatisfied with the Homeric description of the gods as ethically debauched, ultimately concluded that Homer and Hesiod had merely projected human nature upon a pre-existent belief in the divine (to paraphrase anachronistically). This culminated in Xenophanes suggesting that there must be one god who is unlike humanity and their vicissitudes.<sup>14</sup> Xenophanes did not doubt that there was a divine reality, yet he called into question the account Homer had given of it because of the unacceptable consequences of the description. In answer to this problem, he produced a new

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<sup>10</sup>See, for a good example that theology, even though sometimes linguistically trying, can be argued about, Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*. Translated by David Anderson. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980.

<sup>11</sup>See, KRP, "The Unknown Xenophanes", in *The World of Parmenides*, edited by Arne F. Petersen (London: Routledge, 1998) 33-67; and KRP, "Toleration and Intellectual Responsibility", in *In Search of a Better World: Lectures and Essays from Thirty Years*, translated by Laura J. Bennett (London: Routledge, 1994) 188-203.

<sup>12</sup>See KRP, "Toleration and Intellectual Responsibility", in *In Search of a Better World: Lectures and Essays from Thirty Years*, 192-4.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>14</sup>See Xenophanes, in *ibid.*: "One god, alone among gods and alone among men, is the greatest. Neither in body resembling the mortals, nor in his thinking."



(and better) conjecture about the gods. In this, Xenophanes could scarcely be farther from the camp of the strict empiricists, and yet Popper praises his method as "a victory of self criticism without equal."<sup>15</sup> How small a step is it then, to accord methodological merit to the critical Christian thinker who, like Xenophanes acknowledging the existence of God as reality, seeks to describe the divine nature as best he can. Popper was convinced that there was one way for human knowledge to grow, that is, by means of conjectures about the truth and their refutation through critical discussion when their claims clash with objective reality. In order to encourage this growth, Popper promoted his methodology of openly seeking the refutation of erroneous theories through an attitude which was willing both to give and to receive criticism. Science was a special and marvellous case for Popper because the arguments criticizing its statements could be extended and supported by empirical tests. Metaphysics though, at its best, shares that same critical spirit in spite of its not being subjectable to the same empirical extension. More specifically, there are limits to the way that Christian theology can offer itself to discussion and testing within and over against other intellectual frameworks, but certainly within a Christian framework, there is the real opportunity for theology to utilise the critical spirit of Popper's rationalism to see its descriptions of the nature of God approach the objective truth of His reality.

## **Part Two: Theology, testing, and the critical spirit.**

Whereas the preceding was aimed at demonstrating that critical rationalism can, in principle, be applied to Christian knowledge, the following will focus on describing the

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<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 193.

manner in which such an application might be made. The first section will discuss the extent to which criticism and testing can be levelled at theological statements by someone who stands outside the Christian framework. The second section will, by means of a case study, demonstrate the way that those sharing a Christian paradigm could put the Popperian method into practice. That is, if theology insists on making assertions regarding the reality about which it is convinced,<sup>16</sup> and which stand beyond the reach of a universally intersubjective test, it ought at least to utilise the critical spirit to excise the particularly exceptionable and inconsistent bits.

As a final introductory note, in what follows below, in using the idea of testing, this paper is not trying to claim a special 'scientific' status for theology. Christian thought is in no need of a scientific endorsement to cure a case of mislaid self-esteem. Theology makes many claims which are quite apart from science and understands that many scientific statements fall outside its own domain. Rather, acknowledging that Popper's critical rationalism has been of benefit in many fields of human knowledge, I here suggest that it is worth the while of theology to examine Popper; not for show, but to determine the extent to which he can assist it in its own goal of speaking as truly as possible of the divine. This paper argues for the real possibility of theological testing, but in the qualitative sense of applying the critical spirit rather than the empirical sense of taking a measurement. It contends that insofar as theology is concerned with make statements which intend on describing the reality of God, it will benefit from using the critical method in the examination of these statements if it desires to approach the truth of God's reality in its descriptions; and, moreover, that it is not only those who already agree on the conclusions to be reached that can participate in this critical process.

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<sup>16</sup>Which is the practice here being advocated.

## II. 1. Theological criticism with those not sharing the Christian paradigm.

By way of beginning, I should like to state that I do not concede that the paradigmatic difference between the Christian and non-Christian thinker is an unnegotiable obstacle; yet it is a genuine difference. There is for every person a unique perspective from which they view the world; determined as it is by environment, education, personal choice, and so on. These perspectives--prisons as Popper would have them<sup>17</sup>--often stand in the way of clear communication with others, the greater dissonance being felt with the greater width of the divide: and how great a gulf exists between two who disagree as to the reality and description of the divine. Yet it is the wonder of human thought that we can break out of our prisons and learn together with those even having a perspective on the world diametrically opposite to our own.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Popper would argue that precisely in this clash between paradigms can occur the most marvellous insights.<sup>19</sup> It is not guaranteed to be a fruitful exercise, but real fructuous potential is always present. All that being said, this essay is being undertaken from the perspective that I may be wrong, and you may be right, but if we are willing to work hard and be patient with one another, we may get closer to the truth.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>See, KRP, "The Myth of the Framework", in *The Myth of the Framework*, 61.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>Cf. KRP, "On Culture Clash", in *In Search of a Better World: Lectures and Essays from Thirty Years*, 117-25.

<sup>20</sup>An adaptation on one of Popper's favourite themes. See KRP, *The Myth of the Framework*, xii-xiii. It is important to emphasise not merely an attitude of intellectual humility and openness to the potential veracity of the theories of all others (as this could leave one open to the charge of relativism) but also the importance of truth as the goal of inter-paradigmatic discussion and the regulative principle of all our knowledge.

Now, it is well attested that theological statements are often difficult both to state clearly and to test, particularly by those outside the Christian community.<sup>21</sup> There are general tests to which theological statements can be put--internal coherence, logical possibility, etc--and these are important in their own right, but ultimately they are epistemologically unsatisfying. What is desired is a way for any person to be able to examine a theological theory and subject it to tests that it could potentially fail: a universal intersubjectivity.

There are two key difficulties in creating an avenue for a universal intersubjectivity of testing in theology. First is the Christian conviction that God is both real and describable. A test is simply a way to compare a given statement with reality and see if there is any clash. Thus, if a scientist makes an assertion about some atoms, any person can, in principle, round up some of the said atoms and see if they act in the manner which the assertion described. The difficulty is that the reality about which the Christian makes assertions is one whose real existence the non-Christian is unconvinced about. The atheist in particular cannot directly test a statement such as "God is three divine persons sharing one substance," not believing that there is such a thing called God. In Popper's terms, the explicandum being regarded as neither given nor true, the non-Christian will have extraordinary difficulty manufacturing a test which gives the explicans the opportunity to clash with the potentially non-existent explicandum about which it makes its explanation.<sup>22</sup> This situation is not without parallel in the empirical sciences, insofar as an object of scientific study must at least be treated as real to be subjected to a meaningful test.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Cf. KRP, "Replies to My Critics", in *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*, edited by Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle: Open Court, 1974) 963.

<sup>22</sup>See KRP, *Realism and the Aim of Science*, 132 ff.

<sup>23</sup>It may be mentioned again at this juncture that this paper is not arguing for the testability of the idea that God exists, but rather of the various descriptions of him.

Moreover, if one is to permit the reality of God as an explicandum, the descriptions about Him are notoriously varied and fuzzy. Even within one local church communion there may be any number of slightly different religious experiences; though all parties would say that each experience is instantiated by some contact with the same divine reality.<sup>24</sup> This situation only compounds the inherent problem of the awkwardness of religious language.

The difficulty of the acceptance of divine reality and the difficulty of the description of religious experience are a formidable barrier to be sure. I allow that these problems limit the scope of the critical method in theology.<sup>25</sup> I do not accept, however, that there is no element of universal intersubjectivity to theological statements. I wish to counter the claim that:

- (a) 'Theological statements can never be subject to potentially falsifiable tests from outside the Christian community.'

To do so, I intend to give a class of counter-examples, whose existential reality shall serve to prove (a) false. To be clear, I do not intend to defend the thesis that:

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<sup>24</sup>That this does not eliminate the applicability of the critical method to these statements can be seen in Popper's discussion of art criticism. Popper suggested that even though one might not even be able to say how, he may be able to truly distinguish between good and bad art (if he is in a community that truly appreciates art). So also, one may be able to have accurate 'feelings' about the divine nature even if he cannot describe them precisely. See KRP, "Works of Art Considered as Third-World Objects. Standards of Art and Standards of Science," in the Hoover Archives, box 105, folder 12.

<sup>25</sup>Perhaps though, one could compare it to the situation in a microscopic scientific field, say, genetic research, in which only a few researchers are directly familiar enough with the reality of the gene to test assertions about it. Inasmuch as the geneticist would say that a new student would have to commit to examining that slice of reality in a particular way; the Christian would say that any person who would wish to test theological assertions directly could, if they were willing to subject themselves to approaching the reality of God in the distinctly Christian way, that is, in the attitude of belief.

(b) 'All theological statements can be subject to potentially falsifiable tests from outside the Christian community.'

Both (a) and (b) are false. The falsity of (a) will be shown below; the falsity of (b) is easily demonstrated by the unfalsifiable nature of the existence of God. God's existence must be accepted as a metaphysical reality in order to serve as the prime explicandum of theology, just as the reality of the cosmos must be accepted before science can begin to describe it. While the falsity of (b) is acknowledged, it is not herein suggested that there is only one potential falsifier of (a). Indeed, the opposite is hoped for. Not so that (a) can be shown to be 'especially false' for its number of falsifiers, but so that the theological task can be open as much as possible to instruction from outsiders. As much as any human being, the theologian needs the aid of others to see his or her blind spots. The greater the number avenues of falsifying (a) exist, the greater the benefit to Christian theology.

In order to counter (a), I will here be drawing on the idea of the consequence class of a theory.<sup>26</sup> This very simple but powerful idea communicates that a theory, though perhaps not testable itself, may have testable consequences, and that the falsity of the consequence can be transmitted to the theory itself. That is, a theory is responsible both for itself and for that which it entails. This is true of theological theories as well as of those of science. Therefore, if there is a theological theory which entails a testable consequence, (a) is falsified.

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<sup>26</sup>See KRP, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Routledge, 2002) section 35. In *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* Popper is discussing logical entailment and using a very strict understanding of 'consequence class'. In this paper I shall most often refer to the moral entailment of a theological theory and a qualitative consequence class. I recognise that the concept does not thus possess the full rigour of Popper's argument but allege that its transmission of falsity follows along Popper's lines nonetheless, in a sense limited by the need to (i) establish the entailment qualitatively and (ii) introduce an initial condition regarding the consensual acceptance of a 'value' based judgement.

Here may I allude again to the acknowledged difference between science and theology which was stated in the introduction to Part Two. I understand that entailment in theology will be different than that of pure logic. However, I assert that entailment in theology is a real entailment nonetheless and allows for falsifiability to transfer onto the original theory from the consequence. (I am open to a more rigorous test of (a), but do not have one at my disposal. In here using more of a qualitative sense of 'test' and a moral sense of 'entailment' I understand that my counter-example is not irrefutable itself, but relies to some extent on the acceptance of the reader. It has, however, been carefully chosen to cultivate such acceptance.)

For the Christian, any theological description will involve an ethical entailment. In understanding God to exist in a certain way, the Christian creates moral implications for himself. That is, if I believe that God's nature is such and such, and if, as a Christian, I believe that he has some level of privilege over my moral choices, then the sentences I use to describe God will have an effect on the ethical expectations which I set myself. No one should suppose that these moral entailments are equally to be imposed upon the non-Christian: only the Christian incurs them through his belief.

All manner of ethical dicta can thus be produced, each corresponding to a various conception of the divine. For example, if God is understood to be the Father of all, then the Christian, taking God as his Lord, will be obliged to treat all people as brothers and sisters. To take a less positive turn, were God the Father to be understood as the ontologically superior person of the Trinity, then it would be entailed that the human father and husband,

whose fatherhood derives from his heavenly Father, is the ontologically superior unit in his family and marriage and is free to organise domestic and ecclesial life in that light.<sup>27</sup>

The consequence class of a theological description is, then, partially filled out by its ethical implications. One must be careful to exclude a certain kind of subjectivity here.

There are Christian people whose actions are not in accord with their stated convictions about the nature of God. This should not be taken as the definition of what their theology entails.<sup>28</sup> Rather, the theology itself can be examined and the ethical entailments upon the theologian recognised. This is in fact part of the criticism to which Christian thinkers subject one another's conjectures.

Yet more than professional theologians can offer criticism at this point. While differing paradigmatically in many respects, the Christian and the non-Christian will almost certainly share a common store of some ethical principles.<sup>29</sup> As such, the non-Christian can offer criticism to certain moral actions: a criticism which the Christian can accept.<sup>30</sup> If the non-Christian is also able to demonstrate that such acceptedly bad actions are entailed by a particular theological description, the Christian will either have to surrender his theory as

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<sup>27</sup>This is the position challenged by Kevin Giles in *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002.) and not that of the present author.

<sup>28</sup>Moving in the opposite direction, it can be argued that someone whose actions are not consonant with what they allege as their understanding of God in fact espouses an understanding different from that which they profess. It is surely also often the case that some Christian people simply live with a disconnect between understanding of God and personal action either through ignorance or pride and self-will.

<sup>29</sup>Though they may differ in the particulars, the two thinkers will likely agree on several points. There may be divergence on issues such as abortion and euthanasia, but both should be able to say that molesting one's children is bad.

<sup>30</sup>Thus the qualitative element of the test: it is based not upon 'fact' or measurement, but upon consensus about a 'value'.



false (that is, as an inadequate picture of God's reality<sup>31</sup>) or oppose the entailment. This is not as rigorous as an empirical test, but it will certainly engage the critical spirit of both parties which is, at the very least, a step in the right direction.

In sum, statement (a) is shown to be false in demonstrating that there is at least one theological description or explanation, having at least one recognisable ethical consequence which is consensually accepted as bad, that is, morally false. Yet with these many qualifications it may be difficult to find an example which is not excluded. Are there such theological statements which could be thus tested and shown false by a non-Christian person?

There are. I will offer two brief examples. The first, mentioned above, is that which Kevin Giles counters in his book: *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate*. Essentially, he argues on theological grounds that men are not ontologically superior to women on the basis of a supposed distinction of superiority in the persons of God. A non-Christian, agreeing with the Christian about the essential equality of the sexes, could echo a strain of Giles' arguments: a theology which produces the consequence that one gender is to be treated as of less value than the other by nature can consensually be declared falsified.

A second example can be found in John Fletcher's *Checks to Antinomianism*.<sup>32</sup> He argues that a doctrine of God's choosing nature which situates all of salvation in a pre-temporal decision relieves the individual of responsibility in the present and entails

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<sup>31</sup>This could be defended against by suggesting *ad hoc* that God's being is somehow defined by the consensually bad action, but such a move would be epistemologically counter-productive.

<sup>32</sup>See the *Works of Fletcher*, 4 volumes (Salem, OH: Schmuel, 1974).

antinomianism.<sup>33</sup> That is, both the believer and the non-believer can agree that human persons bear some responsibility for the choices they make. A theological description which entailed the opposite could be tested with a high degree of universality and shown to be false.

Serious theological thinkers have held each of these positions, each of which has been enjoined by theological and ethical arguments. This is a part of the ongoing work of theology. Particularly in the second example above, the entailment would be strongly objected to, even in contemporary theology, but the reader is referred to the *Checks* which make its case very strongly.<sup>34</sup> The theological arguments levelled against these theories about God are the matter for another occasion. What is critical to note here is that in each instance, a non-Christian could put a theological theory to the test by establishing its connexion with an ethical consequence which has been agreed upon as undesirable: in this case, ontological gender inequality or moral absenteeism. If even one of the three instances is sound, (a) is falsified and theology is shown to not be entirely outside the purview of the Popperian epistemological method.

## II. 2. Theological criticism amongst those sharing the Christian paradigm.

A general qualification as this section begins: what follows has been written primarily as a description of the potential operation of critical rationalism amongst theologians. If the reader remains unconvinced that such an operation should ever occur *prima facie*, it may be

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<sup>33</sup>Very judiciously, Fletcher attacks the problem of antinomianism entailed in the doctrine while not impugning the piety of many of its promoters; cf note 27 above.

<sup>34</sup>The *Checks* do not argue that antinomianism is necessarily produced in the lifestyle of one who believes that God's decision about salvation is entirely pre- or a-temporal, but that the former is, amongst other weaknesses, logically entailed by such a theory as the latter. It is also interesting to note the strong parallels between Fletcher's critique of antinomianism and Popper's critique of the tendency toward moral-futurism in religion in general.

best to skip forward to the conclusion. This section is not attempting to make claims about the existence of divine reality. It is taking as a given explicandum that the God witnessed to in the Bible exists and strikes the theologian as in need of explanation.<sup>35</sup> It does so knowing that not every reader will accept such a given. The necessity of the move is seen in the fact that it will be tremendously difficult to discuss 'Theological criticism amongst those sharing the Christian paradigm' without stepping into that framework at some point of the discussion.

There are several ways that Popper can be of benefit to the practising theologian. They can only be treated in brief here but it is hoped that extrapolation will follow easily from the descriptions given. It should also be noted that several of these benefits are already present in theology to some extent: the great benefit of Popper lies in systematising and drawing our attention to these methodological choices.

The foremost benefit that the theologian can reap from Popper is a decoupling of the notion of a theological idea and God Himself. Sometimes, theological ideas are treated in practice as if they were themselves identical with God. It is obvious that this leads to dogmatism of the tremendously unhelpful sort. Popper's conception that an idea genuinely but never completely represents the reality it is trying to explain relieves the Christian thinker from the need to protect theological ideas from criticism of any sort.<sup>36</sup>

A second benefit is the strong reminder that Popper gives to remain intellectually humble. That theological humility is necessary is usually acknowledged in principle but

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<sup>35</sup>See KRP, *Realism and the Aim of Science*: "It is the aim of science to find *satisfactory explanations* of whatever strikes us as being in need of explanation." 132.

<sup>36</sup>A corollary of this is the benefit when the theologian recognises that his theological ideas are not connected to himself and can be criticised and eliminated without harm to their originator. A good example of such an attitude can be seen in Scott Hahn's recent book *First Comes Love: Finding Your Family in the Church and the Trinity*. (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

sometimes elided in practice. As with all intellectual disciplines, the theologian must keep before him at all times the realisation that he is only ever able to describe his subject in a limited way, and that he will make errors. Indeed, such an attitude is very freeing for the Christian thinker who is faced with the task of justifying how the Church has, at times, 'gotten it wrong' in the past.

Finally (for the moment), Christian knowledge will grow most effectively if theologians, in addition to their personal devotion and attention to the reality of God Himself, accept the reality of theological problems and adopt a critical attitude toward the potential solutions which have been offered to them. If it is held that Christian knowledge is static and only in need of restatement (i.e., if the reality of problems is denied) the theologian will have no real task. If the theologian is denied the room to criticise old solutions and conjecture new ones, Christian knowledge will not be able to expunge the errors it contains and move toward a better understanding of God.

As an example, the following is a case study of an idea presented in Popperian terminology (though, of course, the method is more important than the terms, which are here used for the sake of clarity). This idea has been helped in both form and content by Popper. As regards content, we shouldn't expect that Popper will bear a direct application in every theological field. I can say, however, that I thought of this idea whilst reading Popper rather than whilst smoking or drinking whisky.<sup>37</sup> As regards form, I suggest that proffering a new theological idea is really possible only within something like a Popperian methodology where criticism and creativity are possible and the hope of stepping nearing to an objective reality exists.

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<sup>37</sup>Cf. KRP, *Realism and the Aim of Science*, 36; I must confess that the drinking of coffee was almost certainly involved.

The Christian alleges that humans are created in the image of God. The content of that statement, however, has remained throughout Christian history in need of explanation. To over-simplify the situation greatly, theologians have classically looked at the actions of God, compared them with the actions of people and other creatures, and selected a list of several distinctively human traits--some of which are more clearly intimated in the Biblical witness than others--and classified them as the image of God in man: variously including the ability to work, rule, love, create, and think. Contemporary Trinitarian theology has been more recently been emphasising that the centre of God's nature is His existence in an eternal love relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit. This entails that the central characteristic of the *imago Dei* is the ability of humans to be in love relationship. While this idea has been extremely fruitful, it tends to leave the other traditional elements of the image--some of whose import can be argued for very strongly--as forming a second tier of the way that human persons bear God's likeness.

Now, I assert that one can keep an understanding of relationality as the centre of God's being without the sidelining of some of the other traditional characteristics of the *imago Dei*. Popper suggested that humans can criticise and learn because a human being is that kind of being which can both create an idea which is external to itself and real as well as grasp the idea of another. That is, human minds interact with the physical world and with other minds through a 'world 3' of ideas.<sup>38</sup> I conjecture that it is this ability that we should understand when we say that part of the image of God is to think and to create.

As will become readily apparent to the reader familiar with the history of Christian thought, this idea is based upon the concept of God the Son as the *Logos* (the Word, or

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<sup>38</sup>See KRP *The Self and Its Brain: An Argument for Interactionism*, with John Eccles (London: Routledge, 1977) et al.

Thought) of God: God is not a monad but is always God with His Word, through whom He created the world.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, God is at work in the world through His Word; that is, God interacts with the world through His Word who is distinct in Person from Himself. No one has ever seen God, but God the *monogenes*, God the Word, has made Him known.<sup>40</sup>

Maintaining that the centre of God's being is personal relationality, and holding that human thought can involve both the creation of an idea or word external to ourselves and the grasping of the objective word of another, it can be conjectured that God has created humanity to be in relationship in three ways. First, with God Himself. To be in a true personal relationship, one must know the other. God has created human beings in His own relational image, that is, with the ability to grasp Him through His Word and to be able to express themselves to Him in relationship through a word of their own which can be grasped by God. Second, with others. Humans are seen as relational beings, but that relationship includes not just loving but expressing themselves through their own word and grasping the objective word of another. Third, humans are created to be in relationship with the world. (This idea is particularly important in the field of theological ecology.) Humans can get to know the cosmos better and our knowledge of the world is not merely a happy coincidence but part of our being relational persons who can create an objective word, who can grasp the word of another, and who can choose to love: our knowledge is part of our being created in God's own image. In this way, taking rationality to be creation and criticism,<sup>41</sup> rather than

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<sup>39</sup>John 1:1-3.

<sup>40</sup>John 1:18.

<sup>41</sup>For what is criticism if not comparing an the objective word of another (or oneself) with objective reality.

merely the ability to think about things, the theologian is able to produce a more unified (and more redolent: viz., a better) explanation of what the *imago Dei* really is.

Thus full circle in this section. The application of Popper's critical spirit allows that a theological idea could be produced that is a better picture of ultimate reality than another. These can be examined through comparison. That one is falsified does not mean that it was altogether false in a graded sense of the term, but rather that, along with the new description, it is false in both the Popperian and Dionysian sense of the term as well as less like reality than the theory which replaces it.<sup>42</sup> The new description is able to include the previous as an initial approximation and, though bettering it, does not expect to be perfect in itself and remains open to criticism. Indeed, I feel quite certain that those in the theological community will have a number of criticisms to bring against my conjecture (but they should do so cognizant of the fact that they are grasping my word whilst they criticise it).

I understand also that those outside the theological community will find criticism of it more difficult. As an *apologia*, let me say that this specific theory is not claiming that people are created in the image of a god about whose reality you may or may not be convinced. This latter section is a theological exercise, seeking to describe the ways in which man is created in the image of God for those who are willing to work with the presupposition of such a creation. I will say, however, that ethical implications can be drawn from such a theory, and as such that it is open to a limited amount of intersubjective testing. One ethical implication of the theory is this: the words and ideas of all others must be treated with respect because, in presenting them, the other is exhibiting particularly that aspect of his humanity which has

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<sup>42</sup>See KRP, "A Realist View of Logic, Physics and History", in *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach*, revised edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), especially 304-5; and Mystical Theology, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (London: SPCK, 1977) 133-141.

been created in God's image. I would suggest that this is a positive ethical implication and is not of value on its own (being a verification). It highlights, however, the lack of a primary place for the value of the ideas of another in the theory it is attempting to better. As such, by its consequences, the new theory I have proposed is shown to correspond better to a conviction held together by Christians and non-Christians that the ideas of other people are important, and this without producing new, unfavourable consequences: it has a greater explanatory power. All of this critique could be carried out by any person regardless of their convictions about divine reality. Moreover, it may be that someone may deduce a much more negative implication from my idea. In that case, I would be open, upon discussion, to abandon the idea, rather than bearing the dissonance of its negative entailment. I know that this is only a small step toward one who does not share a Christian paradigm, but its existential reality refutes the idea that there can be no intersubjective testing of theological ideas (and it is offered in the hopes of greater interdisciplinary collaboration in the future).

### **Conclusion.**

Theology has no need to be 'scientific' so that it feels good about itself, but recognises that there will always be a great difference between the work of the scientist and that of the theologian. Yet this divide need not be ultimate. Rather, seeing the strong parallels between science, as seen in a Popperian light, and theology; and recognising that critical rationalism is a method that has borne fruit in the hard sciences, in economics, in politics, and in educational theory; this paper has been interested in probing the idea that Popper's epistemological method might likewise serve the task of theology. It should be no surprise that this epistemological model, designed to facilitate the genuine growth of human knowledge in every field, could be tailored to and benefit a field of human enquiry which,



though certainly unique, bears such a strong resemblance to the way that Popper described science. This paper has been concerned to draw attention to these resemblances and to demonstrate in practice that Popper's methodology can at least sometimes be applied in Christian thought: i.e., that there are falsifiable statements in theology.

Gregory of Nyssa, a Father of the Church from the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, described heaven as an eternity of going from glory to glory, moving ever forward in our understanding of the objective infinity of God's being, with no chance of ever reaching its limit.<sup>43</sup> It seems to me that this Christian notion of even in paradise never reaching perfection of knowledge, though cast in eternity, is not so very far from the Popperian concept of life as an *Unended Quest* towards the truth of reality. And although the former is sometimes trampled in the hubbub of theological discussion, it may be that latter can assist in its resuscitation. There really is the possibility of using Popperian themes in theology and there is a real prospect of growth if such a move is critically undertaken.

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<sup>43</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, *From Glory to Glory: Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, translated by Jean Danielou and Herbert Musurillo (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979).

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