**Problems with religious language**

1. Contradictory to our logic  
   EG – the virgin birth
2. Abstract, metaphysical and puzzling language   
   These ideas are beyond our understanding and experience  
   EG – the Ontological argument
3. Using our human, worldly language to describe a transcendent being   
   This will lead to misunderstanding and error. No language can properly convey exactly what we want to say about God. Our language is inadequate.
4. We may end up anthropomorphising God  
   Giving God human qualities is misleading. This difference in ideas can lead to disagreement about the meaning of religious language
5. Use words that we use every day but in a different meaning.   
   This can cause confusion.   
   EG – Spirit (religious or alcoholic?)
6. Some religious language is confusing and paradoxical   
   EG – Mackie’s inconsistent triad
7. Stories can be interpreted literally or non-literally  
   There are disagreements as to which interpretation is the correct one.
8. The same word can mean different things in different religions  
   EG – Karma in Buddhism and Hinduism
9. Verification principle   
   Statements are only meaningful if analytic or synthetic. Therefore religious statements are meaningless.
10. AJ Ayer  
    Religious statements are no-cognitive and emotive utterances.
11. Flew  
    Religious believers always qualify their claims rather than accept they’re wrong. Their claims ‘die the death by a thousand qualifications’.
12. The verification and falsification principles demand religious believers should be careful and consistent in their use of language  
    The same standards of everyday language should be applied to religious language.   
    We use the principles in everyday life to determine meaning.

A group of philosophers (Schlick, Carnap and Waissmann) met in the 1920s in Vienna and became known as the Vienna Circle. They claimed that people spend large parts of their time talking nonsense because we actually say nothing factual. They developed Logical Positivism.

**The Verification principle**

Statements are only meaningful is capable of being shown true or false. An **analytic** statement is true or false by definition whilst a **synthetic** statement is true or false through research.

AJ Ayer became a member of the Vienna circle.   
He said that if a statement is not analytic or synthetic, best to call it cognitively meaningless.

Under the verification principle, metaphysical language is meaningless. Religious statements are neither analytic nor synthetic; they cannot be probable even in principle.

Ayer says religious statements convey no information, they are non-cognitive. At best they are emotive utterances.

All unverifiable religious language is meaningless and so to say ‘there is no God’ is just as to say ‘there is a God’

**Strong Verification –** a statement is meaningful if it can be verified in practice.   
EG – William has brown hair. One would need to find William to check this.  
Strong verification rules out many statements which we would class as meaningful such as historical statements as they cannot be checked.

Ayer weakened the principle to allow for indirect experience.  
Historical statements became meaningful under **weak verification** but so did other statements which Ayer considered meaningless.  
EG – Jesus rose from the dead

*Even if a statement is false, it is still meaningful if it had been open to verification.*

**The Falsification principle**

Created as a more successful challenge to religious language, after the verification principle had failed.

Popper – verification is not the way to test a statement but rather falsification.

If we can explain the conditions under which a statement would be false then that statement is falsifiable and therefore meaningful.  
EG – ‘all swans are white’ is falsifiable as there have been black swans found.

If a statement is true and we can demonstrate the conditions under which the statement would be false then that statement is also meaningful.   
EG – ‘Sarah is wearing mascara’ is meaningful because the conditions under which this statement would be false would be if Sarah was not wearing mascara

Flew developed falsification.   
He adapted Wisdom’s parable of the garden.   
He argued that despite all the evidence to the contrary, a theist would never relinquish their faith in God. The constant qualification of their belief renders their belief meaningless. The claim ‘there is a gardener’ lacks any meaning as the explorer will not allow anything to falsify his claim.   
These claims ‘die the death by a thousand qualifications’.

**Religious language as Analogical**

Aquinas   
-**Univocal** language (same word, same meaning) cannot be used in connection to God.   
EG – Karen is wise, God is wise  
This would mean that God is the same as us, but God is so much greater than us!

-**Equivocal** language (same word, different meaning) cannot be used in relation to God  
This would mean that God is completely different to us but then we would not be able to say anything meaningful about God!

What we can know and say about God is only partial and he we must use **analogy**. This is a comparison between two things.  
We can use analogy in relation to God because God caused us.   
There are 2 types of analogy  
Analogy of attribution – God caused our attributes so we can say meaningful things about Him.  
Analogy of proportion – God’s attributes are much greater and infinite compared to ours.  
EG – when we say something like ‘God is good’, it is meaningful not only because God’s goodness is bigger and more perfect than ours but also because God caused our goodness in the first instance.

Some people have considered the via negative as a useful way of communicating about God. This is saying what God is not so we do not anthropomorphise Him. However, if we say what God is no, we get no further in understanding what God is.

Ian Ramsey   
-Models and Qualifiers are useful when speaking about God  
EG – when describing God as ‘loving’ you would place ‘infinitely’ before it. Loving is a model word, infinitely is a qualifier.   
This distinguishes God from humanity and stops us from thinking of God in terms that are similar to us.   
Models and Qualifiers allow us some insight into the nature of God.

**Religious language as Symbolic**

Tillich  
-God is beyond the understanding of the finite world.   
-We cannot use normal language literally  
-All religious language is symbolic   
-Symbols open up new levels of reality that are otherwise closed to us  
EG – dove represents peace

Symbol = something physical which represents something non-physical.

The only cognitive statement is that God was ‘Being-itself’ – all beings are caused so God is not a being.

Tillich distinguished between signs and symbols. He argued that whilst signs and symbols point ‘beyond themselves’ only symbols participate in the thing that they represent.   
EG – a national flag. A flag does not just symbolise the country but becomes part of the nation.

**Religious language as Language Games**

Wittgenstein  
-Religious language is not meant to give facts that are true or false  
-The words for each language game must be used in context of that game  
-Language from science cannot be applied to religion  
EG – you cannot ask for proof of a soul when the soul is not physical and only physical things can be verified by science.   
-Verification belongs to a different language game – verification does not apply  
-All games have rules. These rules only work when the game is being played. Religious people take their own tools into their game and use them in a way that is appropriate to them.

“*Whereof one cannot speak, thereon one must be silent”  
“Do not ask for its meaning, ask for its use”*

Language is at its worst when it is not being used or understood in the right context.

DZ Phillips  
-When someone says ‘I believe in God’ the real question is what does this mean to the believer?  
-When a person says ‘I believe in eternal life’ they are using the words to describe the type of life they have now.

*“To know how to use this language is to know God”*

**Strengths of the Verification and Falsification Principles**

-We look to the principles as a way of showing meaning in everyday life. People ask for proof of statements  
-They allow us to separate sense from nonsense  
-Logical Positivists use empirical evidence to demonstrate the meaninglessness of language.   
-Some religious events do defy logic – we are in an age of testing and logic  
-Some religious believers would never accept their belief is wrong as Flew claimed  
-Logical Positivists leave us with a warning about being careful when we talk about God. This has resulted in talking about God in more meaningful ways

**Weaknesses of the Verification and Falsification Principles**

-The principles fail their own test  
-Analogy, symbol and language games are successful and defeat the challenge of the principles  
-Non-cognitive does not mean meaningless. It means statements are not meant to be understood as true or false  
-Swinburne – Toys in the Cupboard analogy demonstrates that the statement ‘the toys move around when no one is looking’ is meaningful because we understand what is meant by it even if it is untrue. Religious claims are therefore meaningful as we can understand them  
-Mitchell – resistance worker and stranger analogy explains that religious believers accept the evidence given against God, however, existing commitment overrides the doubt.   
-Hick – eschatological verification demonstrates that God’s existence will be verified after death.   
-Under weak verification, reports of religious experience and historical religious claims become meaningful  
-Davies – lung cancer example challenged falsification. The statement ‘people with lung cancer are in danger of death’ is meaningful even though we do not know what we would need to do in order to falsify it.   
-Hare – Bliks demonstrate that we all hold unfalsifiable beliefs  
-Not all religious believers qualify their claims; many people lose faith after a traumatic event.