A simplified introduction to the Falsification Debate

Falsification
The point is that Carl Popper made the point that in science it's not so much verifiability that is important, but falsifiability. You don't prove the world is flat, you falsify it. So science progresses through 'paradigm shifts' where the prevailing paradigm (world view) is falsified (Aristotle to Galileo to Newton to Einstein, etc.)

Anthony Flew: meaningful = falsifiable (otherwise dies the death of 1,000 qualifications).

When Flew applied this to religious language, essentially he was saying something like “even if we can’t be clear how to VERIFY religious statements, we can at least be clear about how such statements might be falsified”. He adapted the Parable of the Gardener to prove his point. OK, so you can't verify that there is a gardener, but you can construct a test (or series of tests) to falsify it. If the test for sight, smell, tangibility, sound, effect on garden ALL come back negative, then the gardener has been falsified and therefore the statement “there is a gardener” is meaningful, BECAUSE IT IS CLEAR BY WHAT CRITERIA THE STATEMENT CAN BE FALSIFIED. However, Flew's point is that, in practice, religious people do not accept the falsification tests; instead they tend to qualify the statement. SO the statement “there is a gardener” becomes “there is a gardener, BUT he is invisible, BUT he is odourless, BUT he makes no sound, BUT he is intangible, BUT he has no effect on the garden, BUT....” In this way the meaningfulness of the statement “there is a gardener” has 'died the death of 1,000 qualifications’. So theists who wish to maintain the meaningfulness of religious language must accept that there are decisive tests that COULD FALSE such assertions, (which they would accept rather than qualify, by adding all the 'buts').

Richard Hare: meaningful = in accordance with blik about the world.

Hare's response was essentially that Flew didn’t go far enough. In his story (about the man who thinks that university professors want to kill him), he suggests that even though this statement (“university professors want to kill me”) cannot be verified, NOR CAN IT BE FALSIFIED, but it is still meaningful for the man concerned. People have bliks about reality with are meaningful for them. Perhaps religious people could be seen as having a blik about God’s presence in the world? In this way Hare suggests that “a statement can have meaning without asserting anything”. (??perhaps he would have said a statement can have ‘use’ rather then ‘meaning’ in today’s language??)

Basil Mitchell: meaningful = if evidence for statement can be interpreted to outweigh evidence against. Also allows for prior faith as an interpretive key

Mitchell strongly disagreed with the idea that a statement can have meaning without asserting anything (and Flew agreed: and subsequent debate has made this impossible: meaningfulness is now linked with assertions). However, in rejecting the idea that the blik can make it meaningful, Mitchell still has a problem that any statement about God cannot be verified, nor falsified. His story about the stranger and the resistance worker gets around this problem by recognising the ambiguity of the evidence. You can’t verify the statement “the stranger is n our side”; but then neither can you falsify it – there is a danger of the death of 1,000 qualifications if you try; (the stranger is on our side BUT he is keeping his cover by acting like a Gestapo officer, BUT he has to give accurate info to the Nazis sometimes, BUT the people’s cover had already be blown so they were going to get shot anyway, BUT..., BUT..., BUT...). Mitchell suggests that it is the man’s prior meeting with the stranger that gives him faith by which to interpret the evidence. And so a statement about God can be regarded as meaningful IF there is sufficient evidence to allow it, even if there is evidence to the contrary. In effect the man’s faith in the stranger has become a key by which he can interpret the evidence. But does it make sense to allow people’s faith in God as a basis from which to interpret God-talk. Clearly, within the religious community this is probably what happens, but it seems close to allowing a subjective blik as an interpretative key. Flew thought that a further problem with this is that if God is omnipotent, omni-this and omni-that, then there shouldn't be any ambiguity in the evidence.