

THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

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Introduction

The choice of this topic for discussion in this article is informed by the mass rejection of religious beliefs and practices which abound in our contemporary societies. Ogden accepts this prevalent situation and asks why the reality of God has become such a central theological concern.¹ It is the contention of this author that since the world is changing, the religionist is also required to adapt his language to the changing situations. This will make the religious attitude more comprehensive to the jet-age man who requires an adequate explanation for the various religious practices which appear out-moded. In line with this disturbing situation which is prevalent in our communities and the urgency of a solution, the renowned theologian, Schillebeekx, observes that the traditional form of Christian revelation has ceased to provide valid answers to the questions which people ask about God today. He, therefore, expects a new way of speaking about God in order to make an impression on man and improve his relationship with God and his fellow human beings.²

This essay is intended to explain religious language in order to enlighten people on its relevance as long as it is man's way of expressing his beliefs and concepts of God. It should be recalled here that language marks a great difference between man and the lower creatures. It enables man to communicate with his fellows and plan meaningful development of his culture and society. Hence Donceel asserts:

*With language and speech man reaches... the stage of 'co-reflection', the power of intentionally communicating to, and sharing with, others mental contents and intentions, of developing a culture and a civilization.*³

It is proper to observe that each subject has its own language. Each context, each situation, each occasion', says MacGregor "has its own vocabulary, and within each system a word may acquire a meaning that it does not otherwise carry at all".⁴ He goes on to remark that the uniqueness of religious language springs from the uniqueness of what the language is "about".⁵ There is no doubt that religion as "a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the

self-existent, the absolute or simply, God would present difficulties to man whose vocabulary is limited by his finitude. That man becomes spontaneously aware of this Living Power, "wholly Other" and infinitely greater than himself, as professor Idowu puts it, creates enormous problems for man in describing what transcends his own individuality and reality.

The primary motivation of this essay, therefore, is concretely given in the fact that man is aware of the Ultimate Reality known as God. He expresses his belief in this All-Embracing being in a language which is largely inadequate, albeit not unrealistic or nonsensical. We shall, therefore, proceed to examine the relationship between God and man, the origin of the difficulty in describing man's experience adequately. We shall also attempt to resolve these problems through an examination of the analogical and symbolic interpretations among others, in order to make religious language a true instrument for the effective communication of religious experience.

Man's Relationship With God

God is generally conceived by religious people as the Ultimate Reality who directs man's conduct. The creation narrative shows man as created in God's image and likeness (Gen. 1:26). By virtue of this likeness to Himself, God subjected the whole world to man's control and governance, saying to him "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it" (Gen. 1:28). This unique position of man among God's creatures brings upon him ethical responsibilities, for "Man towers in astonishing dominion over the visible world, whose hidden sources of energy he is able to tap".⁸ In his desire to lead the whole of creation to its destined goal, man is supposed to strive towards goodness which is embedded in God himself from whom all data, all laws and standards originate and derive their meanings. The understanding of such a sublime reality comes gradually, for as Bonhoeffer asserts:

*... The ultimate reality now shows itself to be at the same time the initial reality, the first and the last, alpha and omega... Any perception or apprehension of things or laws without Him is now abstraction, detachment from the origin and goal...*⁹

Man's ability to search for true goodness and adhere to God's will is exhibited in the universal appetite for what is good and real. The sages of old have identified that all men basically and unconsciously have an inclination towards the perfect good, which is God. But because man cannot adequately know God during his life on earth, he is not consciously

animal and suprasensory worlds are depicted and concretized in proverbs".²¹

Understood from this point of view, we have metaphoric expressions like the "rivers clapping their hands", "the voice of Yahweh is over the waters!" (Ps 29:3), "the heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps 19:1). What is of significance in these expressions is that the rivers have no hands to clap; the voice of Yahweh could not sound over the waters because he has no mouth to talk much less a voice; still the heavens have no voice or mouth, yet they are expected to declare the glory of God. These are metaphoric expressions with deep meaning for the religious persons.

For the sake of brevity, we shall leave out details of anthropomorphisms, which describe God as intelligent, wise, benevolent and powerful. We can, therefore, say with confidence that myths, proverbs and metaphors are vehicles for communicating the innermost nature of reality and truth and that the non-literal but often figurative nature of religious language is meant to teach us important truths about the totality of life, always opening new visions about the vocation of man and the eternal joy that awaits him.

Our endeavour to make language relevant is not confined to religion alone. The physicists have also advanced from concrete and observed knowledge to something deeper and more committing. Davies explains that,

*"In the first quarter of this century two momentous theories were proposed: The theory of relativity and the quantum theory... Physicists began to realize that their discoveries demanded a radical reformulation of the most fundamental aspects of reality.. that seemed to turn commonsense on its head and find closer accord with mysticism than materialism."*²²

In confirmation of this Capra asserts that,

*the study of the world of atoms forced physicists to realize that our common language is not only inaccurate but totally inadequate to describe the atomic and sub-atomic reality. Quantum theory and relativity theory, the bases of modern physics have made it clear that this reality transcends classical logic and that we cannot talk about it in ordinary language"*²³

It, therefore, behoves us now to examine the analogical and symbolic modes.

Analysis of Religious Language

The ordinary language we use refers to something concrete and verifiable. Since the Ultimate is not adequately demonstrable, logical positivists have condemned religious statements as being at best emotivistic. Consider such statements as "God thinks", "plans" "desires" and "defends". These are qualities of human beings used to describe God as a being which has the faculties for thinking, desiring and hands for defending the oppressed. Such statements are anthropomorphic. But they are not to be understood literally. Put properly in context, new intuitions, and insights, and concepts can emerge from the anthropomorphic mode of religious language.

Analogical predication

The problem of likening God to man is resolved in the Medieval use of *analogia entis* since man was created *ad imaginem Dei*. That Christians believe in man's creation in the image and likeness of God demonstrates the challenges which await man. The law of transcendence naturally guides this relationship, for it is said that the effect is like the cause or that the effect participates in the qualities of its cause. Hence the doctrine of analogical predication.

The greatest proponent of this doctrine, St. Thomas Aquinas, warns against saying that God is like man as if man were the measuring line, whereas the truth is that man is in some sense like God. God is regarded as the origin, while man is derivative.²⁴ Thomas means by this that man who is finite cannot be the measuring line in seeking a solution to the difficulty in discussing God. Since God is perfect and infinite, it would be improper to use an imperfect and finite being to determine his nature, though this is what we are inclined to do when we go from the known to the unknown.

Man's possession of predicates such as rational, just and merciful is proportionally likened to God's. The doctrine of analogy holds, therefore, that when we say God thinks, plans and is good we do not use such expressions literally, that is, in a universal sense as if God were good in the same degree as man. Ordinarily Christopher could be as good as John for they are both human beings but God's goodness is superior in degree to that of man. Therefore, when I say God is good, the predicate is used analogically and not univocally. It points to a similarity and a difference at the same time. Another example is to compare the statements; John is faithful, and Bingo, the dog is faithful. There is similarity in faithfulness in the sense of loyalty but man's faithfulness is deliberate and quite different from

canine faithfulness. Thus between man and dog, the expression is used analogically, just as the expression "good" is used for God and man.

The statement is also not used equivocally, that is having exactly two different meanings. We may illustrate this last with the expressions of the 'bat' which flies and the 'bat' used in playing table-tennis. These have two different meanings because they serve essentially two different purposes. Hence analogical predication provides a framework for certain limited statements about God. As Hospers puts it:

*.. there is a certain analogy or resemblance that is felt to exist between the things referred to in the symbols and the inexpressible, non-conceptualizable X which the symbols are said to stand for...*²⁵

The Symbolic Interpretation

This brings us to the symbolic interpretation of religious language as essentially propounded by Paul Tillich. He states that, "Man's ultimate concern must be expressed symbolically, because symbolic language alone is able to express the ultimate".²⁶ Tillich was careful to point out the differences between signs and symbols. Though they are similar in indicating and referring to things, the symbol is more far-reaching in its implications. An example is that while the red light at the street corner signifies "halt" or "stop" by convention without having any direct bearing with the car or pedestrian, the symbol points beyond itself, participating in the qualities of that which it represents. The national flag stands for the power and dignity of the nation and its violation is a violation of the nation's integrity. This can best be exemplified by the cross of the Christians which represents to them the love of God. It had been for the ancient Egyptians and Central Americans an intrinsic symbolic power which manifested immortality. By the same token, water is universally used in rituals as a symbol of cleansing.²⁷

Tillich takes time to translate concepts into symbols because they have the character of ultimacy. This enables us to speak symbolically about God. All the qualities which we attribute to God like power, love, justice are taken from finite experience and applied symbolically to that which is beyond finitude. They are symbols taken from our daily experience. In this manner, symbolic language enables us to speak of God in our own terms saying: "O Lord, it is you who are my portion and cup" (Ps 16:5), where I mean that God is my most valued choice while "cup" could signify my

source of energy; or "May the mountains bring forth peace for the people and the hills justice" (Ps 72:3), meaning by this that God dwells on the highest point of the earth and showers his blessings upon us.

The Paradoxical Approach

At this point it would be proper to mention what Capra states that:

*the Eastern mystics repeatedly insist on the fact that the ultimate reality can never be an object of reasoning, or demonstrable knowledge. It can never be adequately described by words because it lies beyond the realms of the senses and of the intellect from which our words and concepts are derived.*²⁸

Consequently, Chinese and Japanese mystics, instead of making the paradoxical nature of reality palatable through symbols and images of myth, prefer to accentuate it by factual language. Hence the main Taoist scripture, Lao Tze's *Tao Te Ching*, is written in an extremely puzzling, seemingly illogical style.²⁹ Communication of mystical experience by the exposition of its paradoxical character is shown in the story of a Zen master who saw the Emperor Godaigo, a student of Zen and said "We are facing each other all day long, yet we have never met".³⁰

However, the paradoxical nature of religious language is not used by the Eastern mystics alone as the idea is also prevalent in the West. Capra could be right in stating its characteristic usage in the Eastern world, but its usage can be found in the Bible as well, especially when we are told to give, in order to receive, and when struck on the one cheek to turn the other, in loving our enemies and leaving vengeance to God (Romans 12:19).

Though this solution sounds unbelievably confusing and illogical, it re-emphasises the limitations of man's capability as a finite being to fully comprehend and describe God accurately.

Religious Language As Non-Cognitive

The non-cognitivists give credence to empiricist pronouncements about religion by accepting them as control for empty talk in the dogmatic and blind defence of religious assertions. This is certifiable in the story of the mysterious gardener of John Wisdom and later of Anthony Flew. In this story, the gardener makes no sound, cannot be seen, leaves no foot-prints. Thus what one would have regarded as a factual statement becomes a rather picturesque way of talking about the jungle with its characteristic features.³¹

It, therefore, means that the empiricists are insisting that God if he is to be known, must manifest Himself in the observable and experienceable situation of man like every other ordinary experience.

Though Hare agrees with Flew that religious statements are factually empty, he proposes that their meaningfulness is in what he calls *bliks*, that is, as principles by which one lives and in accordance with which one interprets experience.³²

The non-cognitive accounts of Hare insists that the primary function of religious statements is not to express or convey knowledge (cognition). It is, rather, in the role which they play in the lives of those who use them. Braithwaite, for his part, states that religious statements have meaning because they have use which can be discovered by suitable observations and stated in straightforward propositions. He believes that he meets the empiricist challenge by stating that religious statements are primarily declarations of adherence to a policy of action, declarations of commitment.³³

The main objection to the assertions of the non-cognitivists is that religious statements are not merely non-cognitively meaningful, in that they inspire and guide behaviour and are assumed by those who use them as "true of the way things are" to be in accord with reality. Thus, Hack argues that:

*to render a distinctive style of life both attractive and rational, religious beliefs must be regarded as assertions of fact, not merely imaginative.*³⁴

On his part, Ibn Crombie asserts that religious expressions like Creation, Redemption, Judgement deepen our understanding and should be so affirmed for they are revelatory of facts.³⁵ Ramsey also asserts that religious discourse functions in a way that is empirically-based, yet enables meanings of a profound and transcendent kind to be expressed.³⁶

The Non-Cognitivists therefore seem to be saying that the empiricists should not associate religious language with emotions alone but also to the behaviour and attitude which they arouse. The theists however will add that religious language is factual and experienceable.

Conclusion

In interpreting religious language, we should be careful to understand the intention of the speaker, the context in which he speaks and avoid taking the

meaning literally. The mythical nature of religious language has to be given consideration. Analogical predication and symbolic interpretations are helps to avoiding the pitfalls of anthropomorphism and literal misconceptions. The Eastern mystics prefer the paradoxical interpretation because we cannot comprehend and discuss the Ultimate adequately in our finitude. We have come to understand that as we penetrate deeper and deeper into nature, we have to abandon more and more of the images and concepts of ordinary language.

As a matter of fact, when I say that a person is my right hand man, it would be improper to understand that he is my right hand or stands on it. It is a statement which is qualitative in its implications, indicating that he is an intimate friend of mine. So, also, when we profess that Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father, it does not necessarily mean that God has hands but that Christ is one who has pleased his father in all ways and remains his beloved forever.

The various approaches to religious language need to be used in a complimentary manner in order to faithfully interpret them. In this way, the problem can be resolved and religion better appreciated.

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