

John Grims
Lethbridge, Canada

SANKARA'S SIREN OF SRUTI

Truth is a tantalizer. It is the song which calls to every philosopher who seeks to find the basic, intrinsically intelligible bedrock of it all from which everything arises and into which experience culminates. Further, all knowledge is revelatory. Its function is to manifest the unknown. However, there is Truth with a capital 'T' and there are truths with a small 't'. "Śaṅkara's Siren of Śruti" posits that there are two paradigmatic approaches to the purport of religious discourse, one of which entails a most intriguing consequence. I am proposing that:

- 1) Religious Discourse refers either to: An 'other' and the approach to this remote and foreign 'other' must be through perception and/or mediated concepts, or, Religious Discourse refers to the very constitutive Being of anything whatsoever and as such is self-evident, immediate, and certain.
- 2) It is more logically consistent to speak of an unqualified Absolute than of a theistic deity.

Is there a truth, anywhere, which is so certain that no reasonable individual could possibly doubt its veracity? The siren of certainty beckons . . .

I. The Problem

In both Western and Indian philosophy, the status of religious discourse has been critiqued in various ways. Distinctions can be discerned and described along lines of description, meaning, interpretation, apprehension, expression, convention, and contrasting perspectives. The sum result of this scholarship is that the very possibility of a philosophical understanding of religious discourse has been called into question.

Isn't it remarkable that one is able to make what seems to be a meaningful statement about an entity who or which is alleged,

by the very person making the statement, to be transcendent to the finite world and radically different from it? Thus, religious discourse raises an interesting and intriguing problem. Its subject-matter involves a reality which is trans-human. The problem is: How to explain how ordinary day-to-day language, which exists and lives in and for the world of individuals and objects, may be used to meaningfully refer to this trans-human reality? If the words which are applied to the objects of religious discourse do not have the same meaning as when applied to the objects of ordinary language, then the exact nature of these objects becomes very difficult to define. Statements containing such words will be unthinkable because no intelligible content can be assigned to them. This approach leads to agnosticism and scepticism. On the other hand, if one asserts existence and causality to the objects of religious discourse in a similar sense in which they are asserted to the objects of ordinary language, used in a common, mundane way, then such language becomes redundant and useless. This approach leads to anthropomorphism.

II. Search for Certainty

Traditionally, religious discourse has been involved in a 'search for certainty' - for that which will never disappoint, disappear, decay, or decline. In recent times philosophers have turned their attention to the use of religious discourse - but the foundations of faith demand more than this. For, unless some aspect of religious discourse can be discerned to be indubitable, the entire body of religious discourse can be, and will be, held suspect.

Śaṅkara placed an emphasis on the 'I'. By granting Śaṅkara's definition of the 'I' or *Ātman*, certainty is gained. Why? Logically, this 'I' cannot be denied or doubted. It is affirmed by the very act of denial. It is the basis of all proving or doubting. It does not presuppose its own possibility but is the very basis of all else. In itself, it simply is, and anyone who questions it must assume it in order to do the questioning.

Acceptance of this vision goes a long way, because, as a truth which is beyond the possibility of doubt, it is also a link between itself and ordinary knowledge. Rationalism and Empiricism doubted the possibility of such a link. However, this 'I' is not based upon human reasoning. Nor is it necessarily dependent upon scriptural

authority. It is the pure experience, the pure actuality. It is always immediately given though one does not normally enquire into its content. It refers to the very substantive being of anything whatsoever and is immediately evident. It is not known through any other sign or symbol. Rather, it is the very awareness to which everything else is an object. It is a literal reference to Reality which is but a matter of direct experience.

III. Two Paradigms

There seems to emerge two paradigmatic approaches to the problem of religious discourse. Either religious discourse refers to an 'other' and the approach to this remote and foreign 'other' is through perception' reasoning, and/or authority, or religious discourse refers to the very constitutive being of anything whatsoever and as such is self-evident and absolutely certain. The former approach is both conceptual and mediate. It takes its ground in logic and/or Revelation wherein the subject and the object are separate and its statements are at best probabilities. A gap, whether large or small, is postulated between the Absolute and the individual. This separation leads to a dualism which is characteristic of all theistic philosophies. In contrast, the latter approach emphasises both identity and certainty. This approach may be termed experiential and immediate. It is a 'radical empiricism'. It refers to the Being of all beings which is immediately evident and immanently present therein. As the subject and the object are identical, absolute certainty is self-established.

Is there something within experience which religious discourse refers to and in relation to which it makes philosophical an experiential sense? As long as religious discourse is seen as referring to an 'other', difficulties are going to arise in answering this question. Neither speculative thought nor dogma, necessarily and indubitably, are able to cross the gap of duality. It is only in the radical non-duality of the experiencer with the experienced that such statements have a consistent and coherent meaning.

Before stating what is the most intriguing consequence of this dichotomy, let me briefly state a number of other consequences. When one places God or the Absolute apart from the individual, knowledge thereof must be hypothetical and conjectural. Such knowledge can only be based upon the interaction between an observer and the observed

and its consequent defect that an objectification of an 'other' demands neutralization of the subject if this knowledge is to reach certainty as to the true nature of the phenomena. Absolute objectivity demands that the observer's subjectivity be excluded. Yet, such an absolute integrity of an observed phenomena cannot be preserved within the domain of logical thought which necessarily demands the observer separate from the observed. The observed system is required to be isolated in order to be defined, yet interacting in order to be observed! This estrangement makes God no better than a postulated entity.

A second consequence in placing God apart as an 'other' is that one need then go in search of a proof for the existence of this estranged entity. Once a gap has been postulated between God and individuals and argumentative reasoning has been found to lack unconditional certainty, the only alternative left is to introduce a non-rational authority. Then, religious discourse is turned into a body of true propositions given to humanity by a supreme Authority simply because it is declared so, by fiat. Once a split between finite individuals and an infinite God has been accepted, nothing but an act of grace from this unique being of unsurpassable grandeur can close the contingent chasm. Yet, dogma is nothing but an attempt to base something upon an invisible foundation.

A third consequence of erecting an 'other' is that one's goal is 'to know about' and 'to relate to' this ultimate object. Quantitative thinking comes to predominate over qualitative thinking. Space becomes dissected and time rolls out. The spiritual journey becomes an actual movement from here to there.

IV. Language About the Absolute

When one posits the Reality of an 'other', an entire legion of difficulties arise. The history of the proofs for the existence of God and the theory of causality are ample testimony to this. The doctrine of causation, like all other relations falling in the realm of ignorance, is found to be unintelligible. The origin of the world, whether a creation of God or a process of natural evolution, involves difficulties in both cases. Knowledge of an 'other' must be hypothetical and conjectural and since it is something to be attained, it is also liable to be lost. Paul Tillich went to the extent of saying that atheism is the inevitable result of placing God apart as a stranger. But there is a further consequence to be explored.

Usually it is held that an anthropomorphic God is comprehensible but inappropriate as an object of worship or religious belief. An anthropomorphic God usually denotes some sort of incredibly powerful physical being in the minds of its devotees. And a sort of 'cosmic man' has a referent - but such a referent is philosophically and religiously unacceptable. Yet, a non-anthropomorphic God seems to be utterly incomprehensible. Who or what does religious discourse refer to? Does it refer to anything at all? A non-anthropomorphic Reality seems rife with obscure terms which no one understands nor can relate to. In order for one to understand what one is saying when they speak of God or the Reality, this referent must have some empirical anchorage which one can relate to.

Yet, strange as it may seem, it is my contention that a non-anthropomorphic Absolute is more consistent and logical and can be empirically anchored easier than a theistic deity. This is not a disparagement of a theistic deity, but merely a statement about consistency and coherence. It is true that the Judaic-Christian-Islamic God is a non-anthropomorphic infinite individual transcendent to the world. Yet, since this God is, in some way or other, conceived of as an 'other', the above difficulties still arise. A theistic deity is spoken of as possessing all perfections. They are praised in innumerable ways. Yet, no one has been able to prove or demonstrate in any plausible sense of these terms, the existence of this 'other'. Flaws, inconsistencies, and contradictions mar the doctrines and traditions which have tried. Thus, God is *Deus Absconditus* and should be accepted humbly on faith.

The non-anthropomorphic Absolute is charged with being dry and barren, perplexing and unintelligible. Yet the Advaitin calls it the most empirical of all empirical entities. It is the most elementary, the further irreducible substratum. The causal relation does not apply to it nor is it the result of evolution. Being indeterminate and undetermined, yet it is. It is immediately given and directly experienced as one's own Self. One's own Self cannot be denied without self-contradiction. It is constitutive of everything and hence is a concrete immediacy. It is immediately felt and not transcendently deduced, it is an accomplished fact. It must be presupposed for any proof regarding it.

V. Retrospect

Our search has not been concerned with merely an intellectual solution. This paper is not so much an attempt to compare the various proposed solutions to the problem of religious discourse as it is to ferret out if there is something within religious discourse itself which is *sui generis*, legitimate and valid, as well as experiential. Religious discourse purports to disclose a real experience as well as to express a theoretical truth capable of sustaining a logical, coherent analysis. It is an attempt to say something and to say it about something. The basic question concerning religious discourse is with its precise meaning. The dilemma of religious discourse arises as to how this concept is to be intelligibly conveyed. To put it succinctly: *What* is being conveyed and *how*? Supposedly the objective of religious language is to reveal something meaningful. And yet supposedly the subject-matter of most key passages in religious discourse are generally declared to be ineffable and transempirical. How can the relational convey the non-relational? How can the empirical convey the trans-empirical? Generally one is tempted to think of the Absolute or God as an invisible something which is beyond the reach of the senses. And if this is the case, how can one be sure that individuals are not deceiving themselves and being led astray by their own language-use? Sense experience is the time-honoured means of verifying with certainty, and if this avenue is closed due to the particular nature of the objects in question, perhaps religious discourse is but another example of the Emperor's New Clothes.

Another way of asking about religious discourse is to question not what sort of language it is, but if any religious discourse is possible at all. The former presupposes some sort of intelligibility while the latter questions its very possibility. The emphasis has thus shifted from asking penultimate questions to the ultimate question. What is the basis for religious discourse as a whole? Are its roots tied to a metaphysical system, a Revelation, a linguistic convention, an empirical experience? What is it within one's experience which has invited these expressions and which purports to convey or communicate something? The question of religious discourse is thus: Is there something within experience which renders religious discourse necessary and in relation to which it makes sense?

Historically, the problem of religious discourse, of answering what is being conveyed and how, has been approached from various angles.

The factual, cognitive approach was juxtaposed with the functional, non-cognitive approach in order to facilitate a historical survey. Cognitive discourse revolved around the concept of verification and validity while an analysis of meaning concerned itself with analytic talk about talk. Traditionally, in the pre-analytic period, religious discourse was understood to be not only cognitive, but also true. In more recent times, analysts have been more concerned with the function that religious discourse plays. The various questioners enquired into the factuality, validity, intelligibility, meaning, and use of this system of communication. And from this enquiry, two basic alternatives came to be distinguished. Either one could hold that religious discourse statements are not factually informative, or one could maintain that such statements are factually informative but that an empirically established meaning and process of verification need not necessarily apply to them. The former, the non-cognitive approach, attempts to sidestep the problem of verification while the latter, the cognitive approach, meets the problem with its own criterion of verification and definitions of meaning. Placing these two paradigmatic Western types of solutions in juxtaposition with the solution proposed by extrapolating Śaṅkara reveals certain basic characteristics and their necessary consequences.

Śaṅkara's solution is that religious discourse refers to that which is immediately evident and immanently present in all experience. The key fact to be noted is that religious discourse is posited to concern individuals, here and now, and not a God, above and beyond. Any approach to an 'other' concerns a search 'elsewhere' – and all the difficulties inherent in such a search. If the so-called incomprehensible Absolute is grounded within each individual's own personal experience – not as an object, but self-luminously evident, not in a theoretical concept or abstract idea – but in fact – then the Absolute is an indubitable fact of everyone's experience, and coincidentally immanently practical.

Thus, by grounding the incomprehensible, unqualified Absolute within each one's own personal experience, it is more than a mere assertion or theoretical concept and is established as an indubitable fact of experience. Any abstraction is an escape from this fact. Though it is customary to regard the impersonal Absolute as an abstraction and a theistic deity as something concrete, an analysis tends to reveal that just the reverse is the case. Any 'other' is removed and thus uncertain and partakes of degrees of murkiness, while identity is an experiential fact which cannot be doubted.