

RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

Neither True nor False, but Meaningful

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1. Introduction

The knowledge of knowing has attracted the attention of philosophers of all times. Knowledge begins with the acquisition of information and, hence, it is primary in philosophical, material, and other aspects of life. Intellectuals of the East as well as the West were very much drawn towards the interrelation of thoughts, words, sentences, and their meanings. It is through the medium of language that the thoughts and feelings can be expressed and, thus, human beings, unlike animals, with their special ability to express their thoughts and feelings through language, stands unique. Language is an abstract system employed primarily for communication and in the act of knowing, language occupies an important position.

Primary goal in man's life is attainment of truth, bliss, or self-realisation. In his march towards this goal, religion and language play a pivotal role. In the fast progressing scientific world, theism has survived and is still a motivating factor that commands the life of many modern erudite persons. Hence, it is interesting to explore the meaning possessed by religious languages. Whether theistic claims are compatible with scientific assertions is an ever debatable question among scholars. It is worthwhile to mention that there is no specific language that is used only for religious purposes. We may use any language in connection with religious practices such as prayer, ritual, worship, preaching, theological learning, etc. Human beings, in the process of communication with various sections of society, use the language suited to the needs. For example, the language of mathematics, which is thoroughly symbolic and short, will not be useful to a politician who has to give lengthy speeches mostly to the common folk.

Some consider the ultimate questions, which philosophy grapples with, as meaningless; but many consider them as powerful and meaningful. Many, however, agree that these problems cannot be verified or falsified empirically but still that it can quite well have a legitimate function. Religion is also concerned with such questions. According to

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Paul Tillich, “Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of meaning of life.”¹

2. Religion and Symbols

Religion is not limited to the conscious psyche of the individuals but it is to a great extent influenced by the elements which are present in the depth of unconscious. Activities of human beings are not only directed by conscious psyche, but also by the suppressed impulses in the unconscious. As religion considers both these aspects, it requires a special language. The unconscious aspect can be expressed only through symbols; naturally, then, the language of religion has to be symbolic. It is difficult to express the unconscious clearly through ordinary language; it is, then, symbols that try to express what is inexpressible. Hence, it can be comprehended that symbol is the proper language of religion. G. Mac Gregor says: “In religion no one can avoid use of symbolism nor should one wish that it were possible to do so. The more lively a religion, the more complex its symbolism has to be, for it is thus that it secures what protection it can get against the ever present danger of literalism, which is fatal to the life of any religion.”² Symbols are, thus, the only means through which religion can express itself directly.

The word *symbol* is derived from the Greek word *symbola*, meaning *tally*. Etymologically, it means *that which tallies or represents something*. In a wider perspective, language itself is symbolic and each and every word is a symbol because it stands for something. Russell writes: “Words all have meaning in the simple sense that they are symbols that stand for something other than themselves.”³ A symbol is that which represents something other than the word, the thing or gesture. A red flag is a symbol when it is not just looked into as a red coloured flag but when it stands for danger signal. The most important characteristic of a symbol is that, it does not stand for its own sake but points to something beyond itself. It is also true that a symbol participates in that which it represents. Therefore, an insult to a religious symbol is an insult to that particular religion itself.

¹Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1963, 4.

²G. Mac Gregor, *Introduction to Religious Philosophy*, New York: Macmillan, 1958, 328.

³B. Russell, *Principles of Mathematics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903, 47

A symbol reveals to us the inner levels of reality which is unknown to scientific analysis. It opens up the inner dimensions of self which corresponds to the inner elements. Another feature of symbol is that it is not permanent and it arises from the function of group mind. A symbol is something which resembles what it represents but this resemblance can be understood only by a person who knows the situation in which the symbol is being used.

Symbols are not restricted to any particular area, but it is often used in religious language. No religion in this world can avoid symbolism. The word God itself is a symbol. It symbolizes the ultimate basis or the root cause of everything. A religious symbol may be a concrete object or some aspect of it. When a believer says that God is the father of all human beings, he tries to express the majesty of God, a feeling of security, an attitude of firm faith and submission.

Religious language for its expression uses both verbal and non-verbal symbols. Non-verbal symbols like moon, star, cross, etc., have great significance in religious language. Like other symbols, religious symbols also open up the hidden levels of reality. Religious symbols stand for that which transcends finitude. The referent of religious symbol does not belong to the universe of finite relations. The transcendent can be known through the finite. “Religious symbols open up experience of the dimension of the depth in the human soul. If a religious symbol has ceased to have this function then it dies.”⁴

Employment of symbolic language is found in all religions. In Hinduism, to describe *trimurti* (triad) Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesvara, the mystical symbol *OM* (*a-um*) is commonly used. The various Hindu deities are also symbolic in name. *Brahma* is the symbol of creation, *Vishnu* of protection, *Siva* of destruction, etc. The most important symbol of Christianity is the cross which symbolizes divine sacrifice. A symbol does not subject the infinite to the finite but renders the finite transparent. It helps us to see the infinite through it. “Religious symbols are unique because the reality they represent is unique and there lies their power and their truth.”⁵

Religious symbols have both integrating and disintegrating powers. It produces creative and destructive feelings among people, thus,

⁴Paul Tillich, *Symbols of Faith in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Abrenethy, New York: Columbia University Press, 1963, 392.

⁵Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, New York: Harper and Row, 1957, 54.

propagating both positive and negative effect on our society. Religion has, thus, its own holiness and unholiness.

Religious symbols have a tendency to become ultimate in themselves. If a symbol moves in that direction, it ultimately ends up in idolatry. This may be avoided if the symbols only participate in the ultimate to which they refer; on the other hand, if they replace them, they become idols. This is generally considered as the destructive aspect of religious symbol.

3. Religion and Positivism

With the arrival of logical positivism in the field of philosophy, one can see a change regarding the nature of religious language. The strict logical positivists who rely solely on criterion of verifiability rejected religious statements as meaningless. Logical positivists accept only two kinds of statements to be cognitively meaningful – analytic and synthetic. Religious statements do not belong to any of these categories. So, the logical positivists do not consider religious statements to be meaningful in the logical sense.

For logical positivists, analytic statement is meaningful by its own right because in analytic propositions the predicate is part of or synonymous to the subject. For example, a white cat is white. This kind of statements is true and meaningful but non-informative. The logical positivists pointed out that the *a priori* prepositions of logic and mathematics belong to this category. Whereas in synthetic statements, the predicate tells us something new or informative about the subject. For example, he went to see his mother, he will come tomorrow, etc. One can verify such statement by experience of our sense. For positivists, such statements alone are meaningful in the real sense.

Take the case of religious statements where believers use terms in a sense different from what they ordinarily convey. When a believer says that ‘God is the creator of this universe’, he does not take the term ‘creator’ in the same sense in which it is used in our ordinary language because God is supposed to be without a material body, without desires, etc. So, whenever a believer used the term ‘creator’ in connection with God, he certainly uses it in a different special sense. Such religious statements do not depend on actual experience and, hence, outside the field of verification, and for logical positivists, all empirically unverifiable statements are meaningless. Naturally, religious statements are considered meaningless.

The power of religious languages, however, cannot be brushed aside. For a believer, religious language is like a *sanctum sanctorum*, which gives him strength and protection to his day to day life. Whenever he is in trouble he finds solace in religious language. Bible, *Bhagavat Gita* and Qur'an are the best examples. One cannot outrightly reject it as meaningless, but can say that religious statements have their own distinctive meaning. That is why even the logical positivists have designated a special meaning to religious language, i.e., the emotive meaning. The difference between ordinary language and religious language is not clearly observable because words used in religious statements are also ordinary but in their application, they completely differ from what they ordinarily stands for. The fact is that the words that we use in religious language are common in themselves but only a believer can easily understand the real spirit of it. For example, an important official letter written by a soldier to his superiors will be comprehended by a common man in a different way than the officials can as he cannot understand the real spirit of that letter and the commitment involved in it. Similar is the case with religious language, where it is easily digestible for a believer. Take the example of *Sivalinga*, the symbol of Lord Siva. For a person who is ignorant of Hindu religion and culture this is just a stone, and has nothing to convey. Thus, in order to understand any language, proper involvement of the situation is necessary which is applicable to religious language also. It is at this juncture the religious language becomes similar to other languages.

4. Conclusion

There are different kinds of religious languages. It may, at times, take the form of a moral expression, sometimes it may point to the experience of believer or to historical facts; it can be the language of rites, rituals, and dedication. So, religious language performs many functions but above all it is the language of parables. The religious declarations such as *God is truth*, *God is love*, etc., are language of parables. The truth and falsity of such religious parables depend on personal religious convictions. If somebody said that God rescued him personally or if he declares that God is at times visible and tangible or God could appear and disappear at will, then, atheists may say that such kind of statements needs empirical verification because they are not empirically verifiable assertions and on the basis of verification principle they are false statements. But even

though they are false, they are meaningful for a believer. Thus, there are many things which are unverifiable but we accept them and talk about them as we really know them. Hence, religious statements are not meaningless as they are not logically impossible statements. A language which performs some functions should be treated as meaningful. So, there is nothing wrong in saying that religious language is meaningful. It is true that only those who are inside the particular faith situation can understand its true spirit and this can be applicable to every language.

Basically, religious language is not adequate to express one's realisation to others. For a true devotee who has attained self-realization, religious languages are sometimes meaningless because they realise that it is difficult to form the concept of ultimate reality through language. Concrete concepts are not visible in religion, but the concept which we use in religion express different meanings and can be interpreted in different ways. What is distinctive in religions cannot be put into words. It is impossible to describe spiritual experiences through the form of language. The statements that we use in our day to day life are either true or false, but religious utterances are neither true nor false. Religious people, however, believe that religious statements are not only meaningful but also true. This leads us to the conclusion that, to a great extent, religious languages are based on faith.