PROBLEM OF DIVERSE CONTEXTS AND SPEAKERS ABOUT GOD

Ignatius Jesudasan[♦]

1. Introduction

Only believers can engage in meaningful God-talk in a variety of contexts. But the belief and its meanings and purpose would vary with the context and the person engaged in the talk. Context connotes the time and location or social space of the speakers relative to us or any other audience, who are presumably inspired, instructed and edified or shaped into a community by that talk. The talk then is meant to teach us to continue the same so as to grow as a community in our turn. But our times and contexts differ. There is a time of remembrance and forgetfulness, reception and rejection, conflict and reconciliation, triumph and failure, joy and sorrow, thanks and self-denunciation, celebration and mourning. Such a variety implies the spontaneity of the change of feeling and meaning which inevitably takes place across socio-cultural-historical space and time in terms of continuity or break with the talk. In many a context, supported by a particular biblical hermeneutic or God-talk, gender diversity is hardly celebrated.[1]

The relation of the talkers to the audience or to us can be that of the positions of our ethno-religiously founding fathers,[2] ruling prophets or priestly teachers – all of them – which command our respect and obedience. Like language and desire, it is by imitation[3] that we inherit and

---

[♦]**Dr. Ignatius Jesudasan SJ** was the librarian at Arulkadal, Jesuit regional theologate in Chennai. He has authored many books including, *Roots of Religious Violence: A Critique of Ethnic Metaphors* (2007), *Genesis Myth of Manifold Meanings* (2008), *Through the Prism: Literary-Critical Scripture-Reading* (2008), *A Rumour of Biblical Angels* (2008), *Cult and Spirituality* (2008), and *Gospels of Deconstructed Adamic Myth* (2009).

[1]"In and through Diversity: Her-Narrative in Context," Prof Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), University of South Africa. <www.ngkerk.org.za/forumdocs/Teologiese perspektiewe Madipoane Masenya.doc>

[2]Ignatius Jesudasan, *Religion as Metaphor for Ethno-Ethical Identity*, Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2011.

[3]"We borrow our desires from others. Far from being autonomous, our desire for a certain object is always provoked by the desire of another person – the model – for this same object. This means that the relationship between the subject and the

---

learn our respective God-talk, which differs with our denominational historical and ideological stand.

If it is true to say that faith comes by hearing, it is because hearing leads to imitative repetition or repetitive imitation. In global historical contest, the faith, which comes by hearing, does not do so in one single voice, but a plurality of ethno-denominationally conflicting interpretative voices. Since imitation is common to all of them, the traditions of faith turn into a confusing cacophony, wherefrom one grows louder and clearer than others because it has assumed and asserted political clout and power over others.

The imitation of the established power is made thus the empirical measure of our respect and obedience for those, who have preceded and set us an example as our preceptors or teaching role-models. Hence it is to the extent that we or a new generation echo the talk that we have heard from its original handlers or carriers that the preceding and succeeding generation of our hearers will approve or disapprove of our own talk. The moment our talk is changed from its original tradition, a disturbance is sensed and spread to the entire believing or ideological community, by its being interpreted as a (heretical) disruption of the faith of the fathers in the God of their faith. Hence it seems reasonable to infer that the God-talk serves either to unite or split the believers into one or more ethnic communities.

While we have to demonstrate it with at least one historical illustration in order to concretize the point, we have also to address a fundamental question about how a new way of talking about God arises. But let us first consider the condition of the possibility of God-talk in general.[4]

---

object is not direct: there is always a triangular relationship of subject, model, and object." http://organic-frog.com/2007/08/16/rene-girard-and-the-mimetic-desire/

[4]In a chapter of his 1936 book titled *Language, Truth, and Logic*, A. J. Ayer argued that one could not speak of God's existence, or even the probability of God's existence. According to him, 'God talk is evidently nonsense,' because to say that 'God exists' is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false. And by the same criterion, no sentence which purports to describe the nature of a transcendent god can possess any literal significance. A. J. Ayer, "God-Talk Is Evidently Nonsense," Davies B., ed., *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 143-146.

2. God-Talk and the Condition of Its Possibility

The problem arises, in the first place, because the subject we name as God is an invisible and non-sensuous entity, inaccessible to our usual empirical verification. It is affirmed in intuitive faith alone, which is not knowledge in any univocal sense with the rest of what we commonly know, but only in an equivocal or analogical application. This is related to the many different ethno-linguistic and political traditions. Even that equivocally analogical knowledge does a lot of pragmatic good. It helps to establish, maintain and administer many different and contrary systems of moral and politico-economic law, order and justice in this world by correlating them to other-worldly rewards and punishments in addition to those of the present world and life. This is the reason why I started this essay by stating that only believers can engage in God-talk in a way that makes some pragmatic sense. Having stated it, I am obliged to dwell further on the nature and function of belief or faith.

3. Nature and Function of Faith or Belief

Every faith or belief is an intuitively imaginative faculty, which substitutes and supplements the absence of real knowledge with plausible-seeming hypothetical constructs of its own. As such, faith is neither verified nor verifiable in empirical or experiential terms relating to the other world. Nonetheless, the power of faith or belief is such that it creates the simulacrum or truth-likeness of heaven and hell here on earth itself, which renders these invisible objects of belief seem reasonably credible enough. But it elevates the whole of this ingeniously imaginary construction to a place of honour and authority by attributively interpreting it all as revelation coming from God himself. In other words, faith claims revelation to be what the true and undeceiving God has graciously spoken to his chosen spokespersons whom subsequent generations designated as ethno-religious patriarchs, rulers, mystical prophets or priests. The latter, therefore, have been declared to be the honorific beneficiary cornerstones and guardians of all ethno-religious foundations.

This faith or belief presumes that God is the first, or has taken the initiative in talking to these chosen representatives, which is what makes it possible for them to talk to and about God. According to this belief, only those that have heard or listened to the voice of God can speak back to or about God. It rules out the possibility of unbelievers ever hearing or speaking to or about God, except as an absence. Therefore, theistic faith divides humanity into believers and unbelievers, unmindfully

contradicting its own premise of one and the same creator-God of all human beings. It has helped religion-based politicians to reinstate their power over their simple followers, by citing God as the prop for their division. The problem gets compounded when the name for the divinity starts to differ from language to language.

4. Plurality of Languages and of God's Names

All ancient peoples have reports of their divinity electing to reveal itself to their ancestral ethnic prophets by particular names in their respective languages or dialects. Since these names differed with the language or dialect of the ethnic groups, the latter opposed their ethnic divinity to that of other groups. The groups being in rivalry with others, they attributed their own rivalries to the names by which they and their rivals invoked the divinity. Thus they generated dualistic theologies divided between God as the primary principle and Demon, or *Daimon*, in the sense of the secondary principle, which they projected as opposed to and challenging the first principle.

Thus the Aryan founder of Persian Zoroastrianism injected dualism into his ethno-ethical religious system by opposing Ahura Mazda to Aura Mainyu as a truth divinely revealed to him, charging Zarathustra with the task of inviting all human beings to choose between him (good) and Aura Mainyu (evil). Thanks to this dualism, Zoroastrianism appeared as a highly ethical religion. Zarathustra elaborated it by teaching that humans are free to choose between right and wrong, truth and lie, and light and dark, and that their acts, words, and thoughts would affect their lives after death. He was thus the first to promote a belief in two heavenly judgments: of the individual soul right after death and of all humanity after a general resurrection. His ideas of heaven, hell, and the resurrection of the body profoundly influenced Judaism during its Babylonian exile and were eventually passed on into Christianity and Islam. Later Zoroastrianism conceived of an opposition between body and soul, though there was no suggestion in its theology that the body was evil and the soul was good. A wandering Christian preacher named Mani from Mesopotamia developed those theories into an extreme form of dualism, which has since that time been fittingly named after him as Manichaeism.[5]

One may be permitted to add here that, though the four-sources theory of the first five books of the Bible traces them to a few centuries preceding the known date of extant Zoroastrian scriptures, the fact that the

[5]http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Zoroastrianism/index.aspx#ixzz1rwFDbHRB

redaction of the Bible in its current global usage took place after the Zoroastrian Zend Avesta became the sacred book of the Babylonian empire points to the Hebrew Bible as syncretistically passing on the dualistic Zoroastrian beliefs and values into Judaism and through it eventually into Christianity and Islam. Once someone has set a precedent, it becomes conveniently easy for others to cite and follow it. Hence I venture to affirm that, imitating Zoroaster's claim of divinely revealed truths, the redactor of the Bible represented his ethnic prophets also as having been entrusted with God's messages, which they communicated to their community as God's own commands. The official teachers of Christianity and Islam asserted the same thing about their respective founders. Thus, in course of time, these traditions began to interpret the words of their prophets as the words of God himself. This is the time and place for us to return to the question of how a new way of talking about God is rendered possible. I shall name it as the origin of a new hermeneutic.

5. Rise of New Hermeneutic

By this phrase I do not mean any particularly unique moment or event in history, but a whole and typological series of historical persons, who re-read an until-then literally and un-questioningly accepted text or event as a prophetic precedent to justify or legitimize a new action or interpretation of their own. Such acts of new hermeneutic take place all the time. For instance, we engage in it every time that we cite a proverb as precedent to make any of our actions appear as everybody's everyday actions, rather than like socially unusual or abnormal occurrences. Hebrew or rabbinic Midrash was a pointer to its common usage or occurrence within Jewish society.[6]

---

[6]In rabbinical Midrash this word serves as a metaphor for Scripture's reality, and Scripture provides a metaphor for Israel's reality as well. Reading one thing in terms of something else, the rabbinic exegetes produced in Midrash a powerful instrument of theological renewal. Shifting from the meanings they convey to the implications they contain, Midrash brings to Scripture an as-if frame of mind, which renews scripture with a fresh perspective. Thus reading one thing in terms of something else, they transformed history from a sequence of one-time events into an ever-present mythic world. Consequently, no longer was there one Moses, one David, one set of happenings of a distinctive and never-to-be-repeated character. But whatever happened, of which the thinkers propose to take account, must enter and be absorbed into that established and ubiquitous pattern and structure founded in Scripture. It is not that biblical history repeats itself. Rather the Bible no longer

The first Christians constructed their gospels by their new hermeneutical use of the Hebrew Bible as midrashic prophecy on everything, which happened or would happen to Jesus and his ardent believers. They went so far with such re-reading that, as one author describes it, they made out the New Testament into one vast echo-chamber of the Hebrew Bible.[7]

It was as a symbolic act of violent rejection of that new hermeneutic that the majority of the ruling Jewish priesthood sentenced Jesus to death and started to persecute his followers. By expelling the first Christians from the temple and the synagogue, they indirectly hardened their victims into reinterpreting the Bible ever more and more as the prophetic words of God, pre-destining the Christians as the new legal heirs to inherit the promises He was believed to have made to Abraham. Thus the Church hermeneutically replaced Israel as the heir of the promises by metaphorically re-describing the Christians as the newly begotten people of God, through their share in the baptismally symbolized participation in the death and resurrected glory of Jesus Christ. Thus they became metaphorical sons with the scripturally interpreted only son, Jesus, begotten on the cross, to which he had subjected himself.[8]

Thus Christianity itself constituted a new hermeneutic act in the sense that it represented a new way of speaking to and about God. This newness, relative to the Jewish way of speaking to and about God, consisted in a characteristic familiarity with God, which the Jews neither owned nor approved of, and which came to be known as Trinitarianism with and within the divinity. It was derived from Jesus' way of dealing with and speaking about the divinity. He dealt with God and spoke as one

---

constitutes history as a story of things that happened once, long ago, and pointed to some one moment in the future. Rather biblical history becomes an account of things that happened every day – hence an ever-present mythic world. Jacob Neusner, *What Is Midrash?* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987, 48-49.

[7] Damian Barry Smyth, *The Trauma of the Cross*, New York: Paulist Press, 1999, 40.

[8] "He … who was born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, … by the action of the same Spirit keeps the church spotless and makes her fruitful. So a numberless throng of sons of God is born by the birth of baptism; to them the saying applies: 'Who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.' He it is in whose person the offspring of Abraham is blessed by the adoption of the whole world. The patriarch becomes the father of all nations, when they are born as sons of the promise, not according to the flesh but by faith.'" *Sermons of Pope St. Leo the Great, Sermon 12 on the Passion.*

participating in God's own nature and work. He taught and spoke of his believers also as graced with the same gift and right to deal with God on equally familiar, Trinitarian terms. Such was Jesus' faith and self-understanding. He commended and demanded the same faith from his followers in order to empower them with a similar self-understanding.

In the face of traditional Jewish orthodoxy, such Christian God-talk was sheer blasphemy. On that ground, and the fear of its becoming a popular mystical streak, the Jewish leadership, who were then in a political majority, got Jesus executed and began persecuting his followers. Having historically suffered at the hands of the Jewish religious leadership for its own brand of orthodoxy, Christianity started persecuting dissidents from it in its turn, when it had acquired the power structure to threaten them by treating them as heretics. Some of the latter contributed to yet another hermeneutic either by returning to their Unitarian roots[9] in pre-Christian Judaism or by reinforcing the Unitarian stream of post-Christian Islam.

6. Recent Paradigm Shift in God-Talk

But of late a paradigm shift has been taking place in where real God-talk occurs, namely in the media-world. When 'The Matrix' came out in 1999, it became, according to Tickle,

> the best treatise on God-talk that has ever been made. It could not have been done with a book. It could not have been done with words. ... The primacy of place in creative, cutting-edge God-talk has shifted from non-fiction in the 1980s to fiction in the 1990s and now it is shifting again to the world of the visual, especially to the kinds of myths and stories we see in movies such as 'The Matrix.' We're talking about the manipulation of theological fantasies and this is a natural fit for visual media.[10]

As she expanded it,

> Theology is found in the world of doctrine, history, academic credentials and ecclesiastical authority. But "God-talk" thrives far from most pulpits. Its standards are flexible, evolving, user-defined and rooted in small communities. This is a true "democratization of

---

[9]Arius and those allied with him insisted that Jesus Christ was substantially distinct from, though of *like* or *similar* substance with God the Father. This view was later called unitarianism, by contrast with the trinitarianism that became official Catholic doctrine with the addition of the Holy Spirit as the third persona of God in 381 CE at the First Council of Constantinople. http://www.wku.edu/~jan.garrett/arius.htm

[10]http://www.leaderu.com/popculture/godtalk_matrix2.html

theology," and can be seen as an extension of Protestantism's division into thousands and thousands of independent denominations, movements and churches.[11]

Writing in the *Journal of Religion and Film*, James L. Ford of Wake Forest University argues that these films offer a powerful fusion of themes from Buddhism, clashing brands of Christianity, Greek mythology, cyber-culture and legions of other sources. "It is impossible to know what narratives will become the foundation myths of our culture," noted Ford, in his "Buddhism, Christianity and The Matrix" essay. "But epic films like The Matrix are the modern-day equivalent of The Iliad-Odyssey ... or various biblical myths. Indeed, one might well argue that popular films like "The Matrix" and "Star Wars" carry more influence among young adults than the traditional religious myths of our culture."[12]

7. Conclusion

How could one substantiate the truth of the claim about the paradigm shift in God-talk? At first sight, it looks impossible that, where theology and philosophy have failed to carry youth along, film and mythology should carry weight with them. But the fact being that they do, we have only to try to understand the process or reason why this happens.

The first reason is that, if every age was susceptible to the concrete image, ours is more evidently receptive to all kinds of imagery that present-day technology renders possible. Only that which touches the senses largely attracts the heart of youth today. The multi-media play largely to that gallery. Since youth and even adults assume that the medium is the message, they are carried off by those personalities, whose lives do not clash with their own image of God. Hence, the historically non-violent Buddha, Jesus and Gandhi become for them the visible revelations of the invisible divinity.

The second reason is the power of the image-making medium. This power of the medium is its capacity to present such personalities and their opponents respectively in the contemporaneously best or worst light possible. In other words, they are mythologically transfigured into divinities or demons. All this happens casually in the seemingly simple

---

[11]http://www.leaderu.com/popculture/godtalk_matrix2.html

[12]James L. Ford, "Buddhism, Christianity, and The Matrix: The Dialectic of Myth-Making in Contemporary Cinema," < http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/the matrix.htm>

process of story-telling through the poetically creative medium of benevolent or malevolent metaphors.

The third reason is the power of the imagination behind the images or icons it tends to create. As cursorily indicated above, there is either a good will or an ill-will behind every imagination. These two wills would influence what each speaker or hearer wants to believe and propagate about the persons that are being spoken about. The good-willed person would fashion a good image, while the ill-willed would promote bad images about fellow humans. The truth or falsity of the image produced should be partly determined by the kind of will behind its production. Accordingly, good will can transfigure ill-willed images into good ones, while the ill-willed ones would only tend to tarnish the really good images into bad, unless they undergo total transformation from within.

To think and speak well of good actions and intentions is plain honesty of will. To speak of bad actions also as well-intentioned reveals the generosity of a good will which, in its hope anticipates the transformation of all ill-wills into good wills. To represent good actions as badly intended events would reveal the hardness and perversity of the ill-will. Redemption consists in trans-figuratively leading the ill-willed into total good will. At this point, the imaginatively produced hope and desire may be said to verge on the mystical experience of intimately live contact with God.