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Religious Assertions : A Linguistic Approach

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Abstract: This article makes an attempt to understand religious assertions from a linguistic perspective. The terms that are applied to God in religious discourse are being used in special ways, different from their use in the scientific or in the ordinary day-to-day contexts. Religious assertions could be viewed as explanations, self-justified, derived from authority, analogical statements, faith statements, symbolic, non-cognitive and as language-games.

The pertinent question is whether religious utterances or assertions are verifiable. Religious assertions are not verifiable in the sense of being publicly verifiable, namely there being publicly agreed methods of verifying them. However this does not entail that they are not informative. As far as religious assertions are concerned, one should concentrate more on the practical usefulness of these beliefs and utterances rather than questioning their truth and verifiability. For those with faith in the religious assertions, no proof is required, but for those without faith no proof is possible.

Keywords: Religious Assertions, Analogical Statements, Symbolic, Non-cognitive, Language-games, Verification.

1. Introduction

Philosophy's task with regard to religion is mainly analytic. The task of philosophy with respect to religion is of a 'second-order' or 'meta', that is philosophy of religion is to religion as meta-ethics is to ethics or philosophy of science is to science. Philosophy of religion analyses the function and peculiarities of religious language as well as

tries to understand the logic and grammar of religious assertions and utterances. Do the religious utterances like 'God is loving' which have the form of factual assertions refer to a special kind of fact, different from the scientific fact or do they perform a different function altogether? There is a long shift of meaning from the secular use of the words like 'loving' and their theological usage. In this article, I have made an attempt to understand the religious assertions from a linguistic perspective.

2. Nature of Religious Assertions

There are a number of beliefs and assertions that form a necessary aspect of religion. Religious assertions refer to a reality external to and beyond the believer. The terms that are applied to God in religious discourse are being used in special ways, different from their use in the scientific or in the ordinary day-to-day contexts. Religious assertions could be characterised in various ways. I shall now deal with some of them.

2. 1. Assertions as Explanations

The most common view about religious assertions is that they are significant in so far as they fill the gaps left by science. It is felt that science cannot explain the whole structure of reality particularly when the supernatural intrudes into the natural world. Religious assertions help in explaining these intrusions which are unexplainable in science. Some feature of the supernatural world is used to account for the occurrences in the natural world. There are certain particular features of the natural world which call for a supernatural explanation. The miraculous order and beauty of the natural world is quoted as a reason for believing in a Creator, particularly on the grounds that it is

otherwise unexplainable.

This view is however criticized on two grounds. Firstly, there might be a natural explanation for the phenomena in the sense that our present scientific knowledge with some extension of it, in terms of knowing some more facts, would explain the phenomena without attributing it to any supernatural cause. Secondly, if God is made use of for giving explanations, then God is reduced to the level of a natural cause and becomes one cause amongst others.

2. 2. Assertions as Self-justified

Religious assertions are regarded as having some reference and relevance to external reality, but no evidence can be provided for them in the outside world. They are considered as self-justified, that is they are justified by their intrinsic merits. In the strict sense, nothing can be self-justifying, for to justify something means to give good reason for it in terms of something else. Religious assertions however are justified not by something else, nor by its effects or its accuracy, but the believer or hearer commits himself to it. When a symbol or set of symbols arouse our feelings or imagination there need not necessarily exist in reality something for which the symbol stands.

Religious assertions are in a class by themselves – they are not descriptive and hence need no justification. One can accept religion or reject it in its own terms. There is no way of justifying it by translating it into other terms. John Wilson comments, “believers come to believe or accept religious assertions... because of their form and content, and not because of their correlation with the outside

world”¹.

2. 3. Assertions as Derived from Authority

Many believers adhere to religious beliefs and assertions because they accept a certain authority which ultimately takes the form of a person – Christ, Buddha, Krishna, etc. – by reference to whom subordinate authorities like the Bible, the Gita are also accepted. A. MacIntyre writes “we justify a particular religious belief by showing its place in the total religious conception; we justify a religious belief as a whole by referring to authority. We accept authority because we discover some point in the world at which we worship, at which we accept the lordship of something not ourselves. We do not worship authority but we accept authority as defining the worshipful”². The religious authority is the ultimate criterion which gives the particular belief or assertion its logical location and status.

The critics however point out that there must be some evidence that the authority is trustworthy. We cannot accept religious assertions on our inner experiences or inner insight. If a religious personage is accepted as a authority for believing in religious assertions, then it is necessary that the personage is an expert in the field of religious knowledge and that the personage is not likely to be biased or prejudiced in any way. However, it is not possible to know that a religious authority is an expert in the field of religious knowledge unless we know that there is such a field whose pronouncements could be checked.

¹ J. Wilson, *Philosophy and Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 54.

² A. MacIntyre (and others), *Metaphysical Belief* (London: S. C. M. Press, 1957), p. 202.

It could also be possible that the religious assertions were made to fulfill certain selfish purposes. It may be perfectly reasonable to follow a religious personage but that does not mean that one could accept him as an authority on religious knowledge. Accepting religious assertions on the basis of authority is giving a psychological explanation and not a rational justification. Therefore, many a time the assertions in religion are dismissed as meaningless or nonsensical.

2. 4. Religious Assertions as Analogical Statements

Thomas Aquinas held that in the religious assertion 'God is good', the term 'good' is applied to the Creator and the created neither univocally nor equivocally but analogically. When the term 'good' is applied to a created being and to God, it is not being used univocally (that is, with exactly the same meaning), that is God is not good in the same sense in which human beings are good. Nor is the term 'good' used equivocally (that is, with completely different meanings). Human goodness and divine goodness are definitely related due to the fact that God has created mankind. Thus religious assertions are analogical.

Analogy could be 'downward' analogy or 'upward' analogy. Analogy downwards would be for example, man to a lower form of life. We speak of a dog as being faithful and we also describe man as faithful. We make use of the same word 'faithful' because there is some similarity between the faithfulness of the dog and of the human being. Therefore, the term is not used equivocally, that is with completely different meanings. However, the term is not used univocally. There is a great difference between the dog's faithfulness and that of a person. The person is superior to the other in terms of responsibility, self-

consciousness as well as in terms of moral purposes and ends. We are therefore, using the term analogically to indicate that at the level of the dog's consciousness there is a quality that corresponds to what at the human level we call faithfulness. In the case of analogy downwards, the true and normative faithfulness of man and the imperfect faithfulness of the dog are compared. In the case of analogy upwards, the situation is reversed. The goodness, love or wisdom of man which are thin shadows, are compared to the perfect qualities of God. Thus when we say that 'God is good' we are implying that there is a quality of the infinitely perfect Being which corresponds to what at the human level is called goodness.

The doctrine of analogy also comprises the aspects of attribution and proportionality. Speaking about the aspect of attribution, Y. Masih holds that "the analogy of attribution requires that one of the terms be 'prime analogate' of which the analogous property is predicted formally or intrinsically, while the other analogate receives it derivatively or secondarily by virtue of its relevant relation to the prime analogate"³. For example, 'faithfulness' is an attribute which man, the prime analogate possesses. But we also apply the term faithful to the dog. Thus the term 'faithful' is analogically attributed to the dog. The other aspect is that of proportionality. We say that 'dog is intelligent' and we say 'man is intelligent'. The term 'intelligent' is used in strict proportion to the essence of the dog and the man. The dog's intelligence is in proportion to his being and the man's intelligence is in proportion to his being.

³ Y. Masih, *The Nature of Religious Knowledge* (West Bengal, India: Centre of Advanced Study in Philosophy, 1971), p. 27.

There are some criticisms leveled against this doctrine of analogy. Firstly, the qualities of infinite love, goodness, etc., are applied to God who is the primary analogate and man's goodness or love are applied to him only derivatively. This would require that we have direct knowledge of the divine attributes. But this is not possible and even if one says it is possible to have direct or non-analogical cognition of divine attributes, then what is the necessity of an analogical predication? Secondly, God's goodness and wisdom are in proportion to his mode of existence and we can never know this proportion at all. Thus, divine goodness and wisdom remain unknown to us and hence cannot be proportionately applied to human beings.

Thirdly, the doctrine of analogy does not spell out the concrete character of God's perfections but only indicates the relation between the different meanings of a word when it is applied both to humanity and to God. John Hick however points out that “ analogy is not an instrument for exploring and mapping the infinite divine nature; it is an account of the way in which terms are used of the Deity whose existence is, at this point, being presupposed”⁴. Fourthly, normally in an analogy we consider objects or beings inferior to our own reality, like material objects or animals or level to our own reality, like fellow human beings. In the case of religious assertions, we apprehend and affirm realities superior to ourselves which are obscure and unclear.

2. 5. Religious Assertions as Faith Statements

⁴ John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India, 1987), p. 78.

We believe in religious statements as a matter of faith. Faith is a belief and the belief may not be rational. However, knowledge has rational justifications in its favour.' Hick maintains that we know God by faith. According to him "our knowledge of Him is ... like all our knowledge of environment, an apprehension reached by an act of interpretation; but it differs from the rest of our knowing in that in this case the interpretation is uniquely total in its scope"⁵. It is due to faith that we see all things in relation to the divine purpose or find God in all things and live consciously in his presence. The assertion like 'God exists' has to be viewed at a deeper level and from the 'inside' of the believer who formulates the notion of God. Hence only a believer can meaningfully use religious assertions. Religious language is therefore convictional and not the depersonalised factual language of science.

2. 6. Religious Assertions as Symbolic

Paul Tillich maintained that religious assertions or statements are symbolic in nature. Tillich distinguishes between a sign and a symbol. According to Paul Tillich both sign and symbol point to something beyond themselves. But a sign signifies that to which it points by arbitrary connection whereas unlike this purely external connection, a symbol participates in that to which it points. Paul Tillich further points out that symbols are not arbitrarily instituted like conventional signs, but "grow out of the individual or collective unconscious"⁶ A symbol

⁵ J. Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1957), p. 150.

⁶ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1957), p. 43.

thereby opens up the levels of reality which are otherwise closed to us. Religious faith which is concerned with the ultimate can only express itself in symbolic language. All the religious assertions about God, like God is eternally good, loving or perfect, are symbolic except for one statement namely, 'God is Being itself'.

Tillich is criticised on the ground that he does not explain or define the notion of 'participation'. A symbol according to him participates in the reality to which it points. If one considers the symbolic statement that 'God is good'; is the symbol in this case the proposition 'God is good' or the concept of 'goodness of God'? Does this symbol participate in Being itself in the same sense as that in which a flag participates in the power and dignity of a nation? Tillich does not analyse this aspect. The second criticism leveled against Tillich's theory is whether it is really possible to speak of a theological statement such as 'God is not dependent for its existence upon any external reality' to have arisen from the unconscious – individual or collective? Does this assertion not seem to be formulated by a philosophical theologian? Does this statement really open up levels of reality which are otherwise closed to us?

2. 7. Religious Assertions as Non-cognitive

A cognitive utterance or statement like 'It is raining' or 'Two plus two equals four' is either true or false. The other types of utterances for example, commands, interrogations, exclamations, etc., are those which are neither true nor false. They do not describe facts. Now the question arises as to whether the utterance 'God is loving' is cognitive or non-cognitive? As a matter of historical fact religious people have believed statements regarding God to be not only cognitive but also true. However, there

are a number of theories which consider religious assertions to be non-cognitive.

One of the theories about the religious assertions being non-cognitive is proposed by J. H. Randall. Randall holds that religion is a human activity which plays an important role in human culture. Religion works with symbols and myths and these symbols are both non representative and non-cognitive. Randall speaks of religious symbols as having a four-fold function.⁷ Firstly, they arouse emotions and stir people to actions. Secondly, they bind a community together through a common response to its symbols, thereby stimulating co-operative action. Thirdly, they communicate qualities which cannot be expressed literally. Fourthly, they evoke and clarify the human experience with the help of the Divine. Randall believes that God or Divine does not exist as a reality independent of the human mind. Therefore J. Hick writes “ God is fleeting ripple of imagination in a tiny corner of space-time”⁸. For Randall religion which is a human enterprise forms a sociable indispensable function. Religion enables the individual to achieve harmony internally and in relation to the environment.

The second theory that asserts the non-cognitive nature of religious language is offered by R. B. Braithwaite. For him, religious assertions serve an ethical function. Religious statements express and recommend a commitment to a certain way of life. Braithwaite however raises the question as to how two religions like Christianity and Hinduism which recommend essentially

⁷ Refer to J. H. Randall, *The Role of knowledge in Western Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).

⁸ J. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India, 1987), p. 85.

the same quality or way of life are different? There are differences in the rituals of the two religions, but the more significant difference is the set of stories, myths or parables that are associated with the two religions. Braithwaite holds that these stories need not be true or even believed to be true.

The relation between the religious stories and the religious way of life is psychological and causal. People find it more convincing and easier to follow a course of action which may be contrary to their natural inclinations if this policy or action is associated with certain stories. Therefore, R. B. Braithwaite maintains that “a religious assertion ... is the assertion of an intention to carry out a certain behaviour policy, subsumable under a sufficiently general principle to be a moral one, together with the implicit or explicit statement, but not the assertion, of certain stories”.⁹ God is a character in the stories. The Christian stories referred to by Braithwaite are of diverse kinds. They include straightforward historical statements of the life of Jesus, mythological expressions of belief in creation and belief in the existence of God. Of these only the first type constitute stories. Statements such as 'God loves mankind' do not fit into Braithwaite's definition of a story.

Braithwaite's theory can be criticised on the grounds that his stories focus on only a peripheral type of religious statements, and are not able to account for the more directly and distinctively religious statements that refer to God. Thus these important beliefs and assertions of

⁹ R. B. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's' View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Folcroft, Pa: Folcroft Library Editions, 1955), p. 32.

religion remain unanalysed in Braithwaite's discussion. Braithwaite has also not sufficiently explained the nature of a 'story'. He says a story could be a parable, a fairy-tale, a myth, a fable and so on. Are all these terms synonymous? The stories are dealt with superficially by Braithwaite.

2. 8. Religious Assertions as Language Games

Wittgenstein proposes a theory of meaning according to which the meaning of any utterance can be determined by the use or function or role it has within the context of a given 'language-game' and these language-games are themselves involved with what Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life'. M. J. Charlesworth is of the opinion that "there is ... no such thing as language *tout court* but rather particular 'language-games' and similarly there is no general criterion of the meaningfulness of language, but each language-game has its own criterion of meaningfulness proper to it which can only be discovered by looking at the 'form of life' in which it is involved"¹⁰.

Wittgenstein himself has said very little about religious locutions or utterances, however one could apply his theory to the latter. Thus one can say that there is a religious form of life and that it was only within the context of this distinctive form of life that the meaningfulness of religious assertions could be assessed. Thus Wittgenstein says "what has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – forms of life"¹¹. Any attempt which shows that religious utterances are meaningless

¹⁰ M.J. Charlesworth, *Philosophy of Religion: The Historic Approaches* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1972), p. 161.

¹¹ G. Pitcher, *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1964), p. 226.

because they fail to satisfy the criterion of meaning such as the verifiability principle or the falsifiability principle could then be dismissed. Wittgenstein holds that religious utterances involve a 'picture' or way of looking at the world and at life, thus influencing the way in which we live. Religious language is meaningful and intelligible within the religious language-game or within the activities, attitudes, procedures, beliefs or institutions that make up the religious form of life and the religious utterances function within this context. The difficulty that arises is how we characterise the religious form of life within which religious locutions or utterances have their meaning. There is no clear way of determining whether there is a genuine realm of religious discourse and an irreducibly distinctive religious form of life.

3. Religious Assertions and Verification

Having discussed the nature of religious assertions, the pertinent question is whether religious utterances or assertions are verifiable. According to logical positivists, a proposition has a factual or cognitive meaning if it is in principle verifiable or at least 'probabilifiable' by reference to experience. The concept of verification involves the removal of ignorance or uncertainty concerning the truth of the propositions.

The question that can be asked is whether the process of verification is logical only or is both logical and psychological. Is the statement that P is verified, a statement that a certain state of affairs exists, or is it a statement that someone is aware that this state of affairs exists (or has existed) and notes that its existence establishes the truth of P? The only sort of verification that one can speak of with regard to religious assertions is one

in which human beings participate. Therefore it would be better to treat verification as a logico-psychological concept rather than a purely logical concept. B. Mitchell is of the opinion that “ verification is ... primarily the name for an event which takes place in human consciousness”¹².

We could speak mainly of two classes of meaningful statements, namely, statements about particular matters of empirical facts and the logically necessary statements of logic and mathematics. Religious assertions and statements cannot fit into any of these classes. Does this imply that religious utterances are not verifiable? Do they have no meaning or are they nonsensical? The logical positivist holds that religious utterances are nonsensical or meaningless. Religious assertions are not verifiable in the sense of being publicly verifiable, namely, there being publicly agreed methods of verifying them. However this does not entail that religious assertions are unverifiable and hence not informative.

The religious assertions might be verifiable and informative within a limited group of people. There are some beliefs which are peculiar to certain groups and the same religious assertions may differ in meaning, verification and information from one group to another. The group members would share certain common experiences to which their assertions referred. However the non-believers or critics would not accept the assertions unless they are conclusively proved, however long a history the beliefs may have, and however respectable and high-minded the believers may be. Different religious groups have different terminologies which have more or

¹² B. Mitchell, *The Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 54.

less precise usages within the groups, but since there is no common testing system the usage is bound to seem vague to the non-believer. An assertion such as 'Christ answers prayers' seems impossible to verify unless one happens to be a member of a sect in which it has a precise meaning. Similarly, 'God' means different things to different religious groups, nevertheless, a basic and minimal criterion is adopted for its universal application. For R. M. Hare religious assertions cannot be classified as true or false. He suggested that religious assertions express a distinctive *blik*, a *blik* being an unverifiable interpretation of one's experience¹³.

4. Conclusion

Religion serves a purpose in human life. As far as religious assertions are concerned, one should concentrate more on the practical usefulness of these beliefs and utterances rather than questioning their truth and verifiability. Most religions postulate a reality which permits a belief in unseen and otherwise potentially unknowable aspects of life, including the hope of eternal life and after-life. Many people from many faiths contend that their faith in religious assertions brings them fulfillment, peace, joy apart from the worldly interests. Many religions also provide their adherents with spiritual and moral role models who they believe can bring highly positive influences to the believer as well as society in general.

¹³ Cf. A. Flew in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: S. C. M. Press Ltd., 1955) The New Essays discussion by Flew, Hare, Mitchell and Crombie is reprinted in J. Hick ed. *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J. : Prentice Hall Inc., 1970).

Religious utterances are meaningful in so far as they make a difference to the way a person acts and feels, that is, to his behaviour. Religious assertions in religious language have a *sui generis* function of their own, just as scientific knowledge has its own distinctive function and moral language has its own function. G. E. Hughes claims that religious language comprising of religious assertions and beliefs “is a long-established *fait-accomplis* and something which does a job which ... no other segment of language can do”¹⁴. Religious assertions may not be true or false from a scientific or empirical point of view, but for the believer they are not only meaningful and useful, but also true. For those with faith in the religious assertions, no proof is required, but for those without faith no proof is possible.

¹⁴ G. E. Hughes, “Critical Notice ‘Religious Belief’” by C. B. Martin, *Australian Journal of Philosophy*, XL, 1962, p. 215.