ON THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Emmanuel Kant, in his work on The Critique of Pure Reason, introduced a new direction into classical philosophy of religion. He tried to show that traditional metaphysics, which his predecessors had relied on to guard their natural theology was untenable. In the twentieth century, it gave birth to the development of Logical Positivism associated with the philosophers belonging to the Vienna Circle of the 1920s and 1930s. These philosophers raised fundamental questions about the status of metaphysics and theology. Since they were short of the scientific method, they do not qualify as genuine knowledge. They argued that the function of philosophy is basically analytical: the analysis and clarification of language. They thus raised questions about God, the soul with regard to their unverifiability in language etc. If God is without body or parts, the veracity of the idea of God as having hands, legs, fingers, face etc. as given in the Christian scripture, is questionable. In this paper, the researcher is concerned with studying the perspectives of philosophers through various stages of the history of philosophy on the issue of religious language.

Key Words: Problem, Religious, Language, God.

Introduction

The expression of who God is in human language has recently constituted a problem in philosophy of religion. When the scripture

speaks of God as being 'clothed in light', does it mean that God wears cloth? When it speaks of the 'finger of God', does it mean that God has fingers? When it speaks of 'the hand of God', does it mean that God has hands? When it says that God 'walked into the garden', does it mean that God has legs to walk? The scripture captures the image of God in anthropomorphic terms. Do these images capture who God really is? Mary of Agreda, in her mystical experience of God tried to express God in human language but failed to capture the immensity of his essence. She wrote,

> He is beautiful without blemish, great without quantity, good without need of qualification, eternal without the duration of time, strong without any weakness, living without any touch of decay, true without deceit, present in all places, filling without occupying them, existing without occupying space. There is no contradiction in His kindness, or defect in His wisdom. In his wisdom, He is inscrutable, in His decrees he is terrible, in His judgments just, in his thoughts most hidden, in his words most true, in his works holy, in His riches affluent. To Him no space is too wide, nor narrowness causes restraint, his will does not vary, the sorrowful does not cause Him pains. The past has not passed of this, nor does future happen in regard to him. Oh eternal immensity, what illimitable expansion have I seen in thee? What vastness do I see in thy infinite being? Vision does not terminate, nor ever exhaust itself in thy abyss of being. This is the unchangeable Essence, the Being above all other being, the most perfect sanctity, the most constant Truth; this is the infinite, the length, the breath, the height, the depth, glory and it cause, rest without fatigue, goodness immeasurable. (pp. 27-28).

According to St Augustine, the quest to know the nature of God is tantamount to attempting to pour a river into a hole. This is because in essence, God is vaster than the human mind can contain or comprehend.

St Faustina had said about the Divine, "Who God is in His Essence, no one will fathom, neither the minds of angles nor of man" (p. 52).

Emmanuel Kant, in his work on *The Critique of Pure Reason*, introduced a new direction into classical philosophy of religion. He tried to show that traditional metaphysics, which his predecessors had relied on to guard their natural theology was untenable. In the contention of Charlesworth (2006), his rejection of metaphysics and of any philosophy of religion based on metaphysics had an enormous influence on modern thought. In the twentieth century, it gave birth to the development of Logical Positivism associated with the philosophers belonging to the Vienna Circle of the 1920s and 1930s. These philosophers raised fundamental questions about the status of metaphysics and theology. Since they were short of the scientific method, they do not qualify as genuine knowledge. They argued that the function of philosophy is basically analytical: the analysis and clarification of language. They thus raised questions about God, the soul with regard to their unverifiability in language etc. If God is without body or parts, the veracity of the idea of God as having hands, legs, fingers, face etc., is questionable. In this paper, the researcher is concerned with studying the perspectives of philosophers through various stages of the history of philosophy on the issue of religious language.

The way of Analogy

The way of analogy was proposed by John Scotus of Eriugenna, built upon by Pseudo-Dionysius and further developed by Thomas Aquinas.

Through the way of analogy, they argue that we come to know God by predicating of Him the positive attributes of creatures in an analogues way. Attributes common to creatures like, justice, love, wisdom, powerful etc., are also predicated to God, however, analogically and not univocally. This is because since God is the First Cause of all things, it is supposed that He must possess in an eminent degree those perfections found in creatures, this is because God's goodness and attributes are proportionate to His being as those of his creatures are proportionate to their being (Wallace, 2005). In this case, He is not simply just, He is justice itself, life itself, love itself, wisdom itself etc. For instance, when we say that 'God is loves and just', we do not use these words in the same way as when we say that 'Okoro is just and loving'. If it is used in the same sense, then it would imply that the concepts are applied univocally; but it is said to be analogically, it means that God does not *love* or is not *just* in the same sense as human beings. However, this is not to say that these concepts are predicated to God equivocally, that is, different from the way it is applied to humans. God's love has similarity with the love of human beings, but again it is different. As such, when religious languages like *God sees* or *God stands* or *God is walking* or *God is laughing* is used in describing what God has done, it predicated to Him in a different way but similar to that of human beings. This, according to Aquinas, is based on the similarities and difference between God and man. Here another question arises; If God cannot be known, how then do we know that he has similarities with human beings? Aquinas (cited by Omoregbe, 1993) points to the scriptures where God

created human beings in his own image and likeness. This position is difficult for those who are not Christians to accept.

Language as the Structure of Reality

Ludwig Johann Wittgenstein was one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. He studied philosophy at Cambridge University and later spent most of his life as a professor in the same university. According to Omoregbe (2003), he became famous as a result of two of his works: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations*. In his *Tractatus,* he argues that the structure of language is conditioned by the structure of reality, for language makes us see reality in a structure corresponding to the structure of language. Wittgenstein (1961) writes, "What every picture of whatever form must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it at all… is the logical form, that is, the form of reality" (p. 18). Thus, he is saying that the structure of the world is pictured by language, which can now be considered a model of reality. Wittgenstein (1974) further writes, "These facts (of which the world is made of) are pictured by language so that by means of language we make to ourselves pictures of facts" (p. 1). In this picture and the pictured, there must be something identical in order that one can be a picture of the other at all. Language is like a mirror of facts, and if it does not correspond to it, it is false. From the foregoing, what makes propositions true or false are facts. Language cannot therefore be used to speak about realities outside the world; and whatever language speaks of that lies outside the world is nonsense. The aim of philosophy he says is to resolve the problem

arising from the misuse of language, which he puts as "To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" (1974, p. 30), and the true philosopher is the one who is able to detect and solve these problems, thereby showing the fly the way out of the fly-bottle. From the foregoing, religious and metaphysical languages are nonsense and meaningless, because what they assert cannot be said to be true or false. If Wittgenstein argues that the structure of language is conditioned by the structure of reality, it then means that if God is a reality, religious language is structured according to the structure and reality of God, and if he argues that reality is limited to this world, then he has arrogated to himself more than he can know. T limit knowledge to only what the sense can offer, is an extreme that limits knowledge.

Theological and Metaphysical Propositions as Meaningless and Nonsensical

Alfred Ayer was the person who introduced the doctrine of Logical Positivism into the English world. In his work *Language, Truth and Logic,* he divides meaningful propositions into two: those of matters of fact and those of mathematics and logic. He argued that any proposition that does not fall into these two types of propositions is meaningless and nonsensical. Propositions of metaphysics and theology are not verifiable and thus are meaningless and nonsensical (Omoregbe, 2003). Thus propositions about God are meaningless. Ayer (1946) writes,

> The mention of God brings us to the question of the possibility of religious knowledge. We shall see that this possibility has already been ruled out by our treatment of metaphysics …. For 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 the transcendent God can possess any literal significance … All utterances about the nature of God are nonsensical. (pp. 114-120).

Thus to talk about God is to make meaningless sounds. In this case, both the theists and atheists are making meaningless statements, for he writes: "If the assertion that there is no God is nonsensical, then the assertion that there is no god is equally nonsensical" (p. 120). From his theory of verification, which are of two types: practical verification and verification in principle, ideas about the soul and mystical experiences are also false. Going by the verification in principle, which speaks of propositions that are verifiable, but not in the present due to some circumstances in the present state of science, it means that issues regarding the eschaton, God etc., are verifiable in principle since they will be verifiable in the afterlife. These will be verified in a matter of time. This counts against Ayer.

Theological Propositions as Pseudo Propositions

Anthony Flew argued that theological propositions are pseudo propositions and make no meaning at all, and in the final analysis say nothing. Flew (1955) elaborated the emptiness of religious language with a parable of two explorers who came upon a clearing in the jungle, where there were flowers and weeds. One of the two explorers insisted that there is a gardener. They then pitched their tents, watching to see the gardener. They set up a bard wired fence and electrified it, and yet no movement is heard, however, the one who said that there is gardener continues to insist that there is a gardener who is invisible, intangible and insensible to electric shock, "a gardener who has no scent and makes no

sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves" (pp. 13-15). For Flew, this position that speaks of an invisible, intangible and eternally elusive gardener is not different from the position that denies his presence or that proposes an imaginary gardener. Taking up the problem of evil to substantiate his parable, he pointed to the conditions of suffering innocent children, whom we are taught are loved by God, as in the cases of throat cancer, earthquakes, fire accidents, flood disaster, and then God shows no sign of intervening, as an earthly father would have been seen running around to help the son he loves; with this scenario, how do we say that God loves them? Of what use is God's love if it does not guarantee their safety? Many Christian philosophers have responded to this by arguing that God allows evil because he, at the end can turn evil to good.

Religious Language as a Declaration to Act in a Particular Way

Braithwaite (cited in Charlesworth, 2006), gave a reductionist account of religious language in his essays *An Empircist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief.* He argues that religious propositions only make declarations to act in a certain way. They are declarations of adherence to a particular way of life or policy of actions, which he calls 'the life of selfless love'. He sees the doctrines of Christianity as stories which should not be taken literally. They are there to help the Christian live a life of love. Thus when the Christian recites the creed, he is only encouraging himself to live the life of love and when he says that God is love, he is only saying that he can also live the life of love. Thus, he argues that to speak of religious language, like God is love or exists is

meaningless and false. Contrary to the Christian, an atheist is the person who has refused to tell himself the Christian stories and to live *agapeistically*. Braithwaite has beautifully captured the Christian life as the life of Love, flowing from the love of God himself. But if he turns back to speak of the idea of God's love as meaningless, and yet it is one that has changed the lives of many and continues to, a life that perpetually calls for peace in the world of strife, then his idea of meaninglessness needs to be readdressed. For what then shall be considered meaningful?

Religious Language as a non-Factual Assertion

R. M. Hare maintained a reductionist perspective of religious language. He first asserts that religious language is not a factual assertion, for if they were, there would be the possibility of evidence counting against their truths. Rather than function as factual statements, they function meaningfully as what he categorized as *Blik* (which speaks of metaphysical attitudes towards the world and pour knowledge of it). This is quite different from facts. From the foregoing, since religious language are bliks, it then means that they say nothing about facts and as such are neither verifiable or falsifiable. Since they are bliks, those who tend to follow them also tend to behave in a certain way. They are also justifiable since it is possible to choose which is right or more appropriate blik to follow.

Religious Language as having its Own Meaning

Norman Malcolm, in his work, *Is it a Religious Belief that 'God Exists?'* criticizes the idea that we must first belief that God exist before we can take up an attitude of belief to him. He questions if there is any demarcation between the two. He argues that if one beliefs in God as almighty and the creator of the universe, one cannot but be touched by dismay and fear of the power of God. The belief in God is one that is effective in the life of the believer. What is believed here cannot be verified or falsified, yet they have meaning in so far as they make a difference to the way a person acts or feels, that is, his behaviour. Thus religious language has its own meaning.

Religious Language as a derivative of the Spiritual Dimension of Man

M. I. Crombie, maintains that the idea of God expressed in religious language is derived from the spiritual dimension of man. Man is not just an embodiment of material object. Crombie (1958) writes, "It remains true that you cannot adequately describe a human person with the range of concepts which is adequate for the description of a chair, a cabbage or even an electronic circulating machine" (p. 44). Our spiritual dimension leads us to think of a spiritual being (God) who is perfectly what we are imperfectly, and the source of our imperfect spirituality; and this is expressed in a religious language.

Religious Language as Symbolic

Paul Tillich avers that all religious statements are symbolic except the statement that God is being itself. Outside this, all other religious propositions like God is good, kind, loving, all-powerful, all-knowing etc., are symbolic language. This is the only statement that can and should be understood literally about God. He says that religious faith can only express itself in symbols. Tillich (1951) describes symbolic expressions thus,

> A symbolic expression is one whose proper meaning is negated by that to which it points. And yet it also is affirmed by it, and this affirmation gives the symbolic expression an adequate basis for pointing beyond itself (p. 139).

In this symbolic expression, a segment of the finite experience is employed in order to say something about the infinite which transcends the content of the finite. From the foregoing, he is arguing that the problem of religious language springs from the attempt to understand them literally rather than symbolically.

Conclusion

This paper has studied the problem of language by going through the history of thinkers and discussing their relevant views on this issue. A cursory glance at the perspectives of various thinkers also reveals that positions taken by different philosophers have been determined by their school of thought; while the thorough going empiricists see religious language as nonsensical, the rationalists do see them as meaningful. While atheists have no place for religious language, theists see religious language as significant. Be that as it may, the researcher strongly agrees

with Crombie that the idea of God and other spiritual entities expressed in religious language is derived from the spiritual dimension of man. Our spiritual dimension leads us to think of a spiritual being (God) who is perfectly what we are imperfectly, which is expressed in a religious language.

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