



UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE



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ABSTRACT

'Religion is like opium'- Karl Marx. As consumption of opium makes one intoxicated, similarly blind adherence to religion expresses itself in the form of fanaticism, fundamentalism, dogmatism etc. In the name of religion, there is animosity, violence, bloodsheds, communal riots and so on. Does any religion preach all these things? The story not only ends here. It will go on adding more feathers to its cap – the differences between theists and atheists, the conflict between medieval and post-medieval thinkers and the challenges between religious thinkers and positivist thinkers. However, religion is different from philosophy of religion.

KEYWORDS: Religion, opium, Philosophy, communicating systems, post-medieval thinkers

INTRODUCTION

'Religion is like opium'- Karl Marx. As consumption of opium makes one intoxicated, similarly blind adherence to religion expresses itself in the form of fanaticism, fundamentalism, dogmatism etc. In the name of religion, there is animosity, violence, bloodsheds, communal riots and so on. Does any religion preach all these things? The story not only ends here. It will go on adding more feathers to its cap – the differences between theists and atheists, the conflict between medieval and post-medieval thinkers and the challenges between religious thinkers and positivist thinkers. However, religion is different from philosophy of religion. Religion signifies a body of beliefs, set of rites and rituals, mode of prayer, set of prescriptions and prohibitions and a world view. On the other hand, philosophy of religion takes into account the analysis of the religious concepts like faith, belief, prayer, worship etc., premises and arguments used in religious language. Though philosophers avoid not to be trapped in the net called 'religion' but they do not shy away to discuss topics related to philosophy of religion. A cursory look into the whole issue will bring into focus the following important points:

- * Nature of religious language
- * Religious discourse
- * Faith versus Reason

In this paper more emphasis is given to understand the nature of religious language.

DISCUSSION

Philosophy and language are inexorably related to human life. Language is the most elementary instrument that human beings use continuously and constantly to express their own minds and to know other minds. It is the distinctive feature of humans where as non-humans are bereft of it. Thought is nothing but thinking through language. Thoughtless language is an impossibility. Non-humans, particularly animals are incapable of thinking ability; therefore, they have no language. They have actions (though instinct guided), reactions and communicating systems. They have a high networking and communicating system which is by and large conditioned by instincts. For example, a good number of crows get themselves gathered by the typical way of cawing which makes them aware that one of their species is in danger. This clearly shows that animals do have communication but they have no



language. Therefore, language is a 'thief' imperceptibly came into the house of only humans. But the fact remains that the language that obtains in human world changes, grows and develops. It shows that language is not created but evolved.

Language is a verbal symbol having a form and content. Meaning is the nucleus of every form of language. Any symbol may have one meaning or plethora of meaning. Meanings are non-material but they make a difference to the material world. The limit of the language is the limit of the world is the view of Wittgenstein. Ordinarily, we try to understand the meaning of number of objects and statements by scientific and empirical manner. But when we try to understand the meaning of "meaning", it becomes philosophical.

The traditional theories of meaning, i.e.1) referential 2) ideational and 3) stimulus-response or causal theory of meaning have essentialist approaches to the nature of meaning. Meaning, as a general concept, designates a unique essence which is possessed by all meaningful expressions. The search for this unique essence as a general criterion is a futile enterprise. There is a kind of family resemblance rather than some identical features which is truer of the concept of the meaning.

The modern analysts of meaning developed a non-essentialist attitude to the concept essence but a criterion for applicability. The non-essentialists maintained that the meaning of different statements can be examined from the level of their actual working conditions. The focus of attention must be shifted from the abstract to the concrete, from the structuralism to functionalism. James in his analysis of meaning covers varieties of linguistic uses under the name practical consequence. His pragmatic analysis of meaning exposed the fact that language is a living, practical and social affair which can be used for various purposes. He holds that the statements of religion can have tremendous practical cash-value in the stream of life but not in the same sense as factual statements have.

The logical positivists, on the other hand, formulate another criterion of meaning to mark a clear line of distinction between meaningful and meaningless statements. They cast aside the metaphysical and religious statements as meaningless and useless. Even the criterion of falsifiability of Karl Popper does not show the truth or falsity of the religious propositions rather it exposes their meaninglessness.

The hidden dimensions of language are brought into focus by Wittgenstein in the form of 'Use view of meaning'. In Philosophical Investigation (PI), Wittgenstein

deliberates the manifold functions of language. Words are used to do different linguistic jobs. Words are used to state facts, to tell stories, to cut jokes, to ask questions, to report something, to express emotions etc. Wittgenstein states that in order to determine the meaning of a word, we have to look into how it is used in a particular context. The context will determine the meaning of the word. "Don't think, but look" is the maxim. Using language is just like playing a game. As each game has its own rules and regulations, similarly each use of language has its own significance in its own discourse. One language can not be understood by the logic of another as one game cannot be played by the rules of another. An expression as such has no meaning. It acquires meaning only when it is used in a particular context, in the stream of life. Therefore, every statement is meaningful in its respective logic. It has its distinctive logic. To assess the meaning of a statement of one discourse with the help of the logic of another is certainly to embrace philosophical problems. The same logic makes religious statements significant, meaningful and fruitful in the stream of human lives.

Religious discourse is certainly different from other discourses. A discourse is nothing other than a particular world view. There are as many discourses as there are world views. The languages used by the people for their religious discourse is called religious language. Theologians and philosophers of religion use religious language to communicate about reality or God or Transcendental. Religious language is different from ordinary language/ descriptive language having only non-cognitive meaning. Ordinary language communicates about the empirical where as religious language communicates about the a-empirical. Both of them make truth-claims. But the modes through which they made it are different. The religious thinkers do not have a distinctive language of their own. They make use of ordinary language but with a difference or with different connotation. The language used in religious discourse should not be interpreted in its literal sense rather they are used in metaphorical sense. From time to time the logicians and philosophers of religion have been making significant attempts to establish the truth and profundity of religious statements on the one hand and the critics on the other hand have questioned and challenged the meaningfulness and genuineness of the sanity of such (religious) statements.

The cognitivists maintain that religious statements are cognitively meaningful or significant. No doubt, every religious claim is a truth-claim. The religious statements are not only express truths but universal

truths. To this notion of cognitivism, there is a sharp reaction from the quarters of empiricism. Empiricism of different forms construes sense experience as the core of all forms of understanding. Even in Indian context down from radical empiricists like Carvaka to Mimasakas; perception constitutes the basis of every form of knowledge. From empiricists to Wittgenstein to Russell to Hempel; everyone advocates that any propositions in order to be meaningful must confirm to some form of sense experience or the other. 'Language is the picture of reality' is the view of Wittgenstein. It is the mirror which reflects reality as it is. Since religious statements are not translatable either immediately or remotely to any actual or possible sense experience or perception or reflection, they are said to be devoid of any sense.

The crux of the issue is that whether the truth-claims made in religious discourses are translatable in terms of I-It encounter. In the I-It encounter the 'I' is the subject and 'It' is the object. There is always a sense of duality between the subject who perceived and the object of perception. Again, they are objective in the sense that they are subject to inter-subjectivity verification. The theologians and philosophers of religion state that religious statements are not of the nature of I-It encounter rather they are of the nature of I-Thou encounter. There is no sense of dichotomy between the knower and the known. The 'I' is merged with the 'Thou' and becomes one unitary experience. Here the question is: Is I-Thou encounter as objective as the I-It encounter? Obviously the answer is in affirmative. It is equally objectively verifiable and demonstrable like the I-It experience. The only difference between them consists in the nature of experience. It is only those privileged who have competency and proper mindset, i.e. faith can undergo such experience.

The language of religion is nothing other than the language of faith. Faith is a-rational. Faith does not oppose reason but supplements it. In other words, where reason fails; faith succeeds. Reason is found to be handicapped when it tries to know the trans-empirical or the absolute. Therefore, faith is the only objective mode of knowing the a-empirical or the transcendental.

viçvāse milai hari tarke bahudūra

It is only through faith that the ultimate reality can be apprehended in its nature. The logic of the religious language and its truth claims has to be understood in the context of faith leading to I-Thou encounter. The cognitivists therefore claim that religious statements are uniquely cognitive because there is a unique blending of cognition, conation and affection which constitutes the totality of religious experience.

Non-cognitivism, on the other hand, maintains that the statements of religion lack cognitive significance. They cannot be said to be either true or false but out and out meaningless. Here, the question of truth and falsity remains a pre-closed issue because meaningfulness is logically prior to the truth-value of a proposition. Non-cognitivism in its radical form is advocated by the logical positivists. Logical positivists maintain that religious statements are not only meaningless but also sheer nonsensical. The verifiability criterion of meaning of positivists states that the meaning of a statement depends on the method of its verification. The whole discourse of meaningful propositions will be classified into either analytic i.e. about relationship among concepts or synthetic i.e. about matters of fact. But the religious propositions are neither analytic nor synthetic. The theologians would not acknowledge the propositions to be analytic because of their empirical unformativeness or emptiness even they cannot be synthetic either as they are not verifiable in fact or in principle. They are neither analytic nor synthetic.

The theologians would claim that theological propositions have profound meaning about the ultimate reality. These propositions are necessarily true propositions. To negate them is to embrace self-contradiction. They are the most basic truths which do not affect by the contingencies of time and clime. To this, the positivists have sharp reactions. They held that propositions can be either informative there by synthetic but not both. Thus verifiability theory of meaning rendered religious statements as meaningless because of the paucity of an actual or possible circumstance where a religious statement can be verified as probably true or false. Even Karl Poppers falsifiability criterion of meaning polemicized religious statements to be meaningless According to this criterion, a proposition in order to be meaningful must be falsifiable in principle. At least there must be a single circumstance where it can be rendered as conclusively false. But religious truths are too sacrosanct to be false. Wisdom's grand design goes to show how a religious statement cannot in principle be falsified by thousands contradictory evidence.

The diehard non-cognitivist thinkers discarded the religious propositions as mere nonsensical as they are not amenable to any form of verification. The liberal form of non-cognitive thinkers like Braithwaite and Randall maintain that religious statements, though not cognitively significant, continue to be significant in other uses. Religious statements do not cease to be significant simply because they do not function in the same way as descriptive

statements function. Religious statements are not cognitive but convictive and evocative. They guide us to live a life full of principles and to embrace a value-centric life.

Though no two religions are found to be identical, the religious pursuit is one. Rites and rituals do and don'ts differ from one religion to another yet the core features i.e. love, sacrifice, service, truth, peace etc. unanimously accepted in all religions. The distinctive functions of religious statements are highlighted by religious thinkers either of the nature of beliefs or convictional or of the nature of symbols. They are neither descriptive nor prescriptive nor emotive.

CONCLUSION

To conclude it can be said that religious statements cannot be simply ruled out as meaningless. It has significance and import on the human lives. It creates hope in the hopeless and acts as a solace at the time of sufferings. The understanding of religious language is to be found in religious mode of living. Through religious dialogues and deliberations; the darker chambers of the human minds are getting illuminated. It empowers the humans with strong positivism and drives the individuals

with deep rooted values. It helps the individuals to respond to the newer challenges of life. It makes life more meaningful and gives a direction to move on for nobler and harmonious life in the society.

Therefore, religious statements have to be understood only in the religious mode of life. Words of ordinary language when employed in religious discourse do not retain their original meaning nor are they used in altogether different sense. They have their logic and their semantic rules which make them meaningful in their respective discourses. Religious discourses describe things of non spatio-temporal. Definitely to understand every discourse through space-time framework (descriptive mode) is to commit category mistake.

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