
UNIT 2 RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE-II

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

Objective of this unit is to understand the various approaches to religious languages. We will deal with:

- the traditional understanding
- the meaning of Theological predicates
- non assertive interpretations

2.1 INTRODUCTION

It is obvious that many of the terms that are applied in religious discourse to God are being used in special ways. They all differ from their use in ordinary contexts. For example, when it is said that ‘great is the Lord’ it is not meant that God occupies a large volume of space; when it said that ‘The lord spoke to Joshua’ it is not meant that God has a physical body with speech organs. There is a long shift of meaning between the familiar use of these words and their theological employment. In all these cases in which a word occurs both in secular and in theological contexts, its secular meaning is primary in the sense that it developed first and has accordingly determined the definition of the word. When we use these terms in religious sense they all possess a peculiar meaning and outlook. So various attempts have been made to understand the relation between the religious and secular languages.

2.2 THREE TRADITIONAL WAYS

In the medieval period we see these clearest expressions. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas (1224-74) argued that religious language is analogical, that is, it conveys truth but not literal truth. In the same century, John Duns Scotus (1264-1308) contended that Thomas’s view was incoherent. Duns Scotus emphasized that only two options are possible, univocal and equivocal language. For example, the word ‘bat’ can mean two different things, a baseball bat or a flying mammal. If we do not know to which it refers, the use is equivocal. If we do know to which it refers, it is literally, or univocally, one or the other. No other

option exists. Nobody thought seriously the alternative of equivocal language. They assumed that since religious language, particularly Scripture, is in fact meaningful, it must be either univocal or analogical. They forgot the fact that religious language is noncognitive. This view is held by the majority in the eastern thought. More specifically, all words must be denied or negated in order to understand Ultimate Reality truly, hence this option is often designed as 'negative way' (via negativa). This view was held by German mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) and by the great Jewish Philosopher, Moses Maimonides (1135-1204). This tradition sees language as valuable only in the sense of being evocative of an experience of the divine or the ultimate.

The Negative Way

The assertion that all religious language is equivocal, and must be negated, may strike us as being skeptical and belonging rather to unbelief than to belief. But this is the view of those who had the emphatic vision about the reality and vividness of an experience of God. This is the view of the mystical traditions of all religions. In the West, this idea is rooted in Platonic thought which was influenced by Eastern ideas mediated by the Pythagorean School. Neo-Platonism emphasized that aspect of Plato's thought that stressed the transcendence of the One or Good and the way the One is beyond all categorical language or thought. Plotinus (204-70) in the third century portrayed a mystical view of God. The One is beyond all knowing and saying. The One emanates into intellect and from intellect emanates soul and from soul emanates matter. The ascent to the One happens through a purification from matter to soul and soul to intellect and from intellect to One. It is an imageless or apophatic type of meditation. One quits oneself, getting rid of the 'lowest' and moving to the 'higher' that is, one quits the body, then the images of the mind, then the words and thoughts of the mind, opening up the possibility of the unmediated encounter with the One, "flight from the alone to the alone", as Plotinus called it. What is usually emphasized is that this experience is ineffable yet intensely real, the most real experience one can have. This influenced the medieval spiritual tradition in Meister Eckhart and the anonymous author of the "Cloud of Unknowing".

Neo-Platonism influenced Augustine, who in turn was the key intellectual figure in the Western Church till Thomas Aquinas.

Pseudo-Dionysius or Dennis the Areopagite suggested that there are different approaches to God. In "The Divine Names" he shows how the names of God do not literally describe God but point to God as the cause of all things. On the other hand he appears to subordinate this affirmative way to the negative way. He argues that "the higher we ascend the more our language becomes restricted" until finally we arrive at a "complete absence of discourse and intelligibility". The way we must follow to this highest point is the 'via negativa' which means that all terms must be denied of God.

A striking example can be seen in 'Mystical Theology' of Pseudo-Dionysius

"Once more, ascending yet higher we maintain that It is not soul, or mind, or endowed with the faculty of imagination, conjecture, reason, or understanding; nor is It any act of reason or understanding; nor can It be described by reason or perceived by the understanding, since It is not number, or order, or greatness, or littleness, or equality or inequality, and since It is not immovable nor in motion,

or at rest, and has power, and is not power or light, and does not live and is not life; nor It is personal essence, nor eternity, or time; nor It be grasped by the understanding, since It is not knowledge or truth;...nor It is Spirit, as we understand the term, since It is not son -ship or Fatherhood;...It transcends all affirmation by being the perfect and unique Cause of all things, and transcends all negation by the pre-eminence of Its simple and absolute nature – free from every limitation and beyond them all”

Several observations can be made on this passage. First it relies on the common method of the negative way.. One moves beyond words and concepts by denying them, which is to lead, not to skepticism or unbelief, but precisely to the truth, to the insight and actual experience that God is beyond all such words. This represents a reliance on language, but it is reliance on a functional or evocative sense only. No cognitive or descriptive content is allowed. Second, we must note the remarkable thoroughness with which he carries through the method. Not only the negative terms are denied – evil, falsehood, unreality – but the positive terms – goodness, truth, reality – also are negated, even to the point of denying fatherhood and son-ship to God- an astounding step for a Christian theologian. Third, we should note that the rigor of this passage undercuts any approach involving cognitive meaning. Fourth, despite the thoroughness, at the end the author lapses into unusually strait forward assertion. When he deals with the question of why we should approach God in this way, he alludes to common rational explanations of God’s relation to the world.

What happens to Dionysius here points to a perplexing inconsistency on the part of most proponents of the equivocal way. It is very difficult to speak and write about what one has experienced, in short, to communicate about it, which is what they want to deny. In fact, mystical writings are very extensive and often very illuminating. Perhaps the only consistent response would simply be silent and not say or write anything.

A similar approach in the Western tradition was the twelfth century work of the Jewish Philosopher Moses Maimonides, who wrote in the “The Guide for the Perplexed”:

There is a great danger in applying positive attributes to God. For it has been shown that every perfection we could imagine, even if existing in God..would in reality not be of the same kind as that imagined by us, but would only be called by the same name, according to our explanation; it would in fact amount to a negation”

He contends that the best that can be done is simply to deny any attribute applied; the result will be that “you have undoubtedly come one step nearer to the knowledge of God”. Some would argue that such a purely negative approach simply fails; it never says enough to make a difference. And even if it did, Maimonides inconsistently like Dionysius, calls upon affirmations of God at other points in his thought such as God’s simplicity and God’s understanding.

In Indian Philosophy, the concept of ‘neti neti’ (not this not that) reveals the indescribability of Brahman by any attributes or language. The Nirguna Brahman in Sankara’s Philosophy clearly tells us that we cannot describe Brahman either positively or negatively. Brahman is beyond all positive and negative qualities and attributes. Whatever we say about God we can say that He is not that.

Another example from the Eastern mystical tradition that especially underscores the ‘instrumental’ use of religious language is Zen Buddhist ‘koan’ , a seemingly nonsensical riddle that is to be the means to ‘satori’ or Enlightenment. A well – known ‘koan’ is “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” A disciple may puzzle over such a riddle for months or even years, and when the disciple come to the end of all rational approaches, precipitated perhaps by a slap or blow by the Master at the opportune time, ‘satori’ occurs. The nonsense is the point. This usage exemplifies very well how language can be valuable in the negative way, but as a means, not as a description. Nevertheless, even Zen Buddhists speak of what is supposedly unspeakable, if only to distinguish their vision of ultimate reality from a more typically Western one.

This contradiction or difficult challenge that lies at the heart of the negative way appears almost insuperable, especially if it arises in the context of a Western religion centered on a written revelation from God. Thus Aquinas and Scotus assumed that the equivocal option is ruled out because God has indeed communicated to us about the divine nature. On the other hand, this approach is a reminder, especially to the univocal way, that language is notoriously unstable when applied to God. We are stretching it to its breaking point – and perhaps beyond . It is a warning against the idolatry of language. Even religions centered on writing and speaking can see how language functions to protect the transcendence of God. An obvious example in the Jewish tradition was the earlier refusal to speak or write the name of God, with result that today we still are not sure of what that name was.

The Univocal Way

John Duns Scotus defines univocal language as follows: “I call that a univocal concept whose unity suffices for contradiction when it is affirmed and denied of the same things. It also suffices as a syllogistic middle term”. For example, in the syllogism - All humans are mortal; Socrates is human; therefore, Socrates is mortal – ‘human’ is used univocally as the middle term. Scotus recognized that there is much figurative language in Scripture, but the implication is that we would not know what such language meant apart from being able to translate it into literal language.

Scotus has been followed by modern theologians like Carl Henry. He argues against the third way of analogy: “The logical difficulty with the theory of analogical predication lies in its futile attempt to explore a middle road between univocity and equivocacy. Only univocal assertions protect us from equivocacy; only univocal knowledge is, therefore, genuine and authentic knowledge.” Further he writes, “Unless we have some literal truth about God, no similarity between man and God can in fact be predicated...The alternative to univocal knowledge of God is equivocation and skepticism”. What is curious is that within a short space Henry goes on to write, “Of course God is epistemologically transcendent; of course human beings do not have exhaustive knowledge of him” This concession appears to take back with one hand what he gave with the other. One can see in this tension Henry’s awareness of doing justice to the transcendence of God, yet at the risk of self –contradiction, which was one of the dangers of the equivocal way.

Paul Tillich also makes the same point. He is usually recognized for opening up the significance of symbolic language in expressing what cannot be expressed in

any other way. It is quite clear in Tillich's systematic theology that he expresses the classic univocal way. In the first volume of Tillich's systematic theology, he maintains that there is only one literal statement in theology. He says "Theologians must make explicit what is implicit in religious thought and expression; and, in order to do this, they must begin with the most abstract and completely unsymbolic statement which is possible, namely, that God is being-itself or the absolute".

Schubert Ogden is another theologian who in his later writings firmly believes in the univocal way. He says that unless there is a univocal foundation, we cannot ascribe meaning to the use of symbolic or metaphorical language.

In conclusion, it is clear that the univocal way is still alive and well, but that it has its endemic problems. It may be that if the only choice is between equivocal or univocal language, many may choose the latter; but the cost is high. It is difficult to see how we can move from literal language, with its context in everyday life, to the transcendence of God without sacrificing something precious to common religious sensibilities. That is why it is often those most committed to spirituality opt for the equivocal way.

The Analogical Way

Thomas Aquinas opted for the analogical way, attempting to do justice to the intentions of both other ways and yet to avoid their drawbacks. His appeal to analogy became the standard model for understanding religious language. He began with the 'via negativa' and ruled out univocal way from the outset. God is not a being like other beings. God cannot be 'classified' into some genus and species. Every term used of God must consequently in an important sense be denied, "for what He is not is clearer to us than what He is". Aquinas agrees with Scotist that we do have cognitive revelation, that is, we know something of God and can express this knowledge in language. As Aquinas says "If then, nothing was said of God and creatures except in a purely equivocal way, no reasoning proceeding from creatures to God could take place. But, the contrary is evident from all those who have spoken about God" How do we, however, understand this "mean between pure equivocation and simple univocation?"

Aquinas' answer is that we know and speak of God 'analogically'. We can understand it in two ways: analogy of attribution or proportion and analogy of proportionality. Analogy of attribution can be understood through an example that Aquinas uses. We attribute health to persons in a literal sense, that is persons possess health 'formally'. On the other hand, we might say of medicine that it, too, is healthy, but it certainly is not healthy in the literal sense that people are healthy. The reason seems to be that medicine causes people to be healthy; thus, it is healthy in a derivative or 'virtual' sense. When we then turn to Aquinas' famous emphasis on God as the first or uncaused cause of the world, it follows that since God is the cause of everything, the names of everything can be virtually attributed to God. God is love because God is the cause of love. As Aquinas expresses it more fully:

"Our natural knowledge takes its beginning from sense. Hence our natural knowledge can go as far as it can be led by sensible things. But our mind cannot be led by sense so far to see the essences of God, as their cause. Hence from the knowledge of sensible things the whole power of God cannot be known; nor

therefore can His essence be seen. But because they are His effects and depend on their cause, we can be led from them so far as to know of God whether He exists, and to know of Him what must necessarily belong to Him as the first cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by Him”.

We can make an opposition as if God is the cause of everything, then everything can equally be attributed to God. Is god as aptly ‘love’ as a ‘lion’? Is God as much evil as good? In response, Aquinas first of all can appeal to his understanding of evil as non being to dismiss negative terms. Evil in itself is nothing. Negative characterization of God, therefore, on the basis of the analogy of attribution, is ruled out. Second, since God is infinite, terms that are capable of infinite expansion are more appropriately applied to God than terms that are not. Thus ‘good is more appropriately applied to God than is ‘lion’. Calling God a lion or Jesus the bread of life are what Aquinas calls metaphors. He expresses the difference well:

“There are some names which signify these perfections flowing from God to creatures in such a way that the imperfect way in which creatures receive the divine perfection is part of the very signification of the name itself, as stone signifies a material being, and the names of this kind can be applied to God only in a metaphorical sense. Other names, however, express these perfections absolutely, without any such mode of participation being part of their signification, as the words being, good, living, and the like, and such names can be properly applied to God”

For Aquinas analogy is a much more potent category than metaphor. The second approach to analogy, that of proportionality, follows from the name. We may say that a cabbage has life or is alive. Probably we would consider that it has life literally in the way that any other garden plant lives. On the other hand, we may consider that there is only a proportional relationship between the life of a cabbage, and a rabbit. Life functions differently in both cases, but it is also similar, that is, analogical. When applied to God, the proportionality is simply extended. We then would say that life is to a cabbage as life is to God. God has life or love or goodness, or power, in the way appropriate to God. The two approaches to analogy thus complement each other.

2.3 MEANING OF THEOLOGICAL PREDICATES

Most philosophers have located the difficulties of religious language in the predicates of theological statements. What does ‘good’ mean in ‘God is good’? It may seem that we should start with the subject of the statements, with the concept of God. But there is no alternative to starting with the predicates. For the only way to make clear what one means by ‘God’ is to provide an identifying description, such as ‘the creator of the universe’; and to understand that phrase one must understand the predicate ‘created the universe’ as applied to God. Theological predicate can be divided into negative and positive. The positive predicates can be concerned either with attributes like good, wise etc. or with actions like makes, forgives, speaks etc. Negative predicates present no special difficulty, but in themselves they are clearly insufficient to give any positive conception of the deity.

Derivation and Application

When one reflects on the use of predicates in theological statements one comes to realize two fundamental facts. 1) This use is necessarily derivative from the application of the predicates to human beings and other observable entities. 2) The theological use of predicates is markedly different from the application of predicates to human beings.

Theological predicates are derivative primarily because it is impossible to teach theological language from scratch. How would one teach a child what it means to say “God has spoken to me” without first making sure that child knows what it is for a human being to speak to him? In order to do so one would have to have some reliable way of determining when God was speaking to him, so that when this happens one could say to him “that is what it is for God to speak to you”. And even if we admit that God does speak to people from time to time, there is no way for one person to tell when God is speaking to another person unless the other person tells him, which would require that the other person have already mastered the theological use of language. Hence there is no alternative to the usual procedure of teaching the theological use of terms by extension from their application to empirically observable objects.

As for the difference in the use of predicates as applied to God and to human beings, there are many ways of seeing that terms cannot have quite the same meaning in both cases. If, as in the classical Christian theology, God is conceived of as not in time, then it is clear that God’s performance of actions like speaking, making, or comforting is something radically different from the temporally sequential performance of actions by human beings. Aquinas in his famous discussion of this problem based the distinction between the application of predicates to human beings and the application of predicates to God on the principle that God is an absolute unity and that, therefore, various attributes and activities are not distinguishable in God as they are in men. But even if we allow God to be temporal and straightforwardly multifaceted, we are left with the corporeal – incorporeal difference. If God does not have a body, it is clear that speaking, making, or comforting cannot be the same thing for God as for man.

This leaves us with a serious problem. We must show how the theological use of these terms derived from their non theological use. Until we do, it will be unclear just what we are saying about God in such utterances. The usual way of dealing this problem is by cutting out the inapplicable portions of the original meaning of the terms, leaving the remainder for theology. Thus, since God is incorporeal, his speaking cannot involve producing sounds by expelling air over vocal cords. What is left is that God does something which results in the addressee having an experience of the sort he would have if some human being were speaking to him. The nature of the ‘something’ is deliberately left vague. Since God is a pure spirit, it will presumably be some conscious mental act; perhaps an act of will to the effect that the addressee shall have the experience of being told such and such. More generally, to attribute any interpersonal action to God is to attribute to him a purely mental act which has its intended result a certain experience, like the one that would result from such an action on the part of the human being.

Check Your Progress I

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer
b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) What are the traditional approaches to religious Language?

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Verifiability of Theological Statements

In the last few decades a great many philosophers have come to accept some form of the ‘verifiability theory of meaning’, according to which one is making a genuine factual assertion, a real claim as to the way the world is, only if it is possible to conceive of some way in which what he is saying can be shown to be true or false by empirical observation. Applying this theory to theology, it has been argued that since an empirical test is in principle impossible to carry out for statements about a supernatural incorporeal personal deity, these statements cannot be regarded as straightforward factual assertions, but must be interpreted in some other way.

Are Theological Statements Testable?

The question of whether theological statements are subjects to empirical test is quite complicated. If we rule out mystical experience as a means of observation, then it is clear that statements about God cannot be tested directly. But science is full of hypotheses about unobservable entities – electromagnetic fields, social structures, instincts, - which verificationists accept as meaningful because they can be tested indirectly. That is, from these hypotheses we can draw implications which can themselves be tested by observation. The question is whether directly testable consequences can be drawn from theological statements. We can phrase this question as follows: Would we expect any possible observations to differ according to whether there is or is not a God? It would clearly be unreasonable to require of the theologian that he specify a set of observations which would conclusively prove or disprove his assertions. Few, if any, scientific hypotheses could reasonably be demanded is that he specify some observable states of affairs which would count for or against his assertions.

One thing that makes this problem difficult is the fact that on this point religious belief differs at different times and places. Supernatural deities have often been thought of as dealing in a fairly predictable way with contingencies in the natural world and human society. Thus in many primitive religions it is believed that gods will bring abundant crops or victory in battle if they are approached in certain ways through prayer and ritual. Even in advanced religious traditions like the Judaeo-Christian, it is believed that God has certain fixed intentions which will result in prayers being answered and will result in the final victory of the people who believe in him.

It would seem that such expectations provide a basis for empirical test. In so far as they are fulfilled, the theology is confirmed; in so far as they are frustrated it is disproved. However, things are not that simple. Even in primitive communities such tests are rarely allowed to be decisive; the empirical implications are hedged around with a variety of escape clauses. If the ritual dances are held and still the crops fail, there are several alternatives to abandoning traditional beliefs about the gods. Perhaps there was an unnoticed slip somewhere in the ritual; perhaps devils were conducting counter rituals. More sophisticated explanations are employed in the more advanced religions. For example, God will answer prayers, but only when doing so would be for the good of the supplicant.

Are Theological Statements Assertions of Fact?

As to whether a statement that cannot be empirically tested must not be construed as an assertion of fact, a theologian might well challenge the application of the verifiability theory to theology. If God is supernatural, we should not expect his behaviour to be governed by any laws or regulations we could hope to discover. But we could never be certain that, for example, the statement that God loves his creatures would imply that a war should have one outcome rather than another. This would mean that, according to verifiability theory, it would be impossible for us to make any statements, even false ones, about such a being. But a theory which would prevent us from recognizing the existence of a certain kind of entity, if it did exist, would be an unreasonable theory.

2.4 NON ASSERTIVE INTERPRETATIONS

Thinkers like George Santayana without holding that theological sentences are factually meaningless, are convinced that as factual assertions are false, but still are unwilling to abandon traditional religious discourse. They feel that somehow it has a valuable function in human life, and in order to preserve it they are forced to reinterpret it so that the unwarranted factual claims are expunged.

Non assertive interpretations can be divided into four groups. Statements about God have been interpreted as; 1) expressions of feelings of various thoughts; 2) Symbolic presentations of a variety of vital aspects of experiences, from natural facts to moral ideals; 3) Integral elements in ritualistic worship; 4) A unique kind of ‘mystical’ or symbolic’ expression, not reducible to any other use of language.

Expressions of Feeling

Theological utterances have been interpreted as expressions of feelings that arise in connection with religious belief and activity. Thus we might think of “God made the heavens and the earth” as an expression of the sense of awe and mystery evoked by grandeur of nature; of “God has predestined every man to salvation or damnation” as an expression of a pervasive sense of helplessness; and of “God watches over the affairs of men” as an expression of a sense of peace, security, at-homeness in the world. This is a ‘poetic’ expression rather than expression by expletives. It is like expressing a sense of futility by saying “life is a walking shadow” rather than like expressing futility by saying ‘Ah, me’. That is, the feeling is expressed by depicting a situation which might naturally evoke it; a sense of security, for instance, is evoked by some powerful persons looking after one.

Symbolic Presentations

Symbolic interpretations of religious doctrines have been common for a long time. Many of the traditional ways of speaking about God have to be taken as symbolic. God cannot literally be a shepherd or rock. The shepherd functions as a symbol of providence and rock as a symbol for God's role as a refuge and protection in time of trouble. A symbol in this sense is some concrete object, situation, or activity which can be taken to stand for the ultimate object of discourse through some kind of association, usually on the basis of similarity. We speak symbolically when what we literally refer to is something which functions as a symbol.

In the traditional use of symbolic interpretation it is, necessarily, only a part of theological discourse which is taken as symbolic. For if we have to hold that the symbolic utterances are symbolizing facts about God, we will have to have some way of saying what those facts are; and we cannot make that specification in symbolic terms, on pain of infinite regress. But we are now considering views according to which all theological discourse is symbolic, which means that if we are to say what is being symbolized it will have to be something in the natural world that can be specified in non theological terms. The most common version of such a view is that theological utterances are symbolic presentations of moral ideals, attitudes, or values. This position has been set forth most fully and persuasively by George Santayana. According to him every religious doctrine involves two components: a kernel of moral or valuational insight, and a poetic or pictorial rendering it. Thus the doctrine that the physical universe is a creation of a supremely good personal deity is a pictorial rendering of the insight that everything in the world is potentially usable for the enrichment of the human life. The Christian story of incarnation, sacrificial death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a way of making the point that self-sacrifice for others is of supreme moral value. It is worthwhile embodying these moral insights in theological doctrine because this vivid presentation, together with the systematic cultivation of feelings and attitudes that accompanies it, provide a more effective way of getting across the insights than would a bald statement.

The way in which interpretations of the first two kinds throw light on the theological use of predicates is analogous to the way in which one explicates the use of words in poetic metaphors. If we consider the metaphor in "sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care", it is clear that 'knit' is not used simply to refer to a certain kind of physical operation. This utterance has quite different kind of implication from 'she knit me a sweater', in which 'knit' does have its usual sense. In the metaphoric statement, 'knit' is used in its usual sense to depict a certain kind of situation which, as whole, is presented as an analogue of the effect of sleep on care. The only way of effectively getting at the function of the word 'knit' is by seeing how the whole phrase 'knits up the raveled sleeve' is used to say something indirectly about sleep.

In the first two of the four kinds of the non assertive interpretation we are examining whether theological statements are essentially metaphors. And if they are correctly so regarded, we get nowhere if we extract the word 'made' from the sentence "God made the heavens and the earth" and try to say what it means by itself. What we have to do is take the picture presented by the whole sentence and see how it functions as a way of expressing a feeling of security, or as away

of presenting the insight that everything in the world can be used to enrich human life.

Ritualistic Interpretation

The ritualistic interpretation of theological discourse can best be introduced by citing the reply of an intellectually sophisticated high –church Anglican to question from an agnostic friend. The question was “How can you go to the church and say all those things in the creed?” The reply “I don’t say them ; I sing them” In the view under consideration, the corporate practice of worship is the native soil from which talk about God springs. Talk about the attributes, doings, and intentions of a supernatural personal being has meaning as a part of the practice of worship and is puzzling only when it is separated from that context. If we think of an utterance like “ God made the heavens and the earth” as the expression of a belief about the way things in fact originated and then wonder whether it is true or false, we will be at a loss.

To understand it we have to put it back into the setting where it does its work. In that setting, these words are not being used to explain anything, but to do something quite different.

Unfortunately, proponents of this view have never been very clear about what this ‘something different’ is. The clearest suggestion they give is that the talk about God serves to provide an imaginative framework for the conduct of worship. It articulates one’s sense that something important is going on, and it keeps to indicate the appropriateness of one response rather than another. In speaking of Holy Eucharist as the re-enactment of the self-sacrifice of an omnipotent personal God who took the form of human and in conceiving of it as a cleansing and renewing incorporation of the substance of such God, one provides for the activity a pictorial framework that records and nurtures the felt solemnity of the occasion and the attitudes and aspirations kindled by the ceremony. This position presupposes, contrary to the usual view, that ritual worship has an autonomous value, apart from any theological foundation. It is generally supposed that a given ritual has a point only if certain theological doctrines are objectively true. But in ritualistic interpretation, theological doctrines are not regarded as statements about which questions of truth or falsity are properly raised. Since these doctrines depend for their significance on the ritual, it is supposed that the ritual has some intrinsic value in forming and giving expression to valuable sentiments, feelings, and attitudes.

Myths

Ernst Cassirer has developed the notion that the basis of religious discourse lies in a unique ‘symbolic form’ which he terms ‘mythical’. He maintains that it is found in purest form in the myths of the primitive people and is based on a way of perceiving and thinking about the world which is radically different from our accustomed mode. In the ‘mystical consciousness’ there is no sharp distinction between the subjective and the objective. No clear line is drawn between symbol and object, between wish and fulfillment, between perception and fantasy. Again, no sharp distinction is made between the object itself and the emotional reaction it evokes; emotional response is taken to be an integral part of the environment. As a result none of our familiar standards of truth or objectivity are applicable. What is most real is what arouses the greatest intensity of emotional response

and particularly, what is felt as most sacred . The mythical consciousness carries its own special organizations of space and time. For example, there is no distinction made between a position and what occupies it; every spatial position is endowed with a qualitative character and exerts influence as such. Sophisticated theology represents an uneasy compromise between mythical and scientific modes of thought, and as such cannot be understood without seeing how it has developed from its origins. It is basically a mythical view of the world, given a ‘secondary elaboration’ in a vain attempt to make it acceptable to the rationalistic consciousness; judged by rationalistic standards it is not only groundless, but meaningless.

Mysticism

Philosophers and theologians in the mystical tradition have put forward versions of this fourth kind of interpretation which do not regard theology as a manifestation of cultural lag. To the mystic the only way to communicate with God is through mystical experience, and this experience reveals God to be an ineffable unity. He can be directly intuited in mystical experience, but since there are no distinctions within the absolute unity of his being, and since any statements we can make predicates of him one thing rather than another, eg. Wisdom as distinguishable from power, no statement can be true of him. The most we can do in language is to direct our hearers to the mode of experience which constitutes the sole means of access. Proponents of this view sometimes speak of theological language as ‘symbolic’, but this differs from our second type of theory in that here there is no way to symbolize, and it is therefore questionable whether we should use the term ‘symbol’. A symbol is always a symbol of something. In fact it is difficult to make clear just what, on this view, religious utterances are supposed to be doing. They are said to ‘point to’ adumbrate’ or ‘indicate’ the ineffable divine reality, but all too often these expressions remain uninterrupted.

In recent years two interesting attempts have been made to develop this position further. W.T. Stace, in his book ‘Time and Eternity’ considers the chief function of religious language to be the evocation of mystical experience, or faint echoes thereof. This seems at first to be a subjectivist account, with the deity omitted, but as, Stace correctly points out, it is an axiom in the mystical experience as ineffable, he departs from his official position to the extent of giving some indications of the aspects of this experience with different theological utterances evoke. ‘God is truth’ evokes the sense of revelatoriness, and ‘God is infinite’ evokes the sense of all-inclusiveness.

Paul Tillich, although not squarely in the mystical tradition, is faced with similar problems in the interpretation of religious language. He holds that theological doctrines ‘symbolize’ an ultimate reality, ‘being itself’ about which nothing can be said literally except that it is metaphysically ultimate. Tillich develops the notion that it is an expression of ‘ultimate concern’, a complex of devotion, commitment, and orientation, focused on something non ultimate – a human being, a nation, or a supernatural deity. Religious statements, which literally refer to such relatively concrete focuses of ultimate concern, express the sense of sacredness such objects have as ‘manifestations’ of being itself. But just what it is for such an object to be taken as a ‘manifestation’ or ‘symbol’ of being – itself, Tillich never makes clear.

It would seem that talk about God is much more complex than is recognized by any of the existing theories. The brief discussion given above of empirically testable implications illustrates this point. Theological sentences perform a great many closely interrelated linguistic functions. In saying ‘God, who created the world, watches over the affairs of men,’ the believer is committing himself to approach God in prayer and ritual in one way rather than another. And these functions are intimately dependent on each other. Whatever is needed is a description of the relationship among these functions, one sufficiently complex to match the complexity of the subject matter

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer
b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) What are the divisions of the non-assertive interpretations of Religious Language?

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2.5 LET US SUM UP

There are traditional and non traditional approaches to the religious language. All approaches have its own advantages and its own limitations. The language of religion is comprised of a set of symbols, myths, metaphors, Mysticism and esoteric signs which help men of religion to share and convey their profound and ineffable emotions and experiences. The same function is performed by various rituals, practices and observances. They are all acts without ordinary meaning. They perform the function of symbols, representing realities of religion. As poetic expression arouses in readers listeners certain emotional aura felt and experienced by the poet, in the same manner, religious languages or ceremonies and observances convey others some shared experiences and certain intimations from unknown or unseen.

2.6 KEY WORDS

- Traditional

:

Pertaining to or characteristic of the older styles.
- Tradition

:

Belief or customs taught by one generation to the next.

Negative way	: It is a theology that attempts to describe God, by negation, to speak only in terms of what may not be said about the perfect goodness that is God.
Analogy	: Analogy is an inference or an argument from one particular to another particular, as opposed to deduction, induction and abduction, where at least one of the premises or conclusion is general.
Univocal	: A word is used univocally when it means exactly the same thing in several contexts.
Symbolic presentation	: It is the practice of representing things by means of symbols or of attributing symbolic meaning or significance to objects, events, or relationships.
Myths	: Myths are traditional stories and in the society in which it is told, it is usually regarded as a true account of the remote past.
Mysticism	: Mysticism is a pursuit of communion with, identity with, or conscious awareness of an Ultimate reality, or God through direct experience, intuition, instinct or insight.

2.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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2.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) The traditional approaches to religious language are:
 - a) The Negative way
 - b) The Univocal way
 - c) The Analogical way

Answer to Check Your Progress II

- 1) Non assertive interpretations can be divided into four groups:
 - a) Expressions of feelings of various thoughts
 - b) Symbolic presentations of a variety of vital aspects of experiences, from natural facts to moral ideals;
 - c) Integral elements in ritualistic worship
 - d) A unique kind of ‘mystical’ or ‘symbolic’ expression, not reducible to any other use of language.