

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to make the learner understand the various approaches to religious languages including – its meaning, its problems and the ways in which language has been regarded as the manifestation of the sacred. In this regard the present unit will familiarize you with the following issues:

- Language as sacred substance
- the traditional understanding
- the meaning of Theological predicates
- non assertive interpretations

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Language, as a fundamental mode of human expression and communication, becomes a central element in every religious tradition. Traditional terms used to describe the forms of religious discourse include prayer, praise, petition, confession, exhortation, etc.

* Augustine Mundiath, Sawangi Meghe, Wardha. (This unit is a revised version of units 'Religious Language-I' and "Religious Language- II' of BPYE-001 compiled by Mahak Uppal, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Hindu College, University of Delhi.)

An explanation of the nature of religious language depends upon how we define religion and language. The key to the modern understanding of language is to see it as an integrated system of components that are concerned with form and purpose, as well as with meaning. Spoken languages manifest themselves as a purposeful human activity that can be analyzed in terms of its intended effect within a social context. Various attempts have been made to understand the relation between the religious and secular languages. On this view three basic approaches to the study of religious language can be outlined.

- 1 The First approach assumes that religion refers to some transcendent 'sacred' reality which concerns itself with certain all-encompassing questions such as the meaning of life and death, good and evil, and suffering.
- 2 The Second approach views religion as basically an expression of emotions.

With both of these approaches, religious language is not to be taken literally but is to be understood as being a symbolic representation of emotions that are non-cognitive. Many of the terms that are applied in religious discourse tend to be used in special ways. Most of them differ starkly from their use in ordinary contexts. There is, therefore, a long shift of meaning between the familiar use of these words and their theological employment. When we use these terms in a religious context, they all tend to adopt a peculiar meaning and outlook.

- 3 The Third approach denies that there is anything special about religious language. This approach draws upon the semantic theory of language and sides with Logical Positivism in claiming that the meaning of religious language should be explained as a part of ordinary language in which meaning is determined by the truth conditions entailed by all languages.

4.2 RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE AS A SACRED SUBSTANCE

One of the most important aspects of the modern understanding of language is the realization that meaning rests on the conventional relationship between the signified and signifier. The signifier, which usually appears in the form of a word (written or spoken), is comprised of both form and substance. Form is comprised of the phonological and grammatical rules of proper formation and Substance is its sound (in the case of a spoken word). The meaning of a word, however, is not inherent in either its form or substance.

In pre-modern attitudes toward language, such distinctions were usually not made. To regard some linguistic manifestation as sacred did not imply that it was exclusively the meaning that was taken to be holy. More often it was the exact form or even the veritable substance in which it was expressed that was felt to be the locus of the sacrality. This is seen most clearly in the reluctance or refusal to allow the translation of certain religious expressions into terms of other languages. Religious traditions have often held the position that synonymy does not preserve sacrality.

Understandably, many of the world religions developed the idea that an entire language, usually other than the vernacular, is sacred. Such languages are often reserved for liturgical or ritualistic functions. A sacred language usually begins as a vernacular through which a revelation is believed to have been received. This can lead to the belief that the language is particularly suited for revelation, and that it is superior to other languages and thereby inherently sacred.

Many traditional people, as well as high cultures, recite sacred doctrines and rituals in an archaic form of speech that may appear to be only barely comprehensible to the ordinary users of that language. In such cases the language itself is regarded as sacred, not because it is different from the vernacular, but rather because it contains the doctrines of revered figures from the past, such as gods, prophets, or ancestors. The desire to express the eternal validity of some scripture or liturgy by disallowing any change in its language has the potential for making the language itself, and the sacred meaning being conveyed thereby, largely unintelligible to those without special training.

Whenever language becomes a mere “form” to the common person, having lost the ability to convey any message beyond its symbolic representation of a particular manifestation of sacrality, it incites a reaction by those who see a need for a scripture or liturgy that can once again speak and teach. Many religious movements have begun on this very note, railing against frozen formalism, demanding and usually producing vernacular expressions of their religious feeling.

4.2.1 Set of sacred words

Not all religions, however, consider an entire language to be sacred; instead, most treat some special subset of speech as an embodiment of the sacred. In such cases it is usually held that the mere uttering or hearing of words from this special set, (which usually takes the form of a collection of sacred scriptures), will be efficacious, irrespective of whether

the meaning itself is understood. This emphasis on formulaic (as opposed to spontaneous) language brings with it an emphasis on techniques of preservation and precise recitation of the given texts, rather than on methods for inspiration and creation of new expressions.

4.2.2 The Speaker

The characteristics possessed by the speaker have often been regarded as equally significant factors contributing to, or detracting from, the sacred impact of the words uttered. The greatest impact comes when the speaker is regarded, in effect, as being a god. Very dramatic are those cases where a god is believed to talk directly and immediately through a person in the present tense as in the case of Oracles. For human persons, their status also affects the sacrality attributed to their words. Particular status may even be a necessary precondition for the use of sacred words. Priests for example, may have exclusive rights to the use of liturgical utterances.

All religions have struggled with the problem of keeping their tradition of rites and prayers from becoming an empty formalism. They insisted that a certain quality of heart or mind must accompany the recitation of the sacred formulas. This usually involves a greater attention to the meaning of the language and requires a different attitude on the part of the speaker than a focus on mere exactness in the repetition of the forms.

4.2.3 The Hearer

There is a great difference in perspective on the issue of the sacrality of language between the speaker and the hearer or audience. On many occasions, the intended hearer of the sacred discourse is a God or a Deity. However, unlike the addressee of an ordinary conversation, the addressed Gods and Deities seldom ever talk back. Many a times the discourse ends up as a monologue, or even as a ritual where there may be multiple speakers, where the participants are seldom responding to, conversing with, or addressing one another.

4.2.4 The Medium

The spoken word uses the medium of sound for its transmission. This gives it qualities that make it quite distinct from the written word, which is conveyed through the medium of print. Many cultures regard the speaking of an utterance as the manifestation of power. The

word thereby came to be viewed as an active force that is immediately and directly responsible for shaping the world itself. For instance, the texts of ancient Sumer provide the first example of the commonly found doctrine of the creative power of the divine word. The major deities of the Sumerian pantheon first plan creation by thinking, then utter the command and pronounce the name, and the object comes into being. In the first book of Bible, namely Genesis, God brings order out of chaos by simply speaking “Let there be light” and by naming “God called the light Day, and the Darkness he called Night”. Adam’s giving of names to the plants and animals in the second chapter of Genesis further embodies the idea of the manifestation of physical existence with linguistic utterance. The Vedas too contain the most developed speculations which acknowledge that speech is a basic cosmic force. One Vedic god, Prajapati (the god of creation) speaks the primal syllables ‘bhur, bhuvah, svah’ to create the earth, atmosphere, and heaven. He is said to give order to the world through name and form, which are elsewhere called his manifest aspects. These two terms ‘nama-rupa’ are key elements in much of later Hindu Philosophy, standing for the two basic dimensions of reality. The single most important term from this earliest stratum of Indian thought on language is ‘vac’ meaning speech. It has been personified as an independent deity, the goddess who is Prajapati’s wife and who is, in some places, given the role of the true active agent in creating or becoming the Universe.

4.2.5 The Context

Any Language which is regarded as sacred quite often has as its context a ritual setting. Yet, it may also find expression in settings other than the specified ritual, as in the case of spontaneous prayers or the occasional use of magic spells. The relationship between the ritual language and its context is much different from that between ordinary language and its context. Since ritual language is, for the most part, the repetition of a fixed text, it may be seen as preceding and, in effect, creating, its context rather than reflecting and representing in speech a context regarded as prior and already defined. Therefore, much ritual language tends to be directed towards defining the characteristics of the participants and the nature of the ritual situation. The rich symbolism of both the object and the action that marks off ritualistic behavior from ordinary behavior adds yet another distinctive trait to religious language. Its message is often paralleled in the symbolic systems of those other media—the visual and tactile properties of the physical objects, the kinesthetic sensibilities of gesture and movement—which then serve to reinforce, enhance, or even complete the

verbal meaning.

4.3 THREE TRADITIONAL WAYS

In the thirteenth century, St. 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, and according to him only two options were possible: univocal and equivocal language. For instance, the word 'bat' can mean two different things, a baseball bat or a flying mammal. If we do not know which one of these objects is being referred to, then the use is equivocal; and if we know which object is being referred then the use of that word is literal or univocal. Apart from these two uses, Duns Scotus insists, no other alternative exists. The possibility of the equivocal use of religious and scriptural language did not receive much attention, for it was assumed that since religious language does appear to be meaningful, it must be either univocal or analogical.

4.3.1 The Negative Way

The assertion that all religious language is equivocal led to the view that all words were to be denied or negated in order to understand the Ultimate Reality truly. It is for this reason that this alternative is often designated as the 'negative way' (*via negativa*). This view was held by German mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) and by the 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.

While this view may strike us as being skeptical, but interestingly, it has been defended by those who have 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 the 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 asserted that 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 by getting rid of the 'lowest' and moving to the 'higher'. One quits the body, followed by the images of the mind, then the words and thoughts of the mind, opening up the possibility of the unmediated encounter with the One. What is usually emphasized is that this experience is ineffable yet intensely real.

Pseudo-Dionysius or Dennis the Areopagite shows in "The Divine Names" how the names of God do not literally describe God, but that rather they point to God as the cause of all things. Treating this way of understanding God as subordinate 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 ultimately 'via negativa' which means that all terms must be denied of God.

Similarly, in the Indian Philosophical tradition, the concept of 'neti neti' (not this not that) reveals the indescribability of Brahman by any attributes or linguistic conceptions. The idea of Nirguna Brahman as discussed by Shankaracharya explains that we cannot describe Brahman either positively or negatively. Brahman is beyond all positive and negative qualities and attributions.

A striking illustration of this approach can be noted from the following passage of Pseudo-Dionysius' 'Mystical Theology'.

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...

This passage relies on the common method of the negative way, whereby one moves beyond words and concepts by denying them, thereby leading not to skepticism or unbelief, but precisely to the truth and the insight of actual experience that God is beyond all such words. This represents a reliance on language, but it is reliance in a functional or evocative sense only. Not only are the negative terms—evil, falsehood, unreality—denied but even the positive terms—goodness, truth, reality—also are negated. However at the very end the author alludes to an unusually straight forward assertion. When he deals with

the question of why we should approach God in this way, he relies upon a common rational explanation of God's relation to the world.

This last step in Dionysius' analysis 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, and to communicate about it, when this is what you want to disallow and deny. At the same time, this approach is a reminder, especially to the univocal way, that language is notoriously unstable when applied to God. It is a warning against the idolatry of language.

4.3.2 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.

Theologian Carl Henry follows Scotus is arguing that "only univocal assertions protect us from equivocacy; only univocal knowledge is, therefore, genuine and authentic knowledge". Yet in the same breath Henry also tells us that "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 Henry's awareness of doing justice to the transcendence of God, and that too at the risk of falling into self-contradiction, which was one of the dangers of the equivocal way. Schubert Ogden is another theologian who in his later writings firmly upheld the univocal way. He says that unless there is a univocal foundation, we cannot ascribe meaning to the use of symbolic or metaphorical language.

While it is clear that the univocal way is still alive and well, but it needs to be recognized that it has its inherent problems too. 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 that those who are most committed to spirituality opt for the equivocal way.

4.3.3 The Analogical way

Thomas Aquinas opted for the analogical way, with the aim of doing justice to the intentions of both the other ways and yet avoiding their shortcomings. His appeal to analogy became the standard model for understanding religious language. He began with the 'via negativa' and ruled out the possibility of the univocal way from the very outset. He believed that God is not a being like other beings. God cannot be 'classified' into some genus and species. Every term used of God must consequently be denied, "for what He is not is clearer to us than what He is". Aquinas agreed with Scotus that we do have cognitive revelation, i.e., 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 understand this "mean between pure equivocation and simple univocation"? Aquinas' answer is that we know and speak of God 'analogically'. We can understand this assertion 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.

For Aquinas analogy is a much more potent category than metaphor. The second approach to analogy, that of proportionality, follows from the name itself. 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.

4.4 MEANING OF THEOLOGICAL PREDICATES

Most philosophers have located the difficulties of religious language in the predicates of theological statements. What, for instance, does the term ‘good’ mean in ‘God is good’? while it may seem that the starting point for understanding the meaning of such statements should be the concept of God, yet it may be argued that 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 therefore to have a coherent understanding of theological statements one must understand the predicate ‘creator of the universe’ as applied to God.

4.4.1 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; and 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 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 derives from their non theological use. The usual way of dealing with 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 as its intended result a certain experience, like the one that would result from such an action on the part of the human agent.

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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4.4.2 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.

4.4.2.1 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, etc.— 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.

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.

4.4.2.2 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.

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 fundamental facts concerning the use of predicates in theological statements?

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4.5 NON-ASSERTIVE INTERPRETATIONS

Thinkers like George Santayana, without holding that theological sentences are factually meaningless, were still 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.

Based on how the statements about God have been interpreted, non-assertive interpretations can be divided into four groups, i.e., 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; and 4) A unique kind of 'mystical 'or symbolic' expression, not reducible to any other use of language.

1. 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.

2. 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.

It is usually only a part of the 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. 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.

3. Ritualistic interpretation

In the view under consideration, the 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. 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.

4. 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.

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 may not only appear groundless, but meaningless.

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. 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 in-sufficient.

It would seem that any talk about God and the religious discourse itself is much more complex than is recognized by any of the existing theories. 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. What is therefore needed, is a description of the relationship among these functions, one sufficiently complex to match the complexity of the subject matter

Check Your Progress III

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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.....

4.6 LET US SUM UP

All religions have their own language to speak about the Ultimate, to express the feeling of sacred, awe and holiness. Word has a power of creation and is a sacred substance. Religious language is spoken in the atmosphere of speaker, hearer, medium and a context.

It has a power of transformation and the participants can experience it in the ritual objects and goals. Religious language is used as means of worship in invocation, praise, offering and petition.

There are traditional and non-traditional approaches to understanding the nature of religious language. All approaches have their 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. Just as poetic expressions arouse in readers and listeners certain emotional aura felt and experienced by the poet, similarly, religious languages, or ceremonies and observances convey to others some shared experiences and certain intimations from unknown or unseen.

4.7 KEY WORDS

Analogy: Analogy is an inference or an argument from one particular to another particular, as opposed to deduction, induction and abduction.

Language: Language is a particular kind of system for encoding and decoding information.

Negative way: It is a theological theory 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.

Tradition: Belief or customs taught by one generation to the next.

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.

4.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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4.9 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

Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. There are two fundamental facts concerning the use of predicates in theological statements, 1. Emperical testability, 2. Assertion of facts.

Answer to Check Your Progress III

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.



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