

An Assessment of Religious Language in Philosophy of Religion

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Abstract Every people in history have a concept about God and they refer to Him in several ways. This is the use of religious language. Philosophy of religion is occupied with the problems created by this distinctively religious use of language. The discussion normally centres around two main issues: namely, the special sense that descriptive terms bear when applied to God and the basic function of religious knowledge. The question then is, do those religious statements that have the form of factual assertions (for example, God loves us) refer to a special kind of fact or do they fulfil a different function all together.

Keywords Religion, Language, God, Secular, Symbolic

1. Introduction

John Hick (1983) notes that, it is obvious that the terms that are applied in religious discourse to God are being used in a special way different from their daily use. For example, when we say that "God is good", we do not use the word in the same way as we refer to a good person. To refer to a person as good, there are some moral virtues that must be attributed to the person. We cannot attribute these moral virtues to God. There is clearly a shift of meaning between the daily secular usage of these words and their theological employment.

We also note that these words first get a secular usage and definition before they are applied to God. The meaning that the term acquires when applied to God is an adaptation of its secular use. This is because many of the words when we use them refer to a corporal human being. But God does not have a body. These are the problems that we come across in relation to divine attributes. The major question remains: How do we apply our human terms and experiences to refer to God? (Kasomo, 2011:98).

This paper is an attempt to answer the above question of religious language. Two scholars have been chosen to help us discuss the issue, namely St. Thomas Aquinas and Paul Tillich. St. Thomas deals with the doctrine of analogy while Tillich is the author of the doctrine of Symbolism. Let us try to look at each of them in some detail before we reach our own conclusion regarding religious language. (Kasomo, 2011:79).

2. Analogy of Existence of God

The doctrine of analogy has a long history. Already Greek philosophy was aware of the problem. The "Negative Theology" of, for example, Philo of Alexandria, was formulated by Augustine of Hippo in a classical way: "God is known more truly than he is spoken of, and he is more truly than is known." (Augustine, De Trinitate, VII, 4, 7). For Augustine, man must be aware that what he knows of God is rather *what God is not* than what he is.

St. Thomas Aquinas developed the idea of analogy to try to answer the problem posed by religious language. Aquinas' basic and central idea is that when a word, such as "good" is applied both to a created being and God, it is not being used *univocally*, that is, with exactly the same meaning. Neither do we apply the word *equivocally*, that is, with completely different and unrelated meanings. There is a definite connection between the goodness of a human being and the goodness of God. To Aquinas, then, the term "good" is applied to God and creature neither univocally nor equivocally but *analogically*. This also applies to the references we make to human beings, which we also apply to other lower creatures such as animals and birds. For example, when we say that a sheep is a humble animal, we do not refer to it in the exactly the same way as when we say, "John is humble." There is both a similarity within the difference and difference within the similarity of the kind that led Aquinas to speak of the *analogical* use of the same term in two different contexts.

In the example above about the humility of John and the humility of a sheep, true or normative humility is the one we know directly in ourselves, and the dim or imperfect humility of the sheep is known only by analogy. However, in the case

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of the analogy upwards from humanity to God, the situation is reversed. It is our own human qualities that are the thin shadows and approximations, and the perfect qualities of God that are known to us analogically. In this case, it is the divine qualities, such as goodness, that are true and normative whereas human qualities are faint, fragmentary and distorted. Only in God can perfection of being occur in their true and uncontaminated nature: only God knows, loves, and is righteous and wise in the full and proper sense. Our own knowledge, love, righteousness, wisdom, etc. are all limited as we experience them in our lives.

In dealing with the doctrine of analogy, Aquinas talks of negative and positive attributes. In the negative attributes or concepts, the *thought-content* of the affirmative concept is simply *negated* (Klinger, 2000: 67). These are in fact attributes of our contingent world, things or persons which essentially imply imperfection. When predicated of God, their thought-content must simply be denied. Klinger gives an example of the attribute of "*immortal*". We experience death and mortality in our human world - nature and human beings alike. When we predicate *immortality* to God, we are simply negating the thought-content of mortality in nature. God is not mortal, that is, *immortal*. This is the same with predicates like, "immaterial", "infinite", "immutable", etc. Aquinas mentions also other attributes which do not imply any imperfection. These are affirmative attributes like benevolence, wise, goodness, etc. We first experience these attributes in a limited way in human beings and then attribute them to God in an eminently higher degree. However, it must be noted that despite the attributes we give to God in an eminently higher degree, He remains incomprehensive. This is what is called "*analogy of proper proportion*".

However, another problem arises. Since the deity is hidden from us, how can we know what these divine attributes are in God? How can we, for example, know what perfect goodness, wisdom, love, etc. are like? Thomas Aquinas' answer was that we do not know. As used by him, the doctrine of analogy does not claim to spell out the concrete character of God's perfections, but only to indicate the relations between the different meanings of a word when it is applied both to humanity and to God on the basis of revelation. To Aquinas, the doctrine of analogy is not an instrument for exploring and mapping the infinite divine nature. Rather it is an account of the way in which terms are used for God whose existence is being presupposed. The doctrine of analogy provides a framework for certain limited statements about God without infringing upon agnosticism, and the sense of the mystery of the divine being, which has always characterised the Christian and Jewish thought.

Let us now present Paul Tillich's assertion that reference to God can only be symbolic and compare it with St. Thomas' proofs.

3. Reference to God must be Symbolic

It must be noted from the onset that Tillich continually

asserted that the existence of God is not open to argumentation. To him, the existence of God is not something that can be proved or disproved. There are many direct statements to this effect in Tillich. For example, in the first volume of his *Systematic Theology* he writes:

It would be a great victory for Christian apologetics if words "God" and "existence" were very definitely separated except in the paradox of God becoming manifest under the conditions of existence...God does not exist. He is being-itself beyond essence and existence. Therefore, to argue that God exists is to deny him.

The method of arguing through to a conclusion also contradicts the idea of God. Every argument derives conclusions from something that is sought. In arguments for the existence of God the world is given and God is sought...But, if we derive God from the world, he cannot be that which transcends the world infinitely. (Tillich, 1963: 205)

In saying that "God does not exist", Tillich asserts that the existence is not an attribute one can use to qualify God. Tillich is not the atheist attempting to prove there is no God, he is the fully committed theist trying to state in the sharpest and clearest possible way that God is "beyond essence and existence." According to him, traditional arguments as postulated by St. Thomas Aquinas for the existence of God actually diminish God's importance by placing God alongside of and on a par with all other things, objects, persons, or beings. God does not exist in this narrow and limited sense. For emphasis alone, therefore, Tillich puts it in one round sentence, "God does not exist."

Earlier on in the same volume Tillich himself introduces the possibility that theologians may be able to prove not merely the existence of God but also the truthfulness of the entire Christian message. In defining his vocation, Tillich writes:

It is the task of apologetic theology to prove that the Christian claim also has validity from the point of view of those outside the theological circle. Apologetic theology must show that trends, which are immanent in all religions and cultures, move towards Christian answer. (Tillich, 1963:15)

If this were all one could get by way of proof for God, it would be all one needs. While rejecting traditional arguments for the existence of God, Tillich introduces an argument of his own in the concept of "*theonomous culture*." As a theologian, Tillich saw it as his primary responsibility to point out the hidden religious dimensions in every realm of life. In art and architecture, in politics and economics, in psychology and sociology, in biology and physics, Tillich found confirmation of the Christian faith.

4. Reference to Reality

In reference to reality, which provokes in humanity a sense of the holy while remaining beyond human understanding, Tillich identifies as "the first basic element of any developed idea of God from the earliest Greek philosophers

to present-day theology." Tillich notes:

The manifestation of this ground and abyss of being and meaning creates what modern theology calls "the experience of the numinous"...The same experience can occur, and occurs for the large majority of men, in connection with the impression some persons, events, objects, words,...etc. make on a human soul, creating the feeling of the holy...In such experiences religion lives and tries to maintain the presence of, and the community with, this divine depth of existence. But since it is "inaccessible" to any objectifying concept it must be expressed in symbols. One of these symbols is Personal God. (Tillich, 1959: 130-131)

Repeating his earlier point, Tillich then admits that the symbolic character of the word God is not always realised and that the symbol is confused with some supernatural being which exists out there in an imaginary world of pure spirit. Thus, insists Tillich, the adjective "personal" can be applied to God only in symbolic sense, as it is both affirmed and negated at the same time.

The important element in Tillich's thought is his doctrine of the "symbolic" nature of religious language. He distinguishes between a sign and a symbol. He notes that both of them point to something else beyond themselves. However, A sign signifies that to which it points by arbitrary convention or agreement, e.g. the traffic light red means "stop" while green means "go". A symbol, on the other hand, "participates in that to which it points." For example, a flag. Symbols are not arbitrarily instituted but "grow out of the individual or collective consciousness." Consequently, he notes that they have their own life span. A symbol "opens up levels of reality which are otherwise closed to us." At the same time it "unlocks dimensions and elements of our soul" corresponding to the new aspects of the world it reveals. He gives the example of arts which "create symbols for a level of reality which cannot be reached in any other way, at the same time opening sensitivities and powers of appreciation in us.

Tillich defines religion as the "ultimate concern" about the ultimate. To him, religious faith can express itself only in a symbolic language. Here Tillich describes the only way in which the "ultimate concern" can be represented: by "symbols". Therefore, people always use the language of symbols whenever they discuss religious matters. In his own words,

Whatever we say about that which concerns us ultimately, whether or not we call it God, has symbolic meaning. It points beyond itself while participating in that to which it points. In no other way can faith express itself adequately. The language of faith is the language of symbols. (Tillich, p.45).

According to him, there is only one literal non-symbolic statement that can be made about the ultimate reality (God), that is, God is Being-itself. Beyond this, he says, all theological statements, for example, God is eternal, God is living, God is good, God is personal, God is creator, God is love - are all symbolic. In his own words, he says,

There can be no doubt that any concrete assertion about God must be symbolic, for a concrete assertion is one which

uses a segment of finite experience in order to say something about him. It transcends the content of this segment, although it also includes it. The segment of finite reality which becomes the vehicle of a concrete assertion about God is affirmed and negated at the same time. It becomes a symbol, for a symbolic expression is one whose proper meaning is negated by that to which it points. And yet it also is affirmed by it, and its affirmation gives the symbolic expression an adequate basis for pointing beyond itself. (Taliaferro, 2011: 90).

5. Conclusions

The idea of God is known to almost every culture. Every people have had their own way of knowing and referring to God. In Africa, for example, Mbiti (1969) notes that the African is notoriously religious. Every African culture has had some knowledge of the supreme God. Their knowledge of God is expressed in proverbs, short statements, songs, prayers, names, myths, stories and religious ceremonies. The role of philosophy of religion is to try to articulate these concepts to make them comprehensible. In Africa, the attributes for God are difficult to grasp and express, since they pertain to more of the realm of the abstract than concrete thought forms. Broadly speaking, African thought forms are more concrete than abstract. They are vividly aware of the presence of God in their daily lives and Klinger (2000) agrees with this when he says: For the African, God is viewed as "fullness of life". This doesn't mean that the African people did not have abstract concepts for referring to God. But whatever reference they made to God, it opens up the discussion of the use of religious language.

We have tried to establish by the study of the two scholars that many terms, if not all, that are applied in religious discourse to refer to God are being used in special ways different from the way they are used ordinarily. It is also clear that in all those cases in which words are used both ordinarily and in religious language, its ordinary or secular meaning is primary in the sense that it developed first and has accordingly determined the definition of the word. This different uses of terms when it comes to religious language is what St. Thomas Aquinas and Paul Tillich have tried to illustrate in their own ways.

When critically looked at, especially in Judaic-Christian theism, the negative aspect of Tillich's doctrine of religious symbols corresponds to the negative aspect of St. Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of analogy. Tillich insists that we do not use human language literally, or univocally, when we refer to God or what he calls the "Ultimate". Because our terms can be derived only from our own finite human experience, they cannot be adequate to apply to God; when they are used theologically, their meaning is always partially "negated by that which to which they point". This coincides with St. Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of negative attributes where he states that the thought-content of affirmative concept is

simply negated. This is a very relevant teaching against the danger of what is called "anthropomorphism", that is, the idolatry of thinking of God as merely a greatly magnified human being. This is what some atheistic philosophers call "man creating God in his own image" rather than the other way round.

Tillich's constructive teaching, offering an alternative to the doctrine of analogy, is his theory of *participation*. We already mentioned that Tillich says a symbol participates in the reality to which it points. Unfortunately, this theory of participation is not well developed by him. He gives the symbol of a flag as an example. We are left asking: Does the religious symbol participate in Being-itself in the same sense a flag participates in the power and dignity of the nation? And what precisely is this sense? It is not very clear to us in what respect the religious symbol is supposed to be similar. These are some of the questions that Tillich's doctrine of symbolism invite and for this reason, Hick says that although valuably suggestive, this teaching scarcely constitutes a fully articulated philosophical position.

To conclude, we affirm that every human race have an idea of God in one way or the other. This idea is expressed in human language understandable to the users. However, although these references to God have a basis in human experience, they are ultimately used in a different way from their secular usage. There is ambivalence in their usage:

same yet different. This is what St. Thomas called analogy and Tillich calls symbolism. Both of them have a legacy for philosophy of religion in assisting us to solve the issue of religious language. At least we have somewhere to begin from in analysing religious language. Certainly the issue is far from finished - *aluta continua*.

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