

**RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE AND THE PROBLEM OF MEANINGFULNESS:
TOWARDS A RECONCILIATION OF SUPERNATURALISM AND
ANTHROPOMORPHISM**

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Abstract

The paper examines the age-long problem of religious language which centers on the propositions that words used for finite creatures cannot adequately apply for infinite being without apparently making such a being less than whom he truly is; and that human language is anthropomorphic and as such cannot be used to describe the supernatural world without apparent difficulties. The philosophical school that favours this argument is logical positivism which faults religious language for lack of the principles of verifiability and falsifiability. Other approaches such as: pragmatism, human-moral, contextual, symbolism, equivocal, univocal and analogical argue in favour of the meaningfulness of religious language. The paper strongly argues for the latter. To achieve this, a discursive and analytical approach is used in analyzing data gathered through practical life experiences and reading of philosophical texts. The paper argues that religious language like any other field of human endeavour is a specialized language of religion that serves for purpose of effective communication and dissemination of religious thoughts, ideas and messages. Hence, its meaningfulness or otherwise should be based on its psychological, moral and socio-economic significance and not on the principles of verifiability and falsifiability. It also argues that the meaningfulness or otherwise of any religious assertion does not depend upon the utterance itself but on the hearer because the state of mind of the individual in terms of whether he is a believer or unbeliever also counts.

Keywords: Religious language, problem of meaningfulness, reconciliation, anthropomorphism, supernaturalism.

Introduction

It is a fact that every human endeavour has its own specialized language and terminologies that serve for purpose of effective communication and dissemination of thoughts, ideas and messages. The same is applicable in religion. In fact, as a field of human endeavour, religion is characterized by its own specialized language usually referred to as “religious language”. By definition, the term “religious language” refers to religious assertions or claims

made about God or gods. It could also refer to propositions used in expressing, ascribing, or attributing certain human attributes to God or gods. This could manifest in form of commandments, questions, moral judgments, historical statements, praise, prayer, and so on (Sturch, 1998:579). Ordinarily, this should not pose any serious problem since every human profession is undeniably marked by some forms of specialized terminologies. However, the fact that words or attributes used for finite creatures cannot adequately apply for infinite being without apparently making the latter less than whom he truly is, constitutes a philosophical problem. Also, the fact that human language is a derivative of humans to describe the natural world (anthropomorphism) and not the transcendent or metaphysical world (supernaturalism) poses another difficulty. This therefore, is a typical philosophical problem of religious language that challenges us to articulate the degree to which words or attributes used for finite beings can apply adequately for the infinite being without any form of ambiguity. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which religious language can be meaningful. To achieve this, the paper adopts the discursive and analytical approach and the entire discussion is based on personal life experiences and reading made from philosophical texts. Also, for purpose of simplicity, we shall begin by conceptualizing this problem through examination of extant approaches to the issue.

Conceptualizing the Problem of Religious Language

Generally, the problem of religious language has been variously theorized by scholars. One of the most influential approaches is the *logical positivists'* position. According to Brown (1968), this approach is an anti-metaphysical movement that has roots in David Hume's empirical skepticism of the eighteenth century. Logical positivists used "verification principle" as the chief tool for measuring propositions that are meaningful from those that are not. It is believed in this approach that the meaning and real nature of a proposition is disclosed by its method of verification or lack of it. Thus, it is argued that since religious propositions cannot be adequately verified, then it follows that they are meaningless. A leading figure of the logical positivism approach is Ayer (1946:144) who argues that a "sentence is factually significant to any given person if and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express". However, Ayer is quick to make a distinction between practical verifiability and verifiability in principle noting that whereas the former may not be possible due to certain difficult circumstances, the latter is possible in the future (1946:199).

As a response to the logical positivistic position, Hick (1993) maintains that religious propositions are meaningful since they are eschatologically verifiable. He notes for example that religious propositions such as “God exists” or “there is life after death” could be verified at the long run by the individual when he or she dies. Thus, for him, religious statements are meaningful because they are verifiable in principle. This position is also supported by Swinburne (2000:151) who on his part has argued that the premise under which weak verification is formulated is faulty. Therefore, he upholds that metaphysical assertions about God cannot be totally seen as meaningless. In the same vein, Church (1949:53) has debunked the principle of verification claiming that it is self-contradictory because all statements are verifiable. Even the possibility of eschatological verification has been questioned by Omoregbe (1993:183) who has faulted logical positivists’ position on two major grounds. The first is that eschatological verification is at its best conditional. For example, if there is no life after death, the individual will not be able to verify whether or not God actually exists. Second, is that empirical verification alone is inadequate to serve as a litmus test for the meaningfulness of a phenomenon. Therefore, he believes that personal religious experiences that are life changing also count. Brown (1968:174) has even contended further that the problem with logical positivism is the fact that the verification principle itself had not been verified.

Aside the logical positivists’ approach, there has emerged another view that could be termed *pragmatists’ approach*. In this view, the meaningfulness of a religious statement is defined in terms of its practical usefulness. Accordingly, it holds that a statement is meaningless if what it asserts is in no way related to human life. But if the assertion of a proposition is related to human life and can have practical effects on the lives of people then it is meaningful as Omoregbe (1993:183) points out. This gives room for religious and metaphysical propositions. Accordingly, by this point of view, the meaningfulness of a proposition should not be measured by its empirical verification only. But its usefulness and relation to human life. Religious propositions by this view can be meaningful provided, it is useful and has positive effect in the life of the individual. However, a leading philosopher, Antony Flew (1923-) using the criteria of positivists’ approach on the meaningfulness of religious language, contends that the meaningfulness of religious language, like scientific and other factually meaningful statements should be based on its falsifiability tendency and since believers are unable to specify falsification conditions for their claims

then those claims should be considered not only as false but also as cognitively meaningless (Flew, 1966:chapter 2 cited by Seven et al 2001:374). What this means is that religious language lacks falsifiable criteria and as such cannot pass reasonability test of meaningfulness of language. Omoreregbe (1993) explains that Flew's view strongly implies that theological propositions actually say nothing and that such conclusion was possibly drawn on the basis that an assertion can always be negated by another assertion which the former assertion itself denies. For example, if one declares: "he loves his child", then he may be implicitly admitting that "he is un-cruel to his child". The argument may also be applicable to a religious statement such as: if God loves children with fatherly love, yet they die of hunger, diseases, earthquakes, etc., what could have happened if he does not love them? This view also finds expression in Basil Mitchel (1917-) who on his part admits that religious assertions are not straightforwardly falsifiable but notes that in discussing issues of religious assertions, the role of fruit and commitment must be taken into cognizance when searching for various circumstances that could be considered as falsifying a belief (Seven et al 2001:374).

Adding to this, John Scotus Eriugenna and Pseudo-Dionysius, both medieval philosophers have submitted to Flew's position as Geisler and Feinberg (1980:305) noted. Accordingly, they argue that religious assertions such as "God loves mankind, God is merciful, God is righteous, and God is just", etc. do not apply to God the same way they apply to human beings because God's love in this sense is "supra-love" as Eriugenna calls it, or "supra-essential love" as Dionysius terms it. By this they mean it transcends human love. Thus, it follows that the statement "God loves mankind" is a pseudo-statement, which tells us nothing. This is because we do not know what God's love is. The implication of this as Geisler and Feinberg (1980:305) observe is that religious statements are pseudo-statements. Plotinus cited by Geisler and Feinberg (1980:306) has even stretched the issue further by arguing that religious language is negative of who God is. For example, he argues that all our statements about God have a duality whereas God is one in essence.

A slight shift from logical positivists and pragmatists' approaches is the one we may fittingly term *human-moral* approach. Roughly, this approach does not seek to dismiss the relevance of religious propositions, instead it admits that religious assertions can indeed be meaningful but only within the spheres of human and moral perspectives. For example, Feuerbach cited by Omoregbe (1993:190) hypothesizes that concepts used for God are actually referring to man's perfect

nature projected outside man. By this, he means that any proposition about God is actually a proposition about man's perfect nature. In this light, a religious statement such as "God is infinitely good" would infer that "man's perfect nature is infinitely good". Also, a religious assertion such as "God is all wise", will mean that "man's perfect nature is endowed with wisdom". In this way, Feuerbach does not subscribe to the fact that religious propositions are metaphysical or supernatural sayings with earthly meanings. The difficulty with Feuerbach's position as Omoregbe (1993:190-91) observes, is that it falls prey of attempting to reduce theology to anthropology which in turn reduces religious language to anthropological language. Hinging on the moral aspect of religious assertions, Braithwaite (1996:60-63) on a similar note argues that religious assertions or beliefs are essentially moral assertions and that the primary purpose of religious assertions is to announce allegiance to a set of moral principles. Hence, he notes that to say that "God is love" for example is not really to assert anything about transcendent being but to express a moral virtue. Therefore, it is arguable drawing inferences from Braithwaite's position that a religious language may be meaningful in relation to its moral relevance. The real difficulty here if this is taken as a *prima facie* position is that it limits the meaningfulness of religious assertions to moral relevance, thereby leaving no room for other spheres of life as well.

Perhaps, the last approach that requires examination in this work may best be referred to as *contextualism* approach. Roughly stated, this approach is so termed because it holds that religious propositions are meaningful to the extent to which they are interpreted within their respective contexts. Omoregbe (1993:94-95) links the origin of this approach to Wittgenstein who in his book, *Philosophical Investigations*, criticized and rejected his earlier theory of language in the *Tractatus* and argues that each language is like a game with its own rules governing its use (Wittgenstein, 1953:258f). The implication of this position is that the meaning of any word is to be found within the context in which it is used, that is, in the language of its use. Explaining further some scholars posit that by this Wittgenstein and his followers were of the view that the meaning of terms should be drawn from their role in a whole "language game" (Wittgenstein, 1953:258f cf. Seven et al 2001:374). This means that religious assertions can be meaningful within the context of religious faith. Based on this, scholars like Brown (1968) have identified two undeniable facts about religious assertions: one, that there is a genuine intelligible gap between believers and unbelievers and that religious assertions appear unintelligible to unbelievers

precisely because they are unbelievers; two, that religious statements or religious claims must be understood (only) within the context of the religious faith in which they are made (Brown 1968; also see Omoregbe, 1993:200). Clearly, this approach is a major step forward on the issue of whether or not religious propositions are meaningful. If religious language can only be used by believers, then at least the ambiguity associated with it would be completely eliminated. However, this is not always the case. Believers and unbelievers within the same or different contexts interact where several religious assertions are made daily. How then should the unbeliever who has this intelligible gap be made to come to grip with the reality of religious propositions? This approach does not equally answer the question of whether attributes used for humans could also be used for God without apparently making him (God) less than who he truly is. Therefore, the problem of religious language remains unanswered still. In fact, the problem is been compounded by these approaches. In nutshell, all the approaches considered above only address an aspect of the problem of religious language. A more realistic approach that is therefore required. But what is this approach? And how should the problem of meaningfulness of religious language be fully addressed? These questions will be examined in the next section.

A Reconciliation of the Meaningfulness and Non-meaningfulness of Religious Language

Are religious assertions meaningful giving the fact that they are a creation of finite beings to describe infinite being? This question will be addressed using two approaches. The first approach will involve analyzing scholarly views who have attempted to address the problem of religious language apologetically while the second will be a more simplistic and practical approach using daily life experiences.

Christian Scholars Approach

First, Paul Tillich (1886-1965), a Christian scholar has tried to address the problem of religious language by approaching it from the point of view of *symbolism* (Tillich, 1955). Thus, he argues that it is difficult to understand religious language literally, without taking into cognizance its symbolical meaning. Tillich arrives at this conclusion because he believes that there are levels of reality that cannot be known empirically and it is religious symbols that can unravel these levels of reality to us and a perfect example in this respect is divine reality (Seven et al, 2001:379). Moreover, he maintains that all statements about God are symbolic with the exception of the statement "God is being itself".

He argues that the differences between a symbol and a sign is such that the former is intrinsically connected to the reality it represents while the latter is something unconventional, that is, it has no intrinsic relation with the reality it represents as Hick (1993) explains. Therefore, when terms are used, for God, its true meaning should be found in symbolism. But as Omoregbe (1993) notes in his critique against Tillich's position, that there are no concepts derived from human experience that can directly, properly, adequately and accurately apply to God. Therefore, it is not clear whether Tillich's contention that "God is being" is not symbolic in itself. Clearly, the concept of being, like all other concepts, is a derivative of human experience. On this note, the limitation of Tillich's position then is that of self-contradiction. Perhaps, a theory of complete or absolute symbolism of religious language could have been a possible alternative, rather than this partial symbolic nature of religious language. So why Tillich's position is definitely helpful, it is however, characterized by the limitation of self-contradiction or inconsistency. Ramsey (1957:61&62) has attempted to address the problem associated with Tillich's symbolism by arguing that language functions like a *working model*. Ramsey argues that in the context of religious language, a model is a situation with which we are familiar, and which can be used in describing another situation with which we are not so familiar; one which without the models, we should not recognize so easily; and such models are often accompanied by what he calls qualifiers. It should be stated that while Ramsey's proposition appears helpful in understanding what symbolism represents, it remains unclear whether he is advocating for a partial or absolute theory of symbolism because a change of name from symbol to a model does not address the fact that religious assertions are human creations that may not fittingly apply for infinite being.

Given this persistent enigma, other scholars have opted for a theory of *equivocality* of religious language. Roughly stated, this teaches that the meaning of words used to describe God are entirely different from the way they apply to human beings (Weed (2007). For example, a religious statement such as "God is good" may not apply to God in the same sense that "God is good" applies to the President of Nigeria. Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon (Maimonides) is a strong proponent of this school of thought. Maimon strongly advocates that the solution to the problem of religious language lies in negations or denials of attributing qualities or relations to God (Maimon (1963). For example, one could say, "God is not a body" but one cannot declare correctly, that "God is merciful". Thus for him, we can only say what God is not and what actions he performs, rather than

what God truly is. Similarly, Maimon argues that all scriptural references to God's body part are to be interpreted anthropomorphically (Maimon, 1963). His view has been endorsed and defended by Austyn and Seeskin (2005). One standard objection to maimonides' view is that, it is incompatible with religious practices of Judaism and with those of other monotheistic religions. Most outstanding is Aquinas, who completely rejects this view, stating that it undermines religious practices by invalidating demonstrations about God. His pessimism could be attributed to his doctrine of divine simplicity (Aquinas, 1948). Against this backdrop, some scholars have opted for what is best known as the *univocality* principle of language.

As a principle, the theory of univocal language holds that religious language has the same meaning when use in reference to God and when used in reference to human beings (Alston1989). For example, to say that "God is good" is to be conceived as conveying the same sense as the "President is good" or the "Priest is good". William Alston is one of the most celebrated modern advocates of this theory. However, Alston is skeptical to endorse absolute univocalicity, instead recognizes that divine otherness, especially divine incorporeality would exclude complete univocalicity. This is because as Alston (1989:65) observes, two different things could potentiality possess the same abstract feature in different ways (Alston, 1989a:65). Quite clearly, it should be argued that this theory appears helpful but a careful consideration of it will immediately bring to the fore two limitations. One, is that this theory of univocalicity appears inconsistent with historical religious traditions. Two, it points to a condition where God shares equality with human beings and this is entirely problematic.

Another relevant theory known as the *doctrine of analogy* which appears to be a midway position between equivocal and univocal views on the meaningfulness of religious language is given by Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) in his most celebrated work, *Summa Theologiae*. Roughly stated, the theory of analogy deriving ultimately from Aristotle, centers on how it is possible to speak meaningfully about God using human language (Seven et al, 2001:371). More precisely, the theory of analogy is a general theory that plunges into ways we can actually extend meaningful discourse from our daily human experiences to metaphysical circumstances (Seven et al, 2001:371). As a result, Aquinas' submission is that when terms are used to describe God and his attributes, those terms can also be used to describe humans in the same sense but they confer different things. Aquinas grounds his theory of analogy in the causal relation he

believes obtains between God and creatures using the following argument as a necessary condition for it:

Human beings name things as they know them.

Human beings know God from creatures.

God causes the existence of creatures, and

Creatures resemble God just as an effect resembles its agent cause (Aquinas, 1948).

The implication of Aquinas' doctrine of analogy is that when we say for example that "God is good", then it means that goodness is found in God the same way that goodness is found in the President when we say the "President is good" but in a different mode and to a different degree. Therefore, such a religious claim as "God is good" would not only be a true statement but a meaningful one as well. In fact, the adjective "good" primarily applies to God than to creatures because goodness is an attribute of God given to creatures via the causal relationship. This position also finds strong support in contemporary Christian philosophers like McInerney (1996). It is important to earmark that though Aquinas' approach is a major breakthrough, it still has an undeniable limitation associated with it. For example, a critical consideration will show that the doctrine of analogy requires a metaphysics that most contemporary philosophers would find problematic. For instance, to what extent can his belief in causal relation between creatures and God be validated? Notwithstanding, in comparison with the rest approaches and their respective disadvantages, Aquinas makes a strong case in favour of the meaningfulness of religious language. But this need to be complemented by a more practical experience approach.

A Practical Experience Approach

A complementary case can be further made for the meaningfulness of religious language using our daily life experiences. First, experience has shown that religious statements, for instance, those of the Christian religion can provide serious psychological benefits during moments of bereavement. For example, it is common knowledge that during moments of death of loved-ones, spiritual care-givers namely, priests and pastors usually help members of bereaved families to overcome their shock with such religious assertions as: 'may the Lord comfort you', 'it is well with you', 'God will take care of you', and so on. Observably, these religious assertions are known to have actually provided such expected psychological relief for members of such families who lost their loved ones. Perhaps, this explains why families with known religious faith easily

overcome overwhelming psychological trauma than those without any known religious faith (atheists). This happens because such religious assertions have significant psychological benefits for members of religious faith. Hence, it is safe to argue that religious language is meaningful.

Aside that, experience has also revealed that religious assertions can positively influence moral behaviours in the lives of members of religious faith. This is so because religious assertions as Braithwaite (1996:60-63) observes are also essentially moral assertions that primarily seek to announce allegiance to a set of moral principles. In fact, some major religions of the world like Christianity and Islam have teachings about heaven, hell and ultimate judgement that are central to their doctrines. These teachings anticipate an ultimate judgement in which the righteous shall be rewarded with heaven (paradise) and the immoral rewarded with hell (burning fire). The Christian Holy Bible in particular is replete with such instances of ultimate judgement (cf. Matt. 25:1ff; Rev. 21 and 22). The significance of such teachings is that it has the tendency of provoking right actions and good behaviours among individuals which will eventually translate into development of society. This fact is well captured by Barro and McClearly (2003:773) and McClearly and Barro (2006:67) who in their survey on the influence of religion on economic activities observed that belief in hell potentially contributed to economic growth. This happens because while belief in heaven could motivate citizens to embrace good morals, the fear of hell and ultimate judgement can potentially constrain them from doing what is wrong thereby producing individuals with increase moral consciousness in our society. This is possible only through religious assertions.

Lastly and closely related to the above is the fact that religious assertions can also promote socio-economic benefits. This cuts across all major religions of the world, especially Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The Christian Bible in particular, is replete with religious statements about godliness and contentment, self-sacrifices, and moderation, which have direct link to socio-economic development. For example, a religious statement such as: "what would it profit a person if he gains the whole world and then loses his own soul?" (Mk. 8:36), certainly cautions against wanton accumulation of material and economic resources and seeks to project a society in which individuals place maximum priority on living a life of material contentment, self-sacrifices and moderation (cf. 1Tim.6:6,10; 1Thes. 4:11-12 and 2 Thes. 3:10-12). The idea behind contentment is that of self-satisfaction with whatever one rightfully or lawfully owns rather

than being notoriously insatiable with economic and material resources. What this implies is that lack of contentment can lead to abuses and mismanagement of economic and material resources. Self-sacrifice on the other hand, connotes a phenomenon in which personal benefits are deliberately and decisively forgone for purpose of national interest and economic development. As Koko (2010:87) observes, self-sacrifice can help to create a society devoid of corruption, nepotism, bribery, antagonism, and insecurity and this could translate into socio-economic development. And this is possible only in part by religious assertions. In this light, therefore, it is absolutely instructive to argue that religious assertions are not meaningless as some have hypothesized, instead, they are unquestionably meaningful.

Conclusion

In this paper, efforts have been made to defend the meaningfulness of religious language against philosophical views which conceive it as meaningless on the ground that it is a human creation and as such cannot accurately describe metaphysical issues without apparent difficulties. The paper argues that religious language like any other field of human endeavour is a specialized language of religion that serves for purpose of effective communication and dissemination of thoughts, ideas and messages within the spectrum of religion but which practical relevance cuts across psychological, moral and socio-economic spectra. The paper also argues that the meaningfulness or otherwise of any religious assertion does not depend upon the utterance itself but on the hearer, as well as the practical relevance it has for our daily lives. Also, the state of mind of the individual in terms of whether he is a believer or unbeliever also counts. The true meaning of any religious assertion can only come to lime light when these factors are considered within the context of religious faith. Therefore, the fault then does not lie on the religious proposition as such but on the outsider who has no knowledge of this area of specialization.

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