<u>"All Religious Language is meaningless"</u>

Religious language poses a distinct and complicated problem for philosophers. At our disposal we only have human language and transient terms, which we use as tools to describe the world around us. How then do we use these tools, which relate to the temporary and spatial world, to describe that which is beyond the limits of space and time? Believers have strived for ways to talk meaningfully about God and many theories have been put forward to attempt at enabling us to discuss the transcendent, yet we are often at risk of anthropomorphising God with statements such as 'God Loves me' and even if we do not attribute human description to God there are still problems, the most prominent is whether any thing we say can actually be *meaningful*.

We can look at language, especially religious language, from one of two stand points; the realist and the anti-realist. The realist understands truth as verification transcendent; a statement can only be held to be true if it corresponds to an actual reality, it does not matter if the statement cannot be verified as true, as long as it corresponds to the state of affairs it is referring to. Realists are also cognitive thinkers and bivalent, they believe statements are either true or false, even if we cannot determine which, but that ultimately things either *are*, or they *aren't.* In comparison to Realism we have anti-realists. Their understanding of what it means to be 'true' differs from that of a realist; instead of a statement being truth if it corresponds to an actual reality, a statement can be held as true if it is accepted within a community, this theory of coherence maintains that truth is subjective to individuals and communities, if a statement about God is understood to be true within a form of life then it should be seen as true, whether or not it corresponds with the state of affairs is irrelevant. Consequently when an anti-realists says a statement such as 'god exists' this means that to them and within their frame work of life and their beliefs, god exists, and thus the statement for them is meaningful. Meaning lies in interpretation and the difference between realism and anti realism is precisely this; the interpretation. If one adopts a realist stand point, especially that of a naïve realist, it may be said that language is meaningless as we can never know that what it refers to really truly exists. If we look at it from an anti-realist point of view, whether it refers to a true state of affairs is irrelevant and thus a statement *is* meaningful because it means something to that community and affects them accordingly.

Meaning and verification have often been linked by philosophers trying to analyse statements about God. In the beginning of the 20th century two streams of thought arose, the verificationists and following this, the falsificationist. These theories sum up the basic problems with making religious statements meaningful. The verification principle was concerned with the distinction between sense and non sense, and how this affected meaning. For verificationists it is irrelevant whether a statement is true, the important factor lies in whether the statement is meaningful. In short the Verification principle stipulates that only assertions which could be verified through observation or experience could convey factual information and thus be meaningful. However the verification principle contained within itself its own downfall and with the death of the logical positivism, the falsification debate arose. Propounded by Antony Flew in the 1950s, the Falsification principle seems to be the opposite of its predecessor, where the verification

principle states that for an assertion to be meaningful it must be proved. The falsification principle, on the other hand, specifies that the grounds on which it can be un-proved must be established before it is accepted as meaningful. It would seem if one takes these conclusions then religious language is indeed meaningless. However both of these theories eventually fall, the claim, that religious language is meaningless again is unfounded, both theories misunderstand the nature of religious language. It is non cognitive and its purpose is not to make factual statements, but to be used within a religious context and environment.

Centuries before the works of the Vienna circle and of Flew, Thomas Aquinas sought to making religious language meaningful with the use of analogy. He first rejected univocal, equivocal and the Via Negativa. Univocal language is meaningless as it employs the same term in a completely different sense; it is ambiguous and therefore tells us nothing about God. The use of equivocal language, which is still often used by some believers, also fails to give us any real understanding of God, the words used to describe God's attributes share the same meaning when applied human beings and so we begin to anthropomorphise God. Thus we return to the original problem of using, transient language to discuss the transcendent. An answer to this could lie in the use of the Via Negative, or negative way, in which case we cannot say what god *is* but we can say what God *isn't*. Yet this isn't very useful and certainly is unhelpful if we aim to make any real meaningful statements about God, we may be able to state that God is not x, y or Z but we are still no closer to understand what god is. In an attempt to overcome this original problem Aquinas proposed the use of an analogy. The analogy of attribution states that as God created humans, our qualities of love and goodness must be derived from God, they are connected and so in some way this enables us to use them in reference to God, as he must have whatever qualities are necessary to inspire and create love, justice and goodness in his creation. Following this there is also the analogy of proportion, God is good at whatever it takes for God to be perfectly good and to be God. Ramsay spoke of models and qualifiers, we use human models such as 'good' and qualify them with another word to show they apply differently, such as 'infinitely good'. Yet analogy does not provide a satisfactory way to talk meaningfully about God, it seems to be a compromise between univocal and equivocal language. Aquinas himself admitted that 'we know *that* God is, but not *what* God is'. So to the atheist or agnostic there is still difficulty in talking meaningfully about God, or reaching common ground when discussing religious beliefs.

If then straight language fails, perhaps we can use symbol. In an attempt to overcome that which cannot be cognitized so easily symbol has been used for thousands of years, the cross for example is recognizable as a symbol of Christianity. Yet the point is not that it just helps to indicate a Christian place of worship or a Christian person, but that it stimulates further ideas relevant to the original symbol. The cross represents Jesus' death and thus forgiveness, salvation, an after life and other key Christian ideas. The believer thus identifies and participates in the symbol, it helps one to focus on what it represents and furthers are knowledge of what it means. Myth could be used in the same way we use symbol, as a non literary, non cognitive tool to discuss God with. Myths have been used for millennia to convey human ideas which are not so easily cognitized, they are not

meant to be taken literally as they are supposed to convey ideals and that which cannot be expressed using straight language. It is not the literal myth which is significant it is the message, or meaning behind it.Yet there is still a problem here, we still arrive at the same problem; symbol and myth mean different things to different people. Symbol can be trivialised, and often become the focus of worship themselves as well as becoming outdated and, as with language, misunderstood. However myths and symbols are subjective and aren't supposed to convey facts, they have been used by biblical writers for thousands of years, as Erika Dinker Van Schubert states "symbol expresses what is beyond rational recognition" and this also follows for myth.

Despite numerous solutions religious language still remains a difficult issue. All theories propounded to enable us to talk about God meaningfully essentially all come back to the same problem- *interpretation*. Human language is subjective whereas that which we wish to discuss is an objective reality. Religious believers do not deny that the problem exists and have strived to find solutions, whether or not God exists is unrelated; the point is that we need a common basis in which to discuss the ultimate human idea. However this is not so easy to achieve, the only thing we have at hand to discuss God is human language, there is nothing else we can use beyond this. But as Wittgenstein puts it, we are misunderstanding religious believers; they are playing a different language game to that of science, with different rules. And so religious language may not be meaningful in the same way a scientific fact meaningful and true, but, as the anti realist would state, this is irrelevant. In terms of the community the statement affects their lifestyle and beliefs and so is in every way significant. The meaning of any given statement is contained in the way it is used and its context, we may not ever reach a fully agreed, universal way, to discuss God, yet that does not inhibit a religious statement being personally meaningful for the individual.