

"Religious language is meaningless."

Discuss.

Religious language is the communication of ideas about God, faith, belief and practice. The problem with religious language is that individuals have different interpretations of these concepts and will result in a difference in the use of everyday language. For some it is deemed meaningless because it is equivocal and the meaning is unclear. Yet, for some philosophers, religious language is meaningful and serves a purpose.

Some deem religious language meaningless as there is no way of verifying the language. Others see the language from a different perspective to religious believers, and this allows non-believers to have an open mind about religious language. There are several different types of language related to religion; cognitive and non-cognitive, synthetic and analytical, univocal and equivocal. Synthetic, non-cognitive and equivocal apply to religious language as everyone has a different opinion on things and we can gain a better knowledge to say what God is not rather than saying he is everything. Religious language is meaningful because we don't know how to falsify it. John Hick mentioned religious language was seen as believing in something and experiencing something.

The logical positivists formulated the verification principle and they were concerned with the meaning of words and the way we use them in the context of God. They believe God's talk was meaningless as they are metaphysical statements. They believed for a statement to be deemed meaningful we had to be able to verify the truthhood through our empirical senses.

A. J. Ayer, who was a supporter of the Verification Principle, said a proposition is meaningful if it is known how to prove it true or false. If such verification cannot take place, they become meaningless. He stated there were two types of the verification principle, the strong form and the weak form. The weak verification principle is knowing how to verify a statement. It would become meaningful if you know how to do this. The strong form of the verification principle was being able to prove something true or false through sense experience. Ayer also said to reject analytical statements would be illogical because you cannot try to disprove something that is actually true as you would be contradicting yourself.

Many philosophers challenged the verification principle and rejected it. A main critic was John Hick. He said the principle itself is not meaningful because it cannot be verified using the verification principle. Hick argued when we die the truth of God's existence will be verified either true or false. This is known as the eschatological verification. It can only be verified the day we die.

Anthony Flew put forward the falsification principle. Falsification means to prove something true or false. The falsification principle accepts a statement is verifiable if it is known what empirical evidence could count against it and prove it wrong.

▲Anthony Flew concluded statements are meaningless as there is nothing to count against religious statements. Religious statements cannot be proved true or false because religious believers don't accept any evidence against their belief. Flew argued that Christians hold to their belief that God is good. The believers give reasons why God remains good and Flew stated these constant qualifications render religious statements meaningless because they die the "death of a thousand qualifications." He used John Wisdom's the Parable of the Gardener to back up his argument. The parable is about two people viewing the results of one garden. The garden is full of weeds as it has lacked attention for a very long time. One day, two people see that the garden has been cared for and the weeds have gone and been replaced with plants. One says a gardener must have come into the garden during the night when everybody was sleeping and cared for the weeds as they had now turned into plants. The other man disagreed and stated there couldn't have been a gardener because no one had seen or heard him in the garden. If there had been a gardener he would have cared for all of the weeds and not left some. The first man who believes there had been a gardener believes there is a God whereas the man who believed there had been no gardener doesn't believe in God.

There are several critics of the falsification principle. Richard Swinburne says religious statements are non cognitive, and there are statements we cannot falsify but we have the ability to understand the meaning behind the statement. He used the example of the toy in the cupboard. He said we can never prove that the toys come out of the cupboard at night and move around when we are not watching them. Even though we cannot falsify the fact as to whether toys move or not, we can still understand the ideas of the toys moving. Even though we haven't seen God we have the knowledge to believe God does exist. Therefore the statements are meaningful as we know how to falsify them. Basil Mitchell wanted to show how religious statements are meaningful even if they are not straight forward to verify or falsify. He said Flew missed the point that believers have a commitment to trust in God based on their faith, and for this reason they do not allow evidence to undermine their faith. Mitchell says they look for answers to prove to themselves God exists. He also mentioned the death of a thousand qualifications.

R. M. Hare stated falsification can be used for cognitive statements but it cannot be used for non cognitive statements because religious language cannot be falsified but it doesn't mean it has no meaning. He used the example of the student. The student was convinced dons were going to kill him and he wouldn't accept any evidence against them not wanting to kill him. Even though he wouldn't accept any evidence against his belief, it is meaningful to him because of what he thought. Hare also went on to say that looking at the world in this way is seen as a "blik." Religious beliefs are bliks because of the impact they have on every individual's life and the way believers look at their lives that is different to somebody else's.

R. B. Braithwaite wanted to prove religious language has a purpose because it has the function of conveying ideas and in itself makes it meaningful. He said the errors of the Verification and Falsification Principles had been to treat religious language as cognitive language when it is actually non cognitive. As it is based on our emotions, it can be very hard to prove something meaningful based on emotions as everyone's emotions are different.

Saint Thomas Aquinas argued that we only have our day to day language which we can use to talk about God. We understand when a word is applied to God; it has a different meaning from its everyday use as we understand God is perfect. Therefore we are using analogies.

There have been some critics who argued there has to be a comparative element to any human language used to describe God. This is impossible as God is beyond any true human understanding. Analogies are meaningless in describing God as they are limiting God to what he actually is. Aquinas disagreed. He argued there is a relationship between the world and God. God created the world and sustains it so there is a clear comparison. He went on to develop two forms of analogy to talk about God. Analogy of proportion and analogy of attribution. Analogy of proportion is where the analogy is understood in each case as proportional to the nature of the being. We have to put God in proportion to ourselves to understand how everything works. Analogy of attribution relates to the belief that God created and sustains the world. It is because of this belief we can talk of human qualities. In some way those qualities can be applied back to God. We can talk up to God using the same language. The only problem about the two analogies is they only work if you have previous knowledge of God. If you believe God is omnipotent, omniscience etc, it makes perfect sense to use an analogy. However, without these assumptions it becomes less convincing.

Ian Ramsey developed the term analogy using terms: model and qualifier. Model has a straight forward meaning when it is applied to ordinary things which we experience but it is also used to describe God. We know what the term creator means and by an analogy we can use this word it to god and describe him. However, under no circumstances should no model be taken literal or univocal about God. Qualifier is the way in which the model is developed. Therefore a qualifier is essential. This is a word in which it shows how the word is applied to God. The qualifier is to make clear it is enhanced infinitely when applied to God. It demonstrates greatness in the quality when applied to God.

Paul Tillich and J. R. Randall had similar ideas concerning religious language. Tillich used ordinary language to point to God but spoke of the words used as symbols. He distinguished between a sign and a symbol. A sign is a conventional way of pointing to something, e.g. a road sign. A symbol is something that stands or is used in place of something else. Tillich held God could only be described using symbols but never literally. He said the symbol is transcending meaning something in it's own sense which points to something greater of higher in reality.

J. R. Randall sees religious language as a human activity which makes a special contribution to human culture. Religious language has a very unique function. It is able to stir strong emotion and to bind communities together through a common response to their faith.

Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that the meaning of words is in their use, the function they use as agreed by a particular group or society using them. He said every activity has their own unique language and Wittgenstein regarded this rather like a game with its own set of rules. Language games exist within all forms of human activities and lives.

He said people who are not in the game will not understand the use of the language and will find it meaningless to them. Religious belief has its own language and non believers will find religious language meaningless as they are not in the religious "game." Problems develop when the language "goes on holiday." This is when words are used outside of their context and we use ordinary language to describe God. This should never happen.

Wittgenstein has acquired some critics to his theory. The first is that different faiths have a different language game and it is extremely difficult to share those differences between the religions. Secondly, all religious believers are involved in different language games in one way or another. Religious language has not become totally isolated so there must be a common ground between religious language and other language games. If there is a common ground, non believers are able to understand religious language and decide whether or not it has a meaning for them. Thirdly, non believers might be able to understand the language better than a religious believer as they have an objective view on the use of the religious language. Believers take the language for what it is and cannot be subject to anything else.

In conclusion, believers would agree it is difficult to talk about God. The meaning of the word God applies to a being beyond human understanding. Believers recognise that any discussion of God is limited, but they would argue religious language does have meaning and purpose.