Heritage COLLEGE & SEMINARY

Philosophy of Religion

Lecture 7 – The Nature of Religious Language

Anthropomorphism: God differs from creatures merely in degree, and there is no alteration in meaning when we apply words to him.

Agnosticism: God is so utterly different than us that we cannot hope to say anything intelligible about him.

In Act's 17:23, Paul is in Athens and witnessing to the philosophers on Mars Hill. Paul's usage of the term "unknown god" comes from the Greek, Agnosto, where we get the term agnostic, meaning unknowable or not recognizable. Thomas Henry Huxley, an English biologist, coined the term in 1869 and lifted it directly from Acts 17:23.

Thomas Aquinas (c. 1224-1274): We can only speak of God analogically. Predicating attributes to God does allow us to know him, but God is still utterly Other than us.

Two typical types of predication:
1) Univocally - with exactly the same meaning; or
2) Equivocally - with two completely different meanings.

When we say, "God is just", we mean neither that God is just exactly as humans are, nor that God's justice has nothing to do with our justice. Rather, we point to a similarity between God's justice and ours; they are somehow connected.

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- A third type of language is analogically applied to God. Our language, when applied to God through Analogical Predication, shows a similarity within difference and difference within similarity.
- Analogy is a normal part of human discourse and needs to be explained by any theory of language. However, religious language must account for how we can use analogies from things observably familiar to us, to describe God in invisible spiritual realities that are so far beyond us.
- Aquinas suggests a principle called the analogy of proper proportionality. God and creatures have qualities and engage in activities in proportion to their respective modes of being - Infinite and finite.

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- "God is wise" and "Socrates is wise" are similar statements and not equivocal. Yet they are not univocal because, Socrates is wise as human can be wise, while God is infinitely wise.

$$\frac{\text{God's Wisdom}}{\text{God's Infinite Nature}} = \frac{\text{Socrates' wisdom}}{\text{Socrates finite nature}}$$

- Fredrick Ferre argues that this theory doesn't work because there are two unknowns; God's wisdom and God's Infinite Nature.
- Ross rebuts this and argues that it mistakes a theory of meaning for a theory of inference (where analogy leads to some knowledge of God). Aquinas never intended his theory of meaning to be used to arrive at information about God.

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- Verifiable: The logical positivists (such as A. J. Ayer) argued, "A statement is a genuine factual assertion if, and only if, there could be empirically observable states of affairs that would show it to be either true or false (criterion of verifiability)."
- In other words, you have to be able to prove an assertion through empirical evidence if you claim something is said to be true. This means that any talk of God (theistic or atheistic) is cognitively meaningless.
- However, this verification principle cannot even meet its own standard. There is no empirical proof that you need empirical proof in order for something to be factually true.

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- Falsification: In order for something to be true, you should be able to identify the conditions under which it would be false. Anthony Flew argued that religious believers allow nothing to count against their claims of God … killing their own claims with a thousand qualifications.
- However, there are many beliefs that do not adhere to the falsification principle, including free will and the existence of other minds. John Hick shows that our present life is like a long road trip, and we will not be able to verify or falsify God-claims until our journey is over and we see that there is or is not a God.
- Theology does assert fact-claims about reality. We should not confuse questions of meaning with questions of truth. God-claims are not meaningless inherently, the question is whether or not they are actually true.

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- Functional Analysis: Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) argued that language has many important functions including Imperatives (commands), performatives (actions), and Interrogatives (questions).
- He argues that all speech acts are "language games." There are a variety of different linguistic activities, including ordering, describing, speculating, hypothesizing, presenting, storytelling, lay-acting, joking, asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying. Analysis of these functions applied to religious language intends to discover what tasks theological language performs.

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- R. B. BraithWaite (1900-1990) argued that religious statements are simply moral statements. They show the intention of the person saying them to live morally. However, this seems reductionistic, saying that religious speech into the language of morality embellished by stories.
- Donald Hudson argues that this violates the unique character and function of religious language.
- Paul van Buren argues that religious language is "at the edge of language," much like puns, poetry, and paradox. Society tries to keep us in the centre of language - science, economics, history, etc. – but this loses the richness of experience. Religious language is "edge-talk", not statements of historical fact but statements of faith (cf. Jesus' resurrection).

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- Linguistic Fideism: Faith is immune to external critique because it has its own private language that can only be understood from the inside. Focusing on the function of religious language can neglect its informed cognitive dimension. Religious language includes metaphysical, ethical, and historical statements of actual fact.
- "Religious language has its own inherent standards of precision and sayability, just as science does, without having to relinquish matters of precision of factual communication to science (275)."
- Religious Symbolism: Paul Tillich argues that the meaning of religious language cannot be literal; it must be symbolic. God is wholly other; God is not a being, but the Ground of Being. We cannot treat God as a being amongst others but as that which is beyond.

- Signs point beyond themselves to something else. Symbols, on the other hand, actually participates in the meaning and power of that which it symbolizes. Religious symbols participate in Ultimate Reality, in the Holy.

- They show the human mind they have a relationship with their own ground and meaning. Theological language helps us experience our ultimate concern. However, if we can interpret the meaning of religious symbols, does this not mean that there is a propositional literal content to them?

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- Feminism: God the father, has been literalized and absolutized. Patriarchy is forced upon all religious language.
- The Apophatic tradition says that God can only be named by what he is not. ("I am who I am"). God is not a physical being, not male, not more masculine than feminine.
- Rosemary Ruether argues we need to use inclusive language to describe God. Scripture itself uses feminine metaphors for God.
- Calvin: God manifested himself as both Father and Mother to the Jews. All language about God is metaphorical and thus we can use the image of "Mother" and "Friend" to help us understand God better, showing his Immanence, Nurture and Nature capacity.

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- William Alston: Our language is defective about God because it assumes a subject and its properties are separate, while God's simplicity says that his essence has no difference.
- However, we can still make literal statements about God because the concepts of love, knowledge, power, action, etc. do not necessarily involve creaturely conditions.
- Personalistic predicates are not incompatible with God's incorporeality, infinity, timelessness, simplicity, or radically Other Being.
- Both mental predicates and action predicates may be attributed to God because they do not conceptually require a body. It is not impossible to speak truly about God.