**“Religious language only makes sense when understood in terms of analogy.” Discuss**

The problem with religious language is whether we truly know what we mean by what we say about God and if our language is effectively demonstrating knowledge about God. Whilst some philosophers would argue that religious language has no meaning and therefore it cannot be understood, other philosophers such as Aquinas would argue that it is best understood in terms of analogy. This essay will ultimately conclude that religious language only makes sense when understood in terms of analogy.

The use of analogy is put forward by Aquinas, who rejects the use of univocal and equivocal language. Univocal language is when words have objective meanings, for example the word holy, due to its objective nature the word holy cannot be used to describe God because it does not show us the difference between us and God, who Aquinas sees as a greater being. Equivocal language is when words have a subjective meaning, for example the word good, it is different for each circumstance which it is applied to; a bat which is an animal or a bat which you hit the ball with in baseball. Therefore, Aquinas puts forward two types of analogy which can be used when talking about God.

The first is the analogy of attribution, this is the idea that the attributes of one thing can be applied to another. For example, a bread is good which implies the baker of that bread is good. Now if the baker is good, it means that the baker has good attributes and has transferred them when baking the bread. Though both are good, the attributes of goodness are different in each scenario. For example, the bread may be soft and taste nice, whilst this wouldn’t be logical to apply to the baker. We may say the baker is skilled and knows how to knead dough properly, these are the good attributes of the baker. In the same way we can say that “God is good” because God has transferred his attributes to us but the attributes we associate with God and humans are different. For example, God is good because he created the world and humans are good because they look after the world.

The second type is the analogy of proportion. The analogy of proportion is that we proportionate things so that we can apply them to God. We much understand that humans and God are completely different beings and due to limit of our language we can only talk about God using the language we know, however, it is important to understand that when talking about God our language means something different. An example to clarify this would be that plants have life, humans have life and God has life. Each completely different to one another. Plants having life is considered different to humans life and what the value of living is as a human. Therefore, in the same way God has life, but it is different to human life.

However, there are some issues that can be raised when using analogies. The first is that to proportionate things to God we must know something about God or about his nature. This goes against Christian views of God because God is seen as a mysterious being. If we are attempting to proportionate things to God how do we know we are proportionating things to the extent at which God is at. This seems to make the entire argument illogical because we are attempting to use language to talk about something we don’t understand. As well as this, we are unable to understand the meaning of the word good, therefore how are we able to understand what it means to call ourselves good and then stretch even further to calling God good, in order to be able to apply attributes to God we need to first understanding the meaning of our own language and description.

The use of analogies also anthromorphosies God. In an attempt to understand God and speak about God in a meaningful way which makes sense, we are still using human language and trying to compare him to things on earth and this doesn’t work because if we take the Judeo-Christian view of God, God is beyond us and we cannot find anything like him on earth to compare him to. Also, Philosophers who believe verification is the way to analyse religious language would argue that the use analogy is not verifiable by neither sense experience or logic therefore it is meaningless to discuss God using analogies.

Despite this, these weaknesses can be overcome by the strengths and show that the use of analogies allows for religious language to make sense. Understandably, the difficulties with using analogies is we have no idea what God’s nature is likely and therefore we cannot assume that we have the ability to proportionate. However, theologians would argue that the world around us reveals God’s nature through natural theology therefore we can somewhat understand the nature of God. If we see that nature is good then we can assume that God is good but on a completely different level to us. Some philosophers such as Moore argue that we intuitively know what is good so when we see good around us we automatically understand this is what good is, therefore we can understand good and attribute it to God.

Other philosophers may argue that this is a logical way to speak of God because it makes sense that if we are discussing a being that is external to the world that we attempt to understand that the laws of the world and the attributes of humans is not the best way to talk about the being. If we were to talk about a dog and a human in the same way it wouldn’t be right, so surely this is the same for God? We should not attempt to shrink him down to our nature. Many theologians also argue that this view is coherent with the ones presented in the Bible and at church therefore it holds up against religion.

To further demonstrate how religious language only makes sense when understood in terms of analogy we can look at an alternative view such as the via negativa (the negative way). This view comes from Psuedo Dionysius who argues that our language is limited and therefore we cannot speak about God by saying what he is, it is better to say what he isn’t. By this Dionysius means that rather than saying that God is good, we say what God isn’t, for example “God isn’t evil”, this reveals more about the nature of God than saying what he is. However, this argument isn’t coherent, because surely to understand what God isn’t, we must have previous knowledge of God. If we’re saying God isn’t evil then this idea cannot just have come from anywhere, it comes from the idea God is good and therefore the argument fails itself. The weakness of the via negativa highlights the strengths of the analogy because the use of analogy does not claim to not rely on the knowledge of God’s traits when it clearly does, using analogies makes more sense because it is more consistent.

Another weakness of the via negativa is that it attempts to demonstrate that God does possess certain attributes. However, it is possible that God doesn’t possess those attributes to that extent. However, when using analogies this doesn’t occur because Ramsey attempts to improve upon the use of analogies by arguing that we should use models and qualifiers, this is so that we don’t simply say “God is good” but we say that “God is infinitely good” which suggests that something completely different and demonstrates the difference because goodness in humans and God demonstrates the extent which God possess those attributes.

In conclusion, this essay demonstrates that the use of analogies is the most coherent view as it does not present problems like the via negativa has and religious language is best understood in terms of analogy because it allows us to use religious language but in a way where we can understand God as a greater being and not something similar to us.