Evaluate the view that issues in religious language are no longer relevant in the 21st Century. (30)

Although religion is in decline in the UK, this is not the case around the world and it remains a major global influence, which means that the question of whether it is meaningful to talk about religion is still important. Therefore, whether or not it remains a relevant issue in the 21st Century centres around whether the question has already been settled adequately one way or the other.

There was much debate about this issue in the 20th Century, when the Logical Positivists argued that if the verification principle were applied to religious language, it would show that it is meaningless. According to the verification principle, a statement only has meaning if it can be verified either analytically or synthetically. In other words, if it is logically true in itself, for example ‘all unmarried men are bachelors’ or if it can be proved empirically, for example ‘John is a bachelor’. Since religious language often deals with the metaphysical and cannot therefore be verified empirically, they concluded it is meaningless. At first glance, it may appear from this that the issue has been settled and is no longer relevant.

However, the ideas of the Logical Positivists have been challenged in a variety of ways which may suggest the issue is still ongoing. If applied strongly, the verification principle would rule out historical and universal scientific statements, which is clearly problematic. Ayer appeared to solve this problem with a weak version of the principle which argues that a statement is meaningful if we can say how we would prove it, even if we cannot do so now. However, this opened the way for John Hick to argue that religious statements can be verified in this way – they can be verified at the end of the world, an idea known as eschatological verification. So by this criterion, religious language can have meaning and the logical positivists have not convinced us otherwise.

In addition, many scholars have shown that religious language is not intended to be understood cognitively and the verification principle can only be applied to cognitive language. Using it to judge non-cognitive language is like judging a goldfish on how well it can climb a tree.

One such scholar is Paul Tillich, who along with JH Randall suggested that religious language has symbolic meaning. Tillich argued that symbols give us access to deep layers of meaning that help us to understand the things religious people believe in. Randall said that symbols have important functions on their own – they motivate us to act and create a sense of community, for instance.

Furthermore, as Aquinas and Ramsey have shown, religious language statements may have analogical meaning, where we use them to help us to approach an understanding of God. We may also understand it as mythological – not intended as factual but used to convey deeper meanings, such as Creation myths which convey the idea of God’s purpose in creation. If alternative meanings can be offered which help us to understand religious language in a non-cognitive way, then the logical positivists have not resolved the issue. It is true that none of these possible explanations for the meaning of religious language is perfect and can completely rebuff the logical positivists, however they introduce other possibilities and leave the matter open for debate. Moreover, since they cannot completely resolve the issue by convincing everyone that religious language has meaning, it remains a question to be discussed.

The falsification principle was another way in which the issue of the meaning of religious language may have been resolved in the 20th Century, thanks to scholars such as Anthony Flew. He argued that a statement is meaningless if the speaker is unwilling to accept the possibility that it is incorrect. He noted that many religious people refuse to give up on their beliefs despite great evidence to the contrary, for instance in the case of the problem of evil and suffering. However, Basil Mitchell refuted this argument with the Parable of the Partisan and the Stranger, showing it is rational for someone to refuse to concede that they are wrong. This cast doubt on the principle and it has therefore not resolved the issue.

Perhaps the best solution to the issue of religious language was offered by Wittgenstein, through language game theory. This shows that a statement can have meaning within a particular context but not outside it. It makes sense for religious people to talk about God’s omnibenevolence within the context of their beliefs, even though it does not make sense to those who do not share their beliefs. It can be argued, however, that this has not resolved the issue since there is still a barrier to universal understanding, and therefore to universal meaning, as those outside the ‘game’ cannot understand it.

In conclusion, it is clear that the issue of whether religious language can have meaning is still not resolved. Judging it cognitively, we can say it is meaningless, but many scholars have shown that there are non-cognitive ways to think of it. However, simply saying it is non-cognitive does not fully resolve the matter as there remains confusion within and between religions as to the meaning of religious language. A Roman Catholic and a Protestant referring to receiving the body of Christ in Holy Communion are not talking about the same thing, for instance. Since we are not convinced either way, the issue remains one to be resolved and is therefore still relevant in the 21st Century.

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