On the Nature of Religious Language

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It is a curiosity of our time that academic rhetoric shies from employing in any title the phrase, "on the nature of ---." In an age of metaphysical timidity it seems pretentious. Yet, if momentarily we exclude that rather doubtful sentiment, namely, a shrinking before metaphysical enquiry, there remains ample room for caution.

In the first place, responsible scholars properly pride themselves on a modest view of their hold on knowledge; and, secondly, a common sense all too proud of its commonness seems never comfortable in the presence of those who muse on essences. Thus one who attempts to contemplate the ground of phenomena is likely to fall unceremoniously between two stools--perhaps one might say two thrones: on the one hand, that of the currently reigning academy, and on the other, that of the mob.

It would be craven in any philosopher to whimper at this; and there may have been no little irony in Plato's remark that the philosopher practices dying.

Philosophy entails, among other aims, the clearing of conceptual difficulties yet it would be ludicrous in me to pretend here to a comprehensive analysis of religious language in general. At this point, then, we must draw the boundaries of our task. Here, Aristotle provides us sober and, above all, useful counsel. In Bk. I of the *Nichomachean Ethics* he advises that "our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the

subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions ---" (1094 b); and, similarly, the late Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset notes that "some men refuse to recognize the depth of something because they demand that the profound should manifest itself in the same way as the superficial. Not accepting the fact that there may be several kinds of clarity, they pay exclusive attention to the clarity peculiar to surfaces. They do not realize that to be hidden beneath the surface, merely appearing through it, throbbing underneath it, is essential to depth".[1] It will advantage us to let these sage counsels help us dispose ourselves toward our subject--particularly so in regard of certain basic concepts such as world, revelation, self, suffering and patience.

Now it is precisely at this pass that many academic sorties into the tangled forest of religious thought paralyze themselves with an unseemly anxiety in doubt. And this, not so much from the dizziness that attends one's loss of bearings; but rather from want of skill in doubting--for one may require a whole lifetime to learn how to doubt his own doubt.

It is astonishing that few if any historians of thought trouble their olympian heads to tell us just what Kierkegaard--that great master in religious dialectic--might have had in mind when he declaimed that faith must not rest content with unintelligibility.[2] And that marvelous acrobat in doubting, the gentle David Hume, never once called into question the object-as-such of faith, but merely, yet impeccably, exposed the mediocre, miserable means taken by otherwise sober men to affirm or deny their relation to the object-as-such of faith.

It will prove helpful to divide our enquiry into two parts, the first

dealing with the ordering principle of religious language; and the second concerning its function. Examples of religious language will be taken from the verbal deposit of the great scriptures and, for expediency, chiefly from that of our own culture, namely, the Old and New Testaments.

I

The religious language of the great scriptures arises in part out of man's seeing himself positioned in the world in a certain way. Subjectively, such utterance derives from a peculiar recognition. Objectively, this recognition is grounded in the structure of the world, for knowledge and its object exist in the world in dialectical relation. This is the great lesson of Plato. The primary purpose of religious language, then, is not as one representative scholar imagines, namely "to produce certain attitudes in oneself and in others."[3] On the contrary, religious language expresses the awareness of man's primordial posture without respect to whether he wishes to persuade, order or convert his neighbor.

It is fashionable today to speak of "man's existential predicament" when referring to the negativities of existence. However, all such talk implies man's essential situation and it is here that myth serves to recall us to our proper home and away from a fascination with the demonic. Myth represents to us our primordial posture in the world.

In the Chinese Classic, *The Book of Changes (I Ching)* man is represented as a middle creature--one whose station is between heaven and earth. Man is a microcosm whose task it is to order those capacities in himself that resemble the primal forces which enclose him, namely, heaven and earth. The perfect man modestly mediates this order to the community at large. He is

enabled to perform this work of spirit because he has studied and learned the laws of destiny revealed to him through the *tao*, the Way of heaven and earth; for all things are shaped according to this *tao*, including himself. Thus his primordial position in the world, though conditioned, is nevertheless assured.

In our own *Genesis*, the great myth of creation and the fall of man describes three moments in man's cosmic stance which are of especial significance for our enquiry. God places man in the Garden of Eden with the task of tilling and tending it. He prohibits man from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When man disobeys, God asks him, "Where are you?" Let us notice quickly these elements individually:

1) Man is situated within an order which he never made but is nevertheless responsible for maintaining. This is his peculiar task. (This parallels in some senses the emphasis in the Chinese *Book of Changes*).

2) Not only is man ordered to work--and that even before his notorious disobedience--but a restriction is placed upon his will on pain of disrupting the harmony he primordially participates in, and is responsible to maintain.

3) After his disobedience, his failure to meet his obligation to his Maker, God asks, "Man, where art thou?"[4] And man is unable to say--except to report that out of fear he hid himself, i.e., he confesses himself lost to his original stance in the world. He becomes the original self-displaced person.

Briefly, and at the risk of over-simplifying this scripture, we can sum these three moments up by saying that to be human is to be stanced at the intersection between the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, a participant in both while existing independently in neither. This is man's glory and his liability. Man is, as we say in English, "strictly in the middle", or, as the Spanish say, "between the sword and the wall". All the

traditional scriptures of the world agree in this in spite of their differing ways of stating it.

A conclusion of utmost importance follows from this, namely, that essential suffering is not, as is popularly thought, a disfunction in man--a nuisance which our cleverness must someday overcome--but it is natural to the human condition; and it is all left up to man whether he will suffer creatively or demonically. Essential suffering should be differentiated from physical pain. Over physical pain man has, in principle, achieved a technological mastery. He is not, however, the master of his suffering. How could he be when though free to act he is not free from the consequences of his acts. Here, his autonomy ends and his dependence begins. As a fact, then, suffering itself is not a problem. The problem lies in one's relation to it.

There is nothing religiously new in this observation. Nevertheless the life-styles of most men have shown scant evidence of a preoccupation with it; and the depth and worth of any religion can be measured precisely by how well or ill it assists man to understand and undergo his relation to suffering.

The garden in the myth represents among other things a pre-ordained order which, however, conceals a latent order. Man, the cultivator, must continually bring this depth, this latent order to the surface. Yet, man must not arrogate to himself a certain fruit, a particular product of this order. In effect, he must sacrifice it to his maker.

Precisely through this act of sacrifice he maintains his hold on life. Indeed, if he does not so act he dies. This is curious. We are accustomed to think it sacrifice which entails a death of sorts, whereas the myth presents sacrifice as the precise human means through which man abides continually in his primal estate. There is a latency he must not release--his own latent

desire before a certain fruit; he is to remain behind it and offer his consent to a wiser will. This, in religious language, is called obedience to one's calling; or, in ontological terms, fulfilling the necessary in oneself.

Notice the participle: fulfilling, i.e., filling-full. We call the participle an in-finite form. Man himself is a being in participle for he is always completing himself; and he participates in the infinite by being always on his way. Jesus remarked, "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head."[5] According to the Genesis myth, man-in-the-middle who is ordered to fulfil the necessary in himself and his world is insufficient to himself and must practice a continuing fast before a certain fruit.

How, then, shall a creature of the middle, always on his way, without a finite resting place, responsible for his world; how shall such a creature authenticate himself by fulfilling the necessary in himself? St. Paul answers this unequivocally. He says love is the fulfilling of the law.[6] And St. John the Elder provides his own testament in the first Epistle. He makes an attributive use of the Greek participle in a familiar beautiful and strangely home-calling text. Literally it reads, "God is love, and *the one abiding in love* abides in God and God abides in him."[7]

What is the proper issue from love? Creative acts through ongoing sacrifice. And this is the meaning of the mutual relation in suffering between the divine and the human. The divine is latent everywhere. Continually it waits to be embodied undistortedly in man. Such is the modesty of God.

In the myth, the significance of the prohibition becomes easier to penetrate if we bear in mind the Old Testament's prevailing stress upon the

relation between wills. The divine command shows man's essentially dependent condition which in this case, is not a proper occasion for rebellion but rather for adoration and waiting, i.e., a patient consent to be filled full, not instantly, but continually while upon one's way.

The lovely Greek word for patience hypomonē literally means 'remaining behind,' 'waiting under.' St. Paul, always contemplating destiny, couples it with hope in his expression "patience of hope".[8] Precisely this perspective moves him soberly to declare "---we---rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience character; and character, hope."[9] As with the Old Testament myth of the making of man, this also reorders our accustomed coupling of concepts. We incline often to think patience a mere attribute of good character. Here, patience, effects character; a character prerequisite for hope.

Now we have come to the heart of our enquiry. Religious language expresses utmost concern in human destiny; with man the middle creature, ever on his way, whose continuing fulfilling depends upon his patient consent to obey the necessary in himself. This necessity which each of us carries personally is described by the Hindu scripture, Bhagava Gītā, as a structure of dual function. In Sanskrit these two functions are called *svadharma* and *svabhāva*.[10] These concepts are difficult to translate but in the context of a concern for personal destiny the first refers to the law peculiar to one's own right action, and the second to one's essential self-becoming, i.e., one's proper character. There is a duty proper to each of us; and the Gītā clearly counsels it is better to follow it - even imperfectly - than to abide by the law of action peculiar to some other person-no matter how well performed.

Also, one's essential character has a course of development intrinsic to itself. Each has his proper destiny; and though always being discovered, it remains in some sense objectively ordained in the cosmic order. None is forced to embody it, yet failure to be faithful to it leaves one unfulfilled. In the Christian tradition, St. John Damascene refers the divine principle of personal destiny in each to the creative volitional thought of God. One's growth in personhood is tied to it; and as an image, a model, it has a direct claim upon the career of every being-as-human.[11] It is one's personal 'high-calling'. For the religious mind it has quite objective status and cannot be psychologized away. One is absolutely answerable to it.

It is true that scriptural religious language speaks always to a 'thou'; yet it speaks to a thou in context, to the original thou of cosmos and communion. The Genesis myth clearly shows man as a creature bound up with the whole cosmos. The emphasis upon salvation in our own scriptures is, in essence, equally cosmocentric as anthropocentric - man is not saved apart from the world. (We have already noted his responsibility to his cosmic environment). And so St. Paul in his letter to the Romans says boldly: "I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us----because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God".[12] A wide and sober reading of the Old and New Testaments and the Sūtras of Buddhism offers no encouragement to other-worldliness. Note the words of Jesus before his crucifixion as he prays to his heavenly Father for his disciples: "I do not pray that thou shouldst take them *out* of the world but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one";[13] and the prophet Isaiah's transcendent vision of the wolf dwelling with the lamb, the leopard

with the kid; for he says, "The *earth* shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."[14]

I believe the foregoing implies a provisional definition of religion as: man's attempt consciously to order, undergo and actualize his self-becoming in undistorted relation to the non-relative ground, support and fulfilment of his being.

Furthermore, to the familiar orders of truth in thought, utterance and being we may add a fourth: truth in spirit. Truth in spirit is discerned in a being's undistorted relation to its divine-human destiny. The criterion for truth in spirit is one's self progressively becoming what it necessarily is. The liberty not so to become is the formal and necessary condition for the full expression of truth in spirit; for it is possible to express truth in spirit only through consent. And, as Duns Scotus put it, "to be unable to refuse is not the same as to consent."

Truth in spirit provides the ordering principle of scriptural religious language and this language witnesses to three fundamental relations. The first is man's primordial relation to the Transcendent, the Encompassing and incomprehensibly Sublime. This relation is simply a matter of divine will. There is nothing relative about it. Religious belief is consent through faith to this primordial, non-relative relation. The second is our relation to this primordial relation. Through this secondary relation we produce and apprehend those symbols which we call religious beliefs. These should be distinguished from the act of belief as such, for they are products of the religious imagination. Thirdly, we inter-relate with all other beings in an orchestration of being which finds its proper archetype and fulfilment in the life of God.

This is expressed in the vision of St. John the Divine: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty."[15]

II

In conclusion let us turn to note briefly the *function* of scriptural religious language. It is most important to observe here that an analysis of religious language need not be ordered to non-religious canons and theories. Ultimately, religious language is refractory to non-religious analysis. Methodologically there is nothing peculiar in this--a similar stricture applied to science seemingly offends no one. Let such a claim be made for religion as a discipline and behold we are besieged by a ravenous host of public verifiers, vilifiers, mollifiers and rectifiers. And as if this were not tribulation enough, at the other extreme our enquiry direly threatens the somnolent peace of the sanctifiers.

Recently attempts have been made to equate religious assertions of historical events with non-religious historical assertions. For instance, the statement "Jesus Christ was crucified under Pontius Pilate" is thought to resemble a statement like "Sergeant Jones died while serving under MacArthur." In principle both statements are thought to be empirically verifiable. On the surface this seems innocent enough until we ask in what sense the titles Christ and Sergeant are publicly verifiable in the same respects. Scripture itself points to the contrary for when Peter confesses Jesus to be Christ the Christ answers: "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father who is in heaven."[16] Further, St. Paul says expressly that "The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the

Spirit of God for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are discerned spiritually."[17] One has only to ask who shall determine who has discerned spiritually to see how the inescapably spiritual element in religious language eludes public verification.

We shall fare much better if we move toward an internal analysis of scriptural religious language. Discernment of truth in spirit expresses itself in at least three categories of meaning. Let us tentatively call them the jussive, the oracular and the votive.

1) Jussive. The jussive is a grammatical form expressing command. Religious language often expresses divine commands. The command is one of the chief occasions for the modern to take offense at the whole biblical tradition. This betrays a misconception of the use of authority as expressed in scripture. In the first place the command establishes the human condition and the authentic being of the one addressed. A command is not uttered in a void; and when directed toward a person it presupposes the possibility of disobedience or it would be superfluous. The command points directly to the necessary in ourselves; and while it establishes the authenticity of our personal being, the authenticity of our self-becoming rests strictly with the nature of our response. That is why so much stress is put on hearing (i.e., attending) and obeying. One may just choose not to become what he necessarily is and so fail to obey.

We must face it that the command not to eat of the forbidden fruit places archetypal man under an affliction. There is no question here of man's deciding to obligate himself to his Maker. That obligation is given with his finitude; he can discover it but not invent it. Rather, the question is will he obligate himself to himself to fulfill patiently this primordial

sacrifice. I say this is an affliction because it entails suffering. It is something that must be borne inwardly and has no essential relation to legalism and all its hypocritical evasions. It is instructive to contemplate a marvelous dialectical relation between the Myth of the Fall and the Story of Job. In Genesis, archetypal man is afflicted inwardly by the prohibition and he resorts to an external means to overcome his suffering and so fails. Job, on the other hand, is afflicted externally with the loss of all his possessions. He never once forsakes his patient hold on inwardness and God favors him with beatitude. But he does not treat this as a moment of triumph. Precisely here this continually wholly righteous man repents in dust and ashes.

Perhaps Jesus had thoughts of Job when he commanded "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect."[18]

2) Oracular. The most difficult of the three orders to penetrate is the oracular. The power to divine things seems to have declined as the power to dissect things has increased. The ancients, however, understood oracular language to express a revelatory interdependence between objective images and subjective states. Not merely one's dreams, but the whole world of daylight images was replete with wonders, signs and portents for those with 'eyes to see' and 'ears to hear.' For more than just a few, it seems, the world had still a sacramental being or the following rebuke from St. Paul to the Romans would have been virtually unintelligible--as I fear it is close to being so today. He said, "Ever since the creation of the world his (God's) invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been *clearly* perceived in the things

that have been made. So that they are without excuse."[19] A cultivated intellect is not a prerequisite for such divining but a predisposition of the heart; for the things of God are accessible to the faith 'as of a little child' just as it is also to that of a learned sage. What is it then that determines the oracular as essentially distinct from the superstitious? An objective relationship, namely, the unique mutual reflection between one's own being and the being of every other finite creature. Without such an objective revelatory relationship between beings we could not found the possibility of a *logos* of religious images.

One example of a scriptural oracular statement is this: "...that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height."[20] Here, the image is of the vertical and horizontal axes which form an equilateral cross. We carry this archetypal image in our bodies. From the crown of one's head to the base of his jaw there is an abstract vertical that is also medially bisected by a horizontal axis across the eyes. Suffice it to say for now, that this latently and profoundly affects the way we perceive and, above all, understand the world and our directional situation in it. This image is quite objective and one need have no recourse to psychological theories to establish it.

The numinous and sacramental authenticity of revelation is mediated by oracular utterance. It continually reveals the mutual sacrifice of God and man. God, who is Spirit, continually sacrifices himself by remaining latent, concealed in the things that are made. Man ought reciprocally to sacrifice himself in a work of transmutation. If he perceives and understands the oracular and sacramental nature of all finite things he works to transfigure them into spirit, offering them back to their primordial Source. The actualizing of our self-becoming in communion is grounded functionally in this mutual sacrifice.

3) Votive. The third of these categories, votive utterance, witnesses to the transcendent authenticity of the divine Presence each must undergo whether alone or in communion with his neighbor. (In our tradition this Presence is usually witnessed as Person. In both our Testaments typical titles for this Presence are 'the Lord God,' 'Father,' 'Christ' and 'Holy Spirit'). In Hebrew the verb 'to vow' is related in a parallel sense to the verb 'to dedicate', 'consecrate': (*nadar* and *nazar*).

The votive and jussive categories emerge as dialectically related--as indeed are all personal relations. On the one hand, through the command we are called to; on the other, we respond to the command with a solemn pledge, our vow. Our vow implies consent and divine-human promise. It is our consent to remain authentically grounded in that Power than without which we could not actualize our necessity. The whole ritualistic paraphernalia of conventional worship dramatizes and celebrates our pledge to separate ourselves from any action whatever that will not conduce to this end. This consecration points to the *specialized* meaning of the word 'holy' as distinguished from 'profane'. What is holy is radically set apart as proper to the prerogatives of divinity. It is not that some things are intrinsically holy or intrinsically profane--were this so we should not require to consecrate them to their symbolic function. Rather, our sacred symbols dramatize our continuing task of deciding *for* our divine-human destiny and radically over against whatever fails to promote that end.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews there is a typical expression of votive utterance in its most practical sense: "Let us hold fast the confessions of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.... But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls."[21]

Finally, the course of history witnesses that those who persevere in making this votive effort achieve lives of consummate beauty; and perhaps the great German lyric poet Hölderlin has told us something of why. He says, "Heart's wave could not curl and break beautifully into the foam of spirit, unless the ageless silent rock of destiny stood in its path."[22] The great seers whose visions have come to us in myth and Scripture confess that this ageless silent rock houses all their creative suffering and beatitude.

It is well to consider these things in a time when modish theologians are busily preparing the funeral rites for God and a militant secularism attempts to reduce the phenomenon of religious language to every positivistic reference it can find. Somehow, there must be a third way of seeing it all; and I think this way most deeply and classically expressed in one of the noblest confessions in our canon. It comes to us from one whose letters bear continuing witness to that creative suffering and beatitude that discipline and consummate the human career. The words are too deep to be novel and too sure to be shrill. They do not, in any way, obscure the desperation of our age, nor cloud the certainty that our treasure is in earthern vessels. Yet they remind us that amidst the shock and shout we may possess ourselves in quietude and strength. St. Paul wrote them in times no better than our own: "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation shall be able to separate us from the love of God...."[23]

Footnotes

1. José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*, (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1961), p. 62.
2. S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 540.
3. Paul F. Schmidt, *Religious Knowledge*, (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press of Glencoe), p. 77.
4. Genesis 3:9. KJV.
5. Matthew 8:20. KJV.
6. Romans 13:10. KJV.
7. I John 4:16. (italicized translation mine) RSV.
8. I Thessalonians 1:3. KJV.
9. Romans 5:3f. KJV., RSV.
10. Bhagavad Gītā 2.31; 3.35; 18.41f., 47.
11. V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, (London: James Clarke and Co., Ltd., 1957) p. 94f., quoting De fide orth., II, 2', P.G. 94, 837A.
12. Romans 18:21. RSV.
13. John 17:15. (italics mine) KJV.
14. Isaiah 11:9. (italics mine) KJV.
15. Revelation 1:8. KJV.
16. Matthew 16:17. RSV.
17. I Corinthians 2:14. RSV.
18. Matthew 5:48. KJV.
19. Romans 1:20. (italics mine) RSV.
20. Ephesians 3:18. KJV.
21. Hebrews 10:23, 24, 39. RSV.
22. Joseph Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, (N.Y.: The New American Lib., 1963), p. 121, quoting Hölderlin's *Hyperion*.
23. Romans 8:38, 39. KJV., RSV.