

## A Revision in the Language of Religion by Symbolic Interpretation

Hassan Jafari\*

### Abstract

*Philosophy of religion is an intellectual and logical interpretation of religious experience and language. It merges in philosophy so far as its philosophical thinking about religion is concerned. Philosophical thought is always rational and very deeply intellectual. It is a rational analysis of religious experience and the problem of the language of religion. In the philosophy of religion as it has developed in the Western philosophy and Christian theology, two main questions may be identified as representing problems associated with the religious use of language. How we ought to understand the terms which we use to predicate certain things of God? Do these terms bear the same sense when used of God and of creatures? Another problem is that God is so fundamentally and so enormously different from human beings and other creatures that it seems impossible for terms to be true of God and of creatures in just the same sense. In recent years a number of analyses of theological discourse have been suggested.*

*Thus, this paper analyses a reduction the problem of the language of religion by discussing symbolic interpretation which is alternatively a development of symbolism in religious texts and practices. Therefore, the first of this paper includes the review of the problem of the language of religion and philosophers' and theologians' reflections on it. Secondly, it surveys the correlation between symbolism and interpretation and their function in analyzing.*

---

\*. Azad University, Azadshahr, Iran.

Hassan Jafari  
(حسن جعفری)

**Keywords:** *Symbol, Language, Interpretation, Religion, Philosophy.*

\*\*\*

Philosophy is a rational system of facts and values. The object of philosophy also is experience in all its variety and completeness, not any single aspect of experience. Its main purpose is to show by reflective thought the ultimate principles which give continuity, meaning, and value of this complicated whole of experience. And religion is faith in the realization of God, the Supreme all comprehensive values. Hence, the undertaking of a philosophy of religion is to explain as best as it can, in its own language and to the rational and intellectual parts of man, the truths, the experience, and the laws of religion. A philosophy of religion, therefore, postulates religion as a living fact in the development of the race, and clearly perceives the existence of inner experiences of which religious acts are the expression. And also, it cannot avoid dealing with the problem of the language of religion. There is a question about how we ought to understand the terms which we use to predicate certain things of God. Do these terms bear them same sense when used of God and of creatures, in particular human being? And if they do not, how are we to understand their meaning.

My objective in this paper is to survey a reduction the problem of the language of religion by discussing symbolic interpretation which is alternatively a development of symbolism in religious texts and practices. Ultimately I hope that it will be possible to build some bridges of understanding between religious or divine statements and their true interpretations.

1

Let us now consider the problem of the language of religion as a background which relates to symbolic interpretation. When the believer says, for example, I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth..., he is using either quite ordinary words ("Father", "mighty", "earth") or technical words ("God", "creator") that can be analyzed out ordinary words. If I explain what I mean by the technical term "God", I have to say something like, "a supreme personal being on whom the world depends for its existence and value", and all the terms in this translation are ordinary and familiar words whose proper use we learn in mundane contexts. Similarly, if I define the technical term "creator", I say, for example, that a creator is one who makes things or

**A Revision in the Language of Religion by Symbolic Interpretation**  
(مروری بر زبان دین با تفسیر نمادین)

brings in to existence 'out of nothing', that is, without presupposing any pre existence material out of which the things are made or brought into existence. Once again, all the words in this explanation are perfectly ordinary words used to describe the object of our experience (Charlesworth, 1974, p. 5).

There are still problems as to how understand them. We can focus on the construal of the predicates of such statements, for example, "made the heaven and the earth" and "commissioned Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt". There is a serious problem here because of two basic features of the situation. First, the terms we apply to God got their meaning from their application to creatures, particularly human beings. Regarding the first point, does it just happen that all terms we use to specify Gods attributes, actions, and psychological states are terms we also use for human beings? Second, God is so radically different from us that it seems that these terms cannot have the same meaning in the two uses. The second point, on other hand, is that creaturely terms cannot, in general, be used of God in exactly the same sense because of the ways in which God is different from creatures. For example, God is infinite of power, knowledge, and goodness; each of us is very limited in these respects (Aston, 1998, pp. 255-256).

One way of understanding the attributing proportion to God is to be found in the so-called negative theology. The negative way states that all attributions of properties to God must really be understood as denying other positive attribution. Here an attempt is made to say something meaningful about God by denying that this or that characteristic of finite being applied to him.

Thomas Aquinas, quite on the contrary, declares that there is an analogy between what a word means when it is applied to humanity and when it is applied to God. This use of language assumes that there is a "proper proportionality" to language describing God's and human's attributes and activities.

The logical positivism which relies solely on the criterion of verifiability, expounds that religious statements are not meaningful in the logical sense. It considers only two kinds of statements to be cognitively meaningful-analytic and synthetic. Since religious statements belong to neither category, their claim has not been completely accepted.

The falsification principle also states that religious statement is only meaningful in so far as it can be falsified. While there is nothing that can count against religious statement which can neither be proved true nor false? And religious believer also does not accept any proof to count

agonist his/her beliefs.

Wittgenstein argues that speaking a language is a kind of activity. As such, meaning is best understood as "use". And words do not have meaning; they have usage. Thus speaking about God in the context of a religious community or life is a valid as any other activity. According to him, all language games exist within particular forms of life. Religious belief, therefore, has its own language. An unbeliever will find religious statement meaningless because he or she is not in the religious game.

Finally, there are other excellent treatments of this issue surrounding the nature and use of language in religious statements and how to understand the terms when used of God and creatures. In some instances, I.T. Ramsey argues that the language of religion points us in two directions: in the one direction to some particular models in to whose discourse they fit, discourse which relates to patterns in the world around us. A model thus, is an analogy to help us express something about God. John Hick states that religious pluralism is the best way of understanding the religious statements. For Barth, all religious statements are metaphorical, but they can be interpreted only after the word of God has spoken to the interpreter. Paul Tillich defends the view that religious language is "symbolic", and that in fact all statements about God are symbolic, except one-that God is "being itself" or "ground of being". He also states that even those are "metaphoric names", and he classifies metaphorical descriptions of God ("The Lord is my shepherd") as a form of "secondary religious symbolism". He argues that symbols were intended to convey facts, and therefore that they cannot be verified or falsified using empirical evidence.

## 2

In spite of the fact that some philosophers in opposition to religious language as symbolic, argue that it is not possible for religious symbols successfully to represent that which is beyond human experience; let me make it clear at this point precisely what I am suggesting, that is, symbolic interpretation. It is comment in the religious contexts, which it is a reflection of higher reality in images that reveal the relationship of the outward to the inward, knowledge of this relationship, gained through traditional scriptures and rituals, is necessary to overcome the full from the perfection of primordial man.

My work, in contrast to theirs, is approach the problem of the language of religion, including examine the two most important factors,

**A Revision in the Language of Religion by Symbolic Interpretation**  
(مروری بر زبان دین با تفسیر نمادین)

interpretation and symbol or symbolism, that have characterized religious statements in general and Holy texts and religious experience in particular. Interpretation leads to a deeper understanding of the structure of sacred language. Symbol also is something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, and convention, it, strictly speaking, is a representative of reality.

Since the language of religion is comprised of a set of symbols, myths, metaphors and esoteric signs which help men of religion to share and convey their profound and ineffable emotions and experiences, without ordinary meaning, here the symbolic interpretation of the language of religion is most illuminating. Hence the symbolic interpretation interprets the sacred language in Holy books and religious symbols which have been created during religious movements and experiences of God.

I should like indeed to postulate the inseparability of symbolism and interpretation. These are simply two aspects of a single phenomenon. So, it is not desirable or even possible to study them in isolation. A text becomes symbolic at the point when, through an effort of interpretation, we discover in it an indirect meaning. We, in principle, require that the text itself indicate to us its symbolic nature, that it possesses a series of observable and undeniable properties through which it leads us on to that peculiar form of reading which "interpretation" is. And it is posed by the symbolic nature of the text itself.

An interpretation also takes back something to its origin. Since all things issue from an inward centre, to reach the inner meaning of thing means precisely to take thing back to that centre which is also their origin. To go from the outward to the inward, which is to return to the origin from which, all that is outward and manifested issues. It, on other hand, consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning.

This point is also particularly important to mention in the light of the pretensions of Holy text has, of not one but several dimensions, levels of meaning or types of teaching corresponding to the different types of spiritual and intellectual capabilities and needs of humanity chosen. Although these dimensions or levels are multiple in number and many religious speak of seven or forty or some other symbolic number of levels, they can be reduced at the first stage to the two basic dimensions of exoteric and the esoteric. The first concerns that aspect of the message from Heaven which governs the whole of the life a traditional

humanity; the other relates to the spiritual and intellectual needs of those who seek God or the Ultimate Reality here and now.

The symbolic interpretation considers and depends on an ontological relationship between the symbol and what it symbolizes. A true symbol is merely the manifestation on a "lower" level of reality precisely that same "higher object", or Archetype, or Ultimately Divine Quality or matrix of Qualities which it symbolizes. In other words, the "essence" and the immediate principle of manifestation of a symbol is certainly something else with the same essence as its symbol albeit higher than it. A symbol and what it symbolizes are thus "one", on a certain level of reality, and a symbol is thus something real in itself-albeit not as real as what it symbolizes- and not something that merely indicates something else.

This may be deduced from the Islamic "holy utterance" so called because in it the divinity speaks on the tongue of the Prophet [Muhammad]. I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be known, and so I created the world. Thus the universe and its contents were created in order to make known the Creator, and to make known the good is to praise it. The means of making it known is to reflect it or to shadow it; and a symbol is the reflection or shadow of a higher reality. And even more explicit is the following passage from Evelyn Underhill in his book "*Mysticism*"; *A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*.

A divine, suffering, self-sacrificing Personality was then shown as the sacred heart of a living, striving universe: and for once the Absolute was exhibited in the terms of finite human existence. Some such event as this breaking through of the divine and archetypal life into the temporal world is perceived by the mystical philosopher to be a necessity, if man was ever to see in terms of life that greatness of life to which he belongs: learn to transcend the world of sense, and rebuild his life upon the levels of reality (Underhill, 2002, p. 118).

When symbolism is spoken of as a basic spiritual dominion of humankind and it is imputed to the unity of the human psyche and its activity, the unity of the psyche without delay separates into a variety of different potencies and faculties. Although it employs the most dissimilar spiritual potencies as its elements, interprets a unitary perspective of consciousness from which both nature and soul, both "outward" and "inward" being, appear in a new form. When it is asked which of these potencies plays the firm roles in the structure of the symbolic interpretation, a number of differing views arise.

Let it first be said then that the existence of symbolism arises from the

**A Revision in the Language of Religion by Symbolic Interpretation**  
(مروری بر زبان دین با تفسیر نمادین)

universal, inherent "logic of creation". That is to say that since God created the Universe from Qualities and Attributes, which are necessarily comprised within His Infinite Self, then the elements within the universe must reflect God's Qualities and Attributes. Now to reflect something, or symbol of it. Thus on one levels everything real in Creation is a symbol, ultimately, of the Creator. It must be said, however, that whilst everything in creation is in principle "symbolic" of the Qualities of the Creator, not everything in creation is accessible to every man as a "symbol" as such.

All true symbols can be divided in to three main, self evident categories: those manifested to human beings primarily in the Physical World, those manifested to human beings primarily in the Subtle World, and those manifested in both simultaneously. The symbols of the Physical World consist first of the great natural symbols of creation (the sun, the sky, the seas,) and second of the symbols of sacred art (icons, calligraphy and so on) at least in so far as these are "physical". They became personal in the religious encounter with holy. The personal encounter in religious experience is as real as the encounter of subject and object in the cognitive experience or the encounter of vision and meaning in the artistic experience.

When Jacob, for example, in his dream at Haran saw a ladder reaching to heaven, with angels ascending and descending on it, and heard the Lord speaking from above it, saying: "I am the Lord God of Abraham," he awoke and was afraid and cried out: "How dreadful is this place: this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven". And he took the stone that had been his pillow, and set it up as a monument, and poured oil on the top of it. He called the place Beth-el, that is, house of God. The symbolism implicit in the expression "gate of heaven" is rich and complex; the theophany that occurs in a place consecrates it by the very fact that it makes it open above-that is, in communication with heaven, the paradoxical point of passage from one mode of being to another (Eliade, 1959, p. 26).

**3**

I would like to conclude this brief note by saying that symbolic interpretation is an intuitive perception, made possible by human kinship with the Divine Light who first provided the world to be a medium of thought. Interpretive facility thus depends on man's intimacy with God or with Ultimate Reality and correlates with the spiritual status of the

Hassan Jafari  
(حسن جعفری)

interpretation. To take a single example, David L. Smith states that "the pure in heart shall see God and man in their expressions; the impure have lost the inward capacity to generate them" (Smith, 1981, p. 114). It is the means whereby the intellect made holy by revelation, is able to get through to the heart of revelation to discover that principle truth which is the very root and substance of intellect itself and is manifested in the permanent theme of the universe and related intimately to the inner being of man.

### References

- Charlesworth, M.J. (1974). *The Problem of Religious Language*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, INC., Englewood Cliffs.
- Aston, William P. (1998). "Religious language", in Edward Craig, ed., *The Rutledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol.8, London and New York: Rutledge.
- Underhill, Evelyn (2002). *Mysticism: A study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, INC.
- Eliade, Mircea (1959). *The Sacred and the Profane*, Translated by Willard R. Trask, New York and London: A Harvest / HBJ Book, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Smith, David L. (1981). *Symbolism and Growth: The Religious Thought of Horace Bushnell*, California: Scholars Press.