
THE POSTMODERN RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE IN ANGLO-AMERICAN TRADITION WITTGENSTEIN'S INFLUENCE

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Abstract

If the knowing subject promoted by modernity would unconditionally trust universal reason, neglecting the cultural and language differences, postmodernity finds mediation between world and mind throughout language, as incredible. As a result of taking the idea according to which knowledge of reality is considered a structure, social or of a different nature, language becomes useful not for the representation of reality, but for the interpretation and continuous re-contextualization. Language is thus itself a contribution to the understanding of the object of research. One of the most pressing problems of contemporary Philosophy of religion is based on the controversies arising within the discussion on legitimacy of realistic or nonrealistic conceptions of religious language. Among the most fervent supporters of the nonrealistic conception stand D.Z. Phillips and Don Cupitt. In the 'realistic camp' we find Alston, Plantinga, Swinburne and Hick. Although radically different in approach, both realistic and nonrealistic criticism of religious language found today its most judgments on theory of language games, as indeed happens with the religious language postmodern theorists. And even if a unification of the two traditions can not occur because of the inability to identify the possibility of reconciliation for the realist and non-realist conceptions of God, philosophers like Rorty and others support the idea of interdisciplinarity.

Keywords: postmodernism, anti-foundationalism, postliberal theology, neoliberal theology, language game

1. Introduction

The XXth century Philosophy disposes of a series of *antiesentialist* movements, that doesn't care a cuss of the precursory movements, respectively the positivism and the phenomenology, meaning that they don't see any purpose in the efforts to distinguish between what is real and what is apparent, what is necessary and what is contingent. Thus, according to Rorty, "the XXth century was that one during which Philosophy teachers stopped asking themselves wrong questions – so asking themselves, for example, what it really exists, what

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are the limits and the purposes of human knowledge, how language is connected to reality. These questions start from the assumed thesis according to which Philosophy could be practiced without history.” [1]

Since the second half of the twentieth century onwards and recent, the philosophical discussions about religion became more animated, both among continental postmodern thinkers, but also among analytic philosophers, this debate sometimes leading to conflicts, but also to ideational mutual loans between the two groups of philosophers. Furthermore, we may state that even the meeting between American pragmatism and continental poststructuralist current caused, as Bernstein argues, “the anger against humanism and the Enlightenment heritage“ followed by “[...] the denunciation of any kind of abstract reasoning“ and any “universal emancipation project“ [2]. Some onsets of the analytical philosophy approach some specific characteristics of postmodern trends, as is Richard Rorty’s philosophy, whose thought is under the influence of the continental hermeneutics. *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy* notes that neo-pragmatism is “a postmodern version of pragmatism developed by the American philosopher Richard Rorty and drawing inspiration from authors such as John Dewey, Martin Heidegger, Wilfrid Sellars, Quine, and Jacques Derrida. It repudiates the notion of universal truth, epistemological foundationalism, representationalism, and the notion of epistemic objectivity. It is a nominalist approach that denies that natural kinds and linguistic entities have substantive ontological implications. While traditional pragmatism focuses on experience, Rorty centers on language. Language is contingent on use, and meaning is produced by using words in familiar manners. The self is seen as a ‘centerless web of beliefs and desires’, and Rorty denies that the subject-matter of the human sciences can be studied in the same ways as we study the subject-matter of the natural sciences while simultaneously maintaining that there is no privileged status to any discipline including the ‘hard’ sciences.“ [3]

So the pragmatist critique of foundationalism is illustrated by the approach of some elements situating it near the hermeneutic theory of recent sciences philosophy, as it is Davidson’s ‘radical interpretation’, Wittgenstein’s language game or Gadamer’s interpretation.

2. Wittgenstein’s reaction regarding the interpretation of language as representation

Wittgenstein’s conclusion, according to which we can not extract language from the world and the world from language, will produce a deep disturbance among language theories tribute to the Cartesian separation of subject from object. Thus, Wittgenstein’s considerations regarding this topic (about the Cartesian distinction subject/object Wittgenstein affirms that it would produce confusion, because it is related to occultism to think that thought is an isolated process, produced inside the head, in a closed place) is an important starting point for contemporary American pragmatism, but also for some recent approaches of the continental philosophy.

Wittgenstein showed that we did not have to report to the world in an isolated way, ignoring language (because only by understanding the language we can report us to the world). Thus, we can understand the word *God* if, following Wittgenstein's indications, we start to use it inside a specific linguistic communities, where the practice gives sense to the word, in prayer or confession.

With this in view, Nancey Murphy and Brad J. Kallenberg notice: "Wittgenstein saw an interdependent relation among primitive reactions, socially constituted forms of life, and language use. Agreement in primitive reactions constitutes a community's form of life which, in turn, conditions the shape of its language-games which, in turn, shapes the way the community conceives the world which, in turn, shapes the primitive reactions shared by its members." [4]

As a consequence, the language shouldn't be approached by means of a relation correspondence with the non-linguistic reality, but rather as a social action by means of which a child is engaged in a cohabitation way specific to the community to which he belongs.

3. The pragmatic interpretation of religious language

Thus, within a religious linguistic community, the truth would be found, according to Rorty (and to other postmodern philosophers, Vattimo for example) in the language accordance established through dialogue. This vision, through which any authoritarian theory regarding the truth is rejected, is equally cherished, as we can notice, by pragmatists and hermeneutics. From this perspective, *to adhere to a religion* supposes the development of some actions such as adoration, prayer, meditation, self-discipline, commemoration of some persons and events. It also means the tacit recognition of canonical character of some writings.

So, the pragmatic interpretation of religious language abandons the idea of language as representation. Thus, Rorty's neopragmatism or Habermas's communicative action philosophy conceive the truth only as participative experience within a community, including the religious one, which cherishes the same values. Rorty highlights the futility of trying to explain how the facts fit the world. For Rorty, the truth is a property of sentences, since "sentences, in their existence, rely on vocabularies and since vocabularies are created by human beings", so are truths [5]. Rorty makes a distinction between the two types of textualism: one that would aim the author's intention, treating the text "as it would contain a privileged principle of internal coherence" and the second that doesn't aim the text or the author's intention, but "knocks the text in order to better adapt it to their affirmations" [6]. In this context, one can say that, although religious tradition has as aim the interpretation of biblical text through the author's intention (God is the one who speaks in Scriptures), in reality, the second type of textualism can better explain the segregation phenomenon of religious beliefs.

This approach leads to reaching a common point between neopragmatism and hermeneutics. Thus, both from neopragmatic and hermeneutic perspective, the Christianity should exclude any question regarding the truth. There is *Sola Scriptura*, truth disclosed in the Holy books, that “makes us free” (John 8.32), respectively the call for charity. The refusal of any type of religious authority gives the possibility of reporting to divinity in the absence of fear and superstition feelings. This postmodern challenges that neopragmatists, such as Rorty, but also hermeneutics, such as Vattimo agree with, opposes to the image of a dictatorial God, replacing him with a friend God.

The notion of *truth* thus receives new meanings in postmodernity: Rorty replaces it with the term *solidarity* and Vattimo to that of *love* because, as shown Vattimo, “God is not the content of a sentence, but a person coming among us and leaving us a model of love“ [7]. The metaphysical ideal of truth is now dissolved, Vattimo notes, and this is especially due to Heidegger. Therefore the refusal of the authoritarian notion of truth is, in general, for postmodernists, the best way for elaborating a Christian project.

4. Recent approaches of the language game theory in the analytic philosophy of religion

The theory of language games inherited from Wittgenstein is now embraced by more and more analytical philosophers of religious language. The main exponent of Wittgenstein movement that has developed within the postmodern philosophy of religion is considered D.Z. Phillips. In his opinion, the religious language game works under its own device of concepts, criteria of intelligibility and truth, while beliefs are embedded in speech. The conditions of possibility for verification (or falsification) of a sentence – be it scientific or religious, reflect the use of a single language in the respective language community, without which communication becomes impossible. This language is subject to constant interpretation, but only within the limits certain rules impose, like chess, as Wittgenstein found. Of course, these rules are inherited and accepted or agreed by the participants of the language game.

It becomes convenient to consider Science and religion as ‘separate language games’. Within Science one constructs a hypothesis and provides evidence for and against. In religion one does not do this. Respecting the specific rules of language game we can positively respond to the question of whether God exists inside the religious language game – and negatively respond to the same question, inside the scientific language game. To understand the word of God we must learn our religious communities’ language. The religious language is a way to overcome the difficulties of existence: “a prayer for a sick relative is not suppose to bring healing to the patient. If one does pray with some expectation, then one is guilty of superstition and this would not be authentic religion”, but if we can understand the language of prayer hovering inside our language game, “[...] we realize that this is the way of overcoming the human infirmities” [8].

D.Z. Phillips believes that at the very beginning the conflict between faith and unbelief is a wrong grammar usage. The obsession of philosophers of religion for discussions regarding the existence of God comes from the erroneous approach of the word *existence* in the context of human existence and of physical objects' existence in general, because religious communities have their own methods to determine the truth about the experience of God. Unlike religious communities, religious philosophies seek religious justification external to knowledge. But the religious sentences have their own way of significance. If the philosophers want to examine the criteria of intelligibility of religious language, they will have to refer to religious concepts within the inner form of life in which these religious concepts are commonly used. Phillips believes that there are both similarities and important differences between our speech about the material reality and about God: thus, when a child learns that a chair, for example, exists, he learns that very thing, sitting on that chair, not throughout a sentence whatsoever: "in a related way, persons seldom formulated the propositions 'God exists' or 'God is real'. Certainty about the reality of God comes not from the abstractions of philosophy, but from a whole complex of activities involving above all the language of praise and worship." [9]

Wittgenstein's late writings also influence the thinking of reformed epistemologists, Plantinga and Wolterstorff, whose concerns are turning to analyze the belief in God inside the Calvinist tradition, regarding the refusal of trying to prove logically God's existence.

The central thesis of religious epistemology consists in the fact that a belief on the existence of God (along, perhaps, with other crucial religious beliefs) need not be supported by other faiths. Reformed epistemologists consider, on the one hand, that faith in God is perfectly rational and, on the other hand, if we do not have arguments to support this, then we have no arguments to prove the other way around, either. Especially as most religious beliefs do not come up with explanations about one thing or another: the common people, says Wolterstorff, take them as such. Thus, religious reform debates lead towards religious evidentialism, developing, as I indicated earlier, a close view to the Calvinist tradition of the relationship between reason and faith.

Borrowing from Wittgenstein the concept of language game, Wolterstorff sets as goal his ability to understand the proceedings religious language within a particular religious language game. Wolterstorff believes that, although, when referring to religious language, Wittgenstein does not use the phrase *language games*, its use in this context is entitled to, especially as in Wittgenstein's conception, *language game* means **how to use** a piece of language, and **not** the fragment of language itself.

Starting from the idea that religious language is a particular language game, Nicholas Wolterstorff indicates its functions, namely:

1. expressive function: this means that, on the one hand, some religious people are charged with the interpretation of religious meaning and, on the other hand, those individuals express these interpretations into words;

2. besides expressive function, Wolterstorff indicates the regulative function of the religious language game, meaning that it belongs to a community in which its members learn to use grammar. Nicholas Wolterstorff also shows that a religion incorporates a multitude of propositional attitudes: "hoping that certain events will take place, trusting that certain events will take place, regretting that certain events did take place, believing that certain things are true about God, about the Cosmos, about the natural world, about human beings – their misery and glory, their history, their institutions. Wittgenstein's phrase *form of life* is appropriate: adherence to and participation in a religion is a form of life." [10] About these propositional attitudes, Wolterstorff shows that some have merit, other defects, some have to do with truth and others do not. The purpose of the religious language is the restoration of the human being, his rearranging in the primordial state of harmony and the discourse regarding this purpose makes sense only if it is directed to those who believe.

Finally, Wolterstorff shows two options for the religious believers with respect to the claim of rationality of the religious discourse by appeal to reason and experience: either accept the conditions of validity logic and seek a rational foundation for their beliefs, or 'throw down the gauntlet' to the Enlightenment evidentialism and to 'its son', the logical empiricism.

Another exponent of religious reformism, William Alston, develops in his works in *Perceiving God*, and also in *Faith and rationality*, some of the most important themes of epistemological reform. In the centre of Alston's theory lies the perception of God, given that God is a purely spiritual being, Alston thinks that His perception is different than the perception of material objects, meaning non-sensory perception. It is a mystical perception, unmediated by the events of nature and history (as in the thought of John Baillie, whose influence Alston recognizes), and presented as a realistic model directly perceptible for the mystical experience. On the other hand, Alston cannot ignore the conceptual baggage behind beliefs, since it determines the way in which subject and object enter into the relationship.

The predicates of the religious sentences, shows Alston, are found in ordinary language too, but the way we use them when we apply them to God differs from the way we use them frequently in ordinary human communication. We understand sentences like *God makes* or *God forgives* in a sort of "extension of our understanding of these terms in their human application to their use in application of God", but, Alston wonders: "is it necessary that we borrow terms learned in another sphere of discourse for talk of God, or could be otherwise?" [11] In this sense, he upholds that the independence of religious language with respect to other languages is possible if we accept that the meaning of certain constituents of religious discourse depends partially on religious practice. This is because, although we can identify exhaustive religious terms such as *worship*, at least a part of the meaning of these terms may be used in the context of other language games. Therefore, Alston rejects the vision of religious discourse in the radical autonomous form.

In this approach, explains Alston, truth, existence or reality are expressed conceptually **different** in **different** language games. Epistemological criteria for different religious beliefs are distinguished here from the criteria specific for the other faiths. On the other hand, religious concepts and terms can be understood only through religious practice: the words used in Christian discourse as *grace* or *love* or *spiritual* attract a specific form of life in prayer and worship.

Alston says that we can introduce a *stock* of divine predicates taken from originally usual language, into the basic vocabulary of religion. But the meaning of these predicates can not be removed completely from the human prototype. So, the solution seems to be to apply these terms to God in the same sense of the original language. This implementation has the advantage of being univocal and Alston does not see any reason to claim that, by using the same meaning of the words both in divine and in human frame, we show some lack of respect to God, we prove ourselves disrespectful to God. Of course, we can not talk about a complete unequivocal, since some terms can absolutely not work applied to human beings and to God in the same way: an example is the verb *to speak*: when we think about the sentence *God spoke to people*, we do not imagine that he uses his vocal chords, because in our conception God is a spirit and has no vocal apparatus.

As Alston and Plantinga, John Hick is distinguished by the criticism of the nonrealistic interpretations of Christian ideas. Knowing God, Hick argues, is more likely to feel a certain presence, than to trust in sentences about an absence [9, p. 400].

Hick is opposed to the traditional biblical interpretation which tends to treat belief as a propositional attitude, and not as an act of salvation. By appealing to the expression *seeing as*, Hick understands that an object can be perceived in several ways, as having more meanings, without upholding the agreement to total subjectivity of religious knowledge. In fact, it's about recognition: in real life, says Hick, we say that we recognize or identify objects. For example, when we recognize a fork that does not mean that we have achieved a performative act of recognition, since this is routine. If however, someone from the Stone Age must recognize this fork, the situation changes. So to recognize an object we use concepts that do not represent anything but social tools for understanding.

Hick points out that reality itself should not be confused with reality as experience and thought, specific to the human community. Thus, "in each of the major world religious traditions a distinction is made between the Real in itself and the Real as manifested within the intellectual and experimental life of the private traditions. In various ways, for example, the referent of faith may be said to be ineffable or to transcend human categories. Sometimes it is said that we can only talk negatively of the ultimate reality." [9, p. 404]

Introducing in his argumentative scheme the term *pluralistic hypothesis*, Hick upholds that the major faiths of the world have different perceptions and conceptions, which corresponds to different answers about *Real* seen from the inside of the different human communities. As Markham notes, "for Hick, every

culture experience the ‘Real’ (his preferred inclusive term for ‘God’ or the ‘Transcendent’) through a particular sense. When Christians name the religious experience ‘Trinity’ this is simply their cultural linguistic imposition on the experience. Meanwhile, Buddhists are talking about ‘nirvana’ which is a Buddhist imposition. The great advantage is that no religion is any better or worse than any of the alternatives.” [8, p. 201]

5. Wittgenstein’s influence on Anglo-American postmodern theology

If the modern Theology had proved to be at the same time individualist, based on subject’s experience ‘here and now’ and totalizing, admitting that human nature is uniform, aspects that would put it in the thinking direction traced by Descartes, “postmodern Theology inhabits a different space altogether, for if the language by which religious experience is enabled and described is not of individual’s own making, then religion itself has an irreducibly social and historical component. Investigations into religious reality are never more profound than when the faithful historical *community* is its object.” [4, p. 37]

Anglo-American theologians, Wittgenstein’s followers, will try to deliver religious beliefs from Cartesian trap, in accordance with the idea that what makes people be different is the practice of stories that gives sense to words, thus religious beliefs would receive significance inside the form of life given.

The anti-foundationalism after Wittgenstein was thus favourable for the development of postliberal theological doctrine: postliberal theologians, as the neoliberalist George Linbeck and the postliberalist Hans Frei took in consideration cognitive and pragmatic aspects of the truth from the point of view of dependence for the linguistic use. The theological movement that they inaugurated critiques the universalism, the expressivism and the foundationalism of religious transcendentalism, illustrating among other things, the cultural and linguistic aspects of Theology. Promoting the idea of wittgensteinian language game, postliberal theologians will accentuate the role had by language rules, practices and games, characteristic for a religious community in establishing the significance of religious truths.

If theological postliberalism (Vanhoozer indicates the theological postliberalism as a type of postmodern Theology [12]) will search to identify a method by means of which the liberalism and evangelism would interpenetrate, thus representing a form of theological tradition founded on rationality, a form sustaining that the truth and the method are problems closely related to significance issue that, in turn, is determined by an intra-textual subject in terms of Scriptures. The neoliberalism represents rather “a revisionist extension within the established liberal paradigm, that is not so much depart from as perpetuate the liberal/evangelical split characteristic of modernity itself” [13].

The neoliberalism won’t try to categorically separate itself from liberalism: thus, instead of reinterpreting the propositional content of religious doctrines, neoliberalists propose only its redefinition, and in respect to the

practical content of the religion, neoliberalists propose a pragmatic approach of religious truth theory, in place of experimental-expressive liberalism.

In general, postmodern Theology in Anglo-American tradition adheres to what Kevin J. Vanhoozer calls *communal praxis*. From this perspective, Theology would appear as a description of linguistic and practical rules of the form of life developed inside a religious community, what could reduce the religious phenomenon to a sectarian form, in the critiques' opinion. Another critique aims the way the theological reflection would succeed to go above all these practices, with the idea to reform them. Even this way, several Anglo-American theologians contribute today to philosophical development of *common practice*, among them being remarked David Burrell and Rowan William, tributaries of Wittgenstein, or representatives of Yale School, obliged both to Wittgenstein and to Austin and Quine, and others.

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