

Reflections on the Non-cognitive Nature of Religious Language

Dipika Mazumder

Assistant Professor

Dept. of Philosophy

Indira Gandhi College, Boitamari,

Bongaigaon (Assam)

Email: mazumderdipika1985@gmail.com

Abstract

The present paper attempts to examine and explain the non-cognitive nature of religious language from philosophical perspectives, especially from analytic philosophy. When we assert a fact or deny an alleged fact, we use language cognitively, as it is either true or false. A cognitive sentence thus has two truth values, true or false, making it informative or indicative. At this juncture, the question arises whether religious language or sentences like "God loves humankind" are cognitive or non-cognitive. It is worth mentioning that, historically, religious people believed such statements were cognitive and true. Ordinary believers in the Judaic-Christian tradition assume religious realities and facts exist and that their convictions relate to these. However, many 21st century analytic philosophers with a scientific background treat religious language as non-cognitive. For instance, Randall views religion as a human activity with symbols and myths that are non-representative and non-cognitive, arousing emotions, stimulating action, and communicating qualities of experience that cannot be expressed through literal use of language. R. B. Braithwaite suggests that religious assertions serve an ethical function, making them non-cognitive. Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy views religious language as a language game, supporting the non-cognitive stance. Therefore, the paper aims to explain and examine whether religious language or sentences are indeed non-cognitive from the perspectives of linguistic philosophers.

Keywords: *Language, non-cognitive, philosophy.*

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Dipika Mazumder

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Introduction

Before delving into the problem, it is necessary to understand what religious language is. It is the language used to talk about God, divinity or spiritual ideas. This language is used to make statements about supernatural beings, their nature and actions. It expresses thoughts about God's existence, characteristics and experiences like miracles or sin. Unlike everyday language, religious language is different from scientific facts. Everyday language is cognitive, meaning it is used to state facts or deny allegations. For example, saying "India's population is 1.479 billion" or "It is cold outside" are cognitive statements because they are either true or false. Cognitive language conveys information and can be verified as true or false. There are, however, different types of statements that aren't about facts, so they are neither true nor false. Swearwords, commands and baptismal phrases are examples – they are used to express feelings, give orders, or perform actions. This raises questions about religious statements like "God loves humanity". Are they meant to describe facts or serve another purpose? Here, two questions come up: do people using these statements intend them to be factual, and can they actually be true or false? Historically, religious people believed statements like "God loves humanity" were factual and true. "In the Judaic-Christian tradition, believers assumed there are religious facts and realities and their beliefs relate to these,"¹ similar to how we understand facts from science or everyday life. It means that people in the Judaic-Christian tradition (like Christians and Jews) believed their religious beliefs are about real things (facts and realities) just like how we believe in facts from science (like gravity) or everyday life (like the sun rising). They thought their beliefs about God were describing something true, not just feelings or opinions.

Objectives: The main objectives of the paper are:

- (i) To explain the difference between cognitive and non-cognitive uses of language by examining the operation of factual assertions and the assignment of truth values within analytic philosophy.
- (ii) To critically evaluate prominent arguments that characterize religious language as non-cognitive, with particular attention to J. H. Randall's symbolic interpretation, R. B. Braithwaite's ethical-function theory, and Ludwig Wittgenstein's language-game approach.
- (iii) To assess whether religious utterances such as "God loves humankind" should be regarded as cognitive or non-cognitive, through a comparison of classical Judaic-Christian treatments of these statements as fact-claims with contemporary analytic philosophical critiques.

Methodology: This paper employs a philosophical method grounded in analysis and interpretation. Conceptual analysis is used to differentiate cognitive

from non-cognitive functions of language, guided by foundational tenets of analytic philosophy. The discussion critically examines selected writings of J. H. Randall, R. B. Braithwaite, and Ludwig Wittgenstein to appraise their arguments regarding the non-cognitive status of religious language. The research draws on both primary texts and secondary scholarship to support its analysis.

Discussion and findings

In the 21st century, however, many theories view religious language as non-cognitive. This paper discusses three such theories. J.H. Randall Jr. in his book, *The Role of Knowledge in Western Religion*, presents one perspective. Randall views religion as a human activity contributing to culture, akin to science and art. He focuses on symbols and myths, stating, “What is important to recognize is that religious symbols belong with social and artistic symbols, in the group of symbols that are both *non-representative* and *non-cognitive*. Such non-cognitive symbols can be said to symbolize not some external thing that can be indicated apart from their operation, but rather what they themselves do, their peculiar functions.”² For Randall, religious symbols serve specific functions rather than representing external facts.

According to Randall, religious symbols have a fourfold function. They are: (1) they evoke emotions and motivate people to action, strengthening their commitment to moral principles; (2) they foster community unity and cooperation by eliciting shared responses; (3) they convey experiences and qualities that literal language can’t capture; and (4) they reveal and deepen our experience of the “order of splendor”³ or the Divine. Randall likens this last function to the role of artists, who teach us to perceive the world with fresh eyes, discerning hidden qualities and possibilities. Prophets and saints similarly transform our understanding, enabling us to see the world and our place in it anew. By opening our hearts and minds, they guide us toward the Divine, illuminating the religious dimension of our existence. Through this process, we come to understand what human life is and could be, and discover new ways to engage with the world. As Randall notes, “The work of artists and prophets helps us discern unsuspected qualities, latent powers, and possibilities, making us receptive to the world’s qualities and opening our hearts to new possibilities, ultimately showing us visions of God.”⁴

It is to be noted that Randall’s view marks a significant shift from traditional Western religious thought. When he speaks of “finding the Divine” and being shown “visions of God,” he is using symbolic language. For Randall, God represents “our ideals, our controlling values, ‘our ultimate concern’,”⁵ an intellectual symbol for the religious dimension of life. This dimension is a quality of human experience, “the splendor of the vision that sees beyond the actual into the perfected and eternal realm of imagination.”⁶ As he states, God is “an intellectual symbol for the religious

dimension of the world, for the Divine.”⁷ However, this perspective raises questions: human imagination, which shapes our understanding of the divine, is a product of human existence – it didn’t exist before humans and will likely cease with us, making God a temporary construct, a fleeting moment of imagination in a vast universe.

Randall’s theory of religion and religious language clearly articulates a prevalent way of thinking in today’s culture. This mindset is evident in how “religion” (or “faith”) has become a focal point, often replacing “God” in discussions. Nowadays, debates focus on religion’s nature, function, and value, whereas previously they centered on God’s existence, attributes, and actions. Thus, “religion” has become the new hub of this linguistic family, replacing “God” as the primary term. In other words, people tend to focus more on the concept of “religion” (its practices, beliefs, impact, etc.) rather than directly focusing on “God” or divine concepts. In this sense, the central topic has shifted from God to religion, changing how people talk and think about these ideas. Undoubtedly, there is a lot of discussion about religion as a part of human culture. As Randall puts it, “Religion, we now see, is a distinctive human enterprise with a socially indispensable function of its own to perform.”⁸ Many universities have departments studying religion’s history, variations, and cultural impact. Interestingly, the concept of God is now often a subtopic within this broader study of religion, alongside ideas like cult, priesthood and taboo.

It is important to note that on a popular level, people often see religion as a way to achieve inner peace and balance with their environment. It does this by promoting powerful ideas and symbols, like God, that inspire their best selves. Interestingly, both academically and in everyday thinking, God is often defined through the lens of religion – as a concept within religion, rather than religion being about a divine being. At this juncture, it is worth noting that the shift from “God” to “Religion” as the main focus has changed the kinds of questions people ask. Traditionally, the big question about God was whether He exists. But with religion, existence isn’t the issue – it is obvious religion exists. Now people ask what purpose it serves, whether it should be nurtured, and how it can be developed. Because of this, questions about the truth of religious beliefs have taken a backseat. Instead, practical usefulness has become the main focus, i.e., whether they are useful or helpful.

Looking back, focusing on what religion does for us might be a way to replace the old idea of religious truths. John Stuart Mill, an agnostic, wrote about this in *The Utility of Religion*. He said if religion is true, it is obviously useful – like knowing whether you are in a good or bad place. People didn’t ask if religion was useful until they stopped believing it was true. Now, saying religion is useful can be seen as admitting the truth argument is weak – it is an appeal to non-believers to pretend or to unsure people to look away from doubts, because the whole thing feels

shaky. In essence, people focus on usefulness when truth is doubted, sidestepping the question of actual truth.⁹

If we compare how we think about religion now to how the Bible talks about faith, it shows a big change. Back then, God was the Creator, super powerful and worthy of worship. Now, we have made religion something we pick and choose, using it for our own good with God just a concept inside it. We analyze and tweak religion instead of facing God's judgment. It is like we have flipped things – God used to be the boss, now we are the ones in control. We have turned religion into a product we can customize, making God just an idea. This way, we avoid accountability, treating God as a concept instead of a supreme being.

There is no doubt the widespread view of religion as part of human culture has clear historical roots. It is a natural fit in our tech-driven society, shaped by scientific thinking (also called scientism, positivism, or naturalism). Science has grown rapidly, leading people to assume it is the best way to understand reality. Since God isn't something you can study scientifically, religion becomes the focus instead – with its history, psychology, sociology, and comparisons. As a result, religion is intensely studied and God is seen as just an idea within it.

R.B. Braithwaite offers a second theory on religion's function. Braithwaite's theory claims that religious language is non-cognitive. He believes religious assertions mainly serve an ethical purpose, expressing the speaker's commitment to a specific policy or way of life. As he states, ethical statements convey "the intention of the asserter to act in a particular sort of way specified in the assertion."¹⁰ For Braithwaite, when a Christian says "God is love" (*agape*), it shows the speaker's intent "to follow an agapeistic way of life,"¹¹ recommending this path to others.

It is to be noted that Braithwaite's idea is that what differentiates religions isn't rituals or moral values alone, but the unique stories, myths or parables tied to each faith. He asks, what is the difference between Christianity and Buddhism if they promote similar values? For him, it is these stories that set them apart. They don't need to be true or believed as fact. As he notes, the link between stories and actions is "a psychological and causal one."¹² People find it easier to stick to a tough path with certain stories, even if they are not believed to be true. He cites *Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress* as a prime example - a book with fictional stories that deeply influenced English Christian life. Braithwaite sums it up: "A religious assertion... is the assertion of an intention... together with... certain stories."¹³ He is saying religious statements aren't just facts, but a commitment to a way of life, backed by stories that inspire actions. Basically, when someone makes a religious statement, they are expressing commitment to a way of living, and the stories help shape and motivate

that commitment. It is not about the stories being true or false, but how they influence actions. Thus, according to Braithwaite, religious language is non-cognitive, serving an ethical purpose by expressing the speaker's commitment to a way of life rather than stating objective facts.

A third influential non-cognitive perspective on religious language stems from Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy, developed further by D. Z. Phillips and others. Before diving into this view, it is worth asking: what did Wittgenstein mean by religion and religious language? In his *Theology after Wittgenstein*, Fergus Kerr says, "Religion is thought to be the sort of thing that Wittgenstein meant by a 'form of life'... and religious talk is supposed to be a 'language-game', autonomous, with its own rules, intelligible only to the players."¹⁴ This perspective posits that language is divided into distinct "language-games," each tied to a specific "form of life," like religion or science. To fully engage with a particular form of life, such as Christianity, means using its unique language, which has internal criteria for truth and falsehood. This makes religious utterances resistant to external criticism, including scientific scrutiny, as they are part of a self-contained system.

It is interesting to note that the Neo-Wittgensteinian perspective highlights how religious language, like the Adam and Eve narrative, functions within a distinct "language-game" differing from the scientific realm, each governed by its own rules and criteria. This distinction implies the biblical account isn't presenting scientific assertions about human origins or evolution; rather, it conveys profound spiritual insights into human guilt and divine relationship dynamics. As scientific inquiry approaches facts differently, the narrative and scientific theories coexist without direct collision, addressing different facets of human experience.

Linking religion to everyday facts or scientific research, and expecting it to conform to those standards, would be seen as missing the point of religion altogether. Religion is a self-contained system with its own language; it doesn't need external validation or defence. For instance, affirming God's goodness doesn't imply anything about how the world works or what will happen next. The idea that religion reveals the deep structure of reality or a bigger cosmic context? That is considered a fundamental misunderstanding - ironically, one shared by most influential religious figures.

D. Z. Phillips explores religion as a unique language-game, focusing on prayer and immortality. Typically, Christians see "life everlasting" as a factual claim about post-death existence. Phillips disagrees, viewing "soul" as moral personality - like saying "He'd sell his soul for money", a remark about someone's character, not metaphysics. It highlights a person's integrity, values, and actions. Maybe talk about the soul's immortality expresses spiritual depth rather than literal survival.

Phillips says, “Eternal life is the reality of goodness... Eternity is not an extension of this present life, but a mode of judging it. Eternity is not more life, but life seen under certain moral and religious modes of thought....”¹⁵ He reframes immortality questions as about the kind of life one lives, not its duration. This shift has moral value, freeing us from self-focus and future concerns. ‘Dying to the self’ means letting go of ego centrality. Death teaches us we are not the world’s centre, and our life isn’t necessary - a tough but liberating truth.

Critics argue that our selfish concerns about a future life don’t dictate its existence. Christian belief grounds the afterlife in God’s nature - He created us in His image, and His love won’t abandon us. As Martin Luther said, “Anyone with whom God speaks... is certainly immortal. The Person of God... shows that we are creatures with whom God wills to speak, right into eternity...”¹⁶ God won’t discard us half-formed; He’ll see us through, given our immense potential.

The Neo-Wittgensteinian theory of religious language faces criticism for presenting a radical reinterpretation of religious language, rather than describing actual usage. It strips religious expressions of their traditional cosmic implications, reinterpreting immortality as a present moral quality and God as dependent on human belief. Phillips says, “What (the believer) learns as religious language; a language which he participates in along with other believers. What I am suggesting is that to know how to use this language is to know God.”¹⁷ And, “To have the idea of God is to know God.”¹⁸ The issue is, this view doesn’t allow for the possibility that people can believe in God, use religious language, and still... God might not exist.

Conclusion

In view of the above, it can be said that religious language is now often seen as non-cognitive, focusing on its practical role in human life rather than making claims about God’s existence. It serves a purpose – providing comfort, community, or moral guidance – rather than stating facts about God or the supernatural. We are more interested in what religion does for people – its usefulness, impact, and emotional resonance – than in debating objective truths about a divine being. This shift from “Is God real?” to “What does religion do for people?” reflects a cultural trend influenced by scientific thinking. However, unlike in scientific study, God is a religious phenomenon, and so, like everyday language, religious language isn’t necessarily cognitive. J. H. Randall’s view supports this, treating religious symbols as evoking emotions, fostering community, and conveying experiences – rather than describing external facts. Likewise, Braithwaite believes religious language is non-cognitive, meaning it’s more about expressing the speaker’s commitment to a particular way of life and their values, rather than stating objective facts or describing reality.

Religious language is non-cognitive, says the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. It doesn't describe facts or realities. It is a special "language-game" with its own rules. It is part of a "form of life" called religion. It is understood by people who participate in it. It is hard to criticize from the outside, like using science to judge it. Religious words convey feelings, values and experiences. They are not about objective facts. Truth is decided within the religion itself. D. Z. Phillips says concepts like immortality and God are about morals and spirit, not facts. Critics say this changes what religion actually means. It takes away the traditional big ideas. It doesn't allow people to be wrong about God. It focuses on the inner meaning of religion, not facts. Thus, in a nutshell, it can be said that religious language is largely viewed as non-cognitive, focusing on its practical role in human life, conveying feelings, values, and experiences, rather than making factual claims about God's existence.

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