Some Reflections on Wittgenstein's Concept of Religion: An Analytical Approach

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Abstract

This paper tries to emphasise on the concept of religion and especially deals with religious language, making a distinction between early and later concepts of Wittgenstein. As far as religious language is concerned, he adopts two types of analysis of language. Early religious language is concerned with logical analysis of language, while his later religious language deals with ordinary language analysis. Therefore, Wittgenstein's religious language is divided into two phases centering on the logical and ordinary analysis of language.

Wittgenstein's concept of religion can be extracted from his *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus, Note Books, Philosophical Investigations* and *Culture and Value*. As an analytic Philosopher he uses the technique of analysis in religious language not only in his early work but also in his later works. His analysis of language separates his early views on religion from later works.

Keywords : *Early Wittgenstein, Language, Later Wittgenstein, Logical analysis, Religion.*

1 Wittgenstein's early concept of religion

Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico philosophicus,* mentions clearly that it is better to remain silent. By saying this he indicates that religious language is nonsense. In this context, Wittgenstein seems to follow the logical analysis in the context of religious concepts in order to bring out the embedded structure of concepts like God, destiny etc. Logical analysis cannot bring out the diverse forms of religious concepts, because it emphasises on the logical form of the concepts. That is why, the main function of religious language is to dig out the logical form. Logical analysis cannot focus on the other forms of religious

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language. Therefore, his early picture of religious language is best known as essentialism.

Logical positivists shared his view. They viewed that religious language like 'God exists' is paradoxical, because God's existence cannot be proved through verification principle. That is why, A.J. Ayer in his *Language Truth and logic* shows that religious language is meaningless. He holds that a religious man thinks that the word 'God' is a transcendent term, so it cannot be defined through experience or verification principle.

But there are some theologians who protested against the verification principle. One of the defenders is Alvin Plantinga. Anthony Kenny asserts that towards the end of the twentieth century Alvin Plantinga reinstated the ontological argument. He begins the argument by defining the property of maximal excellence that includes omnipotence, omniscience and moral perfection. If God exists, obviously God has maximal excellence in the actual world. But maximal excellence is not sufficient for God head. We need to consider worlds other than this one. Kenny explains Plantinga's view that maximal greatness therefore is maximal excellence that is equivalent to divinity or God head. Anything that possesses maximal greatness must exist in every possible world, because in a world in which it does not exist it does not possess any properties. If it is possible for maximal greatness to be instantiated, then it is instantiated in every world. If so, then it is instantiated in our world, the actual world; that is to say, God head is instantiated and God exists (Kenny, 2007)

Wittgenstein remarks that "there are, indeed things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest they are what is mystical" (Wittgenstein, 1961, 6.522). He, through this saying, asserts that the mystical element cannot be expressed. It is indeed inexpressible or beyond expression. Therefore, religious language as far as the mystical element is concerned, is meaningless or non-sensical in the sense that it cannot express anything about the mystical. He therefore, in *Tractatus,* points out that the world is totality of facts. Language or propositions which are used to express things is either true or false. Here, language is bounded by experience. We cannot go beyond experience. Language points out the reality which we want to know. But Wittgenstein through religious language points out the fact that there are some things or reality, which we cannot speak, is mystical. Through 'mystical' he wants to carefully point out the concept like value. The concept of value is not found in the world. It remains outside the world. That is why it is found that "In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen; in it no value exists and if it exists it would have no value" (Wittgenstein, 1961, 6.141). Therefore, he shows

that human values reside in transcendental realm. That is why he mentions that "Feeling the world as a limited whole, which has led him to the mystical" (Wittgenstein, 1961, 6.45). This indicates that mystical attitudes towards human values are nonsensical in the sense that they go beyond experience. They lie in the transcendental realm. Similarly, religious language also lies in the transcendental realm which is nonsensical or meaningless from empirical standpoint. "A religious person for Wittgenstein looks at the world from outside, unlike a scientist who looks at it world from inside. A religious person wonders that the hens lay eggs and water boils at 100 degree centigrade. A scientist simply describes these facts without any element of wonder. Both religion and art, in their own ways, according to Wittgenstein, awaken us to wonder, but science is a way of killing this awakening. It sends us to 'to sleep again" (Chandra, 2002, 138).

2   Wittgenstein's Later Concept of Religion

Wittgenstein in his later work *Philosophical Investigations,* lays emphasis on the grammar of religious language. He holds that theology is considered as grammar (Wittgenstein, 1953). Wittgenstein in this context seems to differ from early views. In *Tractatus,* he brought the meaning of human life through the awareness of religious language. This type of language is considered as logical in the sense that the field of enquiry is transcendental. On the other hand, the grammatical investigation followed by Wittgenstein in early and later work is different. The early work deals with the surface grammar, which consists of logical analysis in religious language. Wittgenstein attempts to point out the religious concepts like God, destiny etc. through logical analysis of language. But later Wittgenstein deviates from this view and holds that logical analysis in case of religious language is confined in its nature and cannot point out the concept of religious language game or diverse forms of religious language.

Logical analysis has been replaced by ordinary analysis in later concepts of Wittgenstein in the context of religious language. The later concepts of Wittgenstein holds that the function of religious language is not confined. Rather it has different functions. That is why the different functions of language are known as language game of religion. The concept of language game in religion rejects the early view of Wittgensten which revolve around the circle of logical analysis in religion. That is why, he says that "essence is expressed by grammar" (Wittgenstein, 1977, 53). This indicates that Wittgenstein refutes the mystical concept of religion which he followed through logical analysis. In contrast to this he involves the later technique which holds that essence can be described through ordinary analysis in order to bring out diverse forms of

religious concepts.

Wittgenstein's concept of language game of religion brings out possibility of expressing the concept of God from different perspectives or angles. That is why, Wittgenstein's later concept of religion removes the barrier of impossibility of expressing or speaking about religious concepts. As for instance, we can think of the concept of God. Theologians try to prove the existence of God through different theories like the ontological argument, cosmological argument and teleological argument etc. These different theories try to define the concept of God from different angles or perspectives. Again in comparative religion too, we come across different religions which also discuss the concept of God in their own way without interrupting the views as forwarded by different religions. It is true that we do not have an absolute or an ultimate view regarding the concept of God. Wittgenstein through his later concept of religion unfolds this view. So, it is undoubtedly a holistic concept of religion which unravel the different doors of exposing religious concepts like God, destiny etc. Wittgenstein asserts, "Do not be afraid of talking nonsense. You must keep an eye on your non-sense" (Wittgenstein, 1977, 80).

Wittgenstein puts the remark that, "The way we use the word 'God' does not show whom you mean-but, rather, what you mean" (Wittgenstein, 1977, 82). This concept again, shows that later Wittgenstein does not hold the view that meaning of religious language cannot be derived by pointing to an object. Rather the meaning of religious language can be drawn through the use of these concepts. So, he clarifies that the meanings of religious concepts like God, destiny etc. do not depend on reference. Rather he holds that the meaning of religious concepts comes to light through use. He therefore, remarks that 'God's essence is supposed to guarantee his existence-what this really means is that what is here at issue is not the existence of something" (Wittgenstein, 1977, 53). Because there can be no description of 'what it would be like if there were such a thing as God" (Chandra, 2002, 140). It clears that the meaning of the concept of God does not depend upon its very existence, rather, is based on its diverse use of the concept of God. In this context he beautifully mentions that we must bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use in order to bring out the holistic picture that ordinary analysis of religious concepts is meaningful to reject the early picture of religious language which denotes the essential nature of God's existence. The concept of use only in later philosophy makes religious concepts meaningful. Suresh Chandra also writes in this context that, "The Tractarian picture has been replaced by a new picture. From the transcendental heights we have been brought to the every day use of words. But this is not something unusual. This is not only a shift restricted to his views on

religion. Later Wittgenstein has started looking at the world through the grammar of theology. The nature of objects (if there be any) is decided, not by reality outside, but by the grammar of language". Therefore, Wittgenstein's use theory of meaning is a dominant concept in later philosophy which not only occupies an important place in his philosophy of language but also in his concept of religion.

Wittgenstein shows that philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday. Similarly, in religion too, problems come to light when religious concepts like God, destiny etc. are not used from the backdrop of practical standpoint. As for instance, if X asks Y, what is God? To answer the question will be difficult. But when the same X modifies the question and asks to Y, what is the importance of God? Then the answer will be easy, because the question can be answered from practical standpoint or everyday use that God has infinite qualities like omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence, He is benevolent, saviour and so on and so forth. Therefore, Wittgenstein brings out the fact that language has no specific function i.e., to focus on the internal structure of the word. Rather religious language has diverse function of language that is known as religious language game. Language game can bring out the original or actual picture of language, so, it is clear that Wittgenstein in his later phase does not concentrate on the inner or intrinsic structure of things which cannot disclose the diverse picture of religious language. Wittgenstein in this context seems to follow the strategy of ordinary language analysis in language game of religion to 'fly away from the fly bottle'.

3   Conclusion

It is perspicuous that later Wittgenstein modifies the early concept of religious language. But it is not the case that there is no continuity between early and later religious language. Early Wittgenstein paves the way to the later Wittgenstein to discuss the concept of religion in a more meaningful way so that ordinary people can understand the religious concepts or language game of religion through ordinary language analysis. Wittgenstein through the concept of religious language game directly or indirectly points to the most important issue that is the inculcation of the concept of secularism. That is why he in his *Notebooks* significantly mentions *to believe in God means to see that life has a meaning*. By this saying, he does not point out his sense of belongingness in any existing religions. Rather he indicates his seriousness to religion. Therefore, his concept of God glimpses the most searching and needful issue, that is the concept of secularism embedded in his philosophy of religion. To be brief, the concept of secularism can root out or uproot the serious problems like religious intolerance,

fundamentalism, fanaticism etc. So, Wittgenstein's later concept of religion has undoubtedly showed an important path in better understanding the modern concept of religion.

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