BELIEF, LANGUAGE AND RELIGION

Traditionally Religious Beliefs have their source in the experiences of some individuals who are supposed to be specially chosen by God for receiving the ‘revelation’ of the ultimate truth about man, God and the universe, to pass on this knowledge to the generality of mankind for their moral and spiritual good. The basic religious beliefs are given meaning by reference to the experiences of these individuals who refer to these experiences in their teachings. These basic or central religious beliefs are expressed originally in the ordinary language shared between the teacher and the taught but since these beliefs are not about things ordinarily perceived or experienced by common man, the question of their justification arises, both for the believers and the non-believers. The question of justification is the question of the truth of these beliefs. The believer settles for an answer in terms of faith. But for the non-believer the question of justification is more serious one. He tends to treat these questions as quasi scientific questions. Since the truth of the religious beliefs cannot be verified in experience, in the ordinary sense of the term, it remains suspect. Not only this, the non-believer challenges the very meaningfulness of religious beliefs.

Traditionally philosophers have tackled the question of justification by constructing arguments for the existence of God. But in
the twentieth century the questions in religion have changed their types. In place of asking about the proofs of the existence of God, the questions are being asked about the meaningfulness of the beliefs: whether the language used in expressing the religious beliefs makes any sense.

In this chapter I shall make an endeavour to discuss some of the leading positions on the subject of meaningfulness of religious beliefs.

In philosophy, a distinction is generally made between knowledge and belief. And, the clearest of instance of this distinction we find in the philosophy of Kant. In his book ‘Critique of pure reason’, Kant talks of three modes of awareness viz. opinion, belief and knowledge. Kant is of the opinion that in every rational judgement there is a subjective as well as an objective factor. The subjective factor is the degree of certainty we have for ourselves about something. And the objective factor is the demonstrative evidence which we can elicit to support our this certainty. He says that if a judgement is objectively insufficient and subjectively sufficient, then it is a case of belief, if a judgement is sufficient both subjectively and objectively, then it is a case of knowledge. And, if a judgement is insufficient both subjectively and objectively then it is a case of opinion. Now, when we apply this principle to religious belief, we find that if we have the objectively sufficient evidence of the existence of God, then we can also claim that we have the subjective
we have the subjective sufficiency for the existence of God and the resulting judgement could be called as the knowledge of the existence of God. But, this view, as we have seen in the case of the different Arguments for the existence of God, does not hold ground. There is no sufficient evidence in support of objectivity God. Hence, we are to look for the other possibilities that is if, in case of the non availability of any subject evidence, we are not sure that whether there is a God or not then this will be a case of opinion. But, the case of a religious believer is different. He has a strong persuasion in the face of inadequate objective evidence. This state of subjective certainty when there is not enough evidence to support it objectively is called belief.

The words ‘knowledge’ and ‘belief must have been contrasted in different ways and on different grounds. But, that is not a point of concern for me in this thesis.

In 20th century, the nature of discussion has undergone a lot of changes. Now, in philosophical circles, the questions regarding the existence of God, are hardly discussed. So, with the change in the questions, the nature of justification also has changed. Now, it is the meaningfulness of religious statements which are at the heart of the issue. Whether religious belief as such makes any sense or can we speak of religious utterances meaningfully - logical positivism is a case
in point. The discussion on this issue is further intensified with the arrival of Wittgenstein on the scene.

The first important position that immediately occurs to me at this point is the ‘The Falsification Debate’. This debate took place between three proponents namely Antony Flew, Basil Michell and RM Hare. The debate is initiated by Antony Flew and also concluding remarks are given by him only. Flew’s position of ‘falsification’ seems to be strongly inspired by the positivistic tendencies of the time. As I have said above that in case of belief there is objective insufficiency. Antony flew takes this point for discussion. He is of the view that if we cannot prove the truth of religious belief, it will be appropriate to find out under what conditions it would be false. He says that if we can neither verify a statement of religious belief nor admit any conditions that would falsify it, then in what sense is a statement of religious belief an assertion?

The attack seems to be of the type as of the logical positivists. For the positivists, a statement to be meaningful must be verifiable. Flew takes the stand from the other side. He believes that an assertion to be an assertion must be at least falsifiable. The position seems to be again basically a scientific one. He argues that for a statement to be an assertion, it must have truth value. To illustrate the principle of falsification Flew cites a parable of ‘the invisible gardener’. By way of this parable, Flew seems to be arguing in a direction that brings ‘Faith
and Reason' face to face. The question seems - at what point do we abandon belief in the face of evidence that weighs against belief? How much one must allow to count against a religious belief before it is abandoned as indefensible?

In response to this RM Hare is of the view that Flew is correct to hold that certain people hold certain beliefs so strongly that no evidence is sufficient to ever cause them to abandon those beliefs. Hare argues that such beliefs are not uncommon. He says that we all have deeply rooted convictions which are neither verifiable nor falsifiable. Hare names such convictions as 'bliks'. Hare instanciates his stand with some important and interesting example he cites, "... A certain lunatic is convinced that all dons want to murder him. His friends introduce him to all the mildest and most respectable dons that they can find, and after each of them has retired, they say, ‘you see, he does not really want to murder you; he spoke to you in a most cordial manner; surely you are convinced now?’ But the lunatic replies, ‘yes, but that was only his diabolical cunning; he’s really plotting against me the whole time, like the rest of them; I know it I tell you’. However many kindly dons are produced, the reaction is still the same". I

And there are many such bliks like that of the lunatic. And no

1. Basil Mitchell (ed.): The philosophy of religion page-16, OUP-1971
amount of proofs and tests can destroy these bliks and no amount of
observations and tests can make a person to believe in one blik rather
than the other.

Hare charges Flew of wrongly equating religious utterances with
that of scientific utterances. He says, “The mistake of the position
which Flew selects for attack is to regard this kind of talk (talk about
bliks) as some sort of explanation, as scientists are accustomed to use
the word. As such, it would obviously be ludicrous. We no longer
believe in God as an atlas . . . .”2

Thus, Hare explains all beliefs in terms of bliks. But the problem
with Hare’s explanation is that he talks of ‘right bliks’ and ‘wrong
bliks’. For example, the lunatic has a wrong blik about the dons. And on
the contrary, the other people have the right one. He justifies it by
saying that every argument have two sides. But, the question of right
and wrong bliks remains arbitrary. There is no fixed criterion to settle as
to what bliks are right and what will count as wrong bliks. The question
it seems is left to the majority decision.

Basil Mitchel:

Mitchel charges Flew of misrepresenting the case of a believer. “
. . . so the theologian does recognise the fact of pains as counting

2. Basil Mitchell (ed).: The philosophy of religion page-17, OUP-1971
against Christian doctrine. But, it is then that he will not allow it - or anything to count decisively against it, for he is committed by his faith to trust in God. His attitude is not that of the detached observer, but of the believer".3 Mitchel brings in a parable to explain his position. "... in time of war in an occupied country, a member of the resistance meets one night a stranger who deeply impresses him. They spend that night together in conversation. The stranger tells the partisan that he himself is on the side of the resistance - indeed that he is in command of it, and urges the partisan to have faith in him no matter what happens. The partisan is utterly convinced at that meeting of the stranger’s sincerity and constancy undertakes to trust him”.4

In the parable this stranger is sometimes seen in police uniform, handing over patriots to the aggressing power. At such occasions his friends murmur against him; but the partisan still believes the stranger is on their side. Sometimes this stranger helps the partisan. "The partisan does not allow anything to count decisively against the proposition ‘The stranger is on our side’. This is because he is committed to the stranger. But he of course recognises that the stranger’s ambiguous behaviour does count against but he believes about him. It is precisely this situation which constitutes the trial of faith.

3. ibid, p-18
When the partisan asks for helps and doesn’t get it, what can he do? He can (a) conclude that the stranger is not on our side; or (b) maintain that he is on our side, but that he has reasons for withholding help.”5

But, this position is not tenable simply because as Flew says that so for we talk of a human being it is alright. But, same cannot be justifiably talked of ‘God’ a being who is omniscient, omnipotent etc.

Belief-in and belief-that are two important terms often talked in the philosophy of religion. C.S. Lewis makes a distinction on almost same lines while talking of the falsification debate. He observes that statements of religious belief can be taken in at least three different ways:

(a) As provisional hypothesis to be discarded if experience tells against them;
(b) As significant articles of faith; and
(c) As vacuous formulae to which experience makes no difference and which makes no difference to life. Basil Mitchel concludes that religious belief must be of second kind, and Lewis agrees that taking religious belief in this second kind is a defensible attitude. Also, it comes into the debate that religious belief in the sense of provisional hypothesis is not what a religious believer has in mind.

5. ibid, p-19
Lewis makes a distinction between what he calls the ‘The logic of speculative thought’ and ‘the logic of personal relations.’ Speculative thought is a kind of proportioning the belief to evidence available. This is the sort of task which a scientist is engaged in doing while undertaking research. But the term ‘belief’ is an ambiguous term referring from a weak degree of opinion to psychological certainty, though not a logical certainty. The sense of belief where it is a weak degree of opinion refers to a speculative thought and the later sense refers to the logic of personal relations. For example, when someone says, I believe it is raining outside, but once we step out, it is confirmed to the degree of knowledge. This is what the scientists do. This sense of belief refers the scientific hypothesis. The job of a scientist is to move from the weakly held opinion, sometimes called belief to knowledge supported by empirical evidence. As Lewis sees, the task of a scientists to move from opinion to knowledge.

But, even the scientist, as a human being approaches the personal relations in a different way than he approaches a speculative problem in the laboratory. For example, suppose a friend is accused of committing a crime, but claims to be innocent. The scientist may believe the friends words even though there is a strong evidence against the friend. No one would blame the scientist of defending a friend on the face of strong evidence against him. He does not say, “do not forget, I am scientist, and to be consistent with my scientific methods, I cannot accept your
claims of innocence until all the evidence has been weighed. Then depending as the weight of the evidence, I will inform you whether or not I believe that you are innocent”.6 Friends are not made of such sceptical stuff. This can be better understood by the distinction between ‘belief-in’ and ‘belief-that’. The latter is a kind of weak opinion which characterises the speculation inquiries while the former is a commitment which one continues to hold even on the face of evidence against it.

The belief in God is much like the ‘belief-in’. Lewis also makes a distinction between making a commitment and secondly meeting this commitment even when there is evidence against it.

The very fact that the scientist believes in the innocence of the friend even on the face of counter evidence may prove to be in vain. But no one blames the scientist of maintaining such a belief. There are examples like drowning person hardly asks the rescuer for any evidence whether he is a rescuer or not. “You do not ask the life guard to show you a Red Cross life saving certificate before trusting in the life guard to save you.”7

Lewis argues that our relation to God is more like the relation of a drowning man to the rescuer. And the question of trust arises only

when the situation that calls for trust is ambiguous. If there is a situation of demonstrative certainty, the question of faith does not arise. This ambiguity only makes the faith possible i.e. in the sense of personal trust. In this way, the religious believer cannot be charged of ignoring the question of evil in the world. For the presence of evil is a sort of trial of faith. "... Christian regards it as positively praiseworthy to believe without evidence, or in excess of evidence, or to maintain his belief unmodified in the teeth of steadily increasing evidence against it. Thus, a ‘faith that has stood firm’, which appears to mean belief immune from all the assaults of reality, is commended."

HH Price also talks of this distinction between ‘believe-in’ and ‘believe-that’. He says, “... belief-in is an attitude to a person, whether human or divine, while belief-that is just an attitude to a proposition?...”

An explication of above remarks of HH Price is of interest and importance from religious point of view. To say that ‘Belief In’ is an attitude to a person whether human or divine and ‘Belief That’ is an attitude towards a proposition will be an over simplification of the abounding examples that we find in where the ‘belief in’ is referred to belief in animals, for example a blind man believes in his dog, a rider

believes in his horse, - Belief in machines, where a tailor believes in his sewing machine and a car owner believes in his car, - Belief in Government policies or scientific theories.

But the distinction between 'Belief In' and 'Belief That' is not very sharp. Most cases of 'Belief in' can be easily reduced to 'Belief that'. For example, 'Belief in unicorns' can be converted to 'Belief that Unicorns exist', or a Belief in a person, say, Alexander, amounts to belief that there was a person named Alexander who existed in some part of the history. So, in these cases 'Belief in' is reducible to 'Belief that'. Not only this, even the conversion from 'Belief that' to Belief in' is possible. For example, 'Belief that' 'all whales are mammals' can be reduced to ' the belief in mammality of whales. Thus we find that all the examples under consideration are a sort of existential in nature.

But, this is not the complete description of the case of distinction between 'Belief in' and 'Belief that'. There are cases of belief in which cannot be reduced to belief that. For example, a belief in a friend or belief in one's doctor or a Belief in 'God'. Though these examples presuppose belief that in a sense that they contain some existential contents, but that is not all. A Belief in friend can be reduced to Belief that in a way, a person confirming to such and such descriptions is my friend. But, this does not speak exhaustibly about the friend ship
Thus H.H. Price makes a distinction between two senses of Belief in - Evaluative Belief in and factual Belief in. The evaluative sense of ‘Belief in’ can be illustrated by ‘Belief in’ is ‘disbelief in’ where an attitude of distrust is shown. For example, ‘I do not believe in doctor William’. Here, ‘Belief in’ is quite a different attitude from the attitude shown in case of Belief that. The factual sense of ‘Belief in’ is reducible to Belief that. For example, ‘the belief in fairies’ can be reduced to ‘Belief that’ fairies exist.

It must be noted here that Belief that is merely an attitude of acceptance shown towards a proposition which is generally though not always, of existential nature. Where as in case of ‘Belief in’ in evaluative sense the element of trust comes in. And may be when this ‘belief in ‘ in applied to ‘God’ this trust can be called as faith which results into commitment.

It must be remembered here, as said above, that though the ‘Belief in’ in evaluative sense in not reducible to belief that, there is a close relationship between the two senses of ‘ Belief in’ evaluative sense and factual sense for the evaluative sense presupposes the factual sense. For example, when I say that I believe in my doctor, in the sense that I trust my doctor. Here, the factual sense is presupposed for I cannot say this unless I know that there exists a person to whom the
description ‘my doctor’ applies. Similarly, Belief in God presupposes that existence of God.

Thus the difference between two senses of Belief in - factual sense (which is reducible to Belief that) and evaluative sense is a difference attitude. ‘Belief in’ in the factual sense (‘Belief that’) sense is merely an acceptance of propositions which are generally though not always existential in nature, where as the Belief in ‘ in evaluative sense is an attitude of trust. This attitude may thus into faith when we talk of human relations with God.

In the present context of religious belief, the understanding of the nature of belief as propounded by RB Braithwaite sounds interesting. Braithwaite, in his paper, ‘An Empiricist’s view of the nature of Religious Belief’, like Wittgenstein, talks of the use criterion of meaning. He talks of three classes of statements which can be assigned the truth value i.e. which can be ascertained as true or false. He says, “there are three classes of statement whose method of truth value testing is in general outline clear: statements about particular matters of empirical fact, scientific hypotheses and other general empirical statements, and the logically necessary statements of logic and mathematics (and their contradictories). Do religious statements fall into any of these three classes? If they do, the problem of their
meaningfulness will be solved: their truth-values will be testable by the methods appropriate to empirical statements, particular or general, or to mathematical statements. It seems to me clear that religious statements, as they are normally used, have no place in this trichotomy.

Here it seems he is talking in line with logical positivists whose position has been briefly discussed in the previous chapter. But, then he changes over to the central question under discussion and says that it is not only the nature of religious statements that they do not fall under that trichotomy, even the moral statements do not come under the above trichotomy. But, moral statements cannot be called as nonsensical as they have a use in guiding the conduct. And if they are useful, they certainly are meaningful. Here, he brings in Wittgensteinian use criterion of meaning: “The meaning of any statement is given by the way it is used.”

Braithwaite makes an endeavour to explain the religious belief in empirical terms and thus he talks of understanding the religious statements as used by the believer to assert his religious convictions.

10. Ibid, p-73-74
He is of the opinion that religious assertions are primarily used as moral assertions. He goes a long way to give an explanation of religious assertions in moral terms. He talks of conative understanding of religious i.e. “as being primarily declarations of adherence to a policy of action, declaration of commitment to a way of life . . . It is the intention to behave which constitutes what is known as religious conviction. Braithwaite tries to fully amalgamate religion with moral principles. . . . the primary use of religious assertions is to announce allegiance to a set of moral principles: without such allegiance there is no ‘true religion’. He observes that an important difference between religious and purely moral principle is that the conduct preached by religion is not only external but also internal . . . . the conversion involved in accepting a religion is a conversion, not only of the will, but of the heart. Christianity requires not only that you should behave towards your neighbour as if you loved him as yourself: it requires that you should love him as yourself . . . Christian concept of agape refers partly to external behaviour - the agapeistic behaviour for which there are external criteria - yet being filled with agape includes more than behaving agapeistically externally: it includes an agapeistic frame of mind . . .”12

Braithwaite talks of non-propositional conative theory of ethics;
which makes use of moral assertions as primarily expressing the intention of the assertion to act in a specific way as specified in the assertion. The purely moral assertion is therefore does not assert any proposition where as a religious assertion has the propositional element in it. This is explained and based on the stories forming the texture of religion. For example, he says that the Christian religion is both the Christian doctrinal stories and confessing the allegiance to the Christian way of life.

Quoting a parable of three Lord Shaftesbury’s from Mathew Arnold, he says that the religious stories are not necessarily believed in to be true. What is important in his view is that the religious stories are entertained in thought as having meaning. According to him belief in stories does not form the criteria for a story to be religious. There are stories in Christian religion which are believed and also others not believed by the Christians to be true. What matters is, “A man is not . . . a professing Christian unless he both proposes to live according to Christian moral principles and associates his intention with thinking of Christian stories; but he need not believe that the empirical propositions presented by the stories correspond to empirical fact.”

He justifies the role of religious stories by saying that they are conducive to resolve upon and carry through certain actions, which are

contrary to their natural inclinations. These stories have a psychological impact on the minds of the people which makes them consistent in their behaviour despite the fact that the story influencing the behaviour policy is not believed to be true.

Lastly, he concludes his article by saying that a religious assertion is an assertion of intention to carry out a behaviour policy under the general principle to be a moral one.

But this, to my naive understanding seems objectionable. It seems Braithwaite deliberately wants to avoid the use of terms like ‘faith’. I do not understand how a story which influences a mind so strongly as to the effect that influence is not even withered on the face of the fact that the story is not true. I think this is what, in whole of philosophy of religion the term faith is used for. The difference is that in case of faith the story is definitely believed to be true. Unless a story is believed to be true, it cannot have that strong an influence over the mind of the follower. For example, the fictitious stories in drama or movies have their effect on the audience so far audience feels emotionally carried away with the story. Sooner, the play is over and people realise that the story was just a fiction, its influence starts withering away. I do not understand how Braithwaite will repudiate such charge against his conative theory of religion.
The stories in religion, though, have moral entailments but entailments are from the influence of these stories upon believers, who believe that the stories are true. No sooner, the truth of the stories is challenged by the believer, he no longer remains a same person of religion. His whole behaviour may change and may even start behaving in an entirely opposite way.

To my understanding, Braithwaite started rightly by borrowing the use criterion of meaning from Wittgenstein, but he deviates from the natural entailments of Wittgensteinian theory. Wittgenstein would say that philosophy does not change anything, it only makes the concepts clear by placing these concepts to their original habitat which is their original home. This will be the subject of discussion in the next chapter.