

On the Two-Language Approach to Language of Faith: An Exploration of a Hermeneutical Problem

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Hermeneutics is the branch of philosophy that deals with interpretation. Both science and religion are doing interpretation. In fact, it can be argued that their relationship is a matter of interpretation. Yet, both try very hard not to be associated with one another. It is as if each has its own private domain accessible only to its followers. However, the world has become highly complex and multi-faceted that to insist that one discipline remains exclusive to its followers spells disaster and doom to it.

This is especially true in the case of doing theology in the postmodern time. Slowly but with great efficiency, scientific language creeps into the language of faith – the language of theology. It forces the latter to adopt a multi-disciplinary approach in keeping with the changes that are happening in human society. Nevertheless, some theologians reject the data from science and insist that the language of faith is over and beyond its secular counterpart. Others meanwhile, embrace the changes wholly and proceed to purge the language of faith from its dogmatic and archaic past.

As any language, the language of faith is open to different interpretations. Dilemmas set in when dogmatic interpretation claims that faith-proclamations do not need to be re-read in the modern context; that it has objective claims that do not need veri-

fication – a particular criterion of those who insist that religious pronouncements need to be regarded as inherently mythical and thus need to be “demythologize” in order to be relevant to modern humans.

This paper attempts to investigate if a two-language approach to the language of faith leads to a hermeneutical crisis. Is it more proper to regard the language of faith as fundamentally non-science and therefore incompatible with the language of science? Should it be a testament to the past and therefore its message is “timeless” because it is unchanged? Or should we project our categories in re-reading the past to make the message more relevant? These are just some of the questions that will guide this endeavor to make doing theology more relevant in these postmodern times.

A. Comparative Look into the Models of Science and Religion: Ian Barbour

In *Myths, Models and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion*,¹ Ian Barbour broadly defines a model as a symbolic representation of selected aspects of the behavior of a complex system for particular purposes and that it is an imaginative tool for ordering experiences, rather than a description of the world. Models ultimately direct attention to particular patterns and events and restructure the way one sees the world.² One needs a model to process one's experiences with the world.

Barbour draws some similarities and differences between scientific and religious models. One similarity is that both are mental constructs to give explanations for observed phenomena. In the case of science, the laboratory is the physical world, observed through the senses, while in religion the laboratory is the inner world of human experience. This dichotomy is manifested in their use of language.

The function of scientific language is the prediction and control of nature; that of religious language is the expression of self-

¹ Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1974).

² *Ibid.*, 7.

commitment, ethical dedication, and existential life-orientation. However, the price of this division of labor is that religion would have to give up any claims to truth, at least with respect to any facts external to one's own orientation.³

In other words, science is objective; religion is subjective. However, developments in linguistic analysis allowed some philosophers to question the language divide between science and religion. These people claim that language has different functions and that its usefulness is judged by the way language (e.g., science, ethics, and religion) accomplishes its task. Barbour holds that every type of language has its own logic, appropriate to its specific purposes.

The theme, "language has different functions," is employed in interpreting myths and religious experiences. Religious symbols and images are combined in the complex narratives known as myths. For Barbour, myths are neither true nor false but they provide the community with some explanation about some aspects of the cosmic order; impart a sense of community; provide one with a sense of significance and awareness of one's contribution to the community. As they are re-enacted in rituals, myths give communities a sense of continuity by sharing common memories and goals.

Models also perform functions. In the case of religious models, they are structured to be analogical, that is, they are neither literal pictures of reality nor useful fictions rather they are organizing images used to order and interpret patterns of experience in human life. Religious models offer interpretation of characteristic types of human experiences. Barbour gives examples of these distinctive human experiences such as awe and reverence, moral obligations, human interpersonal relationships, reorientation and reconciliation, key historical events, and order and creativity in the world. Similarly, scientific models are also analogical and serve a function to symbolically represent a phenomenon not directly observable. The contrast between religious and scientific models is revealed in the language they use. Religious language tends to evoke allegiance to a way of life; cultivate awe and worship. In short, it requires self-

³ Ibid., 5.

involvement and some degree of commitment and loyalty. In contrast, scientific language tends to be detached and neutral.⁴

Religious language is frequently metaphorical. Metaphors are dynamic as they evoke from both the writer and the reader a reading of their own life experiences. Barbour claims that metaphors influence perception and interpretation this way. Clout in metaphorical images, religious language strives for objective claim status. This is apparent in the extensive use of metaphors that seem to convey that they have equivalent literal expressions. However, metaphors and myths are not literally true but adherents claim that they have objective truth-claims. Myths in particular have strong explanatory power regarding the cosmic order and the way things are. Rituals and ceremonies cement the explanation and give them literal sense. This is evident in the 19th century when mythology was usually viewed as a primitive attempt to explain natural phenomena. They are essentially prescientific attempts to answer scientific questions. Myths then perform cognitive function and not just sociological and psychological ones.⁵ However, they have been effectively superseded by modern science. Or rather we say, scientific ones that seek to explain the cosmic order replaced prevailing religious models. The period of Enlightenment, which emphasized the primacy of reason, dismissed myths as childhood attempt to explain why things are. Religious language, clout as it was in metaphorical images, was regarded as nonsensical and totally incompatible with the new scientific language that emphasized verification. In short, the former is held as not having any literal sense, or its claim as having no objectivity at all.

For Barbour, the objection is valid and spells out the limitation of the insistence that metaphorical images are literal expressions of the things they represent. Rather than Religious models, which are based on metaphors drawn from human experiences and biblical tradition, similarly influence attitudes and behaviors. For Barbour, they serve as "organizing images." Moreover, they are more systematic and sustained than poetic metaphors. They are so because religious models function to "selectively restructure,

⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁵ Ibid., 20.

as well as, interpret perceptions," that will alter ways of seeing the world.⁶

The Two-Language Theory: The Incompatibility of Science and Religion

The two-language theory is one of the responses presented that come to grips with some incompatibilities between science and religion as perceived by the adherents of both sides. The classic Einstein pronouncement, "science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind" – distinguished between the language of fact and the language of value. "Science can only ascertain what is, but not what should be." "Religion, on the other hand, deals only with evaluations of human thought and action," discloses that there is an unbridgeable gap between science and religion.⁷ The statement is a testament to a truce, a way of quieting down simmering conflicts and allow for the dynamics of each one without the interference of the other.

Langdon Gilkey, a theologian, holds that science and religion are incompatible. In the book, *Creationism on Trial*, he presents a case against the teaching of creationism, which seeks a balance between science and religion, as illegal and can contribute to the erosion of religious values of Americans. He makes the following distinctions: (1) Science seeks to explain objective, public, repeatable data. Religion asks about the existence of order and beauty in the world and the experiences of our inner life (such as guilt, anxiety, and meaninglessness, on the one hand, and forgiveness, trust, and wholeness, on the other). (2) Science asks objective how questions. Religion asks personal why questions about meaning and purpose and about our ultimate origin and destiny. (3) The basis of authority in science is logical coherence and experimental adequacy. The final authority in religion is God and revelation, understood through persons to whom enlightenment and insight were given, and validated in our own experience. (4) Science makes quantitative

⁶ Ibid., 14-15.

⁷ See Ted Peter's article, "Theology and Science: Where Are We?" in *Zygon: Journal of Science and Religion* vol. 31 no. 2 (June 1996): 324-343.

predictions that can be tested experimentally. Religion must use symbolic and analogical language because God is transcendent.⁸ The assumption is that each domain does not talk of or refer to the same reality. Science deals with the world and religion deals with the otherworldly, the metaphysical domain of God. It is a re-telling of a classical distinction between the sacred and the profane.

Rudolf Bultmann on his part deals with this seeming impasse between science and religion by positing that as modern humans (presumably steeped in scientific dynamics), we do not need to dismiss the mythical part of the language of faith. We need to admit that they are not literally true. The Bible, according to him, is profuse with metaphorical images so we have to demythologize them because they provide misleading categories of space (Jesus ascending and descending) time (eschatological discussions) and causality (miracles and supernatural forces).

The ... view of the world of the New Testament is essentially mythical in character ... Heaven is the abode of God and ... the angels. The underworld is hell, the place of torment. Even the Earth is more than the scene of natural, everyday events ... It is the scene of the supernatural activity of God and his angels on the one hand, and of Satan and his demons on the other ... This aeon ... hastens towards its end ... Then the Judge will come from Heaven, the dead will rise, the last judgment will take place, and men will enter into eternal salvation or damnation. This then is the mythical view of the world which the New Testament presupposes when it presents the event of redemption which is the subject of its preaching.⁹

The explanations provided are inadequate to satisfy the modern humans, as they are scientifically untenable. Also, they are also theological inadequate to present the transcendent in the objective categories of the modern world. For Bultmann, demythologizing will help uncover the real purpose of the mythical language

⁸ Langdon Gilkey, *Creationism on Trial: Evolution and God at Little Rock* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1985) 108-116.

⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth* (San Francisco: Harper Torch Book, 1961).

in the bible. Demythologizing is existential re-interpretation of religious statements. It is recognition that the Jesus-act is an act of radical freedom – freedom from anxiety, guilt and freedom to love and the possibility of authentic existence.¹⁰ And here is the fundamental critique of Bultmann's demythologizing. In insisting that the Jesus-event must be appreciated in the interiority of faith, did Bultmann pave the way for the de-historization of that event? The message concerning Christ can indeed be an occasion of personal reorientation, but what is the significance of the event itself?

A Two-Fold Approach to the Language of Faith: Edward Schillebeeckx

For Edward Schillebeeckx, two-fold approach to the language of faith leads to a hermeneutical crisis. The right of the so-called "two-language approach" – the language of faith and secular speaking, that is, sociological, scientific or historical language – is indisputable, but it is important to not to forget that it is the same reality that is approached and interpreted although from different points of view and with different questions.¹¹ Time and distance bring about a communication gap between the past and the present. When there is a gap, hermeneutical dilemmas set in because of the varying interpretations forwarded in an attempt to bridge it.

For Schillebeeckx, the two-language theory held by some theologians is an attempt to solve a "disturbance of communication" between the New Testament, which represents the past, and us in the present as simplistic. The proposal, which seeks to carve exclusive domains, between the past that embodies religion and the present that is marked by science and technology, is inadequate. The fact is that science has intruded into the "exclusive domain" of theology by proposing its own interpretations about the "meaning of facts." Long held as the job of theologians, interpre-

¹⁰ Barbour, *Myths*, 27.

¹¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Language of Faith: Essays on Jesus, Theology and the Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 84.

tation of the meaning of facts becomes a job of a scientist engaged in hermeneutics. The response of the former was to retreat farther away from the clutches of science, which results, according to Schillebeeckx, into a language about God that is far removed from reality.¹² Meanwhile, the latter seems to be determined to show that facts and interpretation of them, deny the reality of God.

It is a case of shape up or ship out for theologians. Schillebeeckx notes a two-fold response: First, the insistence that the language of faith has “timeless” categories. This response appeals to the metaphysical dimension of the language of faith. The latter has to be so to make it relevant still, albeit, to an exclusive “in” group who preserve and transmit it. It is as if the language of faith is a “ghetto language” intelligible only to those who speak and think in it. However, for Schillebeeckx, a “ghetto language” is precisely a language that failed to evolve – a fitting imagery to use for this response that chose not to participate in the life of human society. However, inescapable truth is that the members of the ghetto participate in society that eventually their own exclusive language would become problematic for them. Their members would experience an acute feeling of meaninglessness that can lead to a crisis in faith. This is especially evident in Catholics. Second response is the abandonment of the “religious” linguistic categories of faith altogether in the embrace of the secular ones. This is manifested in Protestant theologies.

For Schillebeeckx, both responses view the past as dead sediment. One holds that any resemblance of it to our present experience is viewed as unbroken continuity, thus, what is past is still valid today. Any disturbance in the communication between past and present is considered negative. The other meanwhile looks at the same disturbance as something positive because it signals a break from a dogmatic and archaic past. Clearly, each response operates on different understanding of the past, an interpretation that is open for consideration. The hermeneutical crisis sets in when both insist that their interpretation is best for faith. The second response nonetheless, opens a new dimension to the hermeneutical task with regard to the language of faith:

¹² Ibid.

the criticism of ideology. Following enlightenment, proponents slam the domination, violence and control that colored the past and seek to correct them in the present.

On the other hand, the attempt to escape the authoritative and dogmatic interpretation of the past and positing an alternative interpretation can also prove to be an exercise of perpetuating an ideology. He gives an illustration: An evangelical interpretation of redemption is conversion or *metanoia*. This is understood as an inner conversion. Yet this operates on many assumptions and one of them is that a personal salvation is the only way possible way we can think of redemption. What about talking in terms of redemption or *metanoia* as emancipation from all kinds of personal and social alienation? The fact is humans are social beings; we exist in society. Is it not valid also to posit that salvation has political and social implications?¹³ Moreover, the second response argues that since the first response views history as a necessary organic development and if Jesus is the origin of our faith, then it is best that we make the Jesus-act and that of his disciples as the sole criterion for the language of faith. He considers this a pernicious or destructive argument because it excludes the fact that the early Christian communities, which handed down the Scriptures to us, were shaped by the social, political and ideological contingencies of their time. In other words, what Christians in the contemporary times need is not another metaphor to describe the "saving act" of God but a critique of the existing metaphor using the lens of the present realities. By present realities, Schillebeeckx echoes the existential interpretation of Bultmann but extend it to mean the anthropological, sociological, political and cultural situations of our time, which should be more fitting criterion with we evaluate the language of faith. However, he rejects Bultmann's rejection of the historical significance of the Jesus-event. He posits that the present is mediated by the past; the present is possible because of the past; and this mediation is never purely theoretical. What is handed down to us by Tradition is meaningful to us in the present. The past may be marked by violence and domination but we are in a position to correct the

¹³ Ibid., 91.

mistakes of the past by proposing an alternative future. The historicity of Jesus as a poor man who suffered greatly has a tremendous impact when we speak of human rights and suffering in our present times. For Schillebeeckx, there are "sediments of meaning," in the past, which we can own. The language of faith indirectly appeals to the Scriptures and never directly. This is because we have learned that a relationship with social, political religious and popular philosophical ideas of the period played an important part in the development of biblical language.¹⁴

There is a special contingency of the language of the faith, inasmuch as we are contingent beings who pronounce this language just as there is a contingency of the historical event of Jesus. The language of the Bible therefore cannot be "translated" into contemporary language as though it were a child's game or changing a doll's clothes, without taking into account the historical circumstances that allowed for the development of it.

Schillebeeckx's proposal to eliminate the dualism with regard to the past, which results in the two-fold approach to the language of faith is to approach the past in the light of a critical and selective remembrance of human traditions containing not only many irrelevant and even meaningless events but also those "sediments of meaning," many of which are extremely important for our decisions in the present about the future. The implication of this proposal is a creative and liberative blend of theory and praxis. The second response opens the possibility for the Church to be more democratic and to see redemption as emancipation from all forms of human alienation. Another is that neither the traditional and modern language of faith can be made absolute. A language of faith that grapples with the reality of Jesus and the search for authentic freedom will be renewed in different social and political situations. These implications have tremendous effects on the validity of liberative, feminist, and ecological re-readings of the Jesus' redemptive act. This proposal also suggests that perhaps one of the things that contribute to the confusion with regard to the language of faith is the use of metaphors that are accepted as literally true. It adds to the confusion primarily because they do not

¹⁴ Ibid., 92.

stand to reason. In simpler terms, they are rejected because they do not pass the criterion of verification. For Schillebeeckx, however, reason cannot accommodate the "inexpressible surplus" present even in ordinary language including the language of faith. This inexpressible surplus is incorporated into narratives such as parables and stories so that we, in the present time, are not reading 'dry-as-a-dust' historical accounts but suggestions on how to live the open-ended future. Rather than regard them as objective truth-claims, the stories are best understood as models of interpreting the world.

The crisis in the language of faith then is partly the result of the two-fold approach in so far as this theory fails to take into account the fact that it is the same reality that is approached and interpreted, although it is viewed from different standpoints. There is a hermeneutical crisis in the language of faith, which remains unresolved, but hopefully it will not translate into a crisis of faith. We should trust the workings of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵

Conclusion

Postmodern readings of science and religion disclose the awareness that they operate on models, which were constructed by people to make sense of the world on which they lived. Over time, however, they had acquired ideological significance and validity. Since these models are constructed, then they can be de-constructed so that those in the margins, who were excluded in the process of weaving ideologies, can have the opportunity for irruption of their voices and to reclaim their rightful place in history.

The process of deconstruction is always painful. The process is even more so in the language of faith that is increasingly pushed to irrelevance by the tremendous surge in sciences. In addition, new commentators employ the hermeneutics of suspicion in attempt to purge it of its ugly past. But, like a phoenix, which has the ability to rise from its ashes, tremendous creativity allows for its resurgence. We have now theologies from the bottom, from the side, from the marginalized, excluded, and oppressed. The best

¹⁵ Ibid., 94.

part is these new ways of doing theology do not find it strange at all to employ the data from science.

The crisis in the language of faith, as Schillebeeckx points out, is because of the refusal to understand that reality is intricate, multifaceted and complex and cannot be reduced by one understanding of it alone. The hermeneutical challenge is to make the good news that is Jesus, relevant and meaningful for post-modern Christians. Does this involve the elimination of the metaphorical or mythical language in the Bible? Schillebeeckx says no. Not to eliminate but to interpret; a translation of the message in terms of the situation; the understanding of reality – the mythical world – picture of that time into the terms of our situation today, which is the postmodern world-picture. The key word is not *elimination* nor *rejection* but *re-reading*. □