LANGUAGE AND RELIGION: A PHILOSOPHICAL NAVIGATION ON THE BOUNDARIES OF TRUT

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Abstract: This paper explores the intricate relationship between language, interpretation, and truth, particularly within the context of religious texts. It argues that language serves as a boundary that shapes human understanding and that truth is a product of interpretation rather than an absolute concept. The paper delves into various philosophical and theological perspectives on the nature of language, suggesting that while language can limit comprehension, it also provides a framework for dialogue and discovery. Emphasizing the diversity of interpretations, the paper proposes a methodological pluralism that accommodates multiple perspectives and acknowledges the evolving nature of truth. It discusses how different interpretations are influenced by cultural, historical, and personal contexts and advocates for an open-ended approach to reading sacred texts, where continuous dialogue can reveal deeper meanings. The study highlights the limitations of human intellect in grasping divine truth and calls for a dynamic engagement with texts to uncover their full significance.

Keywords: **language, truth, interpretation, dialogue, understanding**.

Introduction

Human beings live within a boundary defined by language, which is expressed in many forms: spoken, written, and even sign language for the deaf. There is no way for us to escape this linguistic boundary. The implication of this fact is that there are many possible interpretations in which humans use language for specific purposes. The diversity and conflict of interpretations have historically provided the stimulus and urgency for acquiring understanding. Many methods of interpretation and reading techniques have been developed as attempts to overcome misunderstanding. The right understanding, however, is considered the truth for achieving the meaning of language (Tarski 2021).

To achieve the right understanding, some argue that it requires an appropriate method of interpretation. This argument suggests that ordinary people do not have such a capability (Schwandt, 1994). Though, I personally ponder that an interpretation does not only belong to experts—such as philosophers, scholars, and intellectuals who have discipline in a specific field of study—but also belongs to everyone who engages with language. For me, the process of understanding itself is the interpretation. In this paper, the interpretation is not about the explanation of religious scholars on the sacred texts, but the daily process of understanding upon texts. The question is: what are the conditions that make any sort of correct understanding possible? The other problem which actually emerges when we read scripture as the word of God is "How can we find truth in reading the holy text? What are the criteria for obtaining the true message of God from sacred texts?"

Many believers conceive the concept of truth as relying on the concept of divinity. In theological thought, God is considered infinite. The truth from God is also infinite, and the finite mind of man cannot comprehend the infinite truth of God as represented in scripture. It is assumed that those who have a 'direct connection' to God have the authority to determine whether something is true or not (Hart 1991: 4). The problem remains in verifying the existence of such a person.

The paper discusses that interpretation is a process of uncovering the truth through openness and dialogue with the text, rather than purely adhering strictly to authoritative interpretations. This method involves recognizing the limitations of human language and intellect in fully comprehending divine truth, which is considered infinite. Therefore, the text advocates for a dynamic and participatory approach to interpreting religious texts, where understanding evolves through engagement and reflection.

The analysis acknowledges that different methods of interpretation can influence how truth is perceived, emphasizing the role of personal experience, knowledge, and the context in which interpretation takes place. It aligns with the view that truth is not absolute or static but is something that can develop and change based on the interpreter's perspective and historical context.

Result and Discuccions

 A. The Nature and Purpose of Language

It is undeniable that people around the world communicate in various languages. On islands like Java, there are several local languages spoken by different ethnic groups. If God's aim was for people to easily grasp His divine message, a single, common language would have been more convenient. So, why do humans not have a shared language? (Steiner 1975: 49). This question interestingly stimulates many studies on the origin of language diversity. What is the primary cause of these differences? The discussion about the variety of languages brings different consequences for how understanding and meaning are determined.

 1. The Origin and Nature of Language

There are two perspectives that explain the origin of language and how it has scattered into many forms. The first perspective is the evolutionary (empirical) view, which suggests that many different tongues existed "because over long stretches of time, societies and cultures split apart and, through accretion of particular experiences, evolved their own local speech habits" (Steiner 1975: 56). The various languages can be seen through the variety of races, skin colors, and different environments in this world. As Humboldt argues, "Civilization is uniquely and specifically informed by its language; the language is the unique and specific matrix of its civilization" (Steiner 1975: 84). From this point of view, language is considered a cultural product and social construct of a certain community.

The other perspective can be explained by theological and mythological points of view. It seems there was a magical moment of divine wisdom in which languages were taught or inspired by God. Every community has its own believed system and mythology regarding the primal scattering of languages, such as the story of Babel. In Islamic tradition, for example, there is a term 'tawqif al-lugha,' which explains the origin of language as divinely inspired and revealed by God to Adam (Shah 1999: 28).

It is a hard fact that humans speak different languages, but how can they communicate with each other? Is it possible to fully understand a foreign language out of its own context? Steiner explores two perspectives on the possibility of understanding different languages: universalist and monadist. The former declares that the deep structure of language is universal to all humans, and the dissimilarities between human tongues are only on the surface (Steiner 1975: 73). Thus, a full understanding can be reached between speakers. The latter view proclaims that each language has its own structure, making it impossible to fully understand human thought in a different language. However, there is a possibility for rough understanding.

Human understanding can be limited by language. The relationship between humans and language illustrates the nature of language. There are two views that seem to oppose each other in describing how language influences human thinking, or vice versa. The first view states that language determines human thought, while the second view argues that human thought determines language. The following paragraphs show the different approaches used by Heidegger and Gadamer in discussing this.

For Heidegger, different languages constitute the world differently for different speakers. Thinking is always limited by a finite language, so thinking can, at most, raise regional problems about the ways it is determined. In his later writings, Heidegger tries to show how "man belongs to language," as a critique of the claim that language is something which "belongs to man." Heidegger illustrates that (human) thought does not determine language; rather, language determines thought (Craig 1998).

Gadamer (1975) asserts that words do not have the ability to completely represent human thought. Humans are always lack of words to express their fully ideas. Moreover, the limits of language also reflect the limitations of human intellect. "No human words can perfectly express our mind. From this essential imperfection, it follows that the human word is not one like the divine word but must necessarily be many words" (Gadamer 1975: 385). This variety of words and languages forces people to have different concepts (Gadamer 1975). Thus, language does not determine human thoughts; on the contrary, language has the ability to express what humans want to say, but the human mind is finite in finding words to express their experiences (Hans 1978). Language is the best mirror of the human mind.

2. The Purpose of Language

A language is a network of signification, a set of relations between ideas that exist due to some customary connection. There are many views describing the purpose or function of language. Gracia, in "A Theory of Textuality," shows that language has linguistic and cultural functions. His observation is very helpful in understanding language's mediatory function in delivering a message. I will come to his overview of linguistic function after the following discussion, which examines the purpose of language as communication, internal expression, and external description.

Traditionally, the primary purpose of language is communication. God made human organs fit to produce articulate sounds, and through arbitrary imposition, humans are capable of making these sounds "signs of internal conceptions." According to Locke, "words in their primary or immediate signification stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them" (Szabo 1998). Since the purpose of words is to invoke in the hearer's mind an idea identical to the one the speaker has in mind, a word is bound to be intimately connected to the speaker's idea.

Berkeley denies that communication is the chief end of discourse. Besides conveying our thoughts to others, language is also used in "the raising of some passion, the exciting to or deterring from an action, the putting the mind in some particular disposition" (Szabo 1998). According to Hobbes, the purpose of speech is to "transfer our mental discourse into verbal." There are two reasons we make such a transfer: (1) to record our thoughts for ourselves and (2) to communicate our thoughts to others. Words employed as mnemonic devices are marks; words employed as means of communication are signs. Hobbes holds that the first use of words is primary: if a person were alone in the world, they could create a private language and use words as marks, but not as signs (Szabo 1998).

According to Gadamer (1977), the main task of language is not to express human thought but to express the object itself. This means that humans always try to find various words to describe an object. Therefore, signs in human language are various and flexible. They are flexible in that the same word in a language does not necessarily express the same thing; it designates different things and different expressions of the same object and vice versa (Gadamer 1977).

There are two major arguments in explaining the relation between words and reality (object), illustrated by these assumptions: (1) language always points its word at an object, which is seen as something "real"; (2) language is not only pointing at reality that is objectively verifiable but also illustrating human thought. Both arguments connect to perspectives on the origin of language. I refer to them as theological and empirical views of language.

In the theological view, language is seen as a gift from God to human beings, not as a human product. God has taught language to people so that they can communicate with each other. Words are inspired by God to illustrate 'objects' in this world, which are seen as 'verifiable reality' (such as pen, desk, etc.) and also 'unverifiable reality' (such as heaven, angels, etc.). Zayd (2000: 201) observes that the relation between the signifier and the signified, according to this view, is created by God himself, indicating that meaning has a divine connection. These connections result from divine imposition.

According to the empirical view, language is created by humans. Language reflects social conventions regarding the relation between sound and meaning. From this perspective, words do not point to reality through direct connection; they must be realized, conceptualized, and symbolized through a system of sound. Words do not indicate an "object" but illustrate human ideas shared by the community. The relationship between the signifier and the signified exists only by social convention, not divine imposition. These conventions are the result of human imposition. Following this view, Zayd (2000: 200) concludes that language is a cultural product, including the language used by scripture as the "words of God," which should follow the forms and rules of human language.

Gracia (1995: 87-88) mentions five linguistic functions: informative, directive, expressive, evaluative, and performative. These categories help describe the purposes of language as a mediator in delivering a message. For a brief explanation of these categories, I will use Gracia's own words:

(1) Language has an informative function when it is used to communicate information; (2) The directive function of language is involved when language is used to cause or prevent action; (3) The expressive function occurs when language is used to vent or cause emotion; (4) Language is also used evaluatively if it presents an evaluation of some sort; (5) The performative function takes place when language is used to perform an act.

These categories will be used as considerations in understanding a message within texts and realizing the truth. I think that correct understanding basically depends on determining the purpose of language. Language is used for several purposes that can be identified: communicative, internal expression, and external description. These three categories can include the five categories mentioned by

Gracia. I include the directive category in the communicative function of language; performative and expressive in internal expression; and informative and evaluative in external description.

In general, language used to deliver a message is a form of communication. There are four elements in communication: intention (speaker or author), expression (words or text), situation (context), and destination (audience or listener). Each element has specific methods for achieving the correct understanding as the truth. We will come to this when examining the purposive function of language and determining in which position we want to interpret the text. The understanding of God's message in religious (sacred) texts remains possible, depending on the methods of interpretation and how people perceive the truth.

B. The Truth: Between Reason and Revelation

There is no doubt that religion formulates competitive claims to truth and makes strong assertions concerning God and His relation to the world. Believers, especially those in major religious traditions, attribute truth to their religious statements, and this truth is so important to them that they would rather die than deny it. The question of truth involves a complex problem regarding the relationship between reason and belief, science and religion, and natural knowledge and revelation. We are also placed in this problematic issue. Since anyone can say something about the truth, we have participated in and are always already placed within the truth. The question about truth is also about us (Sini 1993: 3).

Many people suggest using scientific methodologies to determine the truth. They assume that by using scientific methods, the truth can be objectively discovered. Science can provide independence from the assumptions of any particular tradition (Placher 1948: 39). However, the problem of truth cannot be answered solely by scientific argument, especially in proving or disproving religious truth. Science is irrelevant to religion because the truth in science must correspond with facts or reality, while the truth in religion is not always, or cannot always be, proven in reality.

Regarding the sociological approach to observing religion, Ian Robertson states that sociology, as a science, cannot concern itself with the truth or falsity of any religion. Sociology is simply not competent to investigate the supernatural or to play umpire between competing faiths (Robertson 1983: 401). Social sciences can investigate the relationship between religion and society. Sociological research is necessarily directed at the social rather than the theological aspects of religion.

Social sciences are not the right domain for asking and answering the question of truth in religion, although they have a place for examining the historical truth of religion. The question of a transcendental object of religion can be competently addressed only by philosophy and theology of religion, although philosophical methods also face problems dealing with the relationship between reason and revelation. Moreover, some religious people suspect that philosophy might undermine faith. Sometimes speculative reasoning in philosophy contradicts the doctrines in religious thought.

Concerning the contradiction between revelation and reason in "Dar'u Ta'arudl al-'Aqlu wa al-Naqlu", Ibn Taymiyah cites a statement by Fakhrudin al-Razi:

"If there is any contradiction between the propositions of revelation and reason or between the notions stated in revelation and those evident in reason, they should not be combined because the two contradictions cannot be reconciled; it is impossible to do so. One could reject both or support the revelation and subvert reason, but this is also impossible because reason is a cause of revelation. Subverting one of the two sources is the same as subverting both. Thus, supporting revelation over reason condemns both reason and revelation simultaneously. Therefore, reason should be supported, and then revelation could be interpreted through reasoning methods."

In reconciling reason and revelation, Ibn Rushd argues that neither discipline needs to subvert the other. They work in harmony rather than in conflict. Reason is necessary, and without it, the understanding of religious texts remains incomplete (Rushd 2001: xi). Furthermore, Majid Fakhry explains Ibn Rushd's method of harmonizing revelation and reason in "The Decisive Treatise (Fasl al-Maqal)", where he sets out the appropriate methodology for solving the problem of the relationship between religion and philosophy, and more specifically, how philosophical or logical methods of reasoning can be used in religious controversies or applied to the interpretation of scripture (Rushd 2001).

Many controversial issues in religion challenge logical methods to investigate the truth. The understanding of truth in religion cannot rely solely on reason but should also be balanced with religious believe system (faith). Muhammad Iqbal sees no contradiction between faith and reason. He believes that both notions and intuition arise from the same source and do not oppose each other but rather are complementary. Reason aims at understanding the physical world and existence, whereas religious experience aims at transcending this world and achieving the knowledge of the ultimate. Without faith or a system of beliefs, reason cannot apprehend the whole truth in religion.

C. Truth: From Modernism to Post-Modernism

Historically, the conflict between science and religion is common in terms of supposed contradictions between specific dogmas of religion and particular scientific discoveries. The application of scientific techniques to religious doctrines has proven that some doctrines are not scientifically true. A long history of such scientific discoveries produced a series of shocks in the domain of religious belief, as occurred in Church tradition. The Church's geocentric paradigm—that the Earth was the center of the solar system—was replaced by the heliocentric paradigm, which posits that the Sun is the center. The understanding of truth has undergone a radical shift from the authority of the Church to the speculative-reasoning methods of scientists and philosophers (Finocchiaro 2019).

Up until the past century, truth was conceived as quite absolute, static, and exclusive, or monologic. If something was true at one time, it was always true for another time. Not only empirical facts but also the meaning of things is always true

for different places and times. At its core, the notion of truth was based exclusively on Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction: a thing could not be true and not true in the same way at the same time. Truth was defined through exclusion. This is a classicist or absolutist view of truth (Swidler 2000: 48). Modernism also built the idea of rationality based on logic as a universal human perception in the logical system of Aristotle.

Modernism as an approach tries to build a notion of universal rationality. Truth will be perceived as objective truth that will be recognized as such worldwide. In general, modernism aims to rescue the dream of the Enlightenment, as Rawls and Habermas did in their work. In different ways, both have claimed that there are objective standards for evaluating at least some features of the way a society is structured. Habermas claimed that there is a universal core of moral intuition across all times and societies (Placher 1948: 75).

Therefore, using modernist methods in interpreting sacred texts leads people to believe that universal truth can be achieved. There can be no plural truths (meanings) that contradict one to another. The search for truth and original meaning is possible with the appropriate technique or method. This is a positivist approach for determining truth.

The direction of Enlightenment glory suddenly changed radically to what we now know as postmodernism. Some philosophers, like Foucault and Rorty, attack the tradition of modernism in evaluating the truth. Postmodernism is part of a general attack on Enlightenment truth-claims and values and displays a preoccupation with language as an inadequate vehicle for expressing any sort of "reality"; this mode of thought is sometimes called "the linguistic turn" and includes the language-games of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Accordingly, understanding of truth and reality has been undergoing a radical shift.

Structuralism and post-structuralism are closely related to Postmodernism. This relationship is particularly notable in the analyses of society as a system of signs and codes conducted by Roland Barthes and the origination of deconstruction as a method of reading texts and identifying tacit hierarchies within discourses by Jacques Derrida. Michael Foucault also proposes several major theories about the nature of power, repression, and the marginalization of certain groups throughout history. From the objectivist modernism to the relativist post-modernism, the new paradigm that is emerging understands all statements about reality, especially about the meaning of things, to be historical, intentional, perspectival, partial, interpretive, and dialogic. The understanding of truth grows through the process of knowing and experiencing.

Murchadha explains that truth is always within time; it develops historically. Being is in time. Beyond time, we cannot speak of anything being. Thus, to be is to become, for nothing in time is unchanging. Therefore, there are no essential truths, only 'historical truths'—truths of what was and what may be (Murchadha 1992: 127). Truth is developed and disclosed within history. Truth is about understanding that can develop when confronted with reality. Truth is meaningful reality. Reality and truth come to us and surround us as beings for whom the question of truth cannot be separated from the question of existence. In "Being and Time", Heidegger

conceives truth in terms of "aletheia": the uncovering (disclosure) of Being. As he puts it, "the being true (truth) of an assertion must be understood as Being-uncovering" (Murchadha 1992: 123).

From this point of view, every statement has a meaning that will change if it places in a different context. Many scholars came to perceive all statements about the truth of something's meaning as partially the product of their historical circumstances. They argue that truth statements could be properly understood only if they were placed in their historical context. Swidler and Mojzes (2000: 47-51) mention six different views of truth. In brief, they are:

- Historicism: Any statement about truth must be understood in relation to its historical context.
- Intentionality: A statement must be understood in relation to the action-oriented intention of the speaker.
- Sociology of Knowledge: All statements are fundamentally related to the standpoint or perspective of the speaker.
- Limits of Language: Truth, as the meaning of something, especially as talk about the transcendent, is de-absolutized by the limited nature of human language.
- Hermeneutics: All truth and knowledge are seen as interpreted truth.
- Dialogue: The knower engages reality in a dialogue in a language that the knower provides, thereby de-absolutizing all statements about reality.

With this new understanding of the meaning of truth, we do not need to perceive our beliefs as absolute and unchangeable. Our perception of the truth, our understanding of it, can change and develop. For me, the progress of understanding truth depends on personal knowledge bases, experience, and interpretation. To understand the truth, people cannot have the same perspective unless they share the same knowledge, experience, and interpretation.

The problem of viewing truth in religion is caused by different knowledge bases, experiences, and interpretations. Religious conflict is also caused by these differences. We must be humble in recognizing that our understanding of truth is limited by our ability to see the entirety of truth. Our perception of reality is like our view of an object from a certain standpoint. My view and description of the object may be true, but it will not include what someone on the other side perceives, which will also (probably) be true. So, neither of our perceptions and descriptions of reality is total, complete, or objective in the sense of being independent of a subject or viewer.

In communicating or describing truth, we need to understand the situation of the listener (audience). We must use language games that are appropriate for specific circumstances and situations. Ibn Rushd maintained that religion consists of two parts: external and interpreted. The external part is incumbent on the masses, while the interpreted part is incumbent on the learned. Concerning that part, it is the duty of the masses to take it at face value without attempting to interpret it. As for the learned, it is not permissible to divulge their interpretations to the public, as Ali [bin Abi Thalib], God be pleased with him, said: "Address people in a language that they understand" (Rushd 2001: 17)

Conclusion

Communication is a form of dialogue. Reading sacred texts through continuous dialogue will make the text always 'live' and 'speak.' A continuous dialogue with the text allows it to be read at any time, wherever it is, and by whomever reads it. For example, "No smoking" could generally be understood as a prohibition of smoking in the area. Yet its meaning would differ depending on where the sentence is placed, the style and image of the sentence, and who reads it. Author, text, context, and reader are four elements that influence how this text is interpreted. These influences will impact the meaning of the text. Fish asserts that changes in meaning could occur by saying:

"Sentences emerge only in situations and within those situations, the normative meaning of an utterance will always be obvious or at least accessible, although within another situation that same utterance, no longer the same, will have another normative meaning that will be no less obvious and accessible" (Fish 1980: 307-8).

This paper shows that no one can truly, deeply speak about truth without holding a position on where they view it, what knowledge they have, and what is their experience about it. I would like to cite Wittgenstein who writes, "The truth can be spoken only by someone who is already at home in it; not by someone who still lives in falsehood and reaches out from falsehood towards truth on just one occasion" (Kenneson: 170).

Finally, our reading of the text is not only through a continuous dialogue within the text itself but also by engaging in dialogue with others' perspectives of reading. I would like to end by quoting Knitter in challenging our belief and our perception of truth to be discussed with others. He gives note concerning to the shift from an exclusive model of truth to a more dialogic or relational model:

"In the new model, truth will no longer be identified by its ability to exclude or absorb others. Rather, what is true will reveal itself mainly by its ability to relate to other expressions of truth and to grow through these relationships: truth defined not by exclusion but by relation. The new model reflects what our pluralistic world is discovering: no truth can stand alone; no truth can be totally unchangeable. Truth, by its very nature, needs other truth. If it cannot relate, its quality of truth must be open to question" (Swidler 2000: 54).

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