

# “Time” Narratives: Religious and Historical

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This paper aims at understanding the concept of time in a religious framework, primarily from the perspective of Wittgenstein. In religious narratives, we find events happening in time. In every religious discourse, we come across events, which are captured in historical time. Each religion is embedded with stories, events and performances, which belong to a specific time in history. And many religious utterances were performed with reference to time – past and future. How far are these events, which happened in a religious setting, matched or corroborated with historical facts? What is the significance of these utterances? What do these events convey to us? Does it convey the same meaning to a believer and non-believer? In other words, how does the concept of ‘time’ function in historical and religious narratives? Does ‘time’ signify the same in both these frameworks or is it different? If it is same, then, in that case, how can one understand one’s religious stories/legends within the idea of historical time? If it is different, then what is the philosophical justification for it? We will focus on these issues in our paper, primarily from Wittgenstein’s perspective.

Wittgenstein believes that though there are utterances in religious domain with reference to time, it still belongs to a different framework altogether. Events that happened in time in a ‘religious sense’ signify something that is not signified and could not be signified by a ‘historical sense’. This is an outcome of the later Wittgenstein’s conception of language, where he believes that the meaning that is associated with respective words is different depending upon the context in which it is used. There is no one single essential meaning for a word, though the language that is used in different frameworks might be the same. The meaning that we derive out of that language is different from narrative to narrative. A concept that conveys a meaning in one narrative might be different from the meaning the same concept conveys in another narrative. Wittgenstein remarks: “The temporality of the clock and the temporality in music. They are not by any means equivalent concepts” (Wittgenstein 1980). This suggests that there is no one language and a corresponding meaning. On the other hand, there is only language-game and meaning, which exhibits its respective ‘forms of life’. For the later Wittgenstein, language has regularity and order, but this order is not a set of precise logical rules, this is a set of regular uses, institutions and customs. This set of rules is already a second order activity, a grammar that needs some reflection on something that is tacitly performed with spontaneity, founded on basic agreements and trust that exists between a hearer and a speaker. The grammar sets its rules only because there is proper use in a particular context. Meaningful modalities of human discourses are grounded in the reciprocal trust of man as they communicate with one another. Wittgenstein has further developed the notion of language-game into the notion of world-picture. A picture’s sense or non-sense can be determined only within the framework of its reference. These different pictures and different grammars have their basis on agreements on forms of life.

The mutual trust and tacit agreement made in the religious domain, makes religious language games possible in the wider context of life. One has to notice that the language of religion has its own “grammar”. Theology as

picture is a set of rules, the grammar that decides how a correct move is to be made in a particular religious context. Throughout his later work Wittgenstein tries to show that the utterances within religion must be understood as moves within a distinctive system of thought and language, otherwise they make no sense. What counts as evidence within this distinctive system would hardly do so elsewhere. Religious language is neither descriptive nor referential. It can be taken as an expression of value.

With this conception, Wittgenstein reminds us that the ‘time’ we are talking about need not mean the same in all contexts. He remarks: “Can I say that a play has a time of its own, which is not a segment of historical time? I.e., I can distinguish earlier and later within it but there is *no sense* to the question whether the events in it take place, say, before or after Caesar’s death.” (Wittgenstein 1980). This shows that there is the possibility of different frameworks to understand the concept of time. In the like manner, let us try to account for an event that happened in a religious narrative at a particular time. It must not be confused with a historical narrative, precisely because they belong to different frameworks altogether. Referring to Christianity, Wittgenstein says:

Christianity is not based on a historical truth; rather, it offers us a (historical) narrative and says; now believe! But not, believe this narrative with the belief appropriate to a historical narrative, rather: believe, through thick and thin, which you can do only as a result of a life. Here you have a narrative, don’t take the same attitude to it as you take to other historical narratives! Make a quite different place in your life for it. There is nothing paradoxical about that! (Wittgenstein 1980)

The point that Wittgenstein tries to drive home is that the religious (historical) narrative about the life of Christ cannot be equated with the historical narrative about the life of Caesar or Napoleon. A historical narrative enhances one’s knowledge of history. Thus it deals with a historical fact. On the contrary, a religious narrative enhances one’s faith in religion. A believer unlike a historian is not concerned with any concrete facts of existence, rather in the value of a given religious narrative as a parable. As he further points out: “A believer’s relation to these narratives is neither the relation to historical truth (probability), nor yet that to a theory consisting of ‘truths of reason’.” (Wittgenstein 1980). What is important here is that what difference does it make to one’s life when one comes across the narrative about the life of the Christ as a savior.

Christianity is said to have a historic basis. Its historical basis rests on certain historical facts such as the birth, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. But, says Wittgenstein: “here we have a belief in historic facts different from a belief in ordinary historic facts.” (Wittgenstein 1967). Although the facts about Christianity are treated as historical, they are not like ordinary historical facts because they have something more to cater to a believer than stating merely what has happened in the course of human history. In other words, they possess intrinsic value. It is not the indubitable evidence that makes a believer committed to a religious belief; rather it is his personal conviction that makes him committed to a religious belief. A religious belief,

is not, or not simply, a matter of weighing the evidence for or against certain propositions, and assenting or dissenting accordingly, but of holding a certain picture in mind and being moved by it affectively and cognitively. (Wittgenstein 1967)

Then, in a sense, events that happen in a 'religious time' need not carry the same sense like an event that happens in a 'historical time'. The narratives are different. 'Religious time' narrative is a logically self-contained universe of discourse. The idea that 'time' narratives are possible from different frameworks is available in philosophical thought. One of the prominent descriptions would be 'objective time' and 'subjective time'. The latter part is dealt elaborately in phenomenological analysis, especially the works of Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological analysis of human experience that reveals a temporal, narrative pattern. The time as past and future in a historical \objective sense is different from the time in a religious\ subjective sense, because of the meaning it conveys in the different discourses. An event that has happened in a historical narrative is 'past' and the event that is to happen is 'future'. Whereas this sense of 'past' and 'future' is not there in religious sense, we nevertheless talk of 'past' and 'future' happenings. Every year, we celebrate the birth of Krishna, the birth of Prophet Mohammed, the resurrection of Christ, etc. These aspects of the lived dimension of time are not in the 'grammar' of historical time. Phenomenologists like Husserl and Heidegger talked of lived dimension of time. Consciousness in terms of 'temporal structure' of human existence, which for Ricoeur is the 'narrative quality of experience'. "Time becomes human to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the feature of temporal experience." (Ricoeur 1984-8). That all our understanding is embedded in a narrative framework – that it discloses the "mimetic" capacity of a text, not just to imitate actions but through the productive imagination to convey an admirable way of being-in-the-world.

Though the philosophical understanding of religious practices supports a view that there can be different narratives, still, how far such an interpretation is practiced by the 'actual' believers of a particular religion is subject to scrutiny. For, Wittgenstein acknowledges the fact that he is not a religious person.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about religious language is that despite irreducible imprecision, and metaphorical language, religious languages are understandable even for one who is not an insider of that form of life. One may perhaps 'look and see' that there is a deeper structural connection of patterns in our experience that can not be fully grasped in precise univocal language, that there is scope for meaning to be expressed symbolically when symbolic language and narrative descriptions can point to some deeper truth and meaning that has a use in a community of language users. In this way all our thinking is imbedded within a narrative framework, even univocal language has its 'rough edge' and is not that precise, even a modern secular man of science takes recourse to some 'myths to live by.' There can be religious narratives depicting 'history-like' familiar world for those believers and language users for whom the meaning of that religious time or of that 'religious history' is constituted by the stories themselves since the meaning of these narratives is rooted in that very form of life within which it makes sense for meaning to be constituted. For a committed Christian, logic of the religious story in that particular context implies a historical referent such as an actual Jesus Christ undergoing an actual death and an actual resurrection, that is

what the logic of the narrative demands and that is what the logic of a fairy tale or a fiction can not demand. Here lies the difference between a religious story's depiction of a 'history like' situation irrespective of external verification of its claim, and of a historical depiction, that is open for a falsification claim. Wittgenstein remarks: "It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference." (Wittgenstein 1980). The meaning and its truth arise from the narrative itself, not from any external imposition, if it depicts a history- like situation or a lived dimension of time, that is how such stories are to be religiously narrated among a group of believers who are authentic participants of this shared language game.

## Literature

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