Introduction

What does it mean to use language religiously? How does religious language differ from our ordinary linguistic practices? Can religious language have meaning? Among others, these questions are part of the so-called problem of religious language, which originates from the peculiar object of many religious claims, that is, the transcendent, or more precisely, God.

Logical positivism, a movement within analytic philosophy of the twentieth century, dismissed metaphysics and religious language as devoid of meaning, but this view was slowly discarded as logical positivism itself was abandoned as a self-refuting doctrine. This shipwreck rehabilitated metaphysics in the field of philosophy, and the charges of meaninglessness leveled against religious language were abandoned (Wolterstoff, 2009). The first section outlines the history and consequences of this particular debate.

Even if we could state that religious language may have meaning, many questions still remain open. The second section discusses properly theological objections to the use of religious language. For example, theistic mystical traditions (also known as "negative or apophatic theology") heavily restrict the validity of human concepts in spiritual matters so that human language can never capture God, who is incomprehensible. But how then should the use of language in the mystical context by persons like Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite or St. Edith Stein be understood? Negative theology is typically juxtaposed with positive, or univocal theology, or forms of analogical use of language, which claim that our words are directly applicable to the transcendent, or that there is at least significant overlap between our mundane use of the terms and their transcendent object. But how can this be the case if one still wants to maintain the radical otherness of God?

The third section discusses the nature of doctrinal language, including the examination of concepts such as metaphor and allegory. In addition, I will discuss more topical issues such as whether we should understand religious language as a "useful fiction," in what sense the theistic God is gendered, and whether multiple religions can refer to the same God?

My task here is purely descriptive, that is, I do not intend to suggest what religious people should think when they use religious language. Instead, I evaluate which available theories are good descriptive accounts of religious language, that is, whether they adequately explain what people are doing when they use religious language, or whether they are revisionary accounts that tell religious people how they should use religious language. Moreover, the aim of this Element is not to give a definite answer how we should evaluate the truth-value of religious claims. There are many other books that tackle this question

directly.[1] Instead I hope to offer the reader tools that may help in understanding how religious language functions and how it sometimes may differ from other uses of language.

1 Language in the Search of Meaning

1.1 What Is Religious Language?

People have used religious language since time immemorial, yet there is no universally accepted definition of what counts as religious language. Also, as William Alston (1921–2009) has pointed out, 'religious language' itself is a misnomer since there is no language that is used only for religious purposes. Instead, there can be religious uses of any language so that a more correct term would be 'religious speech' or 'religious discourse' (Alston, 2004, 220). Sometimes theologians use the term 'God-talk' in this context. However, since 'religious language' has become a technical term in the philosophical literature, I will continue to use it throughout this Element.

What are the features that single out the use of language as religious? Obviously, sentences about supernatural beings can be religious, but not necessarily all of them. Consider two examples:

(1) God exists.

(2) God does not exist.

Let us assume that the first sentence is uttered by a theist, while the second is uttered by an atheist. The object of both of these sentences is God, who might or might not exist. We more easily admit that sentence (1) is religious while sentence (2) is not (although it could be if it was meant to express quasi-religious belief in, say, nihilism). Consider, then, this sentence:

(3) Forgive me, for I have sinned.

Again, this sentence may be religious or not, depending on the context and who utters it. A religious person may use it to express her guilt before God and neighbor, but she can also use the same sentence ironically to express her innocence in the face of false accusations. An atheist can use it to express his remorse without having any beliefs concerning the religious framework from which the sentence originates.

Therefore, it seems that we cannot decide whether a sentence is religious just by looking at the words and searching for their meaning in a dictionary

[1] See, for example, Craig and Moreland (2009); Evans (2010); Swinburne (2014); Plantinga (2015); Craig and Moreland (2009).

(Swinburne, 2008, 12–13). To offer some general definition, we could say that religious language consists of sentences that express some claim, belief, attitude, or preference which is religiously relevant. This definition can be taken to be too vague, but this is in keeping with the multifaceted nature of religious traditions, some of which are ambiguous concerning the existence of supernatural agents, for example. Also, the definition allows the possibility that atheists and agnostics may also use religious language.[2]

However, in this Element, I will limit my discussion to theistic traditions, and especially those sentences that make claims about supernatural reality, since this is the context from which the philosophical debate concerning the meaningfulness of religious language arose in the early twentieth century, and also because including nontheistic traditions would be too much for such a short Element. But let us now turn to the recent historical developments that created the so-called problem of religious language.

1.2 Ayer's Challenge

In 1936, Oxford philosopher A. J. Ayer (1910–89) wrote a small but influential book called *Language, Truth and Logic*, where he attempted, once and for all, to solve all great philosophical problems. His strategy was simple. Only those sentences that can be given an empirical verification are meaningful. According to him:

> The criterion which we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact is the criterion of verifiability. We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express – that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false. (Ayer, 1952, 16)

Everything that does not fulfil this criterion is "literally meaningless."[3] Obviously to his mind this included statements concerning metaphysics,

[2] For example, Ian Ramsey (1957) makes a claim in his *Religious Language* that the proper use of religious language involves special discernment and commitment, by which he means some kind of conversion experience where the subject realizes the deeper and revolutionary meaning of particular words he has been using before without having the insight and illumination that reveals their deeper meaning. Ramsey's point here is the peculiarity of religious language when used by committed Christians and how in these cases the true meaning of the words cannot adequately be captured without special discernment. This is quite probably true, but some people may have atheistic experiences, which produce discernment and commitment of a different kind. Ramsey's model could be amended to include negations or denials of commitment as well, as I suggest here. Thereby, an atheist who denies the existence of God could also be said to use religious language. For a further discussion of Ramsey's model, see McClendon and Smith (1973).

[3] Of course, there is the class of analytic sentences, which surely have a clear meaning (like "all unmarried men are bachelors"), but these sentences do not add to our knowledge about the world.

aesthetics, ethics, and God. He admitted that there can be statements about morals, but these sentences are not factual like empirical statements. Instead, moral sentences (e.g., "murder is wrong") do not express a matter of fact but merely disapproval of a given action. Likewise, aesthetic sentences (e.g., "that painting is beautiful") express appreciation of the qualities of a given object. This view became known as *emotivism*.

Nowadays, philosophers generally think that Ayer's attempt to eradicate metaphysics with the help of the verification principle failed.[4] But why exactly? First of all, it did not take long for people to notice that Ayer's criterion itself fell outside empirical verification and into the basket of meaningless sentences. He tried to improve his theory in later editions of his work but was unable to offer a rebuttal of the criticisms leveled against his view.

Second, the problem with the verification principle was that all suggested criteria for it were either too strict or too lax. Either the principle itself could not pass its own test, or almost anything could pass it, including religious statements. This was due to Ayer's redefinition of his original principle so that even if some sentence A is not directly verifiable, it could be indirectly verifiable with the help of some directly verifiable states of affairs. This basically opened the floodgates since now we could put virtually anything into the basket of indirectly verifiable things and try to offer a justification with the help of claims that are directly verifiable. Of course, it is possible that the argument from directly verifiable things to indirectly verifiable things might be contested, but the fact that we are able to offer arguments for and against the success of these arguments and have a reasonable conversation about these arguments tells us that the line of demarcation between meaningful and meaningless sentences is more complicated than Ayer suggests.

Third, there is no evident way to sort claims as Ayer intended to do. Consider, for example, the following claim:

(4) It is wrong to torture people for fun.

This is neither an empirically verifiable claim nor just a matter of taste. Instead, it is a philosophical truth.[5] The ways we argue for philosophical truths are not

[4] For longer treatments of Ayer, see Scott (2013, 40–48); Weintraub (2003); Swinburne (2016, 24); Yandell (2013). Originally, Alonzo Church (1949) wrote a short but devastating review of the book, which many of the later critiques built upon.

[5] Here I have used moral facts to illustrate this strange nature of philosophical truths. In many ways, it seems that religious language behaves like moral language. Thus, for example, Ramsey (1957, 40–47) and Braithwaite (1971, 80). The difference between Braithwaite and Ramsey is that while Braithwaite seems to reduce religious language to moral language, Ramsey only argues that religious language bears a close resemblance to moral language without being reducible to it. Moreover, Braithwaite suggests that religious and moral language differ in the respect that religious language primarily consists of myriads of stories (which may conflict with each other)

empirical or scientific, although sometimes empirical states of affairs can be relevant for philosophy or theology, but there is not an a priori way to tell when this is the case. Of course, this issue, like all the other issues in philosophy, can be contested and debated. Even if we do not have a consensus view of moral language, the lack of it is evidence for not restricting options too soon and ending the debate.

Fourth, it is possible to formulate scientific hypotheses about unobservable entities, for example, multiverses, of which we currently have no idea how their existence could be reliably tested and verified. These theories are not nonsensical, and what they claim is understandable to anyone versed in the relevant literature. Therefore, we have good arguments against Ayer's view of restricting the realm of meaningful sentences as he does.

Even if Ayer got hoisted by his own petard, his ideas set the stage for the twentieth-century debate.[6] What kind of language is religious language, then? Michael Scott offers the following four theories that capture the basic options.

> *Face value theory*. Religious sentences represent religious facts and are conventionally used to express beliefs that those facts obtain.
> *Noncognitivism*. Religious sentences do not represent facts and are not conventionally used to express beliefs; they express noncognitive attitudes.
> *Expressivism*. Religious sentences do not represent religious facts but do conventionally express noncognitive attitudes; insofar as they represent nonreligious facts (if they represent any facts at all), they may be used conventionally to express belief in those (nonreligious) facts.
> *Moderate attitude theory*. Religious sentences represent religious facts and are conventionally used to express belief in those facts, and they conventionally express noncognitive states. (Scott, 2013, 9)

According to face value theory, the users of religious language use it more or less in the same way as any other form of ordinary language is used. It is factual, and it expresses beliefs. Noncognitivism fashioned according to Ayer's principles denies this and argues that religious language merely expresses noncognitive states, like approval and disapproval. On noncognitivism, religious

and that religious language somehow goes existentially deeper into the human psyche than moral language, being thereby able to motivate people to act morally, both outwardly and inwardly.

[6] Even if we could say that religious language is not nonsensical and it has a meaning, it may still be that religious language is incoherent. For example, I can say "the sum of the angles in a triangle is 280 degrees" and everyone knows what I mean to say, but the content of my claim is incoherent and obviously false. In a similar way, it is possible to claim that the way Christian theology defines the attributes of God is incoherent so that such a being cannot exist. This, however, is a completely different issue, which is concerned with the compatibility of theistic attributes. For a discussion, see Swinburne (2016).

language can have meaning, but the meaning is not objectively factual. Noncognitivism may sound like an atheistic theory, but things are not that simple. For example, many atheists affirm face value theory. They just think that the truth value of religious language is always negative: all religious claims are false statements (Dawkins, 2006). Ayer was an atheist as well, but he chose a different stance toward theistic claims: he thought that they are beyond verification and therefore more about subjective preference and not descriptions of factual states. While this, on the one hand, seemed to demote the public status of religious language, on the other hand, it opened a way to defend the meaningfulness of religious claims. This strategy became known as expressivism, which will be the topic of the next section.

The last view on Scott's list, moderate attitude theory, is his own preferred view, which is basically face value theory enforced with some elements of noncognitivism. Moderate attitude theory argues that the face value theory is basically a correct descriptive view of how religious people use language, but it acknowledges that religious language is not only about making factual claims, but consists of all kinds of possible speech acts. Religious language can be used to express nonfactitive states, such as prayer and praise and expressions of various emotions, like fear, anger, despair, sorrow, elation, hope, thankfulness, irony, exaggeration, approval, disapproval, confidence, and so on. Consider, for example, the following examples:

"I believe that God exists."
"God, why have you forsaken me?"
"I hope you can still forgive me."
"On the third day, Jesus rose from the dead."
"Thou shall not kill."
"If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down."
"Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."
"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

These examples show that religious language does not have easily defined boundaries. Nonetheless, the correct descriptive understanding of religious discourse and religious identity as a whole requires that at least some of the claims being made are not reducible to mere pro-attitudes.

Thinking about the following example might further elucidate this point. It is possible that a person (let's call him Sam) believes all the things a Christian should believe but fails to act according to his beliefs. In other words, he lacks a proper motivating element that is called a pro-attitude. On expressivism, religious convictions are interpreted as pro-attitudes so that when Sam says that he believes p, his belief that p can be conveniently translated into a pro-

attitude so that it means "Sam is in favour of things related to p." Although no one denies that religious convictions sometimes involve pro-attitudes, they cannot be totally treated as *mere* pro-attitudes. Sam may have a religious belief of the following sort: "God loves human beings and expects humans to treat each other lovingly." However, Sam suffers from weakness of the will (*akrasia*), which inhibits his efforts to think and act lovingly. Sometimes he is so overtaken by akrasia that he simply does not care what happens to his fellow human beings. He does not call his mother as often as he should and pretends not to hear the pleas for help made by his friends, and so on. Yet he keeps on believing in God and the consequent moral ideals that flow from his beliefs. The example of Sam shows that it is possible to make a distinction between a belief and related pro-attitudes. Of course, this is not a paradigmatic instantiation of religious belief, but in Christian theology it is not uncommon to treat these kinds of instances where faith is somehow not perfect in every way as tokens of sincere yet imperfect faith.[7]

Other similar states that manifest the divorce of belief states and pro-attitudes are depression, apathy, outright rebellion, and irrationality (Scott, 2013, 55–56). Of these possibilities depression and apathy come close to akrasia as they can be ingredients in akratic attitudes. Concerning rebellion and irrationality, this is how the apostle James defines the so-called demon's faith (*fides diabolica*), which has all the propositional knowledge that genuine faith has, without the pro-attitudes, that is to say, demons have perfect knowledge of God, but not love for God.

> Jas. 2:19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.

As already granted, these are not examples of what genuine religious belief should look like, but they nonetheless demonstrate that religious convictions cannot always be reduced to mere pro-attitudes.

1.3 Expressivism to the Rescue!

Even if Ayer's strict verificationism never carried the day, remnants of his thought continued to influence theological discourse. Ayer himself focused only on ethical language, which he defended with the emotivist theory, but he left religious language largely untouched. To fill this gap, the Cambridge philosopher and Quaker R. B. Braithwaite (1900–90) thought that maybe theological language, although void of meaning in an empirical sense, could

[7] On faith and the weakness of the will, see Saarinen (1994).

express something valuable in the same way as ethical language within emotivist constraints.

This gave rise to expressivism according to which religious language users are not asserting facts about the world but merely voicing out their preferences and plans of action. For example, when someone says before eating, "Come, Lord Jesus, be our Guest, and let Thy gifts to us be blessed. Amen," she is not asserting that a person exists referred to as "Lord Jesus" who visits us granting various gifts, but is merely expressing her general sense of gratitude for having something to eat ("Hooray! Food!"). According to Braithwaite, "the primary use of a moral assertion is that of expressing the intention of the asserter to act in a particular sort of way specified in the assertion" (Braithwaite, 1971, 78). For Braithwaite, when you scratch the surface of religious language, you will find moral language underneath. Religious language consists of stories about holy people, who are supposed to function as moral exemplars and sources and lead us to live sanctified lives. The point of the lives of the saints and all religious language is to guide believers to live "the agapeistic life," by which Braithwaite means life lived according to the highest moral ideals expressed in the aforementioned stories.

Also, religious belief is not doxastic, that is, it is not necessary that Christians actually believe the things they believe to be factually true or that the aforementioned stories in fact happened; instead "what is necessary is that the story should be entertained in thought" (Braithwaite, 1971, 85–86). The use of religious language effectively boils down to a useful fiction. Fictionalist accounts of religious language will be discussed in more detail in Section 3.

This reinterpretation of religious language was an apologetic strategy that tried to move religion away from the battlefield of public claims into the private sphere, where public verification did not pose challenges to it. Effectively, this would reduce religious language to noncognitive discourse so that there are no truth-makers in the world that make a sentence either true or false.[8] Braithwaite is quite open about his revisionist agenda:

> Stories about the beginning of the world and of the Last Judgment as facts of past or of future history are believed by many unsophisticated Christians. But my contention is that belief in the truth of the Christian stories is not the proper criterion for deciding whether or not an assertion is a Christian one. A man is not, I think, a professing Christian unless he both proposes to live according to Christian moral principles and associates his intention with

[8] A more recent proponent of expressivist account was D. Z. Phillips (1934–2006). Don Cupitt and his Sea of Faith Network (www.sofn.org.uk/) also has been promoting this view (Phillips, 1976, 2002; Cupitt, 1980, 2010).

> thinking of Christian stories; but he need not believe that the empirical propositions presented by the stories correspond to empirical fact. (Braithwaite, 1971, 86)

Braithwaite takes the rigorous ethical demands of Christianity seriously but simultaneously thinks that there is nothing in the empirical world that grounds these demands. But is this a reliable way to interpret what the users of religious language are in fact doing and how the things in the world and moral obligations are connected? It seems not. Braithwaite's expressivism faces several serious challenges, which make it an unsatisfactory candidate for a good descriptive theory for religious language.

Michael Scott mentions several problems that are directly linked to Braithwaite's theory (Scott, 2013, 51–53). The problems originate from abandoning the view according to which religious sentences have a determinate meaning.[9] First, if the meaning of all Christian statements about God is agapeistic, this means that all Christian theological claims have one and the same meaning, which seems somewhat hard to accept. However, if one tries to avoid that consequence and claim that the meaning of the sentence is tied to the behavioral policy that is attached to a given sentence, we are faced with the situation where the same sentence can mean different things in different contexts. At this point, nothing separates religious language from Humpty-Dumptyism, which ironically was the position that expressivism tried to save religious language from.[10]

Also, more recent and developed versions of expressivism contain many problems that so far have not been solved. The most common criticisms are the following. First, the model is elitist.[11] It requires a very complicated state of mind, and many ordinary people, including many atheists, will find it unbelievable. Normally, people think that they should not believe nonsense or things that cannot be argued for using public criteria. Of course, often people do believe nonsense and form beliefs that have no justification, but hardly anyone would

[9] Braithwaite also leaves many things unsaid so that not all the consequences of his theory are as clear as they should be.

[10] Here's the famous exchange between Alice and Humpty Dumpty: "'I don't know what you mean by "glory,"' Alice said. Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't – till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"' 'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument,"' Alice objected. 'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.' 'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you CAN make words mean so many different things.' 'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all'" (Carroll, 2019, ch. 6).

[11] I grant that this charge does not prove the theory wrong. Many scientific theories are very complicated, and there are only a handful of people in the whole world who can understand, say, advanced physics. In this context, however, the elitism charge has some value because expressivist views are often offered as a way to fight secularism and make the religious way of life appealing to the masses again.

promote this as a good belief policy. It takes a lot of training to justify such an elaborate and counterintuitive view.[12] In fact, although some forms of noncognitivism are often offered as a kind of third way between theism and atheism, many atheists feel that noncognitive religious language is atheist by nature, having only an unnecessary and sentimental religious frosting from their point of view. The replacement of religious speech by secular language is quite easy and there is really no need for religious language. I will return to this issue in Section 3.

Second, the model creates an internal tension between users of the religious language: the representative of the noncognitive model must always remind other ordinary language users that they do not really know what they are doing. When ordinary people say, for example, "God is love," they are making realist claims, and from the point of view of the expressivist they are misusing language and stand in need of correction.[13] Ordinary users would agree with the expressivist that "God is love" means that "you must live agapeistically," but they would construe the meaning in the following way: "because God, who exists regardless of our faith and love, is love, we also need to act lovingly."[14] If the point of expressivism, as a revisionist theory, is to solve some of the problems related to public expressions of faith, it seems to create new problems within faith communities.

Third, on expressivism the meaning of religious language threatens to become arbitrary and only reflect the subjective desires of the people. This was the problem already noted in relation to Braithwaite. Some critics also speak of the "re-paganisation" of theological language (Long, 2009, 16). If there is little difference in the mode of speaking, it is possible to revive any old form of speaking or come up with a new one and suggest that language A refers to agapeistic life as well as language B. In other words, expressivism seems to make public discussion about beliefs virtually impossible because the meaning of the language becomes so elusive.

Fourth, noncognitive theories are unable to differentiate between various forms of religious language. Instead, they often put all their claims in the same basket and assume that all religious language is nonreferential. Thus, as a theory it is not well suited for making meaningful distinctions between ontologically different claims in the Apostles' Creed, such as "suffered under

[12] For an atheistic critique of noncognitivism, see Philipse (2012, 19–29).

[13] I do not claim that expressivists in fact go around correcting people, but they seem to have a moral obligation to engage in some form of corrective actions. See Cordry (2010, 85).

[14] How theists argue for their ethical views and their grounding is a matter of metaethics. For a discussion, see Ritchie (2012); Evans (2013).