

The Phenomenon of Religious Language: A Philosophical Appraisal

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ABSTRACT This paper examines religious language as a concept with special focus on its problems of meaningfulness, meaninglessness, verifiability and functions. The aim is to appraise some of the contributions of scholars to some issues raised by the problems that are theologically and philosophically invoked by religious language from the perspective of a religious philosopher with the aim of attempting some solutions to the problems in order to arrive at a workable synthesis. This paper discovers that in most recent findings on the subject, it is a truism that researchers' facts point to a more creative, spiritual, dogmatic, linguistic and imaginative uses of religious assertions which manifest beyond an empirical base. The paper concludes that religious statements are meaningful, though, not verifiable, so far they can be understood in their own context.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary discussions, it is not the question of God's existence that generates the problem of religious language. If God does not exist, any attempt to describe God will be an inaccurate description of reality. Discussions about religious language attempt to articulate how one could speak of God's existence. The problem of religious language is generated by the traditional doctrine of God in the Abrahamic traditions. Since God is thought to be incorporeal, infinite, and timeless, the predicates we apply to corporeal, finite, temporal creatures would not apply to God.

Scholars in the fields of philosophy and religion have shown that there are different ways in which language is given meaning. This includes the method of verification and falsification, or by determining meaning through symbol and comparison. Ultimately, the debate rests on the validity of statements that seem outside of experience, although more recent works have argued that religious language is, in fact, part of our human experience. Some writers have argued that religious language is not about the "metaphysical" at all, but is actually more directly related to our human experience (Horden 1964).

Those within a religious community have their own way of using languages; their own 'religious language' that can only really be understood by being a part of the 'language game'. In this way, religious language can be seen as adapting to

how our view of the world alters. This view, however, is not acceptable to those theists who are realists. For them, God is real. The existence of God is seen as a factual claim and is, therefore, not subject to reinterpretation. The concern for the realist is that the more that religious claims become a matter of the environment and psychology, the less significant religious assertions are invalidated. This paper therefore, probes into the meaning, nature, and problems of religious language from the perspective of a religious philosopher with the aim of attempting some solutions to the problems.

MEANING AND PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

The term "religious language" refers to statements or claims made about God or gods (Stump 2003). Here is a typical philosophical problem of religious language. If God is infinite, then words used to describe finite creatures might not adequately describe God. For example, is God good in the same sense that Peter Ottuh is good? This difficulty challenges us to articulate the degree that attributes used for finite beings can be used for God and what these attributes mean when they describe God. The ambiguity in meaning with respect to the terms predicated of God is the "problem of religious language" or the "problem of naming God." These predications could include divine attributes, properties, or actions. Since the doctrines of the divine in

Eastern religious traditions differ radically from the doctrines of the Abrahamic traditions, the problem of religious language has not been accorded much attention in Eastern philosophy.

We often refer to 'everyday language'. For example, having a conversation in a cafe about the weather is nothing unusual; it is a topic directly related to everyday experience. If, however, the conversation was to turn and I started to talk about God, then the language drifts from the everyday to the 'mysterious', the 'metaphysical'. If we were then to go on to make an assertion about God - for example, 'God exists' - then the listener might well begin to question the validity of the assertion. To assert is to insist that something is true. When we talk of the 'mysterious', many people doubt the validity of such statements. For a variety of reasons, many of us question the validity of such statements as 'God exists', 'God is timeless', 'God is love' and so on. We know such statements are made all the time, and yet we wonder whether they have any real meaning. That is, what does it mean to say 'God is timeless' and how is this different from saying 'The Earth is spherical'?

The problem of religious language is worrisome to the practitioners of the Abrahamic religious traditions because it has the potential to undermine those traditions. All three religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) proclaim truths about God in written texts, commentary traditions, and oral teachings. In fact, speech about God is essential to both personal praxis and organized celebration in these traditions. Without adequate solution to the problem of religious language, human speech about God is called into question. Without the ability to speak about God and to understand the meaning of what is spoken, the Abrahamic faiths (religions) are vulnerable to the criticism that their sacred texts and teachings are unintelligible.

The problem of religious language also provides a challenge for philosophers of religion. If there is no adequate solution to the problem of religious language, large discussions in the domain of philosophy of religion will also be rendered unintelligible. For example, philosophers of religion debate the nature of "divine foreknowledge and human freedom". These claims about God would be rendered unintelligible if human speech about God is impossible. Thus, the problem of religious language is a philosophical problem that must be solved in order

to provide a framework for understanding claims about God.

The problem of religious language is also generated by the medieval doctrine of "divine simplicity" (Stump 2003), which claims that God does not have any intrinsic accidental properties. Intrinsic properties are distinguished from human properties, such that the acquisition or loss of a human property by a subject does not entail a change in that subject, while the acquisition or loss of an intrinsic property by a subject entails a change in that subject. Moreover, accidental properties are distinguished from essential properties such that if a subject were to acquire or lose an accidental property, the subject would still be a member of its species. However, if a subject were to acquire a new essential property or lose an essential property, that subject would no longer be a member of its species. Thus, statements such as "God is P," where P is an intrinsic accidental property would be ruled out by divine simplicity. For example, the statement, "Peter Ottuh is good," means that some property - "goodness" is a property of Peter Ottuh. When one says, "God is good," it would appear that this statement means that some property of "goodness" is a property of God. But if the doctrine of divine simplicity is true, it is impossible that God have the intrinsic accidental property of "goodness". Rather, God is "goodness." That is, God's essence includes goodness and God is identical with his essence. Consequently, whenever someone applies a positive attribute to God they are speaking falsely, for God does not have properties in the way that creatures have properties.

MEANINGFULNESS/MEANINGLESSNESS AND VERIFIABILITY OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

The logical positivists are the 20th-century radical empiricist heirs of David Hume (Weed 2006). The logical positivists argue that statements about the world (that is, *a posteriori* statements) had to pass the verificationist test in order to be meaningful. According to the verificationist test, an empirical statement is meaningful if and only if you know, or you can imagine, what would verify it and what would falsify it. Statements that do not pass the verificationist test are nonsensical in strictest sense. A statement is nonsensical if nothing makes it true or false. In

other words, a statement is nonsensical if it is compatible with all states of affairs.

The verificationist principle applies only to *a posteriori* statements. True statements about *a priori* matters (relations of ideas) are compatible with all states of affairs, but not in a dangerous way. For example, nothing falsifies “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” but according to the positivists, that’s not a statement about the world; it’s a statement about how we think. Many statements of pseudoscience (that is, bogus science) are compatible with all states of affairs. Consider statements of astrology. Suppose your horoscope says “You may be disappointed today.” That’s going to be true whether or not you are disappointed today. In other words, the claim is not falsifiable. According to logical positivists, if it’s not falsifiable, it’s meaningless and nonsensical. The statement “President Obama is on my roof” is meaningful, because I know how my roof would be different if it were true. The statement is not compatible with all states of affairs. However, the statement “God is in this room” would be classified as meaningless, since I do not know how the room would be any different if God were in it or not. Some philosophers have argued that statements about God do not have truth-values and are thus meaningless or unintelligible. These claims are derived from the views of the Vienna Circle (a group of early twentieth century logical empiricists who developed a test for the truth-value of statements known as “Verificationism” (Konyndyk 1977).

Rudolf Carnap (1891-1970) argued that the only way one could be certain of a statement’s truth or falsity was by verifying those statements through perceptions, observations, or experience. He offers the following example of the process by which a statement could be verified (Carnap 1966):

Let us take the statement P1: “This key is made of iron.” There are many ways of verifying this statement: for example: I place the key near a magnet; then I perceive that the key is attracted.

Here the deduction is made in this way: Premises: P1: “This key is made of iron”; The statement to be examined. P2: “If an iron thing is placed near a magnet, it is attracted;” this is a physical law, already verified.

P3: “This object – a bar – is a magnet;” statement already verified.

P4: “The key is placed near the bar;” this is now directly verified by our observation.

From these four premises we can deduce the

conclusion: P5: “The key will now be attracted by the bar.”

This statement is a prediction which can be examined by observation. If we look, we either observe the attraction or we do not. In the first case, we have found a positive instance, an instance of verification of the statement P1 under consideration; in the second case we have a negative instance, an instance of disproof of P1 (Carnap 1966). Having established the principle of verification, Carnap then argues that metaphysical assertions such as, “The principle of the world is water,” cannot be verified. Since metaphysical assertions cannot be verified, they are meaningless. One cannot assess the truth-value of a metaphysical assertion because such assertions cannot be empirically verified.

A.J. Ayer (1910-1989) agreed with Carnap (1966), and thus inferred that since all statements about God cannot be verified, they too are meaningless, “But the notion of a person whose essential attributes are non-empirical is not an intelligible notion at all. We may have a word which is used as if it names this ‘person,’ (God) but, unless the sentences in which it occurs express propositions which are empirically verifiable, it cannot be said to symbolize anything” (Ayer 1946). Thus, on the basis of Verificationism, statements about God do not have truth-values that can be verified and, thus, are unintelligible expressions. This suggests that one solution to the problem of religious language is to claim that statements about God are unintelligible.

Verificationism was challenged by philosophers such as Alonzo Church and Richard Swinburne and largely abandoned in the twentieth century. A.J. Ayer identified and defended a “weak principle of verification” in his seminar paper, “The Principle of Verifiability.” He admitted that empirical propositions are not conclusively verifiable, but argued that in order for a claim to be factual, and thus to have its truth-value determined, it must be verifiable by some possible observations (Ayer 1936). While Ayer did not specify exactly what those possible observations must be, he argued that they need to be the kinds of observations that could verify an assertion.

In response, Richard Swinburne argues that the premises defending weak Verificationism are false. He offers the following example of an argument in defense of weak Verificationism: “It is claimed that a man could not understand a

factual claim unless he knew what it would be like to observe it to hold or knew which observations would count for or against it; from which it follows that a statement could not be factually meaningful unless there could be observational evidence which would count for or against it" (Swinburne 2000). Swinburne then argues that the premise of the above argument is false, since one could understand a statement if one understands the words forming that statement and if those words are organized in a grammatically significant format. Thus, there could be factual statements that do not have evidence either for or against them and one could understand them. Consequently, metaphysical assertions invoking God and his properties cannot be ruled out as meaningless by weak Verificationism.

Ayer modified his principle of verification for the second edition of his book, *Language, Truth and Logic*, as follows:

A statement is directly verifiable if it is either itself an observation-statement, or is such that in conjunction with one or more observation-statements it entails at least one observation-statement which is not deducible from these other premises alone; and I propose to say that a statement is indirectly verifiable if it satisfies the following conditions: first, that in conjunction with certain other premises it entails one or more directly verifiable statements which are not deducible from these other premises alone; and secondly, that these other premises do not include any statement that is not either analytic, or directly verifiable, or capable of being independently established as indirectly verifiable (Ayer 1946).

In a review of the second edition, Alonzo Church argued that even according to Ayer's revised principle of verification, any statement whatsoever or its negation is verifiable. Church gives the following instance:

For let O_1 , O_2 , O_3 be three "observation-statements" (or "experiential propositions") such that no one of the three taken alone entails any of the others. Then using these we may show of any statement S whatever that either it or its negation is verifiable, as follows. Let $\neg O_1$ and $\neg S$ be the negations of O_1 and S respectively. Then (under Ayer's definition) $\neg O_1 O_2 \vee O_3 \neg S$ is directly verifiable, because with O_1 it entails O_3 . Moreover S and $\neg O_1 O_2 \vee O_3 \neg S$ together entail O_2 . Therefore (under Ayer's definition) S is indirectly verifiable – unless it happens that $\neg O_1 O_2 \vee O_3 \neg S$ alone entails O_2 , in which case $\neg S$ and O_3 together

entail O_2 , so that $\neg S$ is directly verifiable (Church 1949).

Church's objection was so devastating, that Ayer's definition of verifiability from the second edition of his book was largely abandoned. Despite repeated attempts by various thinkers such as Kai Neilson to reformulate a principle of verification successfully, Verificationism has been continually rejected as an inadequate methodology. As Ruth Weintraub points out in a recent paper, almost no one defends Verificationism in the twenty-first century (Weintraub 2003).

In order to be able to say whether or not language is meaningful it might be helpful to have rules by which words can be judged. The rules of language were debated by the Vienna Circle: a group of philosophers - influenced by Wittgenstein's early philosophy - and scientists who met periodically for discussions in Vienna during the 1920s and 30s. The Circle rejected the need for metaphysics (the 'transcendental science' that examines the transition in philosophy from the physical world to a world *beyond* sense perception). For them, a sentence could only be meaningful if it could be related to experience: it had to be positive, and it had to be logical; hence the term 'logical positivism'. The same however, could not be said of religious language. Here, it is not a case of whether a statement is true or not, it is rather that they cannot be proven one way or the other (that is, they are not verifiable) and are, therefore, meaningless. The statement 'God exists and He is good' is, for the logical positivist, beyond sense experience, unverifiable and, therefore, meaningless. A.J. Ayer was later to state that his earlier work was 'mostly false', and we can see why he came to that conclusion. By weakening verification you are opening the back door to religious language again. For example, in what respect does the statement 'there are atoms' differ from 'God watches over me'? Both are difficult to verify in the strong sense, but could be verified in the weaker sense. In fact, if nothing else, the existence of God could be verified when you die (what John Hick called 'eschatological verification').

In the 1950s a debate - led by Anthony Flew - on falsification ensued. It is one thing to say that a religious statement cannot be true because it cannot be verified, but what if we say that a statement is presumed to be true until falsified. This way, science accepts that statements can be proven to be false (that is, the sun - in given cir-

cumstance - may not rise tomorrow) but the statement is still meaningful because it admits it! In other words, scientific statements make an assertion about the world and then challenge us to prove it to be untrue. In this sense we can at least say that scientific statements are saying something positive and, therefore, meaningful, whereas - the theory goes - religious statements assert nothing! For example, if I were to say that 'God watches over me' then I am making an assertion that cannot be falsified; especially if I also state that God is invisible! Of course, if I then get run over by a bus that might suggest that God was distracted momentarily, but equally I could retort that it was part of God's plan that I get flattened by a double-decker. The point is that I will not allow for anything to count against my belief that He is watching over me. Quite simply, the statement I am making is 'unscientific' because I am not allowing for the possibility of falsification. The statement, therefore, is really not asserting anything at all and must be meaningless.

There are, however, two major problems with falsification. Firstly, it could be argued that religious language could still have meaning without being factual. Here, it depends on what is meant by 'meaning'! Does a statement that affects a person's life have meaning or not? For the person affected it certainly does. Although not falsifiable, they still have significance. Secondly, religious adherents often admit - in a scientific way - that statements can be falsified by conflicting evidence, for example, the evidence of evil conflicts with the idea of a good God, but that faith in 'God's plan' is of greater validity. As it is generally considered that neither falsification nor verification provides an adequate criterion for establishing meaning, other ways of talking about God have been approached. One can use simile. For example, 'God is like a watchmaker': One can picture a watchmaker, making his device and getting it to tick away nicely and can extract from that an image of God creating the world and getting it rolling. An extension of this is the use of metaphor. A metaphor is frequently used in literature as it is regarded as an imaginative way of trying to express something. Metaphor is frequently used in religious language, such as 'heaven is a land of milk and honey'. Note here that, unlike a simile, we are not saying that heaven is like milk and honey; rather, the image conjured up is an association of sweetness, warmth, security, plenty, and so on.

The Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1135-1204) argued that God is unknowable and that the only way one can talk about God is by saying what He is *not*. However, by saying He is not physical, not finite, not knowable and so on, does that tell us any more about what He is other than the opposite? In which case, why not simply say that He is infinite, spiritual and unknowable? Sometimes it seems more comprehensible to say 'God is good' or 'God is the creator'. In another sense, the Dominican monk, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) thought that it was indeed possible to talk about God in a meaningful way: by using analogy. For example, the word 'good' can be used in two different ways. It can be used univocally (meaning exactly the same thing; for example, 'good' morally) or equivocally (the same word, but having different meanings; for example, 'good' morally and technically). However, Aquinas said there is a third way of applying the same word to mean different things: analogy (McInerny 1996).

For example, when the believer says 'God is good' he or she does not mean it in the univocal sense nor in the equivocal sense (having a completely different meaning and, therefore, still not telling us anything about God). Rather, by analogy, we can say there is some basis of comparison, because we have an idea of what good is and our ideas derive ultimately from God in the first place. God's world is a reflection of what God is; it contains his 'signature'. So, when we use words like 'good', 'wise' and 'all-knowing', we already have a reference point: our language ultimately stems from an attempt to interpret the world and the world, in turn, reflects God's nature. Language both frees us and restricts us; it is all we have. Yet it takes us some of the way in understanding, in the same way as using the analogy of the human heart as a mechanical pump; it obviously is not a mechanical pump, but it helps us to understand its operation.

LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

A new tool was introduced into philosophy in the late 1920's. A group of scientifically trained philosophers meeting in Vienna began asking about the proper use of language, beginning with a minimum of propositions. At this early stage, the movement had no place for religious or metaphysical propositions, and there was no direct contribution to religious education. But

we need to understand why this was so, both because the warnings were important and because of the development of this movement of analysis to the point at which it is extremely valuable to the building of a theory of religious education. Is it meaningful to talk about God at all? In the early days of linguistic analysis the answer was an unqualified "No." The key issue turned on the verification principle. A logical analysis of the use and meaning of words, it was said, led to two types of language: (1) tautologies, where what is said is logically true, as in mathematics or in such statements as "a rose is a rose" or "I am I," and (2) synthetic or non-analytic sentences, in which the meaning is its method of verification. For example, if one says, "It is raining outside," the listener can look outside and see it or go outside and get wet. The way in which even a scientific formula makes sense to a layman is to reduce it to the tests which verified it. Thus, only sentences which can be verified in sense experience have validity.

Now it is obvious that many sentences do not fit these two categories, but for the early linguistic analysts no other kinds make sense. If a sentence cannot be tested in sense experience, it is said to have "emotive" meaning but it is literally "nonsensical". All poetry, religious and metaphysical thinking, and ethical principles fall into this category, and therefore cannot be called true assertions. This was the extreme position, and it became popular among a small number of philosophers. However, it reflected one kind of scientific mentality and can be found among many people who would not be able to expound it. This point of view was popularized by A. J. Ayer as earlier stated. He modified the position slightly by making room for 'probable' knowledge based on history, provided it was tested in someone else's experience, calling this "weak" verification (Ayer 2000). He still dismissed all ethical, metaphysical, and religious statements as having no meaning except to make people feel good. "We often say that the nature of God is a mystery which transcends the human understanding. But to say that something transcends the human understanding is to say that it is unintelligible. And what is unintelligible cannot be significantly described." He was equally condemnatory of the mystic with his visions of God, who, "so far from producing propositions that are empirically verifiable, is unable to produce any intelligible

propositions at all" (Ayer 1936) Ayer was perfectly willing to agree that a person who thought he was experiencing God had experienced a certain kind of sense content, but this does not lead to the verification of a statement about a transcendent God.

The other side of the coin, which seems to some people to be equally devastating, is the principle of falsifiability which we also have discussed earlier. If someone believes in God, say, on the evidence of experience or tradition, what kind of evidence would falsify this belief? how much evil in the world would cause a believer to cease to believe? The believer makes vast assertions about the power and goodness of God which seem to be factual, and then he begins to qualify them, until finally, as Anthony Flew put it, the belief dies a "death by a thousand qualifications." "Now an assertion, to be an assertion at all, must claim that things stand thus and thus; and not otherwise. Similarly an explanation, to be an explanation, must explain why this particular thing occurs; and not something else (Flew and MacIntyre, Eds. 1955 cf. Flew 1966). Many religious thinkers, says Flew, try to hold to two conclusions at once, either as a paradox or as an unrecognized contradiction, and this is a form of "doublethink" as described by George Orwell: "Doublethink" means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs simultaneously, and accepting both of them. The party intellectual knows that he is playing tricks with reality, but by the exercise of "doublethink" he also satisfies himself that reality is not violated" (Orwell 1984 cited in Flew and MacIntyre 1955).

Thomas McPherson, in a cryptic statement, summarizes this point of view: "What to the Jews was a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness is to the logical positivists' nonsense." He takes seriously the reports of mystical experience as the experience of the inexpressible and agrees that what is essential in religious beliefs cannot be put into words. Therefore, according to him, "the way out of this worry is to retreat into silence" (Orwell 1984). McPherson claims to be a friend of religion but an enemy of theology, because "religion belongs to the sphere of the unutterable." By "nonsense" he means what is not verifiable by sense experience. The results so far are primarily negative. They seem to leave Christian education with nothing to do except perhaps to provide the opportunity for

an experience of the holy. What these findings serve to do, however, is to be a warning to all teachers that pupils who have been trained in strictly critical scientific thinking may want to apply the categories of literal sense experience to religious beliefs, with similar negative results. If they do this, one cannot get out of such a situation by the application of “doublethink”, appeals to knowing “by faith,” or even by relying on tradition as authority (Wittgenstein 1958).

The concept of language-game is not frivolous, and it may prove of profound importance in the communication of religious assertions. It indicates that there are different uses of language according to sets of rules. Just as cricket and basketball have little in common besides having their own rules, so language-games have sharp differences. But there are families of language-games just as softball, Little League baseball, and professional baseball have similar rules with a few significant differences. But this does not mean that you can play checkers while I play contract bridge, and that we will have no dealings with each other. The term ‘*language-game*’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life according to Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1958). The human form of life stands behind all language. There is no higher order of language than that provided by human beings who are both responsible and responsive. A person backs his language by his life “as a whole”, and yet he participates in many language-games (High 1967). It may be, then, that as a religious person speaks, he or she uses language that reflects the meaning to be found in his or her own life style.

A variation of this principle of meaning according to use is modified by R. B. Braithwaite. He takes seriously the claim that we cannot verify statements about God, thus eliminating this issue from the discussion, and moves directly to the use of religious assertions for moral purposes. “A statement,” he says, “need not itself be empirically verifiable, but that it is used in a particular way is always a straightforwardly empirical proposition” (Braithwaite 1955). By using ‘*empirical*’ in this way, he lets ethics into the discussion, but he has already applied a more stringent empirical test for the word God. What he has done is to reduce all meaningful religious assertions to moral statements, so that one may “follow an anapestic way of life,” (Braithwaite 1955) which is the way of love.

TOWARDS A METAPHYSICS

One way of starting to develop metaphysics (the ‘*transcendental science*’ that examines the transition in philosophy from the physical world to a world “beyond” sense perception) is to take seriously what Ramsey and Poteat say about “I” language. In other words, the model is derived from generalizing on one’s own inner experience. Our own existence is the key. The experiencing person is not a substance or a thing; he is experiencing himself as relational or social, as a process that moves from past to present to future. He is related to his own body. He is affected by the complex state of his own organism. Through all the complexities of experiences, he affects his surroundings and is affected by them, and he has to make decisions. He is a process of creative becoming.

One can think of God as supreme, unique, and qualitatively different from man, and yet interpret him in strict analogy with ourselves. Gone is the unrelated and non-suffering Absolute, who is timeless and indifferent. As Ogden (1999) says:

God is now conceived as precisely the unique or in all ways perfect instance of creative becoming, and so as the one reality which is eminently social and temporal... God is related to everything. He is understood to be continually in process of self-creation, synthesizing in each new moment of his experience the whole of achieved actuality with the plenitude of possibility as yet unrealized.

Such a deity is working for our good and is affected by what we do. His perfection does not eliminate his sharing of our suffering, his sorrow over our sin, or his joy over our turning to him. He is in our midst; he is “everywhere,” says John B. Cobb, Jr., “but he is not everything. The world does not exist outside God or apart from God, but the world is not God or simply part of God. The character of the world is influenced by God, but it is not determined by him, and the world in its turn contributes novelty and richness to the divine experience” (Cobb 1969).

Such a concept of God, developed to technical fullness by Whitehead and adapted by others such as Ogden, Cobb, Norman Pittenger, Peter Hamilton, Daniel Day Williams, and preeminently Charles Hartshorne, is part of a metaphysical structure of thinking. The idea of God has not been tacked onto another system, whether it be

Plato's, Aristotle's, or Kant's. Whitehead's metaphysics requires a dipolar concept of God, much more complex but similar to what we have described. However, none of the writers cited above agrees wholly with Whitehead, but he is their inspiration at many points. They more or less agree in the way they look on the universe around us, and their vision of God is built into their metaphysical thinking. Whitehead speaks of God in two ways: in the first (primordial) he is the conceptual realization of what might be; he is the structure of possibilities; he is the eternal orderer of the world. "He is," says Whitehead, "the lure for feeling, the eternal urge of desire. His particular relevance to each creative act as it arises from its own conditioned standpoint in the world, constitutes him the initial 'object of desire' establishing the initial phase of each subjective aim" (Weintraub 2003). In the second way, God is sharing with creatures the power of his being, so that all increase of value in the world increases the richness of his being. He is conscious, personal, and fully actual. He has infinite patience.

Whitehead is protesting against some of our inherited ideas of God on both religious and metaphysical grounds. He is violently opposed to concepts of God derived from autocratic forms of government, at whose word everything began, whose rule is by divine fiat, and who is ultimately responsible for all evil and suffering. The way of looking on God and the world derived from process metaphysics is only one possibility. There is a long tradition based on various kinds of idealism that affected theological thinking in previous years and found its modern exponents in such men as William Temple and Paul Tillich, although these two men emphasized different aspects of this tradition. There is a peculiarly American tradition based on pragmatism and pluralism exemplified at its best in William James. There is a strong trend today toward existentialism, as found in the thought of Heidegger and Bultmann. There is the denial of metaphysics as part of theological thinking, as in the theology of Karl Barth. There is the attempt to come to terms with secular views of metaphysics, as in the thought of Paul van Buren and Harvey Cox. In some thinkers, these various strands are mixed.

The point to be made is that theological and metaphysical language-games are closely related. It can even be claimed that metaphysical models are basic to theological meaning and belief.

Theological and metaphysical assertions are attempts to speak in generalized terms about the nature of God and the world, to back up the way one looks on the world in terms of some degree of coherence, consistency, and consideration of the nature of experience. For Whitehead, there is an overlapping between theology and metaphysics, although they are separate disciplines. "Rational religion," he writes, "must have recourse to metaphysics for a scrutiny of its terms" (Whitehead 1926). Both theology and metaphysics are speculative and seek to go "behind the scenes," to explain what is hidden or what is perceived by the use of concepts. Such language is neither descriptive in any scientific sense nor self-involving in the religious sense. The person who uses self-involving language to speak of his faith in God, however, is led to the speculative language of theology and metaphysics in order to talk about his way of looking on God and the world (Evans 1968).

ATTEMPTED SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS

There are at least some probable solutions to the problem of religious language other than the view that statements about God are meaningless. These attempted solutions will be discussed one after the other.

Solution 1: Religious Language as Equivocal Language

The first solution argues that when terms are used to describe God and his attributes, those terms are equivocal with respect to what they mean in reference to God and what they mean in reference to creatures. Consequently, this solution would argue that God is not good in the same sense in which Ottuh is good; God's goodness is entirely different from the goodness of a creature. Despite this tremendous difference in kind, God can be spoken of by human beings through negations. Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides) (1135-1204) is one of the most famous proponents of this doctrine. He argued for this position in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (1963).

Like Aquinas, is committed to the doctrine of divine simplicity (cf. Seeskin and Norman, 1968), as it is described above it is for this reason that he rejects affirmative attributes with respect to God, with some exceptions. Although it is

accurate to characterize Maimonides' solution to the problem of religious language as equivocal, it certainly includes more than just equivocations. One can speak of God through negations. For example, one can say, "God is not dead," in order to signify that God lives. One can speak of God also through naming the divine actions, such as, "God creates." However, the Maimonidean attribute of action is not to be understood as identical with the Aristotelian accident of action. Attributes of action are understood to be events by Maimonides, while Aristotle (384-322 BCE) understands actions to be accidents or properties that inhere in a substance. Since Maimonidean attributes of action are not properties, they do not abrogate divine simplicity (Aristotle 1938).

One might oppose Maimonides on this point by arguing that actions imply composition in their subject, and thus that they would abrogate divine simplicity. For example, in the statement, "Peter stood," the fact that Peter stands shows that Peter has a special feature, namely, the ability or power to stand. So the action of standing implies that Peter has the power to stand. This ability introduces composition in Peter in that it shows that Peter is composed of "the power to stand" among all his other properties. Consequently, Maimonides would be mistaken in arguing that actions do not introduce composition in their subject. In fact, it looks as if each action will introduce a separate power in the agent, thus multiplying the composition in the agent. So for every divine action, God will have a separate power in himself.

Maimonides addresses this objection by arguing that multiple actions could be brought about by a single power or ability (Maimonides 1966). He uses the example of the heat generated by a fire, which can burn, blacken wood, cook food, and so forth. So, one should not assume that a multiplicity of actions entails a multiplicity of powers in the agent. In the fire example, the heat of the fire produces multiple actions. The same could be said about an agent who acts by virtue of his will. Consequently, Maimonides argues that God brings about multiple actions and effects through his will, which is contained in his essence but not as a property, and that the multiplicity of effects or actions does not entail a multiplicity of powers in God (Seeskin and Norman 2005).

According to Maimonides, predicates such as qualities or relations are to be denied of God. For example, one should say, "God is not a body,"

but one cannot say correctly, "God is merciful." While there are biblical passages that contain some of these imperfections, they are written in the language of human beings. Maimonides attempts to interpret these passages to eliminate or to deny the imperfections. His foundational assumption is that these passages do not ascribe to God anything that could be viewed as a deficiency. For example, passages that refer to God's "body parts" are to be interpreted as indicating God's actions. Maimonides argues that when the Bible indicates that God has an eye, "eye" indicates the intellectual act of apprehension performed by God. This act of apprehension does not imply composition in God insofar as it is an attribute of action, so it can be attributed to God without compromising divine simplicity. Qualities that are attributed to God in the Bible, such as "merciful," mean that God performs acts that resemble certain acts done by human beings out of a given quality such as mercy. But "merciful" does not indicate what God is like or what his nature is; "merciful" only refers to a certain kind of action. Taken as a quality, terms such as "merciful" are applied to God equivocally. So we cannot say that God has certain qualities such as "mercy" in the same sense in which we would say "Ottuh is merciful," because God's simplicity precludes his having the quality of mercy. Nor can we speak of any relation of similarity between God and creatures. Relations are accidental properties and God does not have accidental properties. So any relation between God and another thing must be denied of God.

With respect to God, the so-called essential attributes, for example, living, existing, incorporeal, eternal, powerful, knowing, willing, and one are interpreted equivocally. According to Maimonides, these attributes indicate composition in God and they purport to indicate a feature of God's essence (Seeskin 2002). In order to preserve divine simplicity, Maimonides interprets these attributes as signifying "the negation of the privation of the attribute in question" with respect to God. A privation is the absence of the existence of a habit. For example, blindness would be a privation of sight. So one could say, "The wall does not see." Maimonides would not say that the wall is blind, because the only things that could be blind are those things that could or should have the capacity for sight. A wall never

has the capacity for sight, although a wall is unseeing. So the negation of the privation of the attribute of seeing in the case of the wall indicates that the property of sight is not fittingly said of the wall, even in a negative sense. In the case of God, essential attributes are to be interpreted as indicating that those attributes are not fittingly said of God, even in a negative sense. For example, "God is living," would be interpreted to signify, "God is not dead," which is taken to mean that "dead" is not fittingly said of God. A similar procedure is to be followed for the other essential attributes, none of which are appropriately said of God, even in negations.

Solution 2: Religious language as Univocal Language

The second solution argues that when terms are used to describe God and his attributes, those terms are univocal with respect to what they mean in reference to God and what they mean in reference to creatures. This approach would argue that God is good in the same sense in which Ottuh is good. In the contemporary literature William Alston argues that there are some concepts that can be applied univocally to God and to human beings, but he rejects a completely univocal solution. A modern proponent of univocity is William Alston. Alston, however, does not defend complete univocity, in which ordinary terms are used in the same sense of God and creatures, because he recognizes that divine otherness, especially divine incorporeality, would preclude complete univocity. (Alston 1989a). However, he argues that two different things could possess the same abstract feature in different ways:

A meeting and a train of thought can both be "orderly" even though what it is for the one to be orderly is enormously different from what it is for the other to be orderly. A new computer and a new acquaintance can both be "intriguing" in a single sense of the term, even though what makes the one intriguing is very different from what makes the other intriguing (Alston 1989a).

Having pointed out those two different kinds of things can possess the same abstract feature in different ways; Alston argues that God and human beings can possess the same abstract feature in different ways. For example, a human being can know a particular fact and God can know that same fact. But how God knows

something or the way that God knows something will be different from the way that a human being knows something insofar as God is incorporeal, omniscient, and so forth. According to Alston, the difference in the way knowledge is acquired doesn't prevent us from saying that the psychological concept, "knows *p*," can be applied to both human beings and to God. Moreover, one can also apply functionalist concepts, which are concepts of a certain functional role in the psyche, to both human beings and to God. Alston offers the following description of functionalist concepts,

Since functionalist concepts are indifferent as to the nature of the structure of the psyche in which they inhere, it is possible to apply a functionalist concept to both a human being and to God in the same sense. According to Alston (1989a):

We can say of a human being that she will tend to do what she can to bring about what she recognizes to be best in a given situation, and we can take this tendency to be partly constitutive of the concept of recognizing something to be best. We can then formulate the divine regularities in tendency terms also. Thus it will be true of God also that if He recognizes that it is good that *p* He will tend to bring about *p* insofar as He can unless He recognizes something incompatible with *p* to be a greater good.

Alston (1989a) claims that this example illustrates his method of applying functionalist concepts to God and to human beings univocally. According to Alston, the "tendency statements" are true of God, but the core of common meaning between human beings and God is to be found in the concept of "recognizing something to be best." Alston further claims that although both God and human beings can be said to perform the function "recognizing something to be best," human beings do not always assess the situation correctly, but God does. Since God and human beings perform the same function, albeit in a different way, the functionalist concept "recognizing something to be best" can be applied truly to both entities with a common core of meaning. So it would be true to say of God that he recognizes something to be best and that this concept can be applied to him and to human beings in the same sense. Thus, Alston argues that functionalist concepts can be constructed in such a way that they apply in the same sense

to God and creatures, and he identifies this position as “partial univocity.”

At least one of the limitations of Alston’s view is that the predicates that are frequently used of God in the historical religious traditions, for example, “good,” and that are applied also to human beings cannot be applied univocally to God; only constructed terms, for example, “recognizing something to be best,” could be applied univocally to God. Therefore, with respect to the historical religious traditions, Alston’s view is not of much help. A religious believer, for example, might ask herself the question whether or not God could be said truly to be good. Alston can’t provide an answer to this question, because he intentionally limits partial univocity to functionalist concepts. If goodness could be expressed in a functionalist concept such as “recognizing something to be best,” then God could be said truly to possess this predicate in the same sense as a human being who shares the same predicate. But functionalist concepts are descriptive of mental states and so one might wonder if the equation of goodness with a particular mental state is a sufficiently robust description of goodness.

Secondly, one might wonder why Alston believes that God performs the same functions as human beings, given divine otherness. Presumably, he would argue that mental states would be the same in two minds; regardless of how the minds are constructed or out of what materials they are constructed. Granting this point, on what basis does Alston (1993) reject complete univocity between the functionalist concepts of the two minds? If the nature and constituents of their minds does not prevent the two minds from having the same mental state, why would Alston deny that there is a complete univocity between them? Complete univocity is probably denied because of divine otherness. But divine otherness has to do with, for example, divine incorporeality. Divine incorporeality would impinge upon how God’s mind is constructed, but this would be irrelevant for the functionalist concepts. One wonders if Alston should be committed to a completely univocal view, given his account of functionalist concepts. Given the limitations of Alston’s view and some of the unanswered questions that arise concerning it, it is appropriate to turn our attention to the third possible solution to religious language, which is the view of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Solution 3: Religious Language as Analogical Language

The third solution argues that when terms are used to describe God and his attributes, those terms are used analogously. This solution argues that God is good in an analogous sense to Ottuh’s goodness. “Good” applied to both God and to Ottuh would signify the same thing, but in different modes. That is, when “good” is applied to Ottuh it picks out a property of Ottuh, but when “good” is applied to God, it refers to the unity that is God’s essence and not to an individual property. This approach provides a middle position between an equivocal solution and a univocal solution, since terms used analogously aren’t entirely equivocal nor are they entirely univocal; terms used analogously signify the same thing but in different modes. This is the approach of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). He defends this position in his *Summa Theologiae* as well as his *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

Aquinas argues that when terms are used to describe God and his attributes, those terms are used analogously. Thus, when the predicate “good” is applied to God, it doesn’t pick out a property that God has. Owing to divine simplicity, God does not have properties. When predicated of God, “good” refers to the unity that is God’s essence. So when “good” is attributed to God and to Ottuh, it signifies the same thing in both attributions, but it signifies this thing in different modes. Aquinas grounds his analogical approach in the causal relation that obtains between God and creatures. In his discussion of analogy, Aquinas outlines the following points (Aquinas 1948):

- a. Human beings name things as they know them.
- b. Human beings know God from creatures.
- c. God causes the existence of creatures.
- d. Creatures resemble God just as an effect resembles its agent cause.

Aquinas affirms the principle that effects resemble their efficient or agent causes. His account of the similarity between an agent cause and its effect includes a shared form. According to Aquinas, there are at least two different kinds of forms: substantial forms and accidental forms. Substantial forms configure the matter or physical stuff in which they inhere. They contribute a set of essential properties to a substance, such as “rationality”. A substantial form is the essence of

a substance, which is a matter-form composite such as a human being. Accidental forms are non-essential properties, such as perfections or qualities. Aquinas explains that creaturely perfections are associated with both substantial forms and accidental forms:

God alone is good essentially. For everything is called good according to its perfection. Now perfection of a thing is threefold: first, according to the constitution of its own being; secondly, in respect of any accidents being added as necessary for its perfect operation. Thus, for instance, the first perfection of fire consists in its existence, which it has through its own substantial form; its secondary perfection consists in heat, lightness and dryness. This perfection belongs to no creature by its own essence; it belongs to God only, in Whom alone essence is existence; in Whom there are no accidents; since whatever belongs to others accidentally belongs to Him essentially, as, to be powerful, wise, and the like (Aquinas 1948).

According to Aquinas, there is a perfection associated with a thing's substantial form and there are the added perfections that attach to the essence of a thing as accidents. In both cases, these perfections are derived from God. However, insofar as the shared forms are found in more eminent mode in God than in a creature, the creature will be less perfect than God. Consequently, the shared form cannot share a univocal name. However, the shared forms are not wholly different and so they cannot share an equivocal name. Thus, Aquinas argues that the shared forms also share an analogical name, which would be neither univocal nor equivocal. So human beings can name God's perfections by way of analogy, on the basis of the causal relationship that holds between God and creatures. It is on this basis that one could say, "God is good," and, "Ottuh is good," where "good" is understood to be said truly of both God and Ottuh, even though God is good essentially and Ottuh possesses goodness only as an accidental property.

Despite the similarities that exist between God and creatures, there are many ways in which creatures do not resemble God. So when one names God, one must be cognizant of the differences between God and creatures as well as the similarities so that one does not make a false attribution to God. So although Aquinas thinks that God can be named on the basis of the resemblance that holds between him and

creatures, Aquinas acknowledges that this resemblance is limited and that therefore not all terms that are correctly applied to creatures may be correctly applied to God. For example, any terms indicating corporeality cannot be applied to God since God is incorporeal. One might think that if we reject divine simplicity, all reasons for naming God analogically would disappear. But this isn't quite right. As Alston (2005) points out, the problem of religious language can be generated by divine otherness. So even absent divine simplicity, Aquinas would be likely to argue for an analogy between creatures and God. However, Aquinas doesn't limit his approach to religious language solely to analogies. He also approves of naming God by virtue of negations, but he doesn't limit speech about God to negations (Alston 1993).

Alston (1993) provides a recent objection to Aquinas' analogical solution. He argues that serious problems arise in connection with the thing signified by the name, as Aquinas understands it. This is so because Aquinas is unable to specify completely God's perfections. Moreover, he cannot make explicit what likeness holds between God and creatures because all names fall short of him. According to Alston, there are too many ambiguities in Aquinas' view. But Aquinas has an answer to this objection in his recourse to the principle that every effect is like its agent cause. Aquinas knows this principle in general based upon observations of other agent causes, such as artisans who craft artifacts, and he applies this principle to God by virtue of the arguments that God is the first efficient (agent) cause (Aquinas 1948). Thus, God cannot be wholly different from creatures in the way that Alston suspects.

Alston (1993) argues that since the thing signified by the name is indeterminate with respect to God, we cannot know, for example, what "God is good" means. But Aquinas would take issue with the inference from the first claim to the second, on the grounds of the relationship between created effects and God. Perfections such as goodness are found both in the created effect and in God, but in God they are found in a different mode and to a greater degree. So "God is good" is not meaningless nor is it the case that we do not know what "God is good" means. We know that goodness is found in God somehow, in a different mode and to a different degree. So "God is good" is a true statement. In fact, "good"

is said primarily of God, rather than creatures, because “good” is given to creatures via the causal relationship. The thing signified by “good” is indeterminate in the sense that we do not know exactly to what degree it is found in God, except that the mode is different and the degree is greater than that found in creatures. But this degree of indeterminateness does not entail the kind of agnosticism about the divine attributes that Alston suggests. Consequently, Alston’s objection is unsuccessful.

Despite the virtues of Aquinas’ approach to naming God, there are some obvious drawbacks for his view. In particular, his view requires a medieval metaphysics that most contemporary philosophers would find questionable. For example, he believes in a causal relation between creatures and God. However, in comparison with the other two solutions and their respective disadvantages, Aquinas makes a strong case in favor of his view.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have explored the findings of contemporary language analysis as one way of mapping, however roughly, the logical placing of the language of religion. Linguistic analysis being the use of philosophical tools to get at the verification, use, and meaning of words in their contexts it evaluates religious assertions, examine their functions, check the possibilities of testing them in experience, and come to conclusions about the meaning that may be communicated. Such an evaluation proves valuable for anyone involved in the communication of religious beliefs, especially teachers of religions in sacred places and schools. We observed that some of the findings, being primarily negative, can serve only as a warning to those with minds that tend to literal interpretations of religious language. We have also discovered that more recent findings, however, point to more creative and imaginative uses of religious assertions that move beyond an empirical base.

While no single solution has emerged to the satisfaction of all religious communities or philosophers of religion, the solutions attempted in this work offer a way in which statements about God might be understood. Maimonides’ solution severely limits the degree to which human beings can speak about God. Alston’s solution raises at least two objections that require a satisfactory

response and a possible modification of his proposal. Finally, the solution of Aquinas requires a medieval metaphysics in which one affirms the relation of creation between creatures and God, a foundation many contemporary individuals would reject. Consequently, there is much research that is needed to be done on the problem of religious language. Most historical solutions offered here provide a tenuous beginning in that direction and show promise for the emergence of a satisfactory solution probably in the future. However, we posit that religious statements are meaningful, though, not verifiable, so far they can be understood in their own context of usage.

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